

SELLING THE SCRIPT!
THE PEDAGOGY OF
CO-PRODUCTION SCRIPTWRITING

CHER COAD AND PATRICK WEST

© 2007 *Segue* online literary journal

All rights reserved. This publication may be freely distributed only in its entirety and without modification. It may not be sold for profit. Excerpts may only be reproduced and distributed with permission from the copyright owners, except in the case of brief quotations used for reviews and interviews. The work published in *Segue* does not necessarily represent the views and opinions of its staff or of Miami University.

Segue: www.mid.muohio.edu/segue | Miami University Middletown: www.mid.muohio.edu

Scriptwriting students can expect their teachers to keep them informed about the emergence and increasing importance of international co-productions in the film industry, along with the implications for professional practitioner activities. Two themes emerge from this dialogue that reward attention from those of us operating at pedagogic thresholds in teaching and learning contexts. Firstly, the notion of co-productions can generate for students a better understanding of the role of the scriptwriter in the production process as it differs from how textual creation comes about in other genres. Secondly, co-production developments might trigger an investigation into narrative choices that can be distributed into categories of the national and the international. Our interest in this second field of enquiry takes account of the fact that most beginning scriptwriters—at least where we operate, Australia—cut their teeth on the short film form.

Given the rapid changes now being witnessed, no snapshot of the co-production domain at this stage of its development can be expected to remain accurate for long. This applies as much to the definition of the term as to the facts and figures relevant to the expansion of co-production productions. The following might be considered a provisional setting of the scene to aid engagement with the two themes of this article.

Major productions today are increasingly co-productions. We define a co-production simply as a production arrangement containing a significant presence of production elements from two or more national origins. These elements can include a mix of the financial, technical and creative. Investors in a co-production can expect to benefit from the maximization of the capacities drawn from these elements, as well as from the expansion of the potential audience for the film post-production. Well-known recent co-productions are the Australian/UK film *The Proposition* (Dir. John Hillcoat, 2005) and the GB/US film *Chicken Run* (Dirs. Peter Lord and Nick Park, 2000).

Two major categories of co-productions can be identified: private studio-to-studio single-purpose contracts should not be confused with co-production arrangements of the government-to-government variety. Studio-to-studio contracts are purely commercial arrangements across national borders. One recent example of a studio-to-studio co-production is the film *Alexandra's Project* (Dir. Rolf de Heers, 2003), which was co-produced between the Italian and Australian sections of the Italian producer Domenico Proccaci's production house Fandango.

The second, much larger category of government-to-government co-productions, which can be defined as umbrella arrangements for individual studios to exploit, can itself be sub-divided into permanent government-to-government treaty arrangements and one-off production agreements (which operate under the auspices of Memorandums of Understanding [MOU] rather than of a treaty as such). Australia, for example, has operational treaties with the United Kingdom (including Northern Ireland), the Republic of Ireland, Canada, Germany, Italy and Israel, while MOU's are in place with France and New Zealand (Australian Film Commission). *Like Minds* (Dir. Gregory J. Read, 2006) is an example of a treaty arrangement co-production (Australia/UK) while *Elephant Tales* (Dir. Mario Andreacchio, 2006) is an example of a MOU arrangement co-

production (Australia/France). All co-productions that enjoy treaty status can supplement their production budgets through access to various public funding mechanisms (Baltruschat).

We suggest that the more extensive government-to-government co-production category is of greater relevance for developing scriptwriters because, contrary to the arrangements pertaining to one-off privately-funded studio-to-studio co-productions, government funding bodies provide guidelines for creative personnel that have currency in the industry for a significant duration. All examples of enterprise on the spectrum of co-productions, however, are salient to the pedagogic questions under consideration here.

Productivity increases in the film industry over recent years can be largely sourced to a growth in activity on the co-production front. More than 50 countries have entered into Official Co-Production Treaties since the early 1990s (Booth). Eighty percent of current United Kingdom (including Northern Ireland) productions are co-productions (Booth). The Chinese government has granted rights to 26 film studios to administer international film business. Nineteen Canadian studios have signed official agreements with China to accommodate the projected co-production demand (Telefilm Canada).

