

**EARLY SCREENWRITING
TEACHERS**

1910-1922

ORIGINS, CONTRIBUTION AND LEGACY

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

This thesis demonstrates the previously unacknowledged contribution made by early screenwriting teachers to the development of the Hollywood film industry from 1910 to 1922. Through a study of five key screenwriting teachers from the period, it shows the significant role played by such figures in the translation of playwriting theory and theatrical tradition into writing for film. Drawing on an extensive range of primary materials, including manuals and columns written for the fan and trade press, it demonstrates the role played by such teachers in the formation and codification of a set of writing techniques specific to the film medium. In doing so, this thesis fills an important gap in the historiography of screenwriting in Hollywood, giving due credit to a body of work that has previously received only passing consideration, and highlighting the role of early screenwriting teachers, which has previously been understated if not ignored. The thesis also examines some aspects of their legacy in the context of the role and function of contemporary screening gurus.

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CONTENTS

Abstract	3
Acknowledgments.....	4
INTRODUCTION.....	7
Research Objectives	7
The Academic Debate.....	10
Possible Reasons for the Lack of Previous Research	23
Research Methodology	29
PART ONE - ORIGINS.....	34
1. Literary and Theatrical Sources	38
Theatrical Legacy	41
Melodramatic Elements	42
Classical Elements	48
Classical Melodrama	63
2. Industry Context.....	65
The Script as a Controlling Factor	65
The Drive for Narrative Clarity	70
Censorship, Copyright and Stardom.....	81
Censorship	81
Copyright	83
Stardom	84
3. Scenario Fever.....	87
4. Summary.....	94
PART TWO – CONTRIBUTION	97
Section 1 – Screenwriting teachers.....	97
1. The First Screenwriting Teachers.....	97
2. Five Important Criteria	113
3. Peripheral Screenwriting Teachers	117
4. The Five Key Screenwriting Teachers.....	130
PART TWO – CONTRIBUTION	166
Section 2 – The Discourse	166

6. The Advice Given by the Key Screenwriting Teachers.....	166
7. How to Train for the Industry	172
A. The Learning Process	172
B. The Filmic Process.....	197
C. The Storytelling Process	200
8. How to write for the industry	220
A. Visual Writing	220
B. Photoplay Form.....	225
C. Screen Technique.....	246
9. How to sell to the industry.....	259
A. Writing the Manuscript	259
B. Marketing the Script	267
10. The Contribution of the Key Screenwriting Teachers	272
11. The End of an Era.....	284
PART THREE – LEGACY	290
1. Equivalence with Modern Screenwriting Gurus	290
2. Evolution of the Screenplay	323
3. Education of the Screenwriter	327
4. Summary.....	330
CONCLUSION.....	331
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	336

INTRODUCTION

Research Objectives

Academic film historians segregate the periods of Hollywood history in various ways, but, in essence, most analyses are based on three broad phases of history, corresponding to the structure and development of the industry in each particular period. These can be identified as: the 'silent' period up to the 1920s; the studio period (1920s-1950/60s); and the package unit system or independent production period (1950/60s to the present). Generally speaking, those historians who have focused more specifically on screenwriting history concur with this analysis and acknowledge the same broad phases of film history.¹

These basic historical delineations are important for this study, as at the end of each of these periods a major shift in organisation occurred that had direct effects on the level and type of activity in which screenwriting teachers were engaged. My study will focus on the work of screenwriting teachers up to the first major shift in organisation: the establishment of the studio system in the 1920s. This early period coincided with a period of intense activity by screenwriting teachers, which then tailed off in the early 1920s as the studio system took hold.

The aim of this project is to give an account of the origins, contribution and legacy of screenwriting teachers during the twelve years of this period when they were most

¹ Tom Stempel identifies the first period as 'Silent Beginnings' (1894-1920), the second as 'The Studio Period' (1920-1950) and the third as 'Independent Production' from the 1950s onwards. See Tom Stempel, *Framework: A History of Screenwriting in the American Film*, 3rd ed. (New York: Syracuse, 2000), 3-48.

Marc Norman recognises the early period as distinct by describing the activities of screenwriters up to the early 1920s in the first two parts of his book, 3-109; then follows this with a section titled 'Control,' 113-286, which refers to the growing power of the studios; and then 'Freelance' from the 1950s onwards, 289-485. See Marc Norman, *What Happens Next: A History of American Screenwriting* (London: Aurum, 2008).

Janet Staiger identifies the process of cinematic development by changes in the modes of production over six stages. The first four of these occur up to 1931, roughly equating to the silent period. The next stage, the 'producer-unit system' (1931-1955) refers to the studio period; and the final stage, the 'package unit system' (1955-1960), to the period of independent production. See David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia, 1985), 85-153, 309-364.

Bordwell and Thompson identify five stages: early cinema (to about 1919), the late silent era (1919-1929), sound cinema (1926-1945), post-war cinema (1946-1960s) and the 1960s to the present; but if the first four periods are paired up, three broad phases of history can still be detected. See Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, *Film History: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2010), xv.

active in the American film industry (1910-1922). 'Screenwriting teachers' will be defined as those who gave written advice on screenwriting and gained a significant following or traction with the general public or in the film industry during this period. Since screenwriting teachers have been involved in the American film industry for more than a century, an investigation of their activity in this early period may be of particular interest, as it permits an assessment of how their role was originally shaped and defined. This may also aid greater understanding of their role in the Hollywood industry of today.

The intense activity of screenwriting teachers during this early period requires further investigation of the kind offered in this thesis. This issue has never been studied closely in its own right, and has only been examined in a fragmentary way (if at all) in the context of work with a different focus. Up to now, it has been presented by film historians within the general context of film history or subsumed within screenwriting historiography. While these historians frequently acknowledge and comment on the increased level of activity of screenwriting teachers at this time, this phenomenon has never been the focus of a full and systematic academic enquiry.

This lack of research is further exacerbated by the fact that many early film histories were written with a particular bias and were closely linked to vested interests. They offer a less than objective or scholarly viewpoint of early Hollywood, and say next to nothing about screenwriting teachers of the period. The journalist Terry Ramsaye famously delivered a 12-week course of lectures in 1926 at the New School for Social Research in New York on the history of film, which would form the basis of his book, *A Million and One Nights*.² This espoused a populist, biased and anecdotal view of Hollywood history that focused on 'great men' such as D. W. Griffith. Dana Polan records that Ramsaye only devoted one lecture out of twelve to the history of the screenplay, and in this lecture Griffith was cast as one of the influential

² Traditional film history of this kind was narrow in approach, focusing on films that had been canonised and lauding their creators as pioneers and adventurers. Thomas Edison even commissioned Ramsaye's book. See Terry Ramsaye, *A Million and One Nights: A History of the Motion Picture Through 1925* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1926), ix. This approach can still be detected in modern historians such as David A. Cook, who privileges some films as "'masterpieces'" of the medium.' See James Chapman, Mark Glancy and Sue Harper, 'Introduction,' in *The New Film History: Sources, Methods and Approaches*, eds., Chapman, Glancy and Harper (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 2 and David A. Cook, *A History of Narrative Film* (New York: Norton, 1981), 73.

'magicians' who made it happen.³ This unscholarly version of Hollywood history not only ignored economic factors, but also minimised the role of screenwriting teachers. David Gerstner comments that:

The history of film criticism and scholarship that emerged during the early years of the twentieth century fits into [a] historical discourse that stitches together artist-and-masterpiece theories in order to signal film's stake in the realm of the so-called high arts.⁴

While this historiography has been revised through excellent scholarship in recent years, the role of the early screenwriting teacher has largely been left out of this re-evaluation.

More recent histories, written over the last 30 years, seek to offer a more objective and balanced approach by examining cinematic development within a wider context. Robert Allen and Douglas Gomery sum up this new revisionist history of cinema as recognising film as:

a complex historical phenomenon (an art form, economic institution, technology, cultural product) which, since its inception, has participated in many networks of relationships.⁵

More specifically, Janet Staiger's scholarly examination of the Hollywood mode of production indicates that:

the production of meaning is not separate from its economic mode of production, nor from the instruments and techniques which individuals use to form materials.⁶

In order to assess the contribution of the early screenwriting teachers, it is important to understand how they related to, and interacted with, this economic process and how they operated within the broader cultural context.

³ Dana Polan, *Scenes of Instruction: The Beginnings of the U.S. Study of Film* (London: University of California, 2007), 98 and 90-112.

⁴ David A. Gerstner, 'The Practices of Authorship' in *Authorship and Film*, ed. Gerstner and Staiger (London: Routledge, 2003), 5.

⁵ Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery, *Film History: Theory and Practice* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1985), 16.

⁶ Bordwel, Staiger and Thompson, *Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 87.

The Academic Debate

Screenwriting has been in existence for just over a century and there is a considerable body of work to examine. As a result, Bordwell notes that:

In the 1970s screenwriting became an academic enterprise – not only because it was studied in colleges, but also because, like nineteenth-century salon painting, it was characterized by rigid rules and a widely accepted canon.⁷

However, even the film academics have largely ignored the role of the early screenwriting teacher in the development of the Hollywood film industry. The activity of these teachers still tends only to be remarked upon insofar as it contributes to arguments on other topics.

Bordwell makes reference to screenwriting teachers both past and present in his narrative about story and style, *The Way Hollywood Tells It*. He says of the output of modern screenwriting teachers that ‘the best manuals offer useful insights into the mechanics of movies.’⁸ But he also acknowledges that most of these writers owe much of their understanding to their earlier forbears; he asserts that, in essence, their manuals are simply a rehearsal and summation of ‘principles [that] have been reiterated in screenplay handbooks since the 1910s.’⁹ He elaborates on the current manual writers:

the dozens of screenplay manuals pouring from the presses have demanded tight plot construction and a careful coordination of emotional appeals [...] but their consolidation of studio-era principles nicely exemplifies how modern American moviemaking pays its tribute to tradition.¹⁰

It is thus clear that Bordwell accepts to some extent the debt that modern screenwriting teachers and the development of Hollywood narrative style owe to

⁷ David Bordwell, *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies* (London: University of California, 2006), 34.

⁸ Ibid., 35.

⁹ Ibid., 28.

¹⁰ Ibid., 27.

these early pioneers. He continues:

In formal design, today's Hollywood cinema is largely continuous with yesterday's [...and any] changes stand out against a backdrop of conventions that are as powerful today as they were in 1960, or 1940, or 1920.¹¹

Bordwell also regularly quotes from early screenwriting manuals in support of his extensive analysis of what he terms 'classical Hollywood style'. For example, in his chapter on 'Story Causality and Motivation', he quotes Frances Taylor Patterson's 1920 manual, where 'plot' is defined as the:

careful and logical working out of the laws of cause and effect. The mere sequence of events will not make a plot. Emphasis must be laid upon causality and the action and reaction of the human will.¹²

This underpins Bordwell's understanding of what constitutes classical narrative in Hollywood films: 'narrative causality' is synonymous with, and subordinated to, 'psychological causality' and is necessarily rooted in the actions and reactions of the main character as the 'prime causal agent'. This is in sharp contrast to the Soviet cinema of the 1920s, where, for example, 'causality could also be conceived as social – a causality of institutions and group processes' or 'impersonal determinism', where 'coincidence and chance leave the individual little freedom of personal action.'¹³ Bordwell points out that, in Hollywood classical narrative, although 'impersonal causes' may begin a line of story action, it will ultimately be driven by 'personal causes':

Hollywood rule-books insist upon confining coincidence to the initial situation. Boy and girl may meet by accident, but they cannot rely upon chance to keep their acquaintance alive.¹⁴

It necessarily follows that, if the main character is the 'primal agent', then this character must act consistently and according to the qualities and traits they have

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹² Frances Taylor Patterson, *Cinema Craftsmanship: A Book for Photoplaywrights* (1920; repr., Charleston: Bibliolife, 2013), 5; cited in Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, *Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 13.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

been assigned. This view is verified by '[s]creenplay manuals [that] demand that a character's traits be clearly identified and consistent with one another'.¹⁵

Bordwell also refers to Frederick Palmer's 1924 definition of a character's action: 'the outward expression of inner feelings', which he notes is the 'litmus test of character consistency' when discussing how characters become agents of that causality in Hollywood cinema.¹⁶ These, and the opinions of other manual writers such as John Emerson, Anita Loos and Tamar Lane,¹⁷ are also mentioned and quoted in support of Bordwell's understanding of Hollywood story construction as:

causality, consequence, psychological motivations, the drive toward overcoming obstacles and achieving goals. Character-centred i.e., personal or psychological – causality is the armature of the classical story.¹⁸

However, Bordwell offers little or no analysis or in-depth explanation of why or how any manual writer's contribution might be significant in this debate. In fact, he repeatedly quotes from a number of other manuals but omits to even name the writers of these works in his essay, although they are referenced. Among these writers is Henry Albert Phillips, one of the key screenwriting teachers examined in this study.¹⁹ This is perhaps unintentional, but it may be indicative of the overall lack of recognition or value that Bordwell and other film historians currently accord these writers for their contribution.

In her part of the extensive discourse on the Hollywood mode of production, Staiger also includes observations on early screenwriting teachers, but they appear among a whole range of comments about other influences that contributed to the

¹⁵ Ibid., 13.

¹⁶ Frederick Palmer, *Technique of the Photoplay* (Los Angeles: Palmer Institute of Authorship, 1924), 67-68; cited in Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, *Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 15.

¹⁷ John Emerson and Anita Loos, *How to Write Photoplays* (Philadelphia: Jacobs, 1920) and Tamar Lane, *The New Technique of Screen Writing*, (New York: Whittlesey House, 1936); cited in Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, *Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 28, 36, 44, 47-49.

¹⁸ Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, *Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 13.

¹⁹ Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, *Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 39-49. Early screenwriting teachers quoted by Bordwell without being named include Howard T. Dimick, *Modern Photoplay Writing*, (Ohio: James Knapp Reeve, 1922) and Henry Albert Phillips, *The Photodrama*, (1914; repr., Charleston: Bibliolife, 2013) and a later contributor Eugene Vale, *The Technique of Screenplay Writing*, (1944; repr., Souvenir Press, 1973).

establishment of Hollywood practices. In Staiger's words:

The sites of the distribution of these practices were material: labor, professional, and trade associations, advertising materials, *handbooks* [my emphasis], film reviews. These institutions and their discourses were mechanisms to formalize and disperse descriptive and prescriptive analyses of the most efficient production practices, the newest technologies, and best look and sound for the films.²⁰

Staiger extends this list of possible influences at another point, but makes small beer of the role of screenwriting handbooks:

Other mechanisms for standardization included ones somewhat connected to the industry – trade publications and critics and 'how to' books [my emphasis] – and ones external to the industry – college courses, newspaper reviewing, theoretical writing, and museum exhibitions.²¹

Among her general assertions, there are some more specific comments about the contribution of manual writers to the development of style:

While these mechanisms presented themselves as educational and informative, they were also prescriptive. A how-to-write-a-movie script book advised not only how it was done but how it ought to be done to ensure a sale.²²

With regard to the continuity script, which had become standard by 1914, Staiger posits that 'trade papers and 'how-to' handbooks helped to standardize its format.'²³ Staiger does make some limited reference to the trade paper discourse and cites in full a lengthy sample from *The Nickelodeon* (1909) by Archer McMackin, to indicate the type of material that appeared. However, although this is an interesting observation, the actual relevance of this kind of material, and how or why it shaped this discourse, is largely unexplored.²⁴ No real evidence is put forward to show to

²⁰ Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, *Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 89.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 106.

²² *Ibid.*, 106.

²³ *Ibid.*, 138.

²⁴ Archer McMackin, 'How moving picture plays are written', *Nickelodeon*, December 1909, 171-73; cited by

what extent manual writers influenced this development. In fact, throughout her whole discourse there is little mention of these writers, except the occasional reference to Epes Winthrop Sargent, who wrote a weekly column for the trade press publication *Moving Picture World* from 1911 until 1919. She does acknowledge that the column formed the basis of his manual, *The Technique of the Photoplay*, which first appeared in 1912, and quickly 'became a classic'.²⁵

Kristin Thompson also refers to the work of early screenwriting teachers in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, but again, only as part of her extensive narrative on the formulation of classical narrative style. She comments that:

trade journals, handbooks, and reviews disseminated and developed the norms of the classical model, while standardized studio organization was putting those norms into effect.²⁶

It is to be noted that these are cited amid a number of other influences and not singled out. Thompson also refers periodically to the work of a number of manual writers, in support of her arguments; she also usefully points out that they were part of a larger discourse on the development of classical film style, along with the contributions of writers of popular fiction and short stories, playwriting and theatrical manuals, drama critics and theorists and vaudeville writers and filmmakers. Thompson establishes some connections that were made, in the process of this discourse, between the content of screenwriting manuals and these materials. Among the more prominent manual writers mentioned are all five of the important screenwriting teachers in this study: namely, Sargent, Phillips, Leslie Tufnell Peacocke, William Lord Wright, and Eustace Hale Ball. John Nelson and Frederick Palmer are also included, although, as will be shown, their influence was limited. As with Bordwell, these individuals are frequently not directly credited in her text.²⁷ In contrast, the aim of this thesis is to consider how classical style developed with specific reference to the work of key screenwriting teachers.

All these historians refer to the screenwriting teachers only as forming part of a

Staiger in Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, *Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 107.

²⁵ Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, *Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 106.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 157-158.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 157-240.

larger discourse on screenwriting history, rather than investigating their particular and explicit value to this discourse. There is, perhaps, one exception in Thompson's more detailed discussion of the development of the concept of continuity. She says: 'Initially it occurred in the scenario columns and books.'²⁸ Thompson follows this with samples of the specific advice offered by a number of handbook writers, such as Nelson, Phillips, Sargent, and Peacocke.²⁹ She also hints at their greater significance by discussing their role in the industry:

Some of these advisors were themselves scenario editors for the production companies: their guidelines would help determine the kinds of material accepted for filming.³⁰

In her work on classical narrative technique, *Storytelling in the New Hollywood*, Thompson also mentions early screenwriting manuals, albeit fleetingly, with regard to the principles of storytelling and structure:

we can get some help from screenwriting manuals. Such manuals date back to the 1910s, when the burgeoning studios still depended heavily on freelance submissions of scripts and stories.³¹

Thompson extends her work on the development of classical style with some further research published in an anthology marking the centenary of cinema. However, this work is limited to a focus on whether there is a similarity between the way modern screenwriting gurus advise writers on 'narrative divisions and proportions' and the instruction given by early screenwriting teachers, which might also show 'rough versions of these divisions within the narrative.' To test this hypothesis, Thompson examines 'about two dozen of the early manuals' and the structure of some films from the early period, and compares them with a number of the most popular manuals of modern screenwriting gurus and with films that she assumes to have been influenced by their ideas.³² Thompson concludes that the modern gurus'

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 195.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 194-213.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 195.

³¹ Kristin Thompson, *Storytelling in the New Hollywood: Understanding Classical Narrative Technique* (London: Harvard University, 1999), 11 and 21.

