

Why Researching Screenwriters (has Always) Mattered

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Words matter. Writers matter and women writers matter in this world. It is important to consider writers because the word writer comes before the word director when you describe a filmmaker who can do two things. They are writer-directors, they are not director-writers. That tells us something. The vision of a movie cannot exist without the screenplay. A director cannot direct nothing. There must be an idea. There must be a philosophy. There must be a theme. There must be a story. This proves that the writer is of equal importance. We must remember writers have to be equal partners and I think we realize that without realizing it. When people talk about movies to their friends they don't say "I loved the camera angle in scene 7." They quote dialogue from their favorite movies whether they are from a Pixar film or a Disney one, they quote the dialogue and that is the work of the writer. That's the person who should be given credit, yet often at the start of a class I ask students to list their two or three favorite films, who directed those films and who wrote that film. They very often cannot name the person who wrote the film they claim to adore. How can you study to be a writer if you don't remember writers yourself? Hence the reason to study Screenwriting. Hence researching screenwriters has always mattered.

When actors Frances McDormand won her Oscar for *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing Missouri* she said of the screenwriter Martin McDonagh, "He did not sketch a blueprint. That's an insult to a screenplay. He didn't string together a few words. He wrote, meticulously crafted, a tsunami, and then he allowed his troupe of actors to surf it into the shore."

(<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/sag-awards-three-billboards-takes-top-honors-at-a-show-women-took-center-stage-1076726>)

She credited the writer in a way that many people do not.

Stories - and therefore screenplays and therefore screenwriters -- are important because they transmit culture around the world. The United States has had a corner on that market for far too many years but now we're beginning to see other stories permeate our culture, a good and beneficial thing for a country made of immigrants and the ancestors of immigrants. Stories have always transmitted culture far back to the cave paintings of many ancient cultures, through Gilgamesh, and the griots of Africa. Humans have used stories to move culture forward. Movies are the most current version of doing that so why do we forget to study the storytellers? Now is the time to fix this glaring omission both in casual discussions of films and in academia.

One of the first things discovered in my research is the issue of the unreliable narrator. Often when directors are interviewed or give oral histories to archives, they choose not to credit anyone who will take away their own fame. For instance, in his many interviews Alfred Hitchcock showed himself to be an unreliable narrator of his own career. Everyone recognizes his name to the point that viewers and professors say they are watching, or teaching, a Hitchcock film, forgetting that he did not write any of his films. Hitchcock had many other writers who worked

for him including Joan Harrison and John Michael Hayes (DeRosa 2011; Lane 2020). More deeply, when asked about his early training in film Hitchcock said he had learned everything he knows from a middle-aged American woman (McGilligan 2004). That unnamed woman was Eve Unsell, a triple threat - writer/director/producer - sent to the Famous Players-Lasky Film company's studio in London (Moving Picture World 1919). By not granting his mentor the respect of repeating her name so that future researchers could study her he wrote her out of history.

An unreliable narrator effected the memory of one of the early female pioneers of cinema, screenwriter Jeanne McPherson, who wrote most of Cecil B. DeMille's profitable films. Most people have heard of him but they have never heard of McPherson because when he outlived her and gave an interview to the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences for an oral history he claimed she didn't do much real writing work. He claimed that he did most of it while she had some nice ideas (Phillips 2018). Researchers reading his quote might be made to wonder why he would have kept her on board for 20 years of filmmaking if she did so very little. Digging deeper, however, they will find that most of the movies that she wrote for him to direct were blockbusters and when she didn't write his films they did not make money.

Similarly, screenwriter Sarah Y. Mason, who had written 15 films, married Victor Herrmann and together they wrote a few and won an Oscar for adapting *Little Women*. Then Herrmann became a director and never wrote another film, but she wrote 35 more films. However, Heerman outlived his wife and when he gave his oral history he talked about how he trained her to write and how if it wasn't for him she wouldn't have had a career. That is how Mason is now remembered in history because her own husband was her unreliable narrator (Scott 2018).

While women tend to be on the opposite end of most unreliable narration, the same thing happens to people of color across the eras, including Oscar Micheaux, a famous African-American filmmaker during the Silent Era. Micheaux wrote many films in answer to the stereotypes he saw being portrayed in the early days of film, trying to change the negative narratives about African-Americans. Yet Micheaux is not written about in very many books because people aren't thinking about anyone but the very mainstream writers they've heard of in previous books and classes. Following the same path into obscurity, Marion Wong was a Chinese-American woman who made a film in the Silent Era in San Francisco.