As mentioned above, Australia has entered into arrangements directly with the governments of the United Kingdom (including Northern Ireland), the Republic of Ireland, Canada, Germany, Italy and Israel, and with the competent authorities in France and New Zealand (Australian Film Commission). Pursuant to these arrangements, films (as defined therein) may be made as "official co-productions," thereby becoming eligible for certification as Australian Films (Australian Film Commission). This certification provides access to the very considerable benefits of the 10BA tax rebate system. The Australian Asia-Pacific Co-production Association (AAPCA) was founded in October 2003 (one of this article's authors, Cher Coad, is a committee member). Part of its mission is to inform Australian filmmakers of co-production possibilities and to disseminate knowledge about structures and processes. In 2000-2001, total feature film expenditure of \$164 million was divided evenly between productions and co-productions (Australian Film Commission).

With the (primarily Australian) context of this article now established, we will turn to our first theme. The notion of co-productions can generate for students a better understanding of the role of the scriptwriter in the production process as it differs from textual creation in other genres. Something we know from having taught scriptwriting at undergraduate level in university creative writing programmes is that class members often experience difficulties coming to terms with how they should think about themselves as writers for film.

The transition from garret to film set is not always easy. Productions have a great number of elements: finance and budget, release dates and venues, locations, casting, crew, direction,

promotion, editing, sound, timing of shoot, test screenings, and more. Scriptwriters need to take account of them all, in a process which might extend well into post-production. Small wonder that notions of individual creativity can appear to be compromised, even appear to come under assault, in such circumstances. The frequent result amongst beginners? Draft submissions written “on the nose”: pages crowded margin to margin with words; quantities of description more appropriate to a novel; overall, the impression that this script was written to be read, not made into a film. Writing, in other words, as directing (the attic certainly has its attractions—up there, the writer is both cast and crew).

Before elaborating on how co-production awareness might start to counteract the impulse towards this sort of writing in the typical student, we would like to unpack some more details of the context of its emergence. Having considered the advantages and disadvantages of one of our own techniques for steering students down the right pathway as writers, we will then draw attention to Michael Rabiger’s input. Rabiger champions the objective of generating industry relevant parameters for scriptwriting from the perspective of a sophisticated understanding of how the creativity of the script nestles within the overall production apparatus. We like his work. But what are the limitations, as well as the strengths, of Rabiger’s intervention?

For experienced scriptwriters, writing for film is not so much concerned with the inherent pleasure of creative writing and the transition into page-based or web-based product, rather it *anticipates* the pleasure of creative making for the screen. For them, less now, is more later on. Students, however, often have trouble with this concept. It would sometimes appear that what dominates their thinking to an unholy extent is the fact that the vast majority of film scripts remain unpublished (because unproduced). Most exceptions to this rule find refuge in dubious substitutes for the traditional publication forms that work finished for the page can hope to slot into. Internet publication generally implies the loss of traditional authorship privileges (one example being financial return); while scripts used for instructional purposes in writing manuals often have their creative impact diluted as a consequence of their didactic function. Even those rare scripts that actually reach cinema audiences, often in versions unrecognizable to the author, hardly ever appear in book form. Reading scripts is a minority taste and Hollywood producers are reputed to pay someone else to do it. No wonder that students often import into their scriptwriting ways of producing text aligned with more publishable/readable genres such as the novel and short story.

We feel that today’s students have inherited some of the general prejudices against the script-as-script evident in European auteurist discourses. Michaelangelo Antonioni is well known for his dismissal of the film script as a creative work equal to other forms. In his appreciation of the art of film making, Federico Fellini also puts scriptwriting very much on the outer: “I love this way of creating and living at the same time, *without the limits set to a writer or painter*, through being plunged into action” (Thomson 281).

As already suggested, a related factor relevant to the case of the creative writing student per se is the residual influence of other taught genres. Novice scriptwriters in university programmes often have a concurrent investment in genres like the novel, the short story, or poetry, and find it hard shaking off the habits appropriate to these domains. By the same token, scriptwriting certainly shares with all such genres baseline characteristics of creativity and writing. Film school students, as opposed to those in schools of creative arts, are not automatically advantaged when it comes to developing scriptwriting excellence.