³² Kristin Thompson, 'Narrative Structure in Early Classical Cinema' in *Celebrating 1895: The Centenary of Cinema*, ed. John Fullerton (Sydney: Libbey, 1998), 225-238.

emphasis on the three-act structure and the timing of the various proportions of a film can clearly be detected in the teachings of the earliest screenwriting teachers, even if it was expressed differently. She points out that:

The timing of each part [...] has remained fairly consistent between the two periods in question [and these] narrative principles [...] are simply one more instance of the remarkable stability of classical Hollywood filmmaking.³³

In summary, Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson share a common approach, in that they all make fairly frequent reference to manual writers in support of their work on the development of classical Hollywood style. However, this is always among a range of other influences and factors. There is little specific and detailed comment on how exactly these early screenwriting teachers fit into the overall picture of screenwriting development.

Another branch of historical writing should also be considered briefly, namely the antecedents of film, and how these interplayed with, and influenced, the advice contained in early screenwriting manuals. In discussion about screenplay development, some authors have traced how filmic ideas developed from the theatrical practices of vaudeville, melodrama and 'the well-made play', and more serious theatrical endeavour. Nicholas Vardac, in his treatise *Stage to Screen: Theatrical Method from Garrick to Griffith*, links early photoplay content with romantic melodrama, burlesque and farce, trick effects and realistic spectacle in late nineteenth-century theatre. However, he makes no mention of how these ideas may have impacted the thinking and writings of screenwriting teachers.³⁴ Robert Knopf's anthology, *Theatre and Film*, considers the complex historical, cultural and aesthetic relationship between theatre and film, and the effect that each had on the development of the other, but again there is no consideration of the role of the screenwriting teacher in this process.³⁵ Nonetheless, some film historians of this ilk have given some consideration to the writings of screenwriting teachers in this

³³ Ibid., 237.

³⁴ A. Nicholas Vardac, *Stage to Screen: Theatrical Method from Garrick to Griffith* (Cambridge, Harvard University, 1949), 180-233.

³⁵ Robert Knopf, 'Introduction', in *Theater and Film: A Comparative Anthology*, ed. Robert Knopf (London, Yale University, 2005), 1-20.

debate. Ben Brewster and Lea Jacobs, for example, while discussing the Aristotelian model of plot in nineteenth-century dramaturgy in *Theatre to Cinema*, refer to various screenwriting manuals alongside playwriting manuals of the period. However, although some limited comparisons are made between the various materials, they offer no extensive discussion of the link between theatrical traditions or ideas and what was contained in screenwriting manuals.³⁶ Although a detailed analysis of all these various affinities and how they ultimately came to influence the early screenwriting teachers is beyond the scope of this present work, it should be possible to draw some conclusions from the available evidence. Given that many screenwriting manuals make regular reference to theatrical and other sources of their ideas and inspiration, this at least provides a starting point for my discussion, as will be seen later in this thesis.

Tom Stempel claims that his *A History of Screenwriting in the American Film* (2000) is about 'the history of the process of screenwriting', namely, 'how screenwriting is part of the process of making films', which 'involves everything from the selection of material through to the editing, rewriting and reshooting of material in post-production.'³⁷ However, Stempel's history of screenwriting is mainly descriptive and not analytical or interpretive. It concentrates on the individual history of each screenwriter within the studio context and their particular contribution to screenwriting development. It only discusses screenwriting teachers in more detail if they have also been successful scenario writers, and then only in a limited manner.

Edward Azlant, in his unpublished doctoral dissertation, *The Theory, History and Practice of Screenwriting, 1897-1920* (1980), surveys works of theory, criticism and production history from this period of screenwriting. In his attempt to identify and define the nature and structure of the early screenplay and its role in film production, Azlant critically examines the work of one leading screenwriting teacher, selecting Sargent's *Technique of the Photoplay* for special examination as he regards his work as 'exemplary' and representative of the 'best of its kind' for the period.³⁸ He then

³⁶ Ben Brewster and Lea Jacobs, *Theatre to Cinema: Stage Pictorialism and the Early Film* (Oxford: OUP, 1997), 18-32.

³⁷ Stempel, *Framework*, xiii.

³⁸ Edward Azlant, 'The Theory, History and Practice of Screenwriting, 1897-1920' (PhD diss., Wisconsin University, 1980), 8-9, ProQuest (UMI 8111443).

tests Sargent's views by applying them in the critical analysis of what he considers to be an excellent screenplay of the time, *Selfish Yates* (1918) by C. Gardner Sullivan, which went into production under Thomas H. Ince (1917).³⁹ Aside from the fact that there is no evidence that Sullivan ever consulted Sargent's manual, Azlant concedes that focusing on one exemplary and even revered practitioner from the period has its limitations:

Such use of a single authority presents problems, including questions of whether such a testimony is representative, competent or objective. Hopefully, these problems will be moderated through investigation of the writer's background and some comparison with screenwriting manuals from the same period.⁴⁰

As Azlant's focus is on the examination of the history of screenwriting practice and not on screenwriting teachers, his concentration on one screenwriting teacher to illustrate his findings does not necessarily damage his assertions.

Significantly, Azlant points out that the number of textbooks and manuals available from this period 'is perhaps the largest body of craft instruction within the materials of film study, with over ninety books on screenwriting published in English through 1920.' Most importantly, he suggests that it is also 'the largest *unexamined* [my emphasis] body of craft instruction.'⁴¹ Azlant claims he has made 'a careful reading of over fifty screenwriting manuals,'⁴² but the supportive evidence that he cites in supposed 'comparison' of Sargent's work 'with screenwriting manuals from the same period' is largely confined to endnotes on his text. These mention the views held by various screenwriting teachers on topics such as scenario design, segmentation and continuity; but their inclusion as endnotes or summative statements means that they function merely as a contrast to Sargent's views. They do not really justify or support Azlant's decision to adopt Sargent as the locus of his research rather than other important screenwriting teachers of the period.⁴³ The other key screenwriting

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 10-11.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 209.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 212.

⁴³ Azlant refers in his endnotes to Phillips, *Photodrama*; Eustace Hale Ball, *Photoplay Scenarios: How to Write and Sell Them* (1915; repr., Eastbourne: Wildside, 2013); Emerson and Loos, *How to Write Photoplays*; J. Berg

teachers, to whom Azlant pays scant attention, are extensively considered in this study.

This thesis will also test Azlant's assertion that Sargent's views are representative of screenwriting teachers of the period, by re-examining Sargent's work alongside a more detailed analysis of the extant body of material produced by other important screenwriting teachers. A more thorough examination of a wider body of work should tell us more about the significance of the role of these teachers in the early screenwriting discourse. Given the apparently cursory nature of Azlant's treatment of other screenwriting teachers' material of the period, a more detailed investigation of these sources may indicate that his choice of Sargent as 'representative, competent or objective' is not necessarily justified.⁴⁴ It may also raise the profile and value accorded to some of these other teachers, who have remained more obscure and perhaps lacked the recognition they deserve.

Another scholar who has discussed the role of one particular screenwriting teacher is Anne Morey. In her book *Hollywood Outsiders*, Morey investigates how the Hollywood film industry interacted with the general public in the 1910s and 1920s and in particular how 'Hollywood outsiders could become members of the industry'.⁴⁵ Part of her study examines the Palmer Photoplay Corporation's correspondence school of screenwriting, which was one of the largest and most successful of these schools. However, she gives only limited consideration to the particular advice that was actually given by this school in regard to screenwriting and its value or otherwise in the Hollywood screenwriting discourse. Morey focuses more on the benefit gained in terms of personal development by the individuals who participated and how these types of self-improvement ideas fitted into American cultural history. Such a discussion of the activities of just one provider of screenwriting advice, who may or may not have been central, although it is of interest, is far from sufficient when

Esenwein and Arthur Leeds, *Writing the Photoplay* (1913; repr., London: Dodo, 2007), Arthur W. Thomas, *How to Write a Photoplay* (Chicago: Photoplaywrights' Association of America, 1914); Catherine Carr, *The Art of Photoplay Writing* (1914; repr., Charleston: Nabu, 2013), Leslie Tufnell Peacocke, *Hints on Photoplay Writing* (1916; repr., Charleston: BiblioBazaar, 2012) and Dimick, *Modern Photoplay Writing*. Azlant, 'Theory, History and Practice of Screenwriting' 270-275.

⁴⁴ Azlant, 'Theory, History and Practice of Screenwriting', 11.

⁴⁵ Anne Morey, *Hollywood Outsiders: The Adaptation of the Film Industry 1913-1934* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2003), 1.

attempting to assess the overall contribution and impact that early screenwriting teachers had on the Hollywood film industry.⁴⁶

Among other accounts, Marc Norman's *What Happens Next: A History of American Screenwriting* (2008) highlights the plight of the oft-forgotten screenwriter who provided the foundations upon which careers of directors, stars and studio bosses were built. However, this work is biographical and anecdotal, lacking in academic rigour and contains little information on, and only incidental comment about, the role of early screenwriting teachers.

Of more relevance to this study is the work of Steven Maras on screenwriting history, which charts how the written screenplay came to be understood, in industry terms, as the 'blueprint for production.' More importantly, Maras argues that 'scripting' is much broader than just the authoring of a screenplay, which is usually understood to be a separate part of the filmmaking process.⁴⁷ Maras challenges 'the logic of separating conception and execution.'⁴⁸ For him, the idea of the script as a 'blueprint for production' is merely one element that interacts with the whole dynamic process of filmmaking. His narrative on 'scripting' or screenwriting history, past and present, is pluralistic. It embraces a whole gamut of activities, such as: the application of screenwriting theory learnt through practice and historical precedent; an acknowledgement of the role of directors and auteurs, editors and story-boarders; and more recently the contribution of new digital and interactive media.⁴⁹

Maras includes some debate about the role of screenwriting teachers and their involvement in the development of this broader process. However, he limits this discussion to how screenwriting handbooks aided the professionalisation of writing for the screen and how this fits into his interpretation of the 'scripting' process. Maras provides a contextual rather than a chronological history, which attempts to present a clear analysis of exactly what it means to write for the screen. In this regard, and so

⁴⁶ Anne Morey, "'Have you the power?'" The Palmer Photoplay Corporation and the film viewer/author in the 1920s', *Film History* 9, (1997): 300-319 and *Hollywood Outsiders*, 70-111.

⁴⁷ Maras states that one of his aims is 'to create a bridge between scholarly work in film, media and screenwriting studies and practitioner-orientated discussions of craft and industry issues', in Steven Maras, *Screenwriting: History, Theory and Practice* (London: Wallflower, 2009), 1-8.

⁴⁸ Maras, *Screenwriting*, 170.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 185-186.

far as it is relevant to the development of his argument about the process of 'scripting', Maras examines the development of writing for the screen in early handbooks, and accords particular value to the works of Sargent, Howard T. Dimick and Patterson. He also quotes Wright, Peacocke, Ball and Phillips in support of his contentions, although the value of their contribution is not considered.⁵⁰

The views of Maras are embraced by this study. Of particular note is his observation that in recent times there has been a renewed interest among scholars about actual screenwriting manuals:

Film scholars and historians have become adept at looking beyond the film as text and appreciating industrial and production conditions as well as technological and trade discourses [...] supporting film practice. They have even begun to talk about screenwriting manuals.⁵¹

There are clear hints that Maras also regards early screenwriting manuals as helping to shape industry standards and an understanding of what it means to write for the screen. He suggests that 'how-to' books aimed at novices helped:

to define the shape of what qualifies, or does not, as industrial practice, as well as legitimate screenwriting; in other words, it regulates who can speak with authority and who cannot.⁵²

However, despite these assertions, the locus of Maras's research concerns other issues and he does not investigate this process thoroughly. He readily admits that this area of screenwriting history has not yet been fully understood or investigated. He also suggests that a 'comprehensive account of this output is [...] of special interest because it is a key place in which screen writing, and its industrial context, is explained to the wider public.'⁵³ Such an investigation, of at least the early period, is attempted in this study.

Bridget Conor has researched screenwriting as a 'form of creative labor' within what has been termed the 'new cultural economy,' or the current understanding of the

⁵⁰ Ibid., 89-92, 130-153 and 157-169.

⁵¹ Ibid., 19.

⁵² Ibid., 25.

⁵³ Ibid., 144.

industry context. She usefully draws attention to the 'long and particular history of professional practice' and how this 'problematizes notions of creativity, craft and authorship as they are practiced and experienced,'⁵⁴ a subject which will also receive some consideration in this thesis. As part of her study, Conor briefly surveys early screenwriting history, the role the first screenwriting teachers played in the how-to discourse, and how this was 'central in the circulation and maintenance of standards and conventions.'⁵⁵ However, she largely draws on the conclusions of Azlant and Maras as a basis for her claim that 'the codes and conventions of the form, the elements of visuality that writing for the screen required, were carved out and legitimized' in this period by these individuals.⁵⁶ This is understandable, as this is not the focus of Conor's research; however, her agreement with these scholars further underlines the importance of carrying out a full and systematic historical investigation, which will both probe and uncover more precisely the role that early screenwriting teachers played in this process.

Torey Liepa has thoroughly researched the role of the intertitle in silent film in providing exposition and dialogue and advancing the storytelling possibilities of the medium. He accords manual writers an important position in this history, but mostly only insofar as their work affects the development of intertitling. Liepa says: 'For roughly twelve years, from about 1910 until around 1922 these screenwriting, or "photoplay" manuals negotiated the proper and ideal intertitle protocol.'⁵⁷ In his doctoral dissertation, Liepa quotes Sargent extensively, noting that he began discussing the use of intertitles in his column as early as February 1912.⁵⁸ Liepa also considers the views of the other key screenwriting teachers, and his research will be considered by this study.

In a more recent article about the popular writing movement in the early 1900s, Liepa follows up on the work of Maras. He discusses the interface between the

⁵⁴ Bridget Conor, *Screenwriting: Creative Labor and Professional Practice* (Oxon: Routledge, 2014), 1.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 15-17 and 81-82.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁵⁷ Torey Liepa, 'The Sound of Silents: Representations of Speech in Silent Film,' *MiT4: The Work of Stories*, New York University, May 7, 2005, 9, *Learning Ace*, accessed March 3, 2014, <http://www.learningace.com/doc/68479/d904421577ff2a31aba0874760e184fb/liepa>

⁵⁸ Liepa, 'Figures of Silent Speech: Silent Film Dialogue and the American Vernacular, 1909-1916' (PhD diss., New York University, 2008), 148. ProQuest (UMI 3320809).

development of screenwriting practice and the burgeoning early film industry. In this respect, he makes some interesting comments about a wider range of early screenwriting manuals:

Given the diverse authorship of these volumes, taken collectively they often produced vague, contradictory and at times superficial suggestions and one should be cautious of simple confusion and charlatanism. Despite this caveat, however, the synthesis of the diverse advice found in manuals and trade journals presents a complex discourse that offers more than simply an example of journalistic opportunism, but rather a window into a chaotic moment in American cultural production.⁵⁹

The 'complex discourse' referred to by Liepa, and interrogated to some extent by Maras and other eminent scholars, requires further scrutiny and more in-depth research. It is necessary to conduct a far closer examination of these manuals and the industry context in which they operated as a subject in its own right and not as part of research with a differing focus.

Possible Reasons for the Lack of Previous Research

Within a decade of the beginning of narrative cinema, there was controversy about the activities of some of those who were offering screenwriting guidance that was of little worth. Particular scorn was reserved for the many screenwriting schools that sprang up in the first few years of the industry. Their advertisements in popular fan magazines often wildly exaggerated the potential opportunities for outsiders with claims such as 'Fame and Fortune await the ambitious'⁶⁰ or 'You can earn big money writing photo-plays.'⁶¹ *Photoplay* was so concerned about what it considered to be the bogus nature of many of these schools that it announced in an article on advertising in 1915 that it had:

⁵⁹ Liepa, 'Entertaining the Public Option: The popular film writing movement and the emergence of writing for the American Silent Cinema', in *Analyzing the Screenplay*, ed. Jill Neldes (Oxon: Routledge, 2011), 18.

⁶⁰ An advertisement from The Authors' Motion Picture School claimed that as much as \$250 could be paid for one photoplay and that one of their students had won the *Photoplay* Amateur Photoplaywrights' Contest. Another advertisement for Elbert Moore's school displayed a letter addressed to him from United Photoplays Company claiming they were clamouring for new ideas and would offer from \$10 to \$500 cash to his students for them. See *Photoplay*, November, 1914, 2 and 186-7.

⁶¹ A claim made by the Chicago Photoplay-wright College. See *MPM*, July 1914, 168.

decided to investigate the merits of the so-called motion picture schools [and] clearing houses [...]. As a result of this investigation it was decided to entirely eliminate this class of advertising.⁶²

It is worth noting that this policy soon began to slip; within a month, advertising of a different kind began to appear in *Photoplay*. It still claimed to teach photoplay writing, but with the rhetoric somewhat toned down. One school altered its heading to read 'correspondence course is not required,' no doubt to get around the ban on advertising.⁶³ Even in 1917, supposedly exaggerated claims such as: 'Hundreds of people make BIG MONEY [capitals in original] writing photoplays, stories, articles' were still commonplace, although the scope had been broadened to include other forms of writing.⁶⁴

Such schools also sparked disapproval from among the ranks of fellow and more respectable screenwriting teachers and manual writers. For example, Sargent describes those who 'profess to teach the art of photoplay writing in from six to ten lessons' as 'incompetents'.⁶⁵ It seems that the poor offerings of some so-called screenwriting teachers of the time may have shrouded the more serious and substantial work of figures such as Sargent and his contemporaries.

Harsh, negative comments from scholars about early handbooks were very common in later years. Take, for example, the offhand remarks in a *General Bibliography of the Motion Pictures* (1953):

[They] have the pretension of being guides to brilliant film careers and end up by being slightly ridiculous. These are often old books, dating back to a period anterior even to the phenomenon of stardom and the myths of the cinema. We have included them more as a curiosity than for reasons of scrupulous precision.⁶⁶

⁶² 'Scenario School Advertising,' *Photoplay*, April 1915, 114.

⁶³ The Atlas Publishing Company regularly advertised its wares on 'How to Write Moving Picture Plays' in a more moderate tone and in book form. See *Photoplay*, May 1915, 164.

⁶⁴ This text is from The Writers' Service, New York in *MPM*, December 1917, 156.

⁶⁵ Sargent, 'Progress in Photoplay Writing,' in *Motion Picture Annual and Yearbook for 1912* (New York: MPW, 1913), 18.