Actors, such as Marlon Brando, can be unreliable narrators because again they have an ego, a persona, a brand that they have to protect in the world. Recently, Susan L. Mizruchi, an academic, accessed his archives and found the notes he made on scripts fascinating. She used them for the foundation for her book *Brando's Smile: His Life, Thought, and Work* and in her book she attempts to prove that he wrote some of the best dialogue in his films. For instance, in her book she credits Brando for the very famous line in *On the Waterfront*, "I could have had class would have been someone I could have been a contender" (Mizruchi 2014). She claims Brando wrote that line because in his own papers he says he

wrote it but if you go back to the very first script, which was written by Budd Schulberg, that line appeared in the very first draft, according to journalist Tom Shone. "When I visit Schulberg his wife, Betsy, fishes out the original script of *On the Waterfront* to show me the lines... the words etched into every moviegoer's subconscious: "I couldn't have been a contender. I could've had class and been somebody. Real class. Instead of a bum, let's face it, which is what I am." (Shone 2008).

One explanation for why we don't credit writers is that we never really credited them equally in the very early days of Hollywood in favor of crediting directors. For example, Preston Sturges, a very famous director of the 30s, 40s and 50s co-wrote many of his films. The diaries of one collaborator, Charles Brackett were published in 2014. In those diaries he wrote about how he saw himself being written out of Hollywood and he didn't know what to do about it. When credit was granted more to Sturges than Brackett by way of a film poster claiming the film was written and directed by Preston Sturges, Brackett wrote, "Evidently he took out every comma as I expected he would do" (Slide 2014). The same thing happened with the other man Brackett co-wrote with, Billy Wilder also a man more famous because he became a director as well. Together they wrote *Sunset Boulevard* yet on the poster Wilder's name appears in the middle in very big letters but Brackett's appears nowhere on the poster even though he co-wrote this very important film. Also in his diary he made a joke about reading the papers after his own daughter eloped and being amazed his name appeared in those reports. "I thought the trade papers would say that Billy Wilder was upset because his collaborator's daughter had disappeared." Again, we remember directors more yet Brackett won an Oscar for this version of *Titanic* and later became president of the Writers Guild of America yet he does not appear in many film histories because the directors he co-wrote with over took that fame (Slide 2014).

Another famous director who stole the spotlight from the writers whose story and characters are beloved in the United States, especially at Christmastime, Frank Capra always talked about the Capra touch. Academics call his films Capraesque. But Albert Hackett and Frances Goodrich adapted *It's a Wonderful Life* from a postcard. A married couple the Hackett/Goodrich team wrote for over 50 years together, including writing the Broadway play and then adapting the film version of *The Diary of Anne Frank*, for which they won a Pulitzer Prize. Capra never won a Pulitzer Prize. I posit, then that these are Hackett/Goodrich films. They are not Capra films. They also wrote *The Thin Man* movies which were adaptations of the book written by Dashiell Hammett and the married team in that film resembles them much more than the rumored resemblance to Hammett and his lifelong female companion, Lillian Hellman (Goodrich 2001).

In terms of being obliterated by the memory of a director Nunnally Johnson took the brunt of that treatment. He adapted the John Steinbeck novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, directed by John Ford. Steinbeck said he found the script better than his book. He thought the writing of the script improved his novel. Yet when Dorris Bowdon, the woman who starred in the film and had married Johnson, died just a few years ago her very own obituary read:

"Dorris Bowdon, a movie actress best remembered for her role in John Ford's "The Grapes of Wrath" who left acting after she married that film's screenwriter, has died. She was 90" (Los Angeles Times 2005).

Bowdon's obituary doesn't list her husband's name because he's a screenwriter so he can't count as much as the film's director. But Bowdon was not married to director John Ford. More interesting, Journalists, who are writers, dismissed writers when talking about Hollywood, so we cannot always blame the directors. One time Ford pointed out a particular shot he was going to use in a script had been written into the script by Johnson. Johnson envisioned how the camera should move and Ford said to Johnson "I don't know if the critics will recognize you or me for doing this work." Johnson responded "I don't know who's going to get the credit, but I know I did it." (Stempel 1980).