When confronted with scriptwriting “on the nose,” one option the teacher has, of course, is to require that students study correctly formatted scripts with all necessary diligence. We have

found that this expedient is often not sufficient. Of course it has the advantage of being both intuitive and practical, but the imported influence of other models of creativity into amateur practices of scriptwriting seems to be considerable. Besides, this option is basically negative rather than positive, telling students what *not to do*, at best forcing compliance with the industry standard.

There must be a better way. The creativity of scriptwriting is qualitatively different from its equivalents in other genres and a pedagogic approach sophisticated enough to capture this difference while remaining simple and understandable to students needs to be the teacher's primary focus.

In *Directing: Film Techniques and Aesthetics*, Michael Rabiger engages with the issues of how one might think about the creativity of the professional scriptwriter and the dead end confronting the script that is not really a script. "The experienced screenwriter," he suggests:

is an architect who designs the shell of a building and knows that others will choose the walls, interiors, colors, and furnishings. A good reason to avoid over-instructing your readers is that you prevent them from *filling deliberate ambiguities with positive assumptions*. Inexperienced screenwriters tend to be control freaks who, in architectural simile, design the doorknobs, lay carpet, hang pictures, and end up making the building uninhabitable by anyone but themselves (emphasis added) (Rabiger 133).

This contribution has the advantage of making explicit what a scriptwriter should aim to be doing. Film makers need to be in the business of "filling deliberate ambiguities with positive assumptions" (Rabiger 133). It is not a transparent formulation—we can imagine rolled eyeballs in the back row of our lectures even now—but Rabiger could not risk a greater trade-off between precision of effect and simplicity, we suggest, without almost guaranteeing that the difference characteristic of scriptwriting creativity would elude his readers. Probably only years of experience puts one in the position to confidently transport Rabiger's concept into specific writing situations, to know what it might mean, say, for character development, plotting, or issues of pace. Interesting as this topic might be, it is not our primary focus on this occasion.

We are not arguing that student awareness of co-productions alone is sufficient to elevate understandings of scriptwriting activity to the highest professional level. What we are saying is that co-production activity allows for students to be inducted into the culture of writing for performance in a way that suggests an augmentation rather than a minimization of their creative capacities.

Co-production productions mandate international narratives with *enforceable requirements* connected to setting, plot and character. For a film to qualify as a co-production the script must adhere to a points system whereby contributions to the total budget determine the mix of locations and actors sourced from each country (Australian Film Commission).

Co-production scripts therefore offer a clear and definite challenge to beginning writers. In-class exercises could be framed something along these lines: develop a script with a fifty-fifty split between two international settings and a mix of major characters spread equally across three nationalities. Scriptwriting in these terms presents itself to the student, we suggest, not so much as an invitation to "chop a novel off at the knees," but as a project with specifications aligned closely to production issues (specifically the points system) yet familiar from other writing genres. Inescapable negotiations with other creative elements, such as directing or acting, might come to seem less invidious because the task for the writer has greater immediate depth to it.

Obviously just about any form of written art can display an international dimension. The point with the co-production script is that it *must* have this dimension, and the writer is responsible, at least initially, for creating it. We suggest this might help assuage complex feelings in the classroom that scriptwriting creativity is fatally compromised. Production exigencies determine much of the script, as is always the case, but the novice writer might sense in the *co-production* project a challenge *additional* to that of writing a novel or short story, because the narrative *must* be international with respect to at least several elements: setting, plot and character.

Subsequently, this same positive attitude could be used to address scripts with non-international narratives, leading in the end to an engagement with Michael Rabiger's advanced formulation of creative restraint. The co-production script uniquely requires an approach that gives students a positive sense of how writing for film differs from writing for other forms. And once he/she feels "inside" the field of scriptwriting, a student may never want to leave. In other words, co-production resembles a pedagogic Trojan horse.