⁶⁶ Carl Vincent, Ricardo Redi and Franco Venturini, eds., *General Bibliography of the Motion Pictures* (1953);

Azlant suggests that such comments are typical of the attitudes that scholars have displayed towards screenwriting manuals:

They are regarded with indifference, as ostensibly lacking precise information on screenwriting and promoting specious fantasies of a glamorous career [... and such] attitudes are questionable, even uninformed, but have nonetheless acquired the status of truism in the absence of detailed examination of the manuals.⁶⁷

The way screenwriting manuals were viewed is also probably linked to the lack of recognition and credit that early writers received for writing screenplays. Azlant argues that ‘the roots of the screenplay’s neglect in film study’ could be traced to limitations in early film theory. He begins with Hugo Münsterberg’s 1916 work, *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study*, which is generally acknowledged to be the first major work in this field.⁶⁸ Münsterberg asserts that, because film is fundamentally a visual medium, it cannot be conveyed through words on a page. He even regards the use of written intertitles in the film for the purposes of dialogue or clarification as unacceptable.⁶⁹ For Münsterberg, it is only the act of collaboration that can transform the photoplay into its proper manifestation, the realm of visual imagery. This necessarily demotes the value of literary content in such works and, by implication, that of those offering advice on how to write. He comments:

the work which the scenario writer creates is in itself still entirely imperfect and becomes a complete work of art only through the action of the producer [... who] really must show himself a creative artist.⁷⁰

William Morgan Hannon, scenario editor for the Nola Film Company, also wrote an academic essay in 1915 about the relationship between film and art. Hannon exhibits a similar, though less severe, prejudice about the role of the writer:

the function of the director is by far the greatest [... it] is half ‘the show’ –

repr., New York: Arno, 1972), 115; quoted in Azlant, ‘Theory, History and Practice of Screenwriting’, 208.

⁶⁷ Azlant, ‘Theory, History and Practice of Screenwriting’, 209

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁷⁰ Hugo Münsterberg, *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study* (1916; repr., Charleston: BiblioBazaar, 2007), 103.

the author, the actors, the scenic artists, and so on, the other half.⁷¹

Erwin Panofsky, another early film theorist, supported this diminished view of writing for film by claiming ‘that the screenplay, in contrast to the theater play, has no aesthetic existence independent of its performance.’⁷² This downgrading of the scenario as a means of conveying visual ideas in a literary form had ramifications for the way screenwriters and ultimately screenwriting teachers were viewed. The devaluing of the writer meant that the pursuit of literary excellence in screenwriting became a fallacy and the craft promoted by screenwriting teachers was not taken seriously. This was despite the fact that screenwriting teachers offered important advice to writers on how to write in a visual form.

Vachel Lindsay, another pioneer of work on film aesthetics, is similarly dismissive of the more conventional work of the screenwriter. In his *The Art of the Moving Picture*, written in 1915 and revised in 1922, he offers a theoretical outline of motion picture art as an essentially visual medium. Lindsay proposes that film writing is conducted in a pictorial landscape rather than a place of verbal explanations. He advises the screenwriter that ‘[h]e can construct the outlines of his scenarios by placing [...] little pictures in rows.’⁷³

Azlant argues that the tendency of film theorists to look unfavourably upon a language-based process of design for a largely visual medium meant that the legitimacy of the screenplay as a narrative form was belittled.⁷⁴ Azlant maintains that both Lindsay’s and Münsterberg’s approach fed into the idea that only the completed narrative film or ‘its final effects, or the manner in which it is perceived or experienced by its audience’ were of any value.⁷⁵

Polan has re-evaluated the pedagogical efforts of the serious scenario teachers who set out to promote film instruction in institutions of higher learning between 1915 and

⁷¹ William Morgan Hannon, *The Photodrama: Its Place Among the Fine Arts* (1915; repr., Charleston: BiblioBazaar, 2013), 24-25.

⁷² Erwin Panofsky, ‘Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures (1934),’ in *Film Theory and Criticism*, 4th ed. Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen and Leo Braudy, eds. (Oxford: OUP, 1992), 243.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 172.

⁷⁴ Azlant, ‘Theory, History and Practice of Screenwriting’, 335.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 39.

1935. He observes how past historical accounts of screenwriting development readily acknowledge the 'often wacky ramblings' of Lindsay, whom he terms a folk poet and at best a theoretician and academic, but not a practitioner. This is in comparison with theorists and teachers who had a more direct involvement in the development of screenwriting practice, such as Victor O. Freeburg and Patterson, who ran screenwriting courses at Columbia University, and Sargent. Polan hints that the reason for this may be because Freeburg and Patterson, the first teachers of a university course, and Sargent were focusing on the more practical matter of actually helping people to succeed as photoplay writers and as a result 'their practical textbooks do not raise foundational questions in as systematic or explicit a fashion.' Ironically, according to Polan, it is Lindsay's book that becomes more formative and representative of the discipline for the period.⁷⁶

Screenwriters in the silent era garnered little respect from the artistic and literary community and in many cases they were not even credited for their work. In fact, as Maras points out, there was an overall lack of recognition of the role of the screenplay writer in the period before talking pictures were established. He notes that, in 1935, the successful Hollywood screenwriter Ernest Pascal dated screenwriting from the advent of the talking picture. Of the silent cinema, he says that 'stories were bought, but pictures were not written.'⁷⁷ This view has persisted, as for example in Ceplair and Englund (2003):

The screenwriter came to Hollywood along with 'mike' booms and the Great Depression. The advent of the 'talkie' not only capped an evolution in production methods and imposed the need for a producer to standardize moviemaking; it also created a permanent need for professional writers who could turn out shootable, full-length scripts with dialogue.⁷⁸

Azlant also observes that the negative attitude toward screenwriting manuals has perhaps meant that 'the impressive qualifications of many' of these authors have

⁷⁶ Polan, *Scenes of Instruction*, 19-20.

⁷⁷ Ernest Pascal, 'The Author of the Piece,' *The Screen Guilds' Magazine* 2, August 8 (1935): 8; quoted in Maras, *Screenwriting*, 131-132.

⁷⁸ Larry Ceplair and Steven Englund, *The Inquisition in Hollywood: Politics in the Film Community, 1930-1960* (Chicago, University of Illinois, 2003), 2.

been overlooked.⁷⁹ As my study shows, many manual writers were in fact successful journalists, short story and scenario writers with impressive lists of credits. Significantly, Azlant goes on to suggest that many of these scholars appear to have a 'seeming distance from their materials [which even suggests] the authors have not examined the books they so cavalierly dismiss.'⁸⁰ Later, this lack of recognition was compounded by the rise of the notion of the director as 'auteur' filmmaker, an approach that grew in influence from the 1960s and remains significant today, despite its shortcomings.

It is possible that the scorn expressed by some modern academics for the plethora of modern screenwriting manuals may have also influenced the way this earlier material was regarded. Comments from most leading academics about modern screenwriting handbooks tend to be evaluative in nature. They are critical of a rather simplistic approach to classical structure and its supposed negative effect on the industry. For example, Bordwell criticises what he considers their formulaic content:

Few screenplay manuals inspire confidence. If you want proof that contemporary Hollywood is formula-ridden, look no further than Syd Field's 'Paradigm,' with turning points absolutely required on script pages 25-27 and 85-90.⁸¹

Thompson is similarly unenthusiastic about their role, particularly in recent years, in which she believes their influence has been quite damaging:

The manuals usefully point up the basic techniques of classical storytelling – or at least what Hollywood practitioners think those techniques are. And these manuals have had an impact on recent classical filmmaking. Indeed, there is some evidence that by the mid-1990s some of the more formulaic advice of such manuals was actually having a negative effect on the films coming out of Hollywood.⁸²

Although Thompson claims there is 'some evidence' that manuals were encouraging 'formulaic' output from Hollywood, it is very difficult to specifically link the activities of

⁷⁹ Azlant, 'Theory, History and Practice of Screenwriting', 210.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 268.

⁸¹ Bordwell, *The Way Hollywood Tells It*, 27.

⁸² Thompson, *Storytelling in the New Hollywood*, 11.

particular screenwriting gurus with this output. She does give some examples of writers who claim to have been influenced in varying degrees by screenwriting manuals.⁸³ However, there may be many other reasons why similar types of films, dubbed 'formulaic', have emerged from Hollywood, as has arguably always been the case. Thompson admits that she has 'not attempted to survey such handbooks systematically, since they often repeat the same information with minor variations.'⁸⁴ A thorough survey of the material would at least have been a starting point for these strong assertions.

A more sympathetic examination of the work of early screenwriting teachers should yield a more balanced and even-handed understanding, not only of the content of their manuals, but also of the contribution they made to the development of early screenwriting practice and the wider Hollywood film industry. In the light of these findings, it may also be possible to make some tentative comment about the recent spate of screenwriting manuals and their value or otherwise to the industry.

Research Methodology

Historians who are more specifically interested in screenwriting history have tended to concentrate on the process of how screenwriting itself developed and came about. There has never been any extensive or more specific research on what led to, or what adequately explains, the phenomenon of the early screenwriting teacher within this process. This project is the first comprehensive investigation of the activity of early screenwriting teachers during this period of screenwriting history. It explores the causal factors that led to their existence, or encouraged them to thrive or otherwise; their connections with the infant film industry; and the importance of their function and role within that industry as it developed. It also attempts to assess what they bequeathed to the industry in terms of the development of the screenplay form and the process of educating screenwriters. To make this possible, it has been necessary to construct a critical history of the early screenwriting teachers by

⁸³ The most extreme example Thompson gives is Hamilton Phelan, screenwriter of *Mask* (1985) and *Gorillas in the Mist* (1988) who claims she has virtually memorised *Screenplay* by Syd Field. From an interview in William Froug, *The New Screenwriter Looks at the New Screenwriter* (Los Angeles: Silman-James, 1991), 20; quoted in Thompson, *Storytelling in the New Hollywood*, 23-25.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p.11.

extracting and distilling information from respected and available past and modern film history sources.

In exploration of a fuller understanding of their role, one potential line of enquiry would have been to examine the influence that these screenwriting teachers might have had on specific examples of screenwriting practice at the time. Stempel points out that the effect of screenwriting teachers on those who wrote in Hollywood is under-researched. He wants to know the result of the 'influence of the study of screenwriting on screenwriting is as it is actually practiced.'⁸⁵ However, the effectiveness, or otherwise, of screenwriting teachers in shaping or influencing the thinking of screenwriters on specific film projects is very difficult to assess in earlier periods, just as much as it would be today. It is not possible to analyse accurately the degree to which screenwriting teachers have influenced screenwriters directly, as there are too many complexities and variables in the creative process. Nor would either examining the films they have written or contacting them directly (even if that were possible) necessarily provide accurate information about this. Moreover, regarding the early period it would be difficult to uncover any valid opinions, as all those involved have long since passed away and documentary evidence of this nature seems to be in short supply. The inability to establish direct links between screenwriting teachers and industry practice have to be mitigated by a broader contextual study of the historical evidence as it presents itself. This will provide the basis for a more fruitful line of research.

In objectively studying and uncovering the history of these screenwriting teachers and attempting to account for their work, it may be possible to illuminate more fully the avenues and spheres of influence in which they operated. This will in turn help to contextualise their work and perhaps permit a more reasoned, although not definitive, analysis of their role in the development of screenwriting practice.

Therefore, this thesis focuses on the factors that led to the existence of screenwriting teachers in the early period of screenwriting history and the role they played in, or in relation to, the industry. It does not enter into an evaluative debate about whether

⁸⁵ Stempel, *Framework*, 263.

one screenwriting teacher offered more valuable writing solutions than another, as that is not directly relevant to an objective examination of the role of the early screenwriting teacher. Nevertheless, it does not necessarily exclude consideration of the reasons why one particular manual or body of instruction may have had more appeal or been more successful than another, if this can be determined from the historical evidence and the wider cultural factors that were in operation at the time.

In the light of more recent interest from the general public in learning how to write screenplays and the spate of available screenwriting gurus to teach them, it may also be possible to draw some interesting parallels between the experience of the would-be screenwriter of today and their counterparts in the fledgling Hollywood film industry a century ago. Although this is not the primary purpose of this study, some interesting links between these two periods are considered and some limited comparison does, I believe, furnish greater understanding of the role and contribution of screenwriting teachers in a broader context.

Hence, this study pursues the three areas of investigation expressed in the title of the thesis: the origins, contribution and legacy of early screenwriting teachers.

1. The origins of early screenwriting teachers are investigated by examining the theoretical sources from which they drew, the industrial context from which they emerged and the causes of the 'scenario fever' that initiated their appearance.
2. The contribution of early screenwriting teachers is explored by tracing the appearance of the first screenwriting teachers, with reference to criteria that distinguish between peripheral teachers and those key screenwriting teachers who are likely to have played a more central role in the industry. This is followed by critically examining the advice that these particular key screenwriting teachers gave on how to train for, write for, and sell to the industry, alongside an assessment of their overall contribution to the industry.
3. The legacy of early screenwriting teachers is reviewed by considering their equivalence to modern screenwriting 'gurus', their involvement in the evolution of the screenplay and their links to the roots of the education of the more recent screenwriter.

My study is based on detailed primary research and scrutiny of fan and trade press

journals, handbooks and trade publications from the period. The screenwriting manuals of five screenwriting teachers, whose work can be justifiably demonstrated to be representative of, and of key significance for, the period, are analysed in detail. Other relevant manuals are also considered, where there is a significant difference of approach. This process helps to identify the main ideas that were prevalent during the period and to show why, and in what way, they were important to the industry at the time. It also indicates whether those ideas substantially changed, or remained more or less constant throughout the period, and why either might be the case.

This research provides a deeper understanding of how screenwriting teachers interacted with the industry during the period under study and explores whether or not they had a central or more marginal role within it. It also provides an opportunity to give some consideration to what these manuals argue and, broadly, where this material came from. This involves the examination of more proximate sources and concrete models from which these manuals drew, such as ancient and modern dramatic theory, theatre, vaudeville, journalistic and short fiction, photography and early film theorists.

The evidence provided in this thesis suggests that the key screenwriting teachers identified here played a significant part in the developing discourse about early screenwriting practice – a part that is likely to have shaped that practice itself. Their presence and roles within and around the industry gave their ideas important currency, not just generally, but at a key formative moment in the shaping of that practice (a period, therefore, in which the presence of their advice at the heart of the industry was more than usually likely to be able to influence the direction of practice). This provides a reasonable basis for arguing that they performed a more central role in this on-going process, rather than occupying the peripheral or insignificant position that has often been claimed in the past. This is the case, this thesis argues, despite the fact that it remains impossible to prove a direct one-to-one link between any specific teacher and particular screenwriters or individual films, for reasons that will be explained.

This project offers a more complete picture of the history of key early screenwriting teachers and their role in the development of screenwriting than has previously been

available. It includes a fuller explanation of why they existed, their likely level of influence, and their apparent function in this early period of screenwriting history. This is achieved by investigating the sources of their main ideas and how these interacted with, and evolved within, the industry. The result is a more balanced and context-bound understanding than has previously been available of the origins, contribution and legacy of the early screenwriting teachers in the development of screenwriting and of the nascent Hollywood film industry.

PART ONE - ORIGINS

Previous historical accounts have tended to tell the story of the birth of the Hollywood film industry from the perspective of individual innovators or movie moguls, crediting them as the key agents of change. Over the last three decades, some film historians have challenged this historical bias with a new film history that has demonstrated that commercial drive and significant economic forces were important factors at work and that these provide a better contextual framework for understanding the roles of the key participants, traditionally understood to be studio heads, film producers and directors.¹

Charles Musser claims that: 'the history of early cinema cannot be a history of its films alone' and that: 'Fitting the film product [...] into this larger practice has required extensive research and a new approach.'² Musser argues that corporate power, rather than the maverick entrepreneur, was the main driver:

The motion-picture industry exemplified a general trend toward larger commercial units and a hierarchical structure [...] and] the very dynamics of change that favored consolidation and rationalization frequently worked against those in a dominant position.³

Eileen Bowser takes a similar approach and notes that entrepreneurial activity increased greatly in just a few years. Innovation in every field was inspired by opportunity, and the potential market value was enormous for those who succeeded. Bowser comments:

the film business itself changed from a hand-crafted amusement enterprise and sideshow to a gigantic entertainment industry and the first

¹ The first recorded use of the term 'New Film History' was in an article in 1985 by Thomas Elsaesser that noted 'the tendency of recent scholarly works to move beyond film history as just the history of films and to consider how film style and aesthetics were influenced, even determined, by economic, industrial and technological factors.' See Chapman, Glancy and Harper, 'Introduction,' *The New Film History*, 5-6. This new approach is typified in Bordwell, Thompson and Staiger, *Classical Hollywood Cinema* and Allen and Gomery, *Film History*, both published in 1985.

² Charles Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907* (London: University of California, 1994), 495.

³ *Ibid.*, 492.

mass communication medium.⁴

These film historians have redressed an imbalance by pointing out that economic and technological factors were far more at play than previously thought. Success in America was both individually and collectively inspired, and a balance must be struck between the two. Proper recognition is due to those individuals who, through their subjective motives and conscious actions, brought about change; however, as sociologists remind us, that change must also be attributed to collective forces in society expressed through culture, ideology, power structures, religious sentiment and stratification.⁵ The New Film History paradigm not only takes industrial and technological factors into account, but also considers the impact of external agencies such as censors and funders and all the collaborative efforts of the individuals who contribute to filmmaking.⁶ This breadth of approach must also be adopted when considering the history of screenwriting: it was from this cauldron and maelstrom of rapid economic activity, cultural development and intellectual capital that the craft of writing for the screen was born and the screenwriting teacher first emerged.

This study considers both early scenarists and early screenwriting teachers worthy of consideration as potential key participants in these developments. Despite the historical reassessment that has taken place, revisionist film historians have still tended to ignore the role played by the early scenarist in this process and, as a concomitant, the early screenwriting teacher has suffered a similar fate. Azlant's research on screenwriting before 1920 has done much to address this. He dubs the early screenwriters 'forgotten pioneers' and rightly credits the early scenarist with a greater role.⁷ Restoring the status of these early writers also opens up the prospect

⁴ Eileen Bowser, *The Transformation of Cinema: 1907-1915* (London: University of California, 1990), xi.

⁵ The sociologist Malcolm Waters argues that social theory must embrace both the actions of the individual and the collective forces that exist in a society. Individuals are motivated by 'agency' (subjective meanings or reasons) and 'rationality' (the accomplishment of specific conscious objectives). The collective forces of culture, ideology, power structures, religion and stratification are variously argued to exist in the collective unconscious mind and in symbolic relationships of myth and language, but also in the 'integrated wholes' or 'systems' in society. See Malcolm Waters, *Modern Sociological Theory* (London: Sage, 1994), 11-12.

⁶ Allen and Gomery 'identify four approaches to film history – aesthetic, technological, economic and social', which are all-embracing. See Chapman, Glancy and Harper, eds., 'Introduction,' in *The New Film History*, 6.

⁷ Azlant notes that earlier film historians such as Kevin Brownlow and David Robinson virtually write off the role of early scenario writers. He quotes Brownlow as saying that early films were 'shot in a couple of days by directors who had a rough idea of the story and who improvised as they went along.' See Kevin Brownlow, *The Parade's Gone By* (London: Columbus, 1968), 270. He exposes Robinson's simplistic comments about Ince, who

of raising the profile of those who supported and nurtured their talent. As already discussed, Azlant has also added some credence to the role of screenwriting teachers, by using the work of Sargent to illuminate the status of the screenplay and how it had developed up until 1920. However, there still remains much to be done in order properly to accord Sargent and other important early screenwriting teachers their correct role in the development of writing for the screen.