Another pair of screenwriters who often found themselves shunted aside by a famous-named director, Ruth Gordon and Garson Kanin wrote Adam's Rib. Yet when it airs in the United States it is called George Cukor's Adam's Rib. The Gordon/Kanin team wrote this film on speculation, they cast it with friends Katharine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy, which is doing the work of a direct. They wrote several films in this fashion, all-nominated for Academy Awards for Best Writing, and Gordon went on to win an Oscar for acting in Rosemary's Baby (Gordon 1976).

This lack of respect for writers can be traced to a writer, Francois Truffaut. Early in his career as a film reviewer for Cahiers du Cinema he created what we call the auteur theory which stated that directors were the auteur of the film. This is where the author theory was born. Some critics at the time said they only went along with it because often a movie would have two or three writers and only one director so it was easier to use the director's name in a review. It did not mean they thought he was the only one who worked on the film, but it became the way we thought. Another issue this theory created is the great man version of filmmaking because most directors were men so people began to speak only of these geniuses who had created films, the Alfred Hitchcock's of the world. They forget to mention the Joan Harrisons, though she wrote half of his movies including the one that won his only Oscar, Rebecca.

Also in the United States, Peter Bogdanovich wrote Who the Devil Made It: Conversations with Legendary Film Directors in 1977. Even though Bogdanovich was a writer-director he privileged the directors in the history that he wrote about Hollywood. Finally, this discrepancy between credits in film can be traced to the early days of Hollywood because many of the people who came to write came from New York. When they came to Hollywood they didn't take their work seriously so they didn't ask for too much credit. Though Edna Ferber, a novelist from New York, who wrote Showboat and Giant was smart enough to require the studio to lease her novels, not to buy out the rights, so that they had to credit her. Most other writers lost that chance to own our work so for a few other reasons. Famous studio heads back Jack Warner, Louie B Mayer and Carl Laemmle created the studio system and went to the United States government and said that writing a movie was more like working in

a factory on an assembly line. Therefore one person didn't need credit for everything and that meant that the author legally of any movie is not even the director nor the writer but the studio that made the film. so Paramount Studios is the author. In their argument, playwrights sold a product but screenwriters sold a service, like a maid or a carwash and that is not something they should own. That legal difference made the difference in how writers could have control of their work all these years. Then these men formed the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, which we think of as the group that gives away the Oscars and has the big party once a year. In fact, the Academy started out as a union for writers but the producers were in charge of the rules of the Union. Writer Dorothy Parker famously said that "Looking to the Academy for representation was like trying to get laid in your mother's house someone was always watching in the parlor."

Then the stock market crash and the Depression began and these men, particularly Mayer, when to all their studio employees and said they could no longer pay the salaries they had paid out last year but needed everyone to take a 50% pay cut. In response actor Lionel Barrymore said Mayer was acting like a man on his way to the guillotine stopping for a manicure, which meant he did not believe what he was saying but as an actor he did not have the power to not take the pay cut. Albert Hackett said that that day Mayer created more communists than Karl Marx because the writers learned that everyone took a pay cut except members of IATSE, the union for the people who work on the set. That had come from Broadway and they did not take a pay cut because they had a three-year union contract and it couldn't be taken away from them. That's when the writers realized they needed a union. They started a couple of versions until the 1950s when the current union began protecting writers by making sure writers receive their credits on the screen, as well as providing pensions and benefits.

All of that unequal credit lead us to this stage where we do not pay the proper attention to writers, which is why they need to be studied More. Also, film education, which was supposed to help us didn't. In the very beginning the earliest film school, the Moscow Film School started by teaching the history of film as the history of directors which made it the history again of great men. That style of teaching has been passed down across the generations. Yet we always knew writers were important, if not the most important. For instance, if the directors were so important why, when we had the blacklist, were 9 out of 10 of those people writers? It wasn't the directors' philosophy that studio heads feared showing to the world. It was the writers' philosophy, their ideas about poverty and how we needed to fix the political system. That's what frightened the studio owners and that's why all those writers went to prison. So we know that writers are deeply important because stories are what matter. Those are the things that change people.