Our classroom experience of teaching scriptwriting and creativity through the concept of the co-production has been very positive. One recent exercise involved a full-group development of a co-production narrative incorporating two national environments. The students came up with an involving and amusing story of Eskimos travelling to a conference on global warming in Sydney, Australia to argue the case *for* global warming on the grounds that they were all in favour of a tropical North Pole! While in Sydney, they meet up with Al Gore and a number of comic episodes ensue.

Student enthusiasm is always a good sign that learning is taking place—entertainment is a pre-requisite of education—and by this standard our co-production teaching strategy is working well. In the discussion that followed on from the creation of the narrative just described, we were able to make some telling points about the creative exchanges that are possible between the script (product of the scriptwriter) and any given production context—not necessarily a co-production one. One way in which we are going to further strengthen this pedagogy is through the planned incorporation into our scriptwriting course of a greater emphasis on actual production skills, which will throw into even starker relief the dialectic of script and production context by linking the words on the page more immediately to the projected film outcome.

The second of our themes in this article subtends our discussion of the first. How might co-production developments trigger an investigation into narrative choices that can be distributed into categories of the national and the international? As teachers we are often intrigued by the storylines of student writing, not least when it comes to the decision to write within a particular conceptualization of global space: for example, the local, national, or international. Amongst Gold Coast campus students the slippage between the local and the international (read American) is a common thematic preoccupation—we suppose Los Angeles and our own Surfers Paradise share a lot. We want to conclude this article with some speculations on the dialectic between this issue and the topic of co-production scriptwriting.

Most scriptwriting students begin to develop their craft in the short film genre and the zero to minimal budget productions anticipated by these scripts are generally restricted, for obvious financial reasons, to narratives in a single national setting. Indeed our viewing of Australian short films seems to indicate that this is largely an unchallenged orthodoxy. No productions spring to mind that have attempted to portray the international elements now the stock in trade of so many feature films.

Here is a challenge that could be very stimulating for our students (not to mention their teachers) to think about. The notion of the co-production is of value to beginning scriptwriters because of the high premium it places on their creative contribution to the final production. Short film co-production scriptwriting contains this advantage, and adds another. It energizes discussion about the geography of narrative in ways of relevance to many genres but applicable especially to the (possibly audacious) task of injecting an international element into a short film narrative. Conceptions of global space are thereby made problematic in ways relevant to our globalized times, and the short film—which admittedly shows no signs of flagging as a genre—receives a boost to its stocks. Default nationalism, for better or for worse, might thus be exposed.

The rapid growth of co-production film making is obviously a development that teachers of scriptwriting need to incorporate into their teaching and learning packages. We have tried to provide an indication of the extent of the co-production impact across the film industry and a couple of proposals for its usefulness in the classroom. In particular, we have been concerned with how notions of creativity and scriptwriting need to be unpacked and reconstituted in order to maximise the effectiveness of our creative writing pedagogies. No doubt future changes in the co-production arena will open up further directions of thought for teachers, students and professional practitioners.

Cher Coad is a PhD student in the School of Arts at Griffith University writing a thesis on co-production scriptwriting which includes two feature films. She is also an actor and director and a member of the Australian Asia-Pacific Co-Production Association (AAPCA).

Patrick West is a Senior Lecturer in Writing in the School of Arts at Griffith University. His PhD is from The University of Melbourne.

REFERENCES

- Australian Film Commission. "AFC Production Survey." *Australian Film Commission*. 2003. www.afc.gov.au. 2006.
- Baltruschat, Doris. "Globalization and International TV and Film Co-Productions: In Search of New Narratives." *Media in Transition 2: Globalization and Convergence*. MIT, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA. 10 May 2002.
- Booth, Mary. "Financing Films: Putting the Jigsaw Together." *Australian Film Financing Forum: Film Investment: A New Approach*. Sydney, Australia. 27 November 2003.
- Rabiger, Michael. *Directing: Film Techniques and Aesthetics*. Third Edition. Burlington: Focal Press, 2003.
- Telefilm Canada. "Co-Production Statistics." 2004. www.telefilm.gc.ca 2006.
- Thomson, David. "Federico Fellini," *The New Biographical Dictionary of Film*. Fourth Edition. New York: Little, Brown, 2002. 280-281.