With this in mind, it is important to remember that screenwriting teachers were both victims and beneficiaries of the individualism prevalent at the time and of its subsequent historical interpretation. During the period in which they operated, they became minor celebrities and were seen as pioneers in their own right. However, the teleological version of film history which ensued tended to credit successful movie moguls with the creation of the film industry; it sidelined writers and, as a consequence, the achievements of screenwriting teachers were also overshadowed. The revisionist version of film history that takes into account the corporate nature of the film industry now needs to widen its embrace to include them. First, it is important to correct the historical record and recognise the individual achievements of these teachers, which up until now have been overlooked. Second, in the spirit of the New Film History, any retelling of the history of these teachers must be properly examined within the context in which they operated, which also in large part accounts for their existence.

Probing for 'origins,' according to Maras, 'can have the tendency to "fix" the landscape in particular ways, leading to a reductive view of the development [...] of screenwriting.'⁸ This is an inclination that needs to be carefully guarded against. However, by way of balance, Steven Price has pointed out that 'posing the question can [...] also] function as a worthwhile heuristic device, a means of opening up [...] more substantial questions.'⁹ Price, likewise, is speaking of questions regarding the history of the screenplay. Similarly, if we search for the origins of screenwriting teachers, which is an investigation closely related to the history of screenplay

'is credited with introduction of the film scenario.' See David Robinson, *The History of World Cinema* (New York: Stein and Day, 1974), 71. Azlant demonstrates that screenwriting proper began much earlier in Azlant, 'Screenwriting for the Early Silent Cinema: Forgotten Pioneers, 1907-1911,' *Film History* 9, (1977): 228-256.

⁸ Maras, *Screenwriting*, 29.

⁹ Steven Price, *A History of the Screenplay* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 22.

development, without exercising some degree of caution, there is a danger that nothing worthwhile will result. After all, trying to find the origins of anything is a very complex process. However, if the approach to discovering the origins of the screenwriting teacher is narrowly focused on searching for literary and theatrical connections, and on examining the industrial context they emerged from and the phenomenon of 'scenario fever' they were caught up in, it could offer valuable insights and be a means of unlocking this important subject area within the history of screenwriting.

1. Literary and Theatrical Sources

Early screenwriters, and those who instructed them, drew from multifarious sources and were mindful of the prevailing forms of entertainment of the period. They were subject to the influence of pantomime, masques and pageants, vaudeville, stage drama, music (even though film was silent), painting, sculpture, comic strips, novels and short story writing, architecture, the illustrated lecture and photography. The early film theorist, Freeburg, suggests that the 'new art' of the 'motion picture play' inherited characteristics from most of these sources. He says: 'a photoplay is a very complicated thing, involving many elements of expression and many principles of composition.'¹⁰ Recent scholars such as Azlant also point out that film writing emerged from a fusion of various elements:

Early screenwriting borrows much in concept, practice, personnel and instruction from the theatre [...], from literature, the graphic arts, vaudeville and [...] journalism.¹¹

Thompson also affirms that film drew from a number of sources:

models for structuring a film came, not from drama and fiction in general, but specifically from late nineteenth-century norms of those forms [...] which lingered on in popular stories, plays and novels.¹²

My aim in this section is to be more specific and trace some of these influences more directly, as an important part of the background context of early screenwriting and of those who taught it.

There is a great deal of evidence that there was a cross-fertilisation of the propagation of various literary skills. For example, some screenwriting teachers also wrote story-writing manuals. J. Berg Esenwein and Arthur Leeds authored *Writing the Photoplay*, but Esenwein was also editor of *The Writers' Monthly* and wrote manuals on short story writing, public speaking and children's stories. Esenwein's

¹⁰ Victor Oscar Freeburg, *The Art of Photoplay Making* (1918; repr., Forgotten Books, 2012), 4-5.

¹¹ Azlant draws on Musser's research, which shows that early film was influenced by popular culture, including comic strips, dime novels, popular songs, the magic lantern, vaudeville and theatre. Azlant, 'Screenwriting for the Early Silent Film,' *Film History* 9, (1997): 228-229.

¹² Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, *Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 172.

manual *Writing the Short Story* was regularly advertised in photoplay journals.¹³ It was recommended by Sargent, one of the key screenwriting teachers examined in this study, and also, as an aid to the study of plot, by Charlton Andrews, author of *The Technique of Play Writing*.¹⁴ Andrews describes the process of preparing a theatrical scenario, which should 'set forth the gist of a drama to one who may possibly be interested in its production.' For the photoplay author, this would have been the studio editor. Andrews claims that the scenario was like a one-act play or 'a condensed version of the longer play, partaking of the tabloid features of the playlet.'¹⁵

Much of the process of preparing scripts for the theatre had transferred itself to cinema. There were distinct similarities between the idea of the scenario in drama and the photoplay, just as the full version of a play would have similarities to a film continuity script. Phillips, another of the key screenwriting teachers of this study, wrote *The Plot of the Short Story* (1912) and *Art in Short Story Narration* (1913). These works were advertised as 'A Valuable Aid to Successful Photoplaywriting' in the fan press and were again endorsed by Sargent as useful for photoplaywrights.¹⁶ The playwright and critic Brander Matthews claimed of *The Plot of the Short Story* that he had 'read the book with continued interest'.¹⁷ This is further indication of the level of crossover of disciplines. Thompson confirms that:

The short story provided classical models upon which the early films could draw [... as] short films tended to follow the short story's pattern of a steadily rising action leading to a climax late in the plot.¹⁸

However, the evidence shows that by far the most powerful influence on the filmic process was theatrical practice. Patrick Loughney goes as far as to say that the best way to understand the development of narrative film before 1915 was to see that the

¹³ See advertisements for The Home Correspondence School in *Photoplay*, June 1916, 175 and *MPM*, June 1915, 5.

¹⁴ Sargent, 'The Photoplaywright,' *MPW*, November 9, 1918, 660 and Charlton Andrews, *The Technique of Play Writing* (1915; repr., Michigan: University of Michigan, 2013), 45.

¹⁵ Andrews, *Technique of Play Writing*, 201-211.

¹⁶ Advertisement from Caldron Publishing, New York in *MPSM*, July 1913, 155 and Sargent, 'The Photoplaywright,' *MPW*, February 7, 1914, 670.

¹⁷ Advertisement, in 'Art in Short Story Narration' in Phillips, *Photodrama*, 222.

¹⁸ Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, *Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 167-168.

“theatrical writing” forms of the *playscript* and *scenario* [...] evolved as the organizational elements essential to the production of all performing media decades before the advent of motion pictures.¹⁹ In other words, they were not unique to film, but were grounded in theatrical practice. The terminology that the industry used to describe film writing always included the word ‘play’: Maras lists the most common terms used as ‘photoplaywright,’ ‘photoplay writer,’ ‘photoplay dramatist’ or ‘screen-playwright’ as evidence of this connection.²⁰ The uses of the terms ‘screen,’ and ‘play’ have fostered the idea of this link between theatre and film as a continuum, even today. Those who wrote in the trade press at the time certainly saw a strong connection between writing for the theatre and for film. As early as 1910, the writer Thomas Bedding makes this clear:

A long course of theatergoing, and an apprenticeship to the moving picture development, has taught me [to] study the people around [me] see what they like and why they like it. Then go home and write [the] play.²¹

Others not only saw the connection between theatre and film very clearly, but also understood its potential. Carl Charlton, a play manual writer of the period, comments in 1916: ‘With the advent of the moving pictures a new field in play-wrighting was opened up – and one in which there is increasing demand.’²² Another writer, Richard Sylvester, wrote about this in *The Drama Magazine* in 1918 and equates the work of the screenwriter with that of the playwright:

The time is not far distant when the photo-dramatist will be the important individual in the studio. The director, the scenic artist, the actors, as well as the joiner, will then do his bidding. They will do all in their power to produce the playwright’s play in the manner in which he intended it to be presented, just as is now done on the legitimate stage.²³

The connection between theatre and film was strengthened by the flow of personnel

¹⁹ Patrick G. Loughney, ‘In the Beginning Was the Word: Six Pre-Griffith Motion Picture Scenarios’ in *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*, eds., Thomas Elsaesser and Adam Barker (London: BFI, 1990), 211.

²⁰ Maras, *Screenwriting*, 82.

²¹ Thomas Bedding, ‘The Dramatic Moment,’ *MPW*, March 12, 1910, 372.

²² Carl Charlton, *How to Write Photoplays* (1916; repr., Philadelphia: BiblioBazaar, 2012), 13.

²³ Richard Sylvester, ‘The New Art of the Photoplay-dramatist,’ *The Drama*, February 1918, 101.

between the two mediums. John Tibbetts points out that ‘theatrical entrepreneurs, from as early as 1896, actively worked with film personnel on all levels of movie making.’²⁴ Other prominent figures in the theatre were also beginning to see the possibilities of film narrative. Clayton Hamilton, playwright, critic and author,²⁵ writing in 1911, avers that ‘the kinematograph [offers] many possibilities of narrative which lie far beyond the range of the restricted stage of the ordinary writer.’²⁶ Many actors, directors and writers with a theatrical background had entered the industry. Ted Nannicelli observes that William C. De Mille had begun his career in the theatre and saw writing for film as a kind of dramatic writing. According to Nannicelli:

De Mille [...] had transferred his scenario writing experience in the theater to scenario writing for films [...] and] helped institute narrative norms for film writing that were based on principles of dramatic construction he had learned in the theater and from his study under Brander Matthews at Columbia University.²⁷

Matthews was very enthusiastic about film and had so expanded the Columbia arts curriculum that it would pave the way for photoplay courses to be taught at the university under the film theorist, Freeburg.²⁸

Many screenwriting teachers, including the key screenwriting teachers of this study, would also have a strong theatrical pedigree and would apply their theatrical understanding to the medium of film writing.

Theatrical Legacy

It is too simplistic to affirm the connection between playwriting for the theatre and early screenwriting teachers without unpacking the various strains of influence. A scholarly debate has taken place over the last few decades on the interdependent

²⁴ John C. Tibbetts, *The American Theatrical Film* (Ohio: Bowling Green State University, 1985), 1.

²⁵ Hamilton lectured at Columbia and worked for Goldwyn Studios as an editor. See *The New York Public Library Rare Books and Manuscripts Division: Accession Sheet 1955, Biographical Note*, http://archives.nypl.org/uploads/collection/pdf_finding_aid/hamiltonc.pdf

²⁶ Clayton Hamilton, ‘The Art of the Moving Picture,’ *Nickelodeon*, January 14, 1911, 51.

²⁷ Ted Nannicelli, *The Philosophy of the Screenplay* (London: Routledge, 2013), 103-104.

²⁸ Peter Decherney, *Hollywood and the Culture Elite: How the Movies Became American* (New York: Columbia University, 2005), 53.

relationship between theatrical practice and early film, and it still continues. Raffaele Chiarulli recognises that defining ‘the relationship between the forms of theatre and those of cinema overall would mean to unravel a very complex pot of exchanges, connections and negotiations.’²⁹ Tracing the intricacy of this relationship and its precise history via the views of many scholars is beyond the reach of this study. However, the important issues that some have raised do merit investigation, as they have some bearing on the understanding of the role that screenwriting teachers played as important contributors to the discourse on film writing. Most of these scholars fall into one of two camps and emphasise either the melodramatic or the classical elements in theatre as most influential. It is necessary to digress at this point to consider scholarly opinion on these influences, as it has a bearing on the instruction that early screenwriting teachers imparted.

Melodramatic Elements

A number of scholars have attempted to analyse the relationship between melodrama and film. However, this analysis is complicated by the fact that, although there is some degree of consensus, there is no complete agreement on what actually constitutes melodrama. Scholars tend to focus either on what they consider to be its plot, or on its visual characteristics. Steve Neale points out that Thomas Elsaesser’s seminal 1972 article on the subject, which draws on the original definition of melodrama as ‘a dramatic narrative in which the musical accompaniment marks the emotional effects,’ perhaps gives the most useful definition, because melodramatic elements can:

be seen as a system of punctuation, giving expressive colour and chromatic contrast to the storyline, by orchestrating the ups and downs of the intrigue.³⁰

²⁹ Raffaele Chiarulli, ‘Strong Curtains and Dramatic Punches: The Legacy of Playwriting and the Debate on the Three-act Model in the Screenwriting Manuals of the Studio Era,’ Screenwriting Research Network Conference, October 16-19, 2014, Potsdam, Berlin.

³⁰ Thomas Elsaesser, ‘Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama’ in *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Women’s Film*, ed. E. A Kaplan (London: BFI, 1987), 50; cited in Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (London: Routledge, 2000), 183. Melodrama originated from the early 19th-century French word *mélodrame*, which is derived from the Greek *melos* or music, and the French *drame* or drama (from Late Latin *drāma*, which in turn derives from the Greek *drān*, to do, perform).

Neale summarises these melodramatic effects in terms of how the story is plotted. It will comprise an 'unequivocal dramatic conflict between good and evil' that results in the 'triumph' of the good. The principal characters will comprise a 'hero, heroine and villain' who will be drawn into a 'hyperbolic aesthetic' where 'motive, emotion and passion [are] laid bare.' It will be an 'episodic, formulaic and action packed plot' where the 'initiation, development and resolution' are driven by the villain and there will be many 'reversals and recognitions,' which are dependent on 'fate, chance and coincidence.'³¹

Koszarski agrees that: 'Melodrama continued to represent the dominant stylistic mode in Hollywood all through the silent period' and also defines it mainly in terms of plot.³² Here Koszarski draws out its relevance for short films:

the limited narrative capabilities of the silent short film severely restricted what might be accomplished in terms of characterization or thematic development. Early filmmakers inevitably turned to the melodramatic tradition for instant characterization of heroes and villains, simple dramatic confrontations that could be powerfully sketched in visual terms, and familiar thematic structures invoking traditional nineteenth-century ideals.³³

Koszarski goes on to say that even a feature film such as *Birth of a Nation* (1914) was little 'more than a super-melodrama, offering the same heroes and villains, the same image of the family endangered, and the same inevitable victory of good over evil.'³⁴ Koszarski also points out that the characters do not ultimately change, and: 'Instead of psychological realism, what the film offers are characters who are true to type.'³⁵ Bordwell also recognises that Hollywood borrowed from 'melodrama's stock' character types that have 'sharply delineated and unambiguous traits' and the 'formula of hero versus villain' leading to 'two lines of action' of 'cause and effect'

³¹ Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, 196.

³² Richard Koszarski, *An Evening's Entertainment: The Age of the Silent Feature Picture, 1915-1928* (London: University of California, 1994), 182.

³³ *Ibid.*, 181.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 181.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 181.

with characters 'defined by goals.'³⁶

Other scholars have tended to concentrate more on the visual aspects. Vardac was the first scholar to explore the close historical relationship between theatre and film. He argues in *Stage to Screen* (1949) that 'proto-cinematic' techniques were already evident in nineteenth-century theatre. He states that: 'The necessity for greater pictorial realism in the arts of theatre appears as the logical impetus to the invention of cinema.'³⁷ Theatrical pictorialism characterised Victorian melodrama, pantomime and Shakespearean productions. According to Schoch:

Pictorial *mise-en-scène* entailed elaborate scenery [...] vivid costumes and properties, spectacular scenic and lighting effects and the frequent use of tableaux vivants [living pictures].³⁸

Vardac believed that the theatre was striving to create even greater spectacular effects without the appropriate technology – effects that would eventually be realised in cinema. He claims that once this technology was in place, the 'motion picture finally made its appearance in response to the insistence of social pressure for a greater pictorial realism in the theatre.'³⁹ Although Vardac's interpretation is far-fetched, his observation that cinema was influenced by the pictorial elements of melodrama is important.

In a similar vein, John Fell also believes that 'early films largely cannibalised the innards of the [previous] century's theatrical melodrama' for their visual material.⁴⁰ He claims that 'in the motion pictures there surfaced an entire tradition of narrative technique which had been developing unsystematically for a hundred years.' The melodramatic tradition was a conglomeration of many visual technologies that had been drawn from sources such as 'theater, print, optical amusements and "shows,"

³⁶ Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, *Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 13-16.

³⁷ Vardac, *Stage to Screen*, xx.

³⁸ See Richard Schoch, ed., *Great Shakespearians: Macready, Booth, Irving, Terry*, (London: Continuum, 2011), 4.

³⁹ Vardac, *Stage to Screen*, xxv.

⁴⁰ John Fell, *Film and the Narrative Tradition* (Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma, 1974), 12.

and graphics (comics, engraving, lithography, photography, painting).⁴¹

Brewster and Jacobs contend that the need to tell stories visually meant that film naturally leant towards the pictorialism that Vardac identifies in early film. They claim that after 1910, when the demand for longer films grew, filmmakers strove to be theatrical and readily assimilated pictorial realism.⁴² According to Brewster and Jacobs, the nineteenth-century ‘model of plot [was] a series of discrete moments called “situations.” Each ‘situation’ was a particular conjunction of circumstances in which the characters were presented in a striking or exciting way through poses or tableaux. Thus, those involved in ‘script construction for films [...] made use of a conception of plot’ that had been inherited from playwrights. These ‘situations’ were pictorial or visual representations and could be characterised in theatrical parlance as ‘a deadlock, a temporary suspension of the action, a point of equilibrium among the forces that propel the narrative.’⁴³ They point out that: ‘The photoplay-writing manuals make similar definitions of the situation as that which precedes or delays action.’⁴⁴ The most common of these ‘is in terms of suspense.’⁴⁵ Brewster and Jacobs argue that:

pictorial effects developed along the lines of theatrical models were important because they provided ways of underscoring the dramatic action and punctuating the scene’s duration.⁴⁶

Evidence of this can be found in photoplay manuals. In particular, the focus on plot taxonomy, which involved the creation of categorised lists of dramatic conundrums, was a sign of situational thinking that developed out of this more pictorial approach. As Brewster and Jacobs point out:

this way of thinking of plot construction gives rise to attempts to derive a narrative lexicon – a comprehensive list of the situations of which all

⁴¹ Ibid., xv.

⁴² See Brewster and Jacobs, *Theatre to Cinema*, 3-15.

⁴³ Ibid., 20-24.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 23.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 30.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 29.

known plots, and all the as yet unwritten plots [that] are comprised.⁴⁷

Brewster and Jacobs cite Frederick Palmer's *The Photoplay Plot Encyclopedia* and Wycliffe A. Hill's *Ten Million Photoplay Plots* as evidence of how this approach had crept into screenwriting instruction.⁴⁸ Palmer had summarised the meaning of the 'situation' as:

when the characters are so brought together that their contrasts and conflicts are clear and dramatic, that the central character is placed in a dilemma in which he must make a choice, or in a predicament in which a change will be suffered, or is confronted with an obstacle to overcome.⁴⁹

However, Brewster and Jacobs fail to mention Phillips in their work; he is one of the important screenwriting teachers examined in this study, and this form of situational dramaturgy can also be evidenced in his understanding of 'sequence'. Phillips claims, 'The minor incidents of suspense [...] contribut[e] an element of suspense to the main theme that will be felt in the climax itself.'⁵⁰ Phillips also produced *The Universal Plot Catalogue* (1920) for screenwriters, containing countless lists of 'incidents', and this became widely available. The fact that Phillips also endorses this kind of approach lends validation to Brewster and Jacobs's observations.