For example, Michael Wilson was completely censored, some of his movies were released without his name on them at all, there was no written by credit at all. The studio refused to recognize him because he was marked as a communist for the themes of his films (West 1957). Friendly Persuasion, is an anti-war film about our Civil War and Salt of the Earth

is a union movie about a union New Mexican miners who are on strike and the women who support them. No studio wanted to support those ideas so his he essentially disappeared. By censoring the storytellers we censor the stories and that is why we see such a small block of stories repeated over and over and over. Yet if stories equal culture if we censor the stories we're censoring our culture. We're not allowing people to learn about these other people in their struggles which is when art has always been strongest.

When I teach my students the history of screenwriting the quote "Write what you know" comes up in the study of a writer's body of work. and sometimes people think that means if you come from a family where your father's a policeman, you should write about policeman or if you yourself are a high school teacher you should write about teachers. But it doesn't mean you should write your experiences only; it means you should write the emotions that you know because the emotions are what are universal and that's what sells to other people all over the world. I read that Tennessee Williams, a famous playwright in the United States once said most writers work from the emotions of the first six years of their life. Some people laugh at that and I laughed at that until I realized that in many episodes that I had written a recurring theme that I tend to go to is that to be a father is the most important job in your life and you should take it seriously. My father left when I was six years old. Until looking backwards at things that I had written I did not notice the repetition of that theme. Clearly it means something to me. Everybody doesn't have that experience but everybody has been abandoned in some way or another and we recognize that emotion of loss. That emotion is what we sell and streaming services are now allowing us to sell across cultures since emotions are the universal language.

Streaming services are finally our chance to show all the many cultures of the world to each other. This is what streaming services are capable of doing. Previously in the United States the only way we could see a movie from Brazil would be if it won an Oscar or if it was nominated for an Oscar, as in the case of Kiss of the Spider Woman because that was a co-production between Brazil and the United States and it won some Oscars. Those were the only films that had wide release in the United States before streaming services. You would have to be the kind of person who liked to see international films and were willing to read subtitles, and that was not a large portion of the audience in the United States. Recently, I noticed that with my 21 year old son and his generation there is more of a comfort with reading subtitles. He watches Japanese anime and other movies from around the world and he doesn't mind reading subtitles. About ten years ago if I assigned an international movie, and I would often assign some Italian films to my film students they would complain because reading the screen was hard. Now it's become more acceptable.

In my own television viewing experience I've had the chance to see Many international programs which I never would have seen without streaming services. Commissario Montalbano is the most famous detective show in Italy. Watching that in the United States helps me feel more connected to my Sicilian cousins and to my immigrant grandparents and the

world they grew up in. I can see footage from Italy. Trapped was a miniseries made in Iceland you can see the Icelandic translation on the Bottom. It aired in the U.S. and I was amazed to watch eight hours of something that was filmed in Iceland and told me about a culture I could possibly never imagine and might never have the chance to see. But because of streaming I've now experienced this mini-series. I learned about The Almighty Johnsons, a program from New Zealand about Norse mythology, from a young student who pitched an episode of this show because he saw it on Netflix and he didn't realize it wasn't from the United States. This student learned the mythology of another culture.

In preparing this presentation I asked Netflix to show me some Brazilian television and I found Samantha!. I'm amazed we haven't copied that in the United States yet because this experience of being a child star is something that is sadly universal. It is important to realize that a program can travel to many cultures because themes are universal and that's why when we start writing, from a theme we know. In Samantha! The lead character wants to be important, wants to matter in the world, wants to be loved and that is the most universal of all emotions. So streaming services allow us to learn that we're all the same.

Therefore, the question of why has researching screenwriters always mattered is because of all these reasons. One of the newest points is that people are beginning to read screenplays as literature. Some twenty years ago publishers would distribute the top five screenplays of the year or someone like William Goldman, a very famous screenwriter in the States, would publish several of his screenplays. Students can read the screenplays that sell and realize how much directing writers do on the page, against the rule that says they shouldn't. But they do so because a person at a studio has to read the pages and envision the movie. If they can't see it they can't buy it. So now, in reading screenplays, people can appreciate the voice of the writer in a way they were never able to before. Why does this matter? Because we stand on the shoulders of all the people who came before us in this business. We owe them understanding of who they are and what they had to offer. We have to honor them. It is our duty to Write. Reach. Represent. These words mean it is our duty as screenwriters to write our stories, reach other people and represent the cultures and the stories that have not been told. That's why researching screenwriters has always mattered.

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