Brewster and Jacobs also point out that the narrative mode was not abandoned, but there was an attempt 'to reconcile an analysis of plot in terms of situation with the norms of narrative continuity and logic.' In order to avoid 'the kind of criticism that Aristotle makes of the episodic plot [...] close] attention to the motivation and resolution of situations [was] frequently recommended.'⁵¹ 'Situations' were effectively embedded in a structure with a beginning, middle and end.

Ben Singer views as limiting, Brewster and Jacobs's notion of 'situation' or 'arrested or suspended action' as the defining element of melodrama. Singer claims that melodramas do not always involve shocking reversals, revelations or deadlocks and

⁴⁷ Ibid., 23.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 23

⁴⁹ Frederick Palmer, *Photoplay Plot Encyclopedia* (Los Angeles: Palmer Photoplay, 1922), 12; cited in Brewster and Jacobs, *Theatre to Cinema*, 23.

⁵⁰ Phillips, *Photodrama*, 163-164.

⁵¹ Brewster and Jacobs, *Theatre to Cinema*, 24.

'situations' are not always 'an intense, climactic plight that is crystallized in a flash and, after a moment of suspense, broken to allow another thrill to develop.'⁵² By way of support, Neale also challenges the situational model as inadequate because, although 'deadlocks' or 'a temporary suspension of the action' would seem to 'render the characters involved powerless, passive or vulnerable,' the villains in melodrama 'are never characterized as powerless' but are constantly active.⁵³

Singer admits that pinning down the precise meaning of melodrama is difficult, so he defines it as a 'cluster concept', identifying its five key elements as: 'strong pathos' (powerful feelings of pity); 'overwrought emotion' (expressions of raw feeling); 'moral polarization' (extreme representations of good and evil); 'non-classical narrative structure' (implausibility and coincidence in plotting); and 'sensationalism' (thrilling spectacle).⁵⁴ Neale acknowledges Singer's 'cluster concept' as useful and accepts that, with its:

distinct aesthetic features and traditions, all of which found their way into the cinema [...] nineteenth-century melodrama, in all its guises, was both a fundamental progenitor of nearly all of Hollywood's non-comic genres, and a fundamental source of many of its cross-generic features, devices and conventions.⁵⁵

No real agreement emerges, but the fact that some scholars take a broader, more inclusive approach to the concept of melodrama is probably helpful. Indeed, as Bratton, Cook and Gledhill acknowledge, 'the protean nature of melodrama [...] as it shifts between forms, cultures and decades' should be recognised alongside 'cinema's relation to its melodramatic inheritance.'⁵⁶ However, it is understood that melodrama was an important element in early film. Rick Altman indicates that the recognition of melodramatic influences is a necessary corrective, since he claims Bordwell and Thompson have paid:

⁵² Ben Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and Its Contexts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 43.

⁵³ Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, 197-198.

⁵⁴ Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity*, 44-49.

⁵⁵ Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, 201-202.

⁵⁶ Jacky Bratton, Jim Cook and Christine Gledhill, 'Introduction,' in Bratton, Cook and Gledhill, eds., *Melodrama: Stage, Picture, Screen* (London: BFI, London, 1994), 1.

little attention to the possible contribution of melodramatic material to the classical paradigm. This repression of popular theater has the effect of denying Hollywood cinema its fundamental connection to popular traditions and to their characteristic forms of spectacle and narrative.⁵⁷

Marc Norman draws attention to the insightful comments of Elmer Rice, a young playwright signed by Samuel Goldwyn, which elucidate the reasons for, and the importance of, this connection:

The absence of dialogue and rather limited aesthetic and intellectual capacity of the mass audience for whose entertainment films were designed necessitated a concentration upon scenes of action: melodramatic, comic, erotic. Wit and poetry were of course excluded.⁵⁸

The result of such writing requirements would mean that melodramatic influences would form the backdrop of much of the instruction in early screenwriting manuals.

Classical Elements

The locus of John Tibbetts's research in 1982 was in showing how important 'theatrical film' was to early cinema. As the demand for story material grew, producers and writers increasingly turned to the adaptation of plays and literature into scenarios. Tibbetts challenges Vardac's ideas by claiming that these writers went much further than simply imitating popular theatre forms such as vaudeville and melodrama, and that the narrative tradition of 'well-made plays as important models' should also be included.⁵⁹ He argues that these play structures formed the basis of the narrative which ultimately became a plank of Hollywood style.

To begin with, early narrative films attempted to replicate theatrical experience by just presenting parts of, or familiar scenes from, a play. In these theatrical films, the camera position was static, which 'preserved the illusion that the audience was

⁵⁷ Rick Altman, 'Dickens, Griffith, and Film Theory Today' in *Classical Hollywood Narrative: The Paradigm Wars*, ed. Jane Gaines (Durham: Duke University, 1992), 25.

⁵⁸ Norman, *What Happens Next*, 62. Norman quotes from Elmer Rice, *Minority Report: An Autobiography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1963), 173.

⁵⁹ John Tibbetts, 'The Stage/Screen Exchange: Patterns of Imitation in Art: 1896-1930' (PhD diss., Kansas University, 1982), 14. ProQuest (UMI 8301749).

watching players on a large stage from a fixed vantage point.⁶⁰ Tibbetts points out that there was a growing disillusionment with theatrical films by the early teens of the twentieth century. He cites a growing chorus of disapproval from critics, commentators and even filmmakers, such as Griffith, who objected to these closely imitative films. This is typified in the 1913 comments made by Robert Grau, the highly regarded impresario, theatrical manager and writer: 'A majority of those who had seen these pictures on the screen would emphatically state they did not want to renew the experience.'⁶¹ Tibbetts draws on the film aesthetic developed by theorists such as Münsterberg, Lindsay and the playwright and critic Luigi Pirandello, who all agreed that a new approach was needed and 'that imitation was blocking original work in motion pictures.'⁶² Pirandello's ingenious notebook, *Si Gara (Shoot!)* (1915), on the life of a fictional camera operator called Serafino Gubbio, illustrated the power and versatility of the camera.⁶³ Filmmakers realised that it was not possible just to transfer plays to screen in the same way they had appeared on the stage, or to treat the camera as if it were a spectator in the audience. They chose to move it about in order that the central character's story could be told, from his or her point of view or vantage point, through careful use of the camera position.⁶⁴

The ability to control point of view through the ubiquitous use of the camera would become one of the major differences between writing for the theatre and for the cinema and it was something that the key screenwriting teachers examined in this study would constantly stress. A series of articles in the *New York Dramatic Mirror* entitled 'The Evolution of the Motion Picture,' which had been written by filmmaking professionals including editors, directors and cameramen, explained how the motion picture differed from theatre. Peacocke, another of the screenwriting teachers considered in this study, wrote the final part of this series. Tibbetts notes that Peacocke:

⁶⁰ Tibbetts, *American Theatrical Film*, 7.

⁶¹ Robert Grau, 'A Word About Celebrated Stars in Photoplays,' *MPSM*, February 1913, 127; cited in Tibbetts, *American Theatrical Film*, 212.

⁶² Tibbetts, 'Stage/Screen Exchange,' 394.

⁶³ Lorenzo Princi, 'Review of Shoot! By Luigi Pirandello,' *Blurb Hack*, August 21, 2010, <http://blurbhack.com/reviews/review.php?recordID=80&type=book&code=shoot>

⁶⁴ Tibbetts, *American Theatrical Film*, 74.

admitted to substantial differences between the craft of playwriting and screenwriting. His remarks reveal recognition of the film medium as a unique form of expression.⁶⁵

Peacocke points out that scenes are shorter in a film and there are many more of them, and there should be no reliance on dialogue.⁶⁶ As an aside, it is interesting to note that Tibbetts quotes from Peacocke because he was an editor and screenwriter rather than because he was a significant instructional voice in the industry.

Tibbetts claims that between 1912 and 1915 filmmaking that mimicked the theatre was largely abandoned and filmmakers 'departed radically from the hitherto accepted idea that the artistic identity of motion pictures depended on how closely a film could simulate the illusion of a theatrical event.'⁶⁷ However, although the means of filming the material changed, the model of the 'well-made play' on which it was based would continue. Tibbetts points out the usefulness of the 'well-made play' to early film, although he also acknowledges the importance of melodramatic elements, where immediate situation was more important than developing plot. These offered opportunities for camera effects, illusions and visions, as 'melodrama did not emphasize the logic and rigor of plot construction.'⁶⁸

The influence of classical narrative structure and character psychology embedded in what came to be known as the 'well-made play' traces its origins to Aristotelian thinking. There are four main components in Aristotle's *Poetics*: dramatic action, unity of action, probability of action and the unified three-part dramatic structure.

A play, according to this prescription, begins with a protagonist who has a goal or need and the plot or dramatic action serves as a means of answering whether or not this goal or need is met. According to Aristotle, plot or action takes priority over characters and characters demonstrate who they are through their actions. The *Poetics* assert that a play:

⁶⁵ Frederick James Smith, 'The Evolution of the Motion Picture – VII. From the Standpoint of the Photoplaywright. An Interview with Captain Leslie T. Peacocke, special scenario writer with the Universal Company,' *NYDM*, July 23, 1913, 25 and 31; cited by Tibbetts, 'Stage/Screen Exchange', 393.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 393-394.

⁶⁷ Tibbetts, *American Theatrical Film*, 219.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 59.

is not an imitation of persons, but of actions and of life [... and] people possess certain qualities in accordance with their character, but they achieve well-being or its opposite on the basis of how they fare [...] so character is included [only ...] on account of the actions.⁶⁹

According to Aristotle, the pattern of events (actions) of the plot must causally relate to one another and:

should imitate a single, unified action – and one that is also a whole. So the structure of the various sections of the events must be such that the transposition or removal of any one section dislocates and changes the whole.⁷⁰

This means that ‘the arrangement of the incidents’ must form a ‘unity of action’, whereby the incidents are structurally self-contained and bound together by internal necessity, each action leading to the next without a *deus ex machina* (divine intervention). The plot must have universal significance and meaning. The cause-and-effect chain leading from the incentive moment to the climax is called the ‘tying up’ (*desis*) or complication. The more rapid cause-and-effect chain from the climax to the resolution is the ‘unravelling’ (*lusis*) or dénouement. There must be specific ‘plot points’ or moments when the character makes a moral choice and at some point the character will undergo a drastic change. For this to be possible, a character must have a ‘tragic flaw’ (*hamartia*) due to some great error or frailty of character. As a result, the pattern of events (actions) should accomplish some artistic or emotional effect. The end of all tragedy is ‘*katharsis*’ or ‘purging’, the arousing of the emotions of ‘pity and fear’, which has a cleansing effect on the spectator.⁷¹ According to Aryeh Kosman, this cathartic experience appears contradictory because ‘the effect of witnessing tragedy is at once pleasurable and associated with the experience of fear and pity.’ This is due to the fact that it is a mimetic representation and these

⁶⁹ Aristotle, *Poetics*, translated by Malcolm Heath (London: Penguin Books, 1996), 11.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁷¹ See Anthony Birch, ‘Aristotle’s Elements of Drama’, www.mindtools.net/MindFilms/aristot.shtml and Barbara F. McManus, Outline of Aristotle’s Theory of Tragedy in the Poetics, *CLS 267 Topics Page*, November 1999, <http://www2.cnr.edu/home/bmcmanus/poetics.html> and Aristotle’s, *The Poetics*, Chapter 7; ‘The Plot must be a Whole’; Chapter 8, ‘The Plot must be a Unity and Chapter 9, ‘Dramatic Unity,’ <http://www.identitytheory.com/etexts/poetics.html>

emotions can be experienced in safety without their connection to real life.⁷²

These sets of actions relate to a single protagonist, who wages a conflict with an antagonist which will lead to irreversible consequences and 'anything that smacks of randomness or irrationality is part of the back-story [... and everything] that happens must have plausibility.'⁷³ Aristotle says the actions must be necessary and probable:

the function of the poet is not to say what has happened, but to say the kind of thing that would happen, i.e. what is possible in accordance with probability or necessity.⁷⁴

According to Aristotle, these sets of actions should be expressed in a three-part unified structure, meaning that a play should have a beginning, middle, and an end:

A beginning is that which itself does not follow necessarily from anything else, but that some second thing naturally exists or occurs after it [...]. A middle is that which itself comes after something else and some other thing comes after it [...and an] end is that which does itself naturally follow from something else, either necessarily or in general, but there is nothing else after it.⁷⁵

In her 'History of Three-Act Structure' Jennine Lanouette observes that Horace of Rome (65-8 B.C.) interpreted Aristotle's categories of prologue, *parados* (first song of the chorus), episode, *stasimon* (second song of the chorus), and exodus more literally as five acts. This stricture was followed rigidly by the neo-classicists of the 16th century Italian Renaissance and the French dramatists of the 17th century. By the 19th century, the idea of the 'well-made play' with five acts had evolved.

However, as Lanouette points out, three acts could still be detected in this five-act structure.⁷⁶

⁷² Aryeh Kosman, 'Acting: Drama as the Mimesis of Praxis' in *Essays on Aristotle's Poetics*, ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (Princeton, Princeton University, 1992), 51-72.

⁷³ David Wiles, 'Aristotle's Poetics and Ancient Dramatic Theory' in *The Cambridge Companion to Greek and Roman Theatre*, ed. Marianne McDonald and J. Michael Walton (Cambridge, CUP, 2007), 101.

⁷⁴ Aristotle, *Poetics*, 16.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 13-14.

⁷⁶ Lanouette describes the three acts as follows: 'the presentation in the first act of the sympathetic character, background exposition and setting up of the situation [...] in the second act, increasingly intense action and a series of ups and downs in conflict with the adversary; the low point at the end of the second act which comes

The concept of the 'well-made play' had been distilled from the hundreds of plays written by the French dramatist Eugène Scribe (1791-1861) and were further popularised by the playwright Victorien Sardou (1831-1908). Scribe's plots operated strictly by cause and effect and were formulaic. Scribe's ideas about structuring a play in five acts were reminiscent of the construction of many of Shakespeare's plays. They often began with a misunderstanding (a secret known to the audience but not the characters) set up by an inciting incident in Act One. This was followed by rising action, interspersed with upsets and reversals in fortune for the main character in Act Two. This eventually led to a climactic turning-point that determined the outcome in Act Three. This was followed by a working out of the earlier complications, resulting in a final climax in Act Four. A dénouement followed, where any remaining tangles were unravelled and loose ends tied up and a happy ending usually ensued in Act Five.⁷⁷

Gustav Freytag, a German drama theorist and playwright, codified this understanding in his 1863 manual, *The Technique of the Drama*. Freytag examined great works from different periods, by Sophocles, Shakespeare, Lessing, Goethe and Schiller, in an attempt to discover the fundamental laws of dramatic construction. With regard to dramatic action, unity of action and probability of action, Freytag is largely consistent with Aristotle. He affirms that dramatic action must drive the story, as 'passion which leads to action is the business of dramatic art.'⁷⁸ Each piece of dramatic action must relate to that which comes before and after it, since 'the action must move forward with uniform consistency.'⁷⁹ As 'every spectator is a child of his time,' probability of action must be in keeping with what is possible at that point in history, although more might become possible in the future.⁸⁰

Freytag also expanded the three-part to a five-part structure and defined it as

from a reversal of fortune; followed by a third act climax [...]; which is in turn followed by a dénouement.' See Jennine Lanouette, 'A History of Three-Act Structure' in *Screenstakes: Studies in Screenwriting for Writers, Directors and Creative Professionals*, 3-12, December 24, 2012, 4-6, <http://www.screenstakes.com/evolutionary-study-of-the-three-act-structure-model-in-drama/>

⁷⁷ Douglas Cardwell, 'The Well-Made Play of Eugène Scribe,' *The French Review* 56, May 1983, 876-884, <https://ibenglish2011.wikispaces.com/file/view/The+Well-Made+Play+of+Eugene+Scribe.pdf>

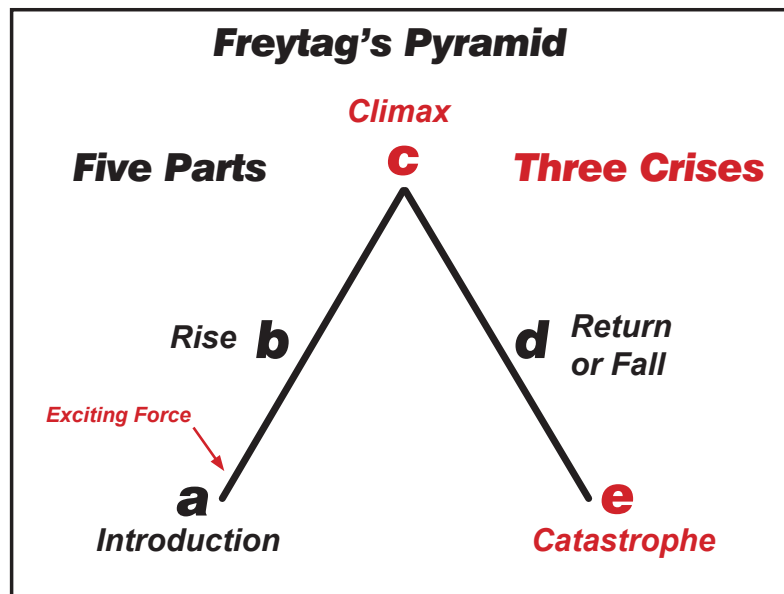
⁷⁸ Gustav Freytag, *Technique of the Drama* (1895: repr., Forgotten Books, 2014), 19.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 51.

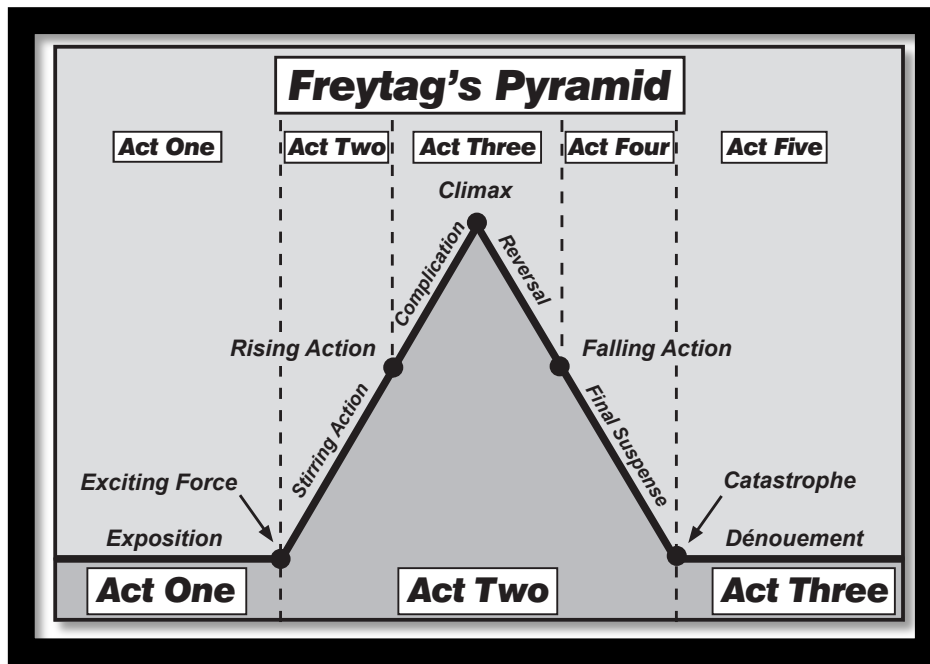
exposition, rising action, climax, falling action and dénouement, using a 'pyramidal structure.' Within this structure he identifies three crises for the protagonist. Other interpretations of this structure commonly regard it as seven stages by dividing the action in another way, although it is fundamentally the same structure.⁸¹

Freytag represented it diagrammatically as follows:



As indicated in the amended diagram that follows, the structure can still be understood as three parts or acts, with a beginning, middle and end. The wings of the diagram are sometimes extended to make this structure clearer.

⁸¹ George Hartley understands the structure in seven stages: 1. Exposition of character and setting; 2. Inciting Incident that begins the conflict; 3. Rising Action building the story; 4. A Climax or tragic moment; 5. Falling Action signalling the story end; 6. A 'catastrophe' which resolves the conflict; 7. A Dénouement where character issues are resolved. See George Hartley, 'Analyzing a Story's Plot: Freytag's Pyramid' in *English 250 Unit: Freytag's Pyramid*, (Ohio University), <http://www.ohio.edu/people/hartleyg/ref/fiction/freytag.html>



The beginning (Act One) serves as an exposition to set the context and introduce the characters and situation. This is followed by the 'exciting force' (inciting incident), 'where the counter-play resolves to use its lever to set the hero in motion.'⁸² This means the characters or forces that oppose the hero will launch him or her into their quest. The middle (Act Two) consists of three separate parts, the rise, climax and return. The 'rise' means: 'The action has been started; the chief persons have shown what they are; the interest has been awakened.'⁸³ This is followed by the climax of the drama that 'naturally forms the middle point of a group of forces, which darting in either direction, course upward and downward.'⁸⁴ The 'return' moves the hero towards a moment of truth where they have to make a stand and either accomplish their goal or fail; hence: 'The most difficult part of the drama is the sequence of scenes [in] the downward movement [where] dangers enter most.'⁸⁵ This leads to the final crisis or moment of truth, called 'the force of the final suspense,' which is 'necessary, in good time to prepare the mind of the audience for the catastrophe.'⁸⁶ The end (Act Three) or 'catastrophe' of the drama is the closing action, 'which must present the logical 'consequences of the action' and outcome for the characters and

⁸² Freytag, *Technique of the Drama*, 121.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 125.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 130.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 133.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 135.

the 'more profound the strife [...] the more noble its purpose.'⁸⁷ In other words, the more conflict, the better the play. The drama is closed out by the dénouement or final situation for the hero. Later critics such as Ferdinand Brunetière (1849-1906) would seek to formulate 'the general "laws" of the theatre [and the] principles that provide a foundation for all drama in all times,' which further encouraged standardisation.⁸⁸

There is plenty of evidence that Aristotle's views were extant within the industry during the early period of film writing and were readily employed by screenwriting teachers. Drawing on Aristotle was common among column writers and those offering support to scenario writers. George Rockhill Crow, a less successful forerunner to Sargent, whom Sargent nevertheless calls a 'well known scenario writer,'⁸⁹ claims in an article on structure that:

Aristotle said [...] that drama has: first, an introduction; second, a climax or a clash; and third, a dénouement or a catastrophe.⁹⁰

Similarly, Louis Reeves Harrison (regarded as more of a theoretician than a screenwriting teacher, as confirmed later in this study) claims, in his articles for *Moving Picture World*, that: 'Remarkably applicable are the three unities. They were propounded by Aristotle, 400 B.C. Unity of time, place and action.' Sargent says that even though 'Harrison writes in high brow and we use more commonplace English,' he is in agreement with Harrison on most issues and he has had 'a profound respect' for him during their long association over many years.⁹¹

According to N. J. Lowe, there is a compelling reason why the Aristotelian model was so central and still endures today in storytelling. He argues that the classical paradigm of plot stands outside

[the] West's own canonization of classical antiquity [...] and] is teleological; it asserts the deep causality and intelligibility of its world

⁸⁷ Ibid., 137.

⁸⁸ Marvin Carson, *Theories of the Theatre; A Historical and Critical Survey from the Greeks to the Present* (London, Cornell University Press, 1984), 298.

⁸⁹ Sargent, 'The Scenario Writer,' *MPW*, December 16, 1911, 895.

⁹⁰ George Rockhill Crow, 'The Technique of the Picture Play,' *MPW*, January 28, 1911, 178.

⁹¹ Louis Reeves Harrison, 'The Law of the Drama,' *MPW*, January 25, 1919, 485 and Sargent, 'The Photoplaywright,' January 26, 1918, 514

even where it denies human access to direct apprehension or control [and therefore] is a uniquely powerful system for the narrative articulation of claims about the order of the world.⁹²

In other words, it helps human beings to understand themselves and make sense of the chaotic, disordered and nonsensical occurrences they often experience in their lives. Lowe continues by saying that:

Western classical plotting is not a purely cultural artefact; that much of its power resides in innate mechanisms of narrative processing that are part of our inheritance as occupants of human brains.⁹³

Plot itself, or this particular form of plotting, could therefore be regarded as a 'label for a fundamental process in the way human minds decode and respond to narrative texts.'⁹⁴ John Yorke reaches a similar conclusion when asking why this paradigm is 'so ubiquitous.' He says it 'tells us much about perception, about narrative and about the workings of the human mind.'⁹⁵ This may also explain why early screenwriting teachers readily adopted Aristotle's approach.

Nannicelli acknowledges a clear link between early screenwriting and 19th century theatrical practice, typified in playwriting manuals, which espoused:

the principles of the well-made play as conceived by Victorien Sardou and Eugene Scribe, theorized by Ferdinand Brunetière and Gustav Freytag, and propounded by American critics such as Brander Matthews, Clayton Hamilton [...], William Archer [...] and W.T. Price.⁹⁶

These manuals would also be a source of inspiration to screenwriting teachers of the period. Much of the language found in screenwriting manuals is reminiscent of that in playwriting manuals; sometimes the borrowing of ideas is acknowledged and sometimes not. Price's playwriting manual, and those of other leading dramaturges, such as Archer, Matthews, Andrews and Hamilton, were regularly advertised and

⁹² N. J. Lowe, *The Classical Plot and the Invention of Western Narrative* (Cambridge: CUP, 2000), 260.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 261.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 259.

⁹⁵ John Yorke, *Into the Woods: A Five Act Journey Into Story* (London: Penguin, 2013), 23.

⁹⁶ Nannicelli, *Philosophy of the Screenplay*, 100-101.

discussed in the film fan and trade press.⁹⁷ Hamilton, also a well-known drama critic, lecturer and playwright,⁹⁸ wrote in 1911 about the possibilities that film presented.⁹⁹ Both he and Andrews would also go on to write successful photoplays and Archer's plays would also be filmed.¹⁰⁰

William T. Price was a theatrical impresario, teacher and critic.¹⁰¹ His manual, *The Technique of the Drama* (1892), is more conventional and, according to Price himself, is a re-statement of the 'obvious and accepted principles as underlie the drama' or 'tricks of the trade.'¹⁰² It is accessible and explanatory rather than experimental in approach, strongly reiterates Aristotle's ideas and advocates the five-act structure outlined by Freytag.¹⁰³ However, Archer's *Play-Making* manual (1912) is a more scholarly work that draws on the literary tradition of playwriting back to the Greeks, with constant references to Aristotle's *Poetics*. He acknowledges Aristotle's requirements, 'that a play should have a beginning, middle and end', although he spends much of his manual discussing theatre's agitation and moving away from this model. He says, 'the fact is that playwrights are more than sufficiently apt to ignore or despise this rule.'¹⁰⁴ In this respect, Archer examines the works of Shakespeare and many 19th century playwrights such as Ibsen and Pinero. All the theorists on drama are discussed, including even the relativistic ideas of Hegel.¹⁰⁵

⁹⁷ See Advertisement in *MPSM*, March 1912, 170; Louis Reeves Harrison, 'Theatrical Plots,' *MPW*, October 23, 1915, 586 and Palmer, 'Today and Tomorrow,' *The Story World and the Photodramatist*, September 1923, 70-71.

⁹⁸ Hamilton was a playwright, lecturer and critic. He lectured at Columbia University and worked for Goldwyn Studios as an editor. He wrote *The Theory of the Theatre* (1910), *Studies in Stagecraft* (1914) and *The Problems of the Playwright* (1917). See Clayton Hamilton, *The New York Public Library Rare Books and Manuscripts Division: Accession Sheet 1955, Biographical Note*, http://archives.nypl.org/uploads/collection/pdf_finding_aid/hamiltonc.pdf

⁹⁹ Hamilton, 'Mr. Hamilton on Photoplays,' *The Nickelodeon*, January 14, 1911, 41-42.

¹⁰⁰ See *IMDbPro*: on Clayton Hamilton, <https://pro-labs.imdb.com/name/nm0357793/> and Andrews, <https://pro-labs.imdb.com/name/nm0028602/>. William Archer's *The Green Goddess* was filmed in 1923 and remade in 1930 and 1939. <https://pro-labs.imdb.com/name/nm0033742/>

¹⁰¹ Price taught in the American School of Playwriting and worked as a critic for the *New York Star*. See J. E. Kleber, ed, *The Encyclopedia of Louisville* (Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 2001), 522.

¹⁰² William T. Price, *The Technique of the Drama*, (1892: repr., Miami, Hard Press, 2013) iv.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 65-111.

¹⁰⁴ William Archer, *Play-Making: A Manual of Craftsmanship* (1912: repr., Forgotten Books, 2012), 67.

¹⁰⁵ Hegel, unlike Aristotle, claimed that the conflict 'is not between good and evil but between goods that are each making too exclusive a claim.' This is a relativistic rather than absolutist approach and sees the tragic hero as adhering to one ethical system, which comes up against competing ethical claims, which can also be equally

Archer frequently refers to Freytag's pyramid that divides a story into five parts and places the climax in the middle of the action. However, Archer modifies this idea and suggests that, once the 'tension sets in', it should not be relaxed until 'just before the fall of the curtain.'¹⁰⁶ Archer also criticises Freytag's pyramidal structure as too rigid and urges flexibility:

In the days of the five-act dogma, each act was supposed to have its special and pre-ordained function. Freytag assigns to the second act, as a rule, the *Steigerung* or heightening – the working up, one might call it – of the interest. But the second act in modern plays, has often to do all the work of the three middle acts [...]. For our present purposes, we may treat the interior section of a play as a unit, whether it consists of one, two or three acts.¹⁰⁷

Archer highlights the importance of the beginning, or what we must grasp in order to begin the action. It is the 'point of attack' that is a 'stirring episode' or Freytag's 'exciting force, 'calculated to arrest the spectator's attention and awaken his interest, while conveying to him little or no information,' which is all we need to know to start the action.¹⁰⁸ This necessarily leads to the 'obligatory scene' near the end, which is a scene 'an audience expects and ardently desires.'¹⁰⁹ This scene is derived from the theme of the work and serves as a resolution to the question that has been raised by the drama and completes the emotional journey of the spectator.

Archer seems to exhibit some ambivalence between five-act and three-act models, but this is because he does not want to impose arbitrary rules based on mere segmentation or the fall of the curtain. As Lanouette indicates, Archer sees them as dependent on:

the natural progression of a real life crisis, grounding his emerging model of dramatic structure in the rhythms of human nature [...] the

justified. See Mark W. Roche, 'Introduction to Hegel's Theory of Tragedy,' <http://aplanguandcomp.blogs.rsu1.org/files/2011/03/hegelontragedy.pdf>

¹⁰⁶ Archer, *Play-Making*, 148.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 145.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 72.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 173.

rhythms of growth, culmination and solution.¹¹⁰

Nevertheless, Archer clearly affirms the usefulness of three-act structure, because he sensed that Aristotle saw this as a demarcation that arose from the natural pulse of the material rather than as an imposed paradigm. Archer puts it thus:

It was doubtless the necessity for marking this rhythm that Aristotle had in mind when he said that a dramatic action must have a beginning, middle and an end. Taken in its simplicity, this principle would indicate the three-act division as the ideal scheme for a play.¹¹¹

Ian Macdonald concurs that Archer proposes a more organic approach to the structural design of a play, one that involves the playwright 'constructing a series of crises in a rhythm appropriate to the theme.'¹¹² Archer confirms that every:

act ought to consist either of a minor crisis, carried to its temporary solution, or of a well-marked group of such crises; and there can be no rule as to the number of such crises which ought to present themselves to the development of a given theme.¹¹³

Archer also asserts that: 'Action ought to exist for the sake of character' and therefore structure is subservient to character, which is a departure from Aristotle.¹¹⁴ Archer likens structure to a skeleton, which is necessary otherwise a human being would collapse into 'an amorphous heap' without it, but it is character that gives him life, just as:

It is by his blood and nerve that he lives, not by his bones; and it is because his bones are, comparatively speaking, dead matter that they continue to exist when the flesh has fallen away from them.¹¹⁵

Archer believed that the dramatic theme must also lead to 'a great crisis, bringing out

¹¹⁰ Jennine Lanouette, 'A History of Three-Act Structure' in *Screentakes*, 8, <http://www.screentakes.com/an-evolutionary-study-of-the-three-act-structure-model-in-drama/>

¹¹¹ Archer, *Play-Making*, 107.

¹¹² Ian W. Macdonald, 'Forming the Craft: Play-wrighting and Photoplay-Writing in Britain in the 1910s' in *Early Popular Visual Culture*, 8.1 (2010): 83.

¹¹³ Archer, *Play-Making*, 107.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 19

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

the vivid manifestations of character'¹¹⁶ and that 'the highest order of drama should consist in the reaction of character to a series of crucial experiences.'¹¹⁷ He again stresses that story structure must serve character development:

The story which is independent of character – which can be carried through by a given number of ready-made puppets – is essentially a trivial thing. Unless, at an early stage of the organizing process, character begins to take the upper hand.¹¹⁸

Archer's influence is clearly exhibited among those who wrote photoplays or offered instruction. Clarence G. Badger (1880-1964), the director, writer and film producer, refers to Archer's terminology of 'Point of Attack' in his short pamphlet on screenwriting. Like Archer, he recognises that the 'Point of Attack' must be a significant dramatic incident that draws the attention of the viewer, although in the case of screenwriting it must be without the use of dialogue. Badger makes no specific reference to Archer, but links his own understanding of writing the photoplay to the writing of a stage play:

The photoplaywright may be said to be a screen dramatist and he is bound by the restrictions similar to those governing the author of a stage play.¹¹⁹

One screenwriting teacher, Howard T. Dimick, readily admits his source of inspiration to be Archer, who he claims has come up with 'a newer formulation of the dramatic in terms of crisis,' which refers to Archer's view of 'tension.' He quotes Archer's definition in support of this: 'A play is more or less a rapidly-developing crisis in destiny or circumstances.'¹²⁰ Dimick lists most of the key playwriting manuals as source material in the appendix of his manual, *Modern Photoplay*

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 33.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 286.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 17.

¹¹⁹ Clarence G. Badger, *The Point of Attack or How to Start the Photoplay* (Los Angeles: Palmer Photoplay Corporation, 1920), 6. Badger was a freelance worked for Lubin, Universal, Sennett-Paramount and Goldwyn Features.

¹²⁰ Dimick, *Modern Photoplay Writing*, 94.

*Writing.*¹²¹

A number of screenwriting teachers also refer to Price as a source. Leona Radnor quotes Price when discussing how to develop ideas for a plot, 'Every true play fashioned under a creative hand has its germ.'¹²² The full quote from Price continues:

This germ may be a pregnant and suggestive trait in some character, a happening; of personal knowledge in life, an incident in history, a paragraph in a newspaper – in short a dramatic idea from any source.¹²³

There are also blatant examples of virtual plagiarism. Dimick defines the three problems facing the photoplaywright when adapting material for dramatic presentation as:

The Moral Problem [...] the object or significance of a play; The Aesthetic Problem [...] the artistic value of the events [...] from the vantage of taste and The Technical Problem [...] of structure and dramatic effectiveness of the story.¹²⁴

This has clearly been modelled on comments from Price's manual, *The Technique of the Drama*, as the similarities are so striking. Price's version of the three problems read as follows:

The Ethical – The theme, with its facts and what is proved; [...] The Aesthetic – The matter of taste is bound up in every drama [and] The Technical – [...] the science and art of giving form to the dramatic material.¹²⁵

Frances Taylor Patterson also reinforces the links between theatrical understanding and photoplay composition when discussing plot, and, in the space of just a few

¹²¹ Dimick lists ten playwriting manuals; as well as Price, *The Technique of the Drama*; Archer, *Play-Making* and Brander Matthews, *The Principles of Play Making*, he also cites George Polti, *The Thirty Six Dramatic Situations* and Hamilton, *Problems of the Playwright*, among others. See *Ibid.*, 392.

¹²² Leona Radnor, *The Photoplay Writer* (1913; repr., New York: Nabu, 2013), 21.

¹²³ Price, *Technique of the Drama*, 227.

¹²⁴ Dimick, *Modern Photoplay Writing*, 33-34.

¹²⁵ Price, *Technique of the Drama*, 29 and 39-40.

lines, mentions five dramaturges, including Aristotle, Archer and Matthews.¹²⁶

The strong connections between playwriting and screenwriting manuals clearly indicate that the tradition of the 'well-made play' provided a strong framework that helped shaped the thinking of early screenwriting teachers.

Classical Melodrama

The observations of Vardac, Fell, and Brewster and Jacobs that the pictorial elements of melodrama were an important constituent of early film are valuable and form the backdrop of screenwriting teachers' understanding of the importance of 'visualisation,' which will be addressed later. Brewster and Jacobs's contribution that 'situations' were used as components of plot construction should be acknowledged too, as this can be evidenced in screenwriting manuals. However, this must be balanced against the comments of Neale and Koszarski, who have interpreted melodrama through its plot features, although one of these features, non-classical narrative structure, tended to be resisted by early screenwriting teachers. Singer's definition of melodrama as a 'cluster concept' is helpful, because it embraces both the pictorial and plot based interpretations and also neatly categorises melodrama into five basic elements. Four of the elements that Singer identifies, namely 'strong pathos', 'overwrought emotion', 'moral polarization' and 'sensationalism,' were certainly common elements in early film and were influential in much of the instruction of early screenwriting teachers. Singer more clearly defines the fifth element of non-classical narrative structure as:

outrageous coincidence, implausibility, convoluted plotting, deus ex machina resolutions, and episodic strings of action that stuff too many events together to be able to be kept in line by cause-and-effect chain of narrative progression.¹²⁷

Early screenwriting teachers would have generally frowned upon the idea of 'non-classical narrative structure', as they tended to follow the regimen of the 'well-made play' with its strong notions of causality alluded to by scholars such as Tibbetts.

¹²⁶ Patterson, *Cinema Craftsmanship*, 5-9.

¹²⁷ Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity*, 46.

However, as already identified, although this theatrical form could trace its origins back to the theatre of Shakespeare and Aristotelian thinking, it also exhibited many melodramatic elements, since it had also developed from a dramatic understanding systematised in 18th and 19th century theatre. The tradition of the 'well-made' play had then been codified by Freytag and had been again reformulated in the manuals of Price and Archer, but was not without its melodramatic tendencies.

To summarise: screenwriting teachers were influenced by a fusion between melodramatic and classical elements, which I will term classical melodrama. Grieveson and Krämer confirm this strong link between the classical storytelling expressed in the feature film and the melodrama of popular theatre and literature, which can be seen in films such as *Birth of a Nation*. They allude to the views of Altman, who characterises such films as 'an amalgam of deformed, embedded melodramatic material and carefully elaborated narrative classicism.'¹²⁸ Patrick Keeting also confirms that the two elements of classical storytelling and melodramatic spectacle were not necessarily in opposition to one another, but 'can often cooperate to create an intensified emotional response.'¹²⁹ In other words, rather than the narrative being just a means of producing comprehension, it was also designed to elicit strong feelings. As will become clear, the early screenwriting teachers examined in this study drew on both these strains of dramatic tradition, as evidenced in their manuals and columns; and the fusion of classicism with melodrama, into what I have identified as classical melodrama, helped to frame their instruction.

¹²⁸ Altman, 'Dickens, Griffith, and Film Theory Today' in *Classical Hollywood Narrative*, ed., Gaines, 41; cited in Lee Grieveson and Peter Krämer eds. 'Classical Hollywood Cinema' in *The Silent Cinema Reader* (London: Routledge, 2004), 274.

¹²⁹ Patrick Keeting, 'Prologue: Emotional Curves and Linear Narratives' in *The Classical Hollywood Reader*, ed. Steven Neale (Oxford: Routledge, 2012), 7 and 18.

2. Industry Context

In order to explore how screenwriting teachers were drawn into the filmmaking process and interacted with it, it is important to contextualise their work within the industry as it grew. This involves examining three important issues: the growing importance of the script as a controlling factor in film production; the mounting pressure to produce films with clear and coherent narratives; and the difficulties that writers faced in dealing with laws on censorship, copyright restrictions and writing for stars.

The Script as a Controlling Factor

Filmmaking practices and narrative formulae were developed to facilitate production and, according to Koszarski, by the early teens of the twentieth century, '[s]ignificant economic and industrial forces now acted to standardize these procedures.'¹³⁰

Technical advances and the development of the film industry on an industrial scale would eventually demand advanced scripting practices. As Staiger has pointed out, the need to achieve continuous and regular production had convinced manufacturers to build factory-like studios and to ensure that they were utilised efficiently and for maximum profit. This led to the advent, by 1909, of the scenario script, which generally included a fully numbered breakdown of action by events and a 'scene plot' listing these events by location.¹³¹ However, by the early teens it soon became clear that, for production purposes, even more precise governance would be needed.

Staiger observes that '[t]he solution was to pay more rigorous attention to preparing a script, which provided narrative continuity before shooting actually started.'¹³² The continuity script soon followed, and would act as a means of control that would allow studios to manage output and costs through careful planning and budgeting. It featured many of the same elements as the scenario script, but in much greater detail, listing shooting dates, very detailed descriptions of actions, shot footage

¹³⁰ Koszarski, *Evening's Entertainment*, 95.

¹³¹ Harry and Roy Aitken, 'The Continuity Script and the Rationalization of Film Production, *Wisconsin Center for Film & Television Research*, <http://old.wcftr.commart.wisc.edu/collections/featured/aitken/continuity/>

¹³² Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, *Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 126.

estimates, budgeting data, and information on release prints and distribution.¹³³

Staiger's analysis of the changing modes of production in the film industry provides a useful framework for understanding how scripting developed up to and beyond 1920. Her categorisation of the first four modes of production or management structures that Hollywood passed through equates roughly to the silent period, before the first major shift in organisation when the studios took full control. These phases are as follows: the cameraman system (1896-1907); the director system (1907-1909); the director unit system (1909-1914); and the central producer system (1914-1931).¹³⁴ If certain aspects of each system of organisation are highlighted, an overall pattern emerges that is not dissimilar to the proposed structure of this study. Such changes in the division of labour and management systems had profound effects on the scripting process and helped to trigger the appearance of screenwriting teachers. These teachers would also interact with the industry and were likely contributors to the development of advanced scriptwriting procedures.

Although the periodic divisions of this study cut across Staiger's choice of modes of production in the last stage (1914-1931), it is important to note that her interest lies in how production was organised generally and not in its specific effects on the writing process and the activity of screenwriting teachers. If the focus is shifted instead to the establishing of the idea of 'continuity' and classical-style filmmaking, rather than how the studio was organised, the divisions selected for this study hold up. The principles of the continuity system (the matching of spatial and temporal relations from shot to shot in order to maintain continuous and clear narrative action)¹³⁵ were, according to Thompson, 'set forth and tested in the years up to 1917.'¹³⁶ Both Thompson and Bordwell confirm that, from this point on, a 'system of formal principles that were standard in American filmmaking [...that] has come to be called

¹³³ Aitken, 'The Continuity Script and the Rationalization of Film Production,' <http://old.wcftr.commarts.wisc.edu/collections/featured/aitken/continuity/>

¹³⁴ See 7, footnote 1.

¹³⁵ The continuity system is a highly standardised system of editing, now virtually universal in commercial film and television but originally associated with Hollywood cinema, Peter Donaldson, 'Film Editing Terms' from *Film Lexicon*, http://art3idea.psu.edu/locus/film_terms.pdf

¹³⁶ Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, *Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 195.

the *classical Hollywood cinema*¹³⁷ had been established. These classical stylistic norms amounted to a set of recurring conventions where ‘narrative logic is the dominant force,’ although how time and space are represented are also important.¹³⁸ In effect, it was very similar to the unity of action and the ideas of time and space that Aristotle had set forth. These procedures dictated the use of cameras, film and equipment, enabling manufacturers and suppliers to ‘assimilate technological change to [fit into] Hollywood’s parameters.’¹³⁹ In effect, by the early 1920s, or during the fourth stage of Staiger’s modes (1914-1931), the studios were set up to fully create a sustained output of movies for the next forty years. The requirement of telling a story in this particular way would be the key factor that would lead aspiring writers to seek expert help from screenwriting teachers. A brief survey of the history of screenwriting up to this point will help to contextualise the appearance of screenwriting teachers.

In the earliest films there was no formal scripting. According to Staiger’s ‘Cameraman System’ (1896-1907), a single cameraman conceived an idea and filmed it without necessarily any recourse to a written plan. If there were writers, they were mere providers of ideas and brief synopses. As early as 1897, the general public had been actively encouraged to submit ideas for films. For example, the American Mutoscope Company advertised a five dollar payment for “‘suggestions for a good scene,” preferably comic,’ in their bulletins.¹⁴⁰ However, public involvement was still very limited at this point, and screenwriting teachers did not figure in the process.

By the early 1900s it became clear that stories presented the best opportunity to turn a profit. Unlike ‘topicals’ (news or current affairs subjects), story films were not dependent on unpredictable news events. They could be carefully planned in advance and created in or near a studio without travelling to distant locales, thus

¹³⁷ Thompson and Bordwell, *Film History*, 32.

¹³⁸ Manchel explains that Bordwell’s understanding of classicism comprises three things: ‘narrative logic’ (definition of events, causal relations and parallelism between events); ‘representation of time’ (order, duration and repetition); and ‘representation of space’ (composition and orientation). See Frank Manchel, *Film Study: An Analytical Bibliography Vol. 1* (London: Associated University Press, 1990), 60.

¹³⁹ Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, *Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 367.

¹⁴⁰ Azlant, ‘Theory, History and Practice of Screenwriting,’ 104.

enabling them to be controlled through scripting. However, the problems presented by telling a story in 'continuity', or ensuring there was temporal and spatial coherency (that character traits, plot events, props and location details were consistent), were evident from the first story films.

The filmmaker Georges Méliès (1861-1938) explored narrative potential in his film *Le Voyage dans la Lune* (1902). David Cook notes that Méliès repeats the moon landing in separate shots and two landings on the moon created a 'kind of overlapping continuity [that] clearly defines spatial relationships [but...] leaves temporal ones undeveloped.'¹⁴¹ In other words, the idea of moving from one place to another was clearly represented but there was no attempt to show that time had passed from one shot to the next. Cook continues:

Motion added the dimension of time, and the major problem for early filmmakers would soon become the establishment of linear continuity from one shot to the next.¹⁴²

This was not so problematic for early audiences, according to Cook, who stresses that they were used to lantern slide shows and stereopticon presentations and:

understood a sequence of motion picture shots as a series of individual moving photographs, or 'attractions,' each of which was self-contained within its frame. If actions overlapped from shot to shot, it didn't matter since the temporal relationships between shots was assumed to be alinear – there was no assumption that time moved forward when cutting from one scene to the next.¹⁴³

Edwin S. Porter's film *The Life of an American Fireman* (1903) was significantly influenced by Méliès' techniques. It combined real footage of firemen on duty with a simple rescue drama. However, it still exhibited continuity problems from a classical perspective, by repeating the same rescue scene from two different viewpoints.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴¹ Cook, *History of Narrative Film*, 22.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁴⁴ Musser, 'The Early Cinema of Edwin S. Porter' in *The Wiley-Blackwell History of American Film*, ed. Cynthia Lucia, Roy Grundmann, Art Simon (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 39-86. It was claimed by some that *The Life of an American Fireman* was the first American story film. However, Musser has clearly shown that the version that was widely circulated in the 1940s had been re-edited to eliminate the problems of continuity in the

According to Musser, from 1903-4 there was a transition to fiction films as the industry's main product.¹⁴⁵ As the prevalence and complexity of these films increased, the issue of continuity was likely to arise more often.

The script for *The Great Train Robbery* (1905) by Porter could have been jotted down on the back of an envelope.¹⁴⁶ Nevertheless, this film is considered by many to be the first American film with a more sustained story, because, according to Cook, Porter established narrative, spatial and temporal relationships and realised the art of telling a story in continuity form.¹⁴⁷ He asserts that *The Great Train Robbery* is:

frequently credited with establishing the realistic narrative, as opposed to the Méliès-style fantasy, as the dominant cinematic form from Porter's day to our own. [... It also] probably did more than any film made before 1912 to convince investors that the cinema was a moneymaking proposition.¹⁴⁸

The success of *The Great Train Robbery* also played its part in helping 'with temporarily standardizing the length of that form to a single reel – 1,000 feet, or ten to sixteen minutes, depending on the speed of projection.'¹⁴⁹

Between 1905 and 1907, a rapid expansion in demand for motion-picture entertainment of the narrative variety meant that a new type of playhouse (the nickelodeon) had to be created to accommodate the newcomers.¹⁵⁰ By 1907, these venues were so popular that they were drawing in over one million patrons a day, which would create a public demand for story films that forced the rationalisation of production.¹⁵¹ During this short transitional period, a substantive reorganisation took place that would ultimately lead to the scripting process becoming central to

earlier version.

¹⁴⁵ Musser, *Emergence of Cinema*, 337.

¹⁴⁶ The original scenario by Edwin S. Porter from a story by Scott Marble, provides very brief descriptions of 14 scenes. *Screenplays for You*, http://sfy.ru/?script=great_train_robbery_1903

¹⁴⁷ Cook, *History of Narrative Film*, 22-24.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁵⁰ Benjamin B. Hampton, *History of the American Film Industry from its Beginnings to 1931* (1931; repr., New York, Dover, 1970), 44.

¹⁵¹ Cook, *History of Narrative Film*, 25.

filmmaking and would prompt the appearance of the first screenwriting teachers. The role of the cameraman and the director became distinct, and the director began to wield considerable power. As already noted, Staiger calls this mode of operation, 'the director system' (1907-1909). Cook confirms that job demarcation meant that: 'By 1908 directing, acting, photographing, writing and laboratory work were separate crafts.'¹⁵² Although camera work and editing was still the province of the director and cameraman, a number of important factors would contribute to the story requiring a screenplay.

The Drive for Narrative Clarity

The filmmakers were under pressure to produce coherent narratives of a particular kind within the standard distribution length of one or two reels imposed by Edison's Motion Picture Patents Company (MPPC).¹⁵³ This limitation had both negative and positive effects for filmmakers. Films often had abrupt connections and sudden conclusions and character motivations were ambiguous or unexplained; unexpected changes in locale often left the spectator with no idea where the action was taking place. An actor using elaborate pantomime might not convey the meaning of a crucial action and the audience was left confused. Bordwell and Thompson cite Musser's quote of a review of a 1906 Edison film to indicate that audiences were often not able to understand the causal, spatial and temporal relations in many films of the time.

A subject recently seen was very good photographically, and the plot also seemed to be good, but could not be understood by the audience.¹⁵⁴

The growing complexity of stories often required lecturers to explain what was

¹⁵² Ibid., 29-30

¹⁵³ Thomas Edison joined others to form the Motion Picture Patents Company (MPPC) in 1908 in an attempt to control the industry through the hire of patented camera and projection equipment and by restricting the length of films to one or two reels as standard sold for one price. Tim Dirks, 'The History of Film – The Pre-1920s' in *Early Cinematic Origins and the Infancy of Film 3*, www.filmsite.org/pre20sintro3.html and J. A. Aberdeen, 'The Edison Movie Monopoly: The Motion Picture Patents Company vs. the Independent Outlaws,' see *Hollywood Renegades Archive – SIMPP Research Database*, http://www.cobbles.com/simpp_archive/edison_trust.htm

¹⁵⁴ Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon: Edwin S. Porter and the Edison Manufacturing Company* (Berkeley: University of California, 1991), 360; cited in Bordwell and Thompson, *Film History*, 32.

happening, if there were gaps in continuity. Bowser comments that:

There were complaints about the lack of clarity. One way in which the crisis manifested itself was in a renewed demand for someone talking along with the film to explain what was going on: the 'showman-narrator,' or lecturer.¹⁵⁵

Narratives that were not clear enough to be self-sufficient would require a lecturer or sufficient intertextual or prior knowledge. Lecturers might explain the plot, but ultimately this was not always satisfactory, due to variations in the quality and content of delivery. The absence of clarity for audiences often led to some peculiar antics in theatres. Richard Butsch observes that:

Managers edited movies to fit their audiences' tastes. Sometimes projectionists would change the speed of the film and even run the film backwards for the amusement of the audience.¹⁵⁶

It became clear that the film would need its own internal system of narrativity to make it understandable as a stand-alone product. According to Gunning:

The film lecturer could only serve as a short-term solution to narrative comprehensibility. The narrator system [where films could be understood through their own internal storytelling mechanisms] offered a more viable solution. It supplied narrative legibility along with diegetic coherence.¹⁵⁷

Although stories still remained relatively simple and scripting requirements were fairly straightforward, according to Bowser, audiences still wanted the 'illusion of reality' and to be able to 'suspend disbelief.'¹⁵⁸ One critic observed in 1908 that the audience seemed more engaged when the plot was sufficiently clear, even in the absence of a lecturer:

As the spectators could follow the plot without the help of a lecturer, they were deeply interested and the different comments were highly favorable

¹⁵⁵ Bowser, *Transformation of Cinema*, 19.

¹⁵⁶ Richard Butsch, 'The Making of American Audiences: From Stage to Television, 1750-1990,' *Movies and American Society*, ed., Steven J. Ross (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 23.

¹⁵⁷ Tom Gunning, *D.W. Griffith and the Origins of Narrative Film: The Early Years at Biograph* (Chicago: University of Illinois, 1994), 93.

¹⁵⁸ Bowser, *Transformation of Cinema*, 55.

to the work.¹⁵⁹

Connecting with the audience would be crucial for the spread to a wider market. Before the rise of the nickelodeon theatres (1905-06), films were exhibited in primarily middle-class environments: vaudeville theatres, summer parks, storefront theatres, lecture halls, churches, saloons and between the acts of plays of repertory companies touring the opera houses. Thompson and Bordwell claim that demand for nickelodeon-style entertainment 'was fuelled in part by the rising immigrant population and the shorter working hours gained by the increasingly militant labor-union movement.'¹⁶⁰ Shorter working weeks led to more time for leisure and the middle-class also started to attend these shows: According to Bowser:

Within a few years just about everybody outside the large cities was going to the same theaters, seeing the same films, and sharing in the same communal experience; people of all classes, and the whole family.¹⁶¹

Staiger claims that this growth was facilitated by the development of narrative continuity and clarity by the filmmakers, which ensured that they had more control and their films could appeal to a wider public. She argues that:

American film did not change its priorities to privilege a continuity narrative form after 1909, but that narrative continuity and clarity were dominant organizing principles from the beginning of filmmaking.¹⁶²

In Staiger's view, this was not done to woo the middle class into the nickelodeon, but to cater to the existing working-class immigrant clientele: for audiences with poor English, it was crucial to establish an internal logic to the film that did not rely on any exterior explanations. Staiger continues:

The textual continuity perceived by later historians is a result of the expansion of the audience to include the working class, immigrants, and rural audiences, to make moving pictures a mass medium rather than

¹⁵⁹ 'Comments on Film Subjects: 'Saved by Love', *MPW*, November 7, 1908, 358.

¹⁶⁰ Thompson and Bordwell, *Film History*, 2.

¹⁶¹ Bowser, *Transformation of Cinema*, 8.

¹⁶² Janet Staiger, *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992), 102.

one accessible to just a privileged few.¹⁶³

While the audience did widen for the reasons Staiger suggests, this is perhaps overstated, as there is evidence that filmmakers were attempting to extend their appeal to the more discerning as well. Stories from celebrated literature or portrayals of important historical events were introduced to counterbalance popular slapstick chases and crime films. Along with this attempt to attract more refined audiences came changes to the places where films were shown. Although nickelodeons continued well into the 1910s, from 1908 onwards exhibitors began to build or convert larger theatres into movie 'palaces', which could hold thousands of patrons. Bowser points out that: 'Feature films showing in the big theatres were getting as much as two dollars, and were bringing in a higher class of people.'¹⁶⁴ This meant that filmmaking with some claims to higher cultural standards was now necessary, and there was an expansion in writing opportunities. As Bowser suggests, 'There was a new emphasis on the need for a higher degree of art and intellect in keeping with this new audience.'¹⁶⁵ Cook agrees that:

The feature film made motion pictures respectable for the middle class by providing a format analogous to that of the legitimate theatre and suitable for the adaptation of middle-class novels and plays.¹⁶⁶

The wide appeal of cinema could perhaps be explained by the fact that film had the potential to absorb the viewer in a storyline, which was something that could be enjoyed by a culturally and ethnically diverse mass public. As Patricia Bradley confirms, film entertainment 'was increasingly becoming an enclosed, privatized experience in which class values were incidental.'¹⁶⁷ In their manuals and columns, screenwriting teachers would continually address issues related to the quality of writing and constantly aspire to what were regarded as higher cultural standards, but would also encourage their students to write in a way that would satisfy the widest possible audience.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 102.

¹⁶⁴ Bowser, *Transformation of Cinema*, 133.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 255.

¹⁶⁶ Cook, *History of Narrative Film*, 35.

¹⁶⁷ Patricia Bradley, *Making American Culture: A Social History, 1900-1920* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 58.

The requirements of early directors ranged from basic script outlines or brief causal scenarios with descriptions of each scene, to more formal documents in which character explanations, entrances and exits, stage directions and a few lines of dialogue were included.¹⁶⁸ These requirements were generally adopted as the norm, and there was a realisation that continuity could only be achieved with rigorous preparation and careful, meticulous scripting. Continuity meant establishing an unbroken connection in the narrative throughout; it required a clear, coherent narrative with a beginning, middle and end. As Charlie Kiel records, there was a ‘transformation at the hands of filmmakers experimenting with how to render narrative comprehensible.’¹⁶⁹ Bowser comments:

The development of new ways to connect shots, or editing, was probably the most important change in film form to take place during the 1907-1909 period. Creating a spatiotemporal world, a kind of geography made of separate shots related to one another, was crucial in the construction of a complex narrative. The development of new editing methods would also greatly increase the potential for enlisting the spectator’s emotions in the film.¹⁷⁰

There had been a gradual movement away from the ‘cinema of attractions,’ a phrase coined by Gunning to describe a cinema that:

directly solicits spectator attention, inciting visual curiosity, and supplying pleasure through an exciting spectacle – a unique event, whether fictional or documentary, that is of interest in itself.¹⁷¹

Kiel discusses this transition and cites Noël Burch in support of his claim, saying that:

The earliest films reinforce the ‘exteriority’ of the spectator’s position, [but] eventually this gives way to the envelopment of the viewer within the diegesis. [...] Increased attention to character psychology and

¹⁶⁸ Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, *Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 119.

¹⁶⁹ Charlie Kiel, *Early American Cinema in Transition: Story, Style, and Filmmaking 1907-1913* (London: University of Wisconsin, 2001), 3-4.

¹⁷⁰ Bowser, *Transformation of Cinema*, 57-58.

¹⁷¹ Tom Gunning, ‘The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator, and the Avant-Garde’ in *Theatre and Film*, ed. Knopf, 40.

motivation [would...] maintain character as the driving force within the classical narrative.¹⁷²

Representations of time would not always, or entirely, be linear from this point on: directors such as D. W. Griffith were already using parallel editing, which involved cutting away from a scene before it ended and into another one even if it had already begun. Gunning points out that 'by developing two trajectories of action at the same time and intercutting them, it complicates [...] simple linearity.'¹⁷³ This helped to build tension by delaying the resolution of each line of action. Subtle cues were needed to indicate that time was flowing without interruption, even across cuts, and other cues might suggest that time had passed. It was necessary to establish continuity between shots, even when cutting in for a closer view of details. As Thompson and Bordwell comment, it was necessary to:

set up a chain of narrative causes and effects. One event would plainly lead to an effect, which would in turn cause another effect, and so on. [...An] event was [...] caused by a character's beliefs or desires. [Therefore] character psychology motivated actions. By following a series of characters' goals and resulting conflicts, the spectator would comprehend the action.¹⁷⁴

Every aspect of silent film style could be used to enhance narrative clarity. Staging in depth could show special relationships among elements. Camera position, set design and lighting could imply time of day or the milieu of the action. The techniques of camerawork, editing, acting and lighting were combined to clarify what was happening. Intertitles were used to elucidate action and convey necessary explanations.

The narrative mode, meaning films that conveyed some kind of fictional story to the audience, came to dominate almost completely. In 1900, it only comprised about 12% of films copyrighted.¹⁷⁵ By 1903, comic films alone (included gags – so not

¹⁷² Kiel, *Early American Cinema in Transition*, 9.

¹⁷³ Gunning, *D.W. Griffith and the Origins of Narrative Film*, 103.

¹⁷⁴ Thompson and Bordwell, *Film History*, 32.

¹⁷⁵ Richard Arlo Sanderson, 'A Historical Study of the Development of American Motion Picture Content and Techniques Prior to 1904' (PhD diss., University of Southern California, 1961), 119. ProQuest (UMI 6102538);

purely narrative) comprised 30% of those copyrighted, and by 1909 narrative (comedy and drama) had risen to an astounding 97% of those registered.¹⁷⁶ Production schedules simply had to keep up with increasing consumer demand for films. The creation of scenarios and continuity scripts that could convey the complexities required by the industry was a challenge for the new writing fraternity and, in order to meet it, they would increasingly need instruction.

The 'director unit system' (1909-14), in which directors worked in multiple units, required more than just a simple 'story outline.' The use of a scenario became standard, as it allowed for pre-planning. Directors still had the flexibility to deviate from a scenario, but it was more limited than before. As story films developed, the screenwriter's task became more taxing, since characterisation and subplots began to creep into films around 1910. Trade literature described the scenario as 'a scene-by-scene account of the action including the intertitles and inserts.' It included a list of story settings for reasons of economy, so the script could be shot out of order in particular locations but still in accordance with the principles of continuity. A synopsis and cast of characters were also standard.¹⁷⁷

This did not mean that issues of narrative comprehension were entirely solved through scripting. Problems persisted, as can be seen from one critic's comment in early 1911, 'when the student of moving pictures finds it difficult to sufficiently grasp the "plot", or see the "point" [...] the public is full of enquiries.'¹⁷⁸ Narrative comprehension was aided by other factors: early film relied on intertextual understanding; the audience would often have knowledge of the plot or characters of a familiar story or classical play or book; a lecturer might be used to fill in the detail or information might be supplied through textual material in fan magazines. Singer believes that: 'Cinema's shift from primitive to Classical narrative was not an instantaneous and unproblematic metamorphosis.'¹⁷⁹ He draws attention to the

cited by Azlant, 'Theory, History and Practice of Screenwriting,' 79.

¹⁷⁶ Robert Allen, 'Vaudeville and Film 1895-1915: A Study in Media Interaction' (PhD diss., University of Iowa, 1977), 151 and 212. ProQuest (UMI 7728428).

¹⁷⁷ Janet Staiger, 'Blueprints for Feature Films: Hollywood's Continuity Scripts' in *The American Film Industry*, ed. Tino Ballo (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1985), 176-177. See also Sargent, 'Technique of the Photoplay,' *MPW*, July 29, 1911, 197-198.

¹⁷⁸ 'The Ambiguous Picture – Some Causes,' *MPW*, January 7 1911, 14-15.

¹⁷⁹ Ben Singer, 'Fiction tie-ins and narrative intelligibility 1911-1918,' *Film History* 5, (1993): 489-490.

importance of one form of intertextual knowledge, namely that provided by the 'fiction tie-in.' He indicates that 'filmmakers and spectators alike might indeed have relied on tie-ins to compensate for the limitations of cinematic storytelling.'¹⁸⁰ One source of such material was *The Motion Picture Story Magazine*, which was launched in 1911 and was America's first movie fan magazine; 'each issue contained as many as twenty [...] "photoplay stories", running about ten pages apiece including numerous movie-still illustrations.'¹⁸¹

However, the development of the scenario meant that the ideas of the writer had a significant and growing influence in the filmmaking process. Azlant notes that there was a tendency for producers around this time to require longer, more detailed scenarios; he quotes Sargent in support of this: 'The plot of action that is little more than a synopsis of the scenes is being replaced by the full script.'¹⁸² This showed the increasing importance of the scenario. This new reliance on scripting created a demand for written material and, in turn, the emergence of the first screenwriting teachers around 1909. The problems posed by writing in continuity would be important factors that these teachers would address in great detail in their columns and manuals. They would also give extensive advice on the form of the scenario and the continuity script, and help writers to hone their craft by offering full training in all aspects of writing for film and marketing their product.

Important changes in market conditions would also affect the length and complexity of films. Carl Laemmle, who formed the Independent Moving Pictures Company (IMP), had, along with other independents, refused to pay licence fees to the MPPC. He had both imported and made multi-reel films; and IMP, with a group of other independents, had in effect become their own conglomerate. In 1912 the courts ruled against the MPPC and in 1915 the US government outlawed them for restrictive practices. Sargent reported in 1912 that 'almost overnight the two, three and five-reel subject has come into its own.'¹⁸³ By 1914 feature films were extremely successful, the popularity of one and two-reelers had waned and MPPC members that had

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 495.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 492.

¹⁸² Azlant, 'Theory, History and Practice of Screenwriting,' 125.

¹⁸³ Sargent, 'Advertising for Exhibitors,' *MPW*, February 24, 1912, 666.

advocated this restriction were virtually wiped out. The successful introduction of multiple reels and film times of 75 minutes, which were of similar length to films that had been imported from Europe, increased the potential profit.¹⁸⁴ Cook says:

The advent of the feature [film...] opened up the possibility of more complicated narratives and offered filmmakers a form commensurate with serious artistic endeavor.¹⁸⁵

Pre-production design was an inevitable requirement of the complexities created by greater film length and developing production processes. This led to an even greater reliance on the screenplay as a 'blueprint' for the whole process, which further boosted the importance and reputation of those who offered instruction to writers. Important industry figures now recognised the primacy of the writer over the director in this process.

According to Staiger, after 1914 central planning became even more crucial in order to ensure quality control of the film product and the satisfaction of the audience consumers, resulting in the maximisation of profit. Staiger calls this fourth mode of production the 'central producer system' (1914-1931), whereby control of production was unified under a single producer who:

used a very detailed shooting script, the continuity script, to plan and budget the entire film shot-by-shot before any major set construction, crew selection or shooting started.¹⁸⁶

Continuity scripts allowed for extensive planning before any filming took place and also aided in post-production. The process of filmmaking was increasingly divided among expert practitioners, including various kinds of writers. As Bordwell and Thompson indicate: 'There were separate scenario departments, for example, and a writer might specialize in plotting, dialogue or intertitles.'¹⁸⁷ In 1916, William Fox emphasises the paramount importance of the script in this process:

¹⁸⁴ See Dirks, 'The History of Film' in *Early Cinematic Origins and the Infancy of Film 3*, See www.filmsite.org/pre20sintro3.html and Aberdeen, 'The Edison Movie Monopoly,' *Hollywood Renegades Archive – SIMPP Research Database*, http://www.cobbles.com/simpp_archive/edison_trust.htm

¹⁸⁵ Cook, *History of Narrative Film*, 35.

¹⁸⁶ Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, *Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 128.

¹⁸⁷ Bordwell and Thompson, *Film History*, 56.

The scenario is the basis of all good pictures. The creative brain that first conceives a story knows more about that story than anyone else can possibly know.¹⁸⁸

Thomas Ince was one of the first to recognise that the script had to play a central role in production. Ince originally worked for Laemmle at IMP in 1910, but signed for the New York Picture Company (NYPC) in 1911 and established studios on the West Coast that would eventually be known as 'Inceville.' Staiger argues that, in 1913, Ince handed over to others the roles of directing and editing and acted as 'Director-General.' This became the prototype for other Hollywood studios, and later that year Lubin, Biograph Edison and Vitagraph would follow suit.¹⁸⁹ Ince is most famous for his collaborations with C. Gardner Sullivan, his most prolific and valuable screenwriter.¹⁹⁰ For Ince, the script was crucial, and it had to have a clear narrative structure by which the audience was caught up and propelled through the story. He relied on a very detailed 'continuity script' and a particular system of organising production.¹⁹¹ Ince sought to control every aspect of production, down to the last detail, by means of the script. These scripts were adhered to on the set and contained meticulous technical instructions about special effects and where intertitles were to be set.¹⁹² Azlant points out that Ince's own notations on the scripts were made to improve narrative flow and included changes:

such as further segmentation, condensation, or omission of actions, changes in plot development through cut-backs and changes in the language of leaders. [...To] construct a film plot [was] Ince's primary, and eventually his almost exclusive, concern.¹⁹³

According to Stempel, Ince 'perfected the narrative style of filmmaking [...] that emphasized a smooth flowing continuity [...] and] told stories clearly and cleanly.'¹⁹⁴ In

¹⁸⁸ William Fox, 'The Scenario Makes the Picture,' *Motography*, May 20, 1916, 1155.

¹⁸⁹ Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, *Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 136-137.

¹⁹⁰ Sullivan was known for his Western scripts featuring the actor William S. Hart as hero; he was Ince's most important writer. See Azlant, 'Theory, History and Practice of Screenwriting,' 172.

¹⁹¹ Stempel, *Framework*, 41.

¹⁹² Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, *Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 138-139.

¹⁹³ Azlant, 'Theory, History and Practice of Screenwriting,' 172.

¹⁹⁴ Stempel, *Framework*, 47-48.

effect, a 'blueprint' that was separate from the actual filming process and had the power to control the costs and logistics of production had finally emerged; and it would also significantly affect the kind of instruction that screenwriting teachers focused on.

The scenario, or its more complex counterpart, the continuity script, became an increasingly important document for effecting such gains, because it allowed for the process of planning as films became longer and relatively more complex.

Professionals in the trade press frequently discussed the importance of creating film continuity at the writing stage, which demonstrated the salience of this issue to the industry at the time. Pierre Key, the advertising and sales manager for Hoffman-Foursquare Pictures comments:

Ninety-nine picture fans in every hundred can instantly tell whether the continuity in a picture is good or bad [...]. They feel instinctively whether it is rhythmical or not; whether the scenes follow one another in proper sequence and whether the correct values of each to the other are maintained.¹⁹⁵

Writers required a detailed and thorough understanding of how to construct scenarios that would meet these industry standards. The very problems of continuity – moving from place to place and the passage of time – that were encountered in the making of the earliest narrative films would present, if properly tackled, the greatest opportunity to the writer, as Hamilton indicated at the time:

The main advantage of the moving picture play over the traditional types of drama is that the author is granted an immeasurably greater freedom in handling the categories of place and time.¹⁹⁶

The script had become central to filmmaking, which would in turn increase the importance of the advice that screenwriting teachers gave to freelance writers at a time when these particular writers played a key role in the business. This state of affairs would continue up to around 1920. However, the focus on producing a highly developed script before production occurred would also ultimately sound the death-

¹⁹⁵ Pierre V. R. Key, 'Continuity is Important Factor,' *Motography*, November 17, 1917, 1033-1034.

¹⁹⁶ Hamilton, 'The Art of the Moving Picture Play,' *Nickelodeon*, January 14, 1911, 50-52.

knell for the amateur scenarist.

The development of the Hollywood studio system would be marked by the take-over of the business by entrepreneurs who would help create a stable platform that would increase the level of opportunity through investment and finance.¹⁹⁷ The film industry had assumed a structure that it would keep for the next four decades: vertically integrated monopolies controlling their own production, theatre chains and distributorships. Full studio control would signal the arrival of the professional screenwriter, who would be drawn mostly from the journalistic or writing fraternity.

Censorship, Copyright and Stardom

Three other issues would also shape the experiences of prospective writers and the type of instruction that screenwriting teachers would offer: the forbidden elements that were likely to be censored; the dangers of copyright infringement and the opportunities afforded by the demand for original material; and the problems and prospects associated with writing for the new stars of the screen.

Censorship

Increasing attendance by all sectors of society at the cinema meant that new demands for censorship were soon voiced. The arch-antagonists of early cinema were two-fold: organised religion and the political right. Many religious groups and social workers considered the nickel theatres to be sinister places where young people could be led astray; they were viewed as training grounds for prostitution and robbery. Lurid subject matter, such as re-enacted executions and murders, was common fare in the early nickelodeon boom. The moralists denounced such leisure-time viewing as a threat to social control because of its often violent and erotic content. George Mitchell points out that 'movie attendance' was condemned alongside other 'such diversions as dancing, gambling, novel reading, theatre going

¹⁹⁷ Dirks, 'The History of Film' in *Early Cinematic Origins and the Infancy of Film 3*, www.filmsite.org/pre20sintro3.html and Aberdeen, 'The Edison Movie Monopoly,' *Hollywood Renegades Archive – SIMPP Research Database*, http://www.cobbles.com/simpp_archive/edison_trust.htm

[and] drinking.¹⁹⁸ The film theorist Münsterberg opposed this viewpoint and set out to counter the moral condemnation, implying that film could actually be a means of social control. Mitchell says that Münsterberg supported 'film because of its ability to remove the viewer from the real world [and] its capacity to provide a vital interval of relaxation.'¹⁹⁹ With so much confusion and varying viewpoints, writers would need clear guidance on this issue.

The problem of censorship was a quagmire for the producers. In 1908, the Mayor of New York managed briefly to close down the entire city's nickelodeons, and local censorship boards were formed in many towns. By 1909, 'it became obligatory in many parts of the country for ministers, businessmen and politicians to inveigh against the movies as a corrupter of youth and a threat to public morality.'²⁰⁰ The real threat may have been more economic than ideological, as the substantial revenues of churches, saloons and vaudeville houses were under threat. A group of New York citizens formed the National Board of Censorship of Motion Pictures in 1909, later known as the National Board of Review. This was a private body that attempted to improve the movies and prevent the federal government from passing national censorship laws; it reviewed films and provided a seal of approval for those without offence.²⁰¹ The MPPC supported this body and helped it financially; within a year, it was reviewing 80% of films. As Gregory Black points out: 'The only way industry leaders could fend off that eventuality was to censor their own products [... so] self-censorship [...] was just good business.'²⁰² A series of legal challenges did follow, but a Supreme Court ruling in 1915 upheld the right of individual states to impose their own censorship on the movies.

Prospective scenario writers needed a clear understanding of what was permissible and what was not. If restraint and self-censorship were necessary, this was best achieved at the scenario stage. As Azlant concludes: 'Censorship militated for pre-

¹⁹⁸ George Mitchell, 'The Movies and Münsterberg,' *Jump Cut*, no.27, July 1982, 57-60, <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC27folder/Munsterberg.html>

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Cook, *History of Narrative Film*, 31.

²⁰¹ Kenneth Macgowan, *Behind the Screen: The History and Technique of the Motion Picture* (New York: Delacorte, 1965), 350.

²⁰² Gregory D. Black, *Hollywood Censored: Morality Codes, Catholics and the Movies* (Cambridge: CUP, 1994), 14-18.

production control of story materials.²⁰³ Manufacturers had to insure themselves against the possibilities of a film on which they had laid out huge levels of expenditure being banned. The screenwriting teachers would comment a great deal on this very complex subject in their columns and manuals. Sargent sums up their concerns and frustrations by saying that '90 per cent of the various rulings of the various censors are childish and without foundation', but he did understand that public opinion was outraged by the irresponsibility of the few.²⁰⁴ Freelance writers increasingly turned to screenwriting teachers in order to understand these forbidden elements, as will be evidenced later by the amount of space such issues took up in all the manuals. Filmmakers could not ignore the issues raised by the moral uplift movement, even if it had more to do with respectability than morality. Such pressures would also contribute to the need for a narrative comprehension that reinforced morality, as it was perceived at the time. According to Bowser:

Producers were being urged to make films that would be morally improving and educational for the mass audience [...] The film would have] to enlist the emotions of the spectator in a story [...] and] carry a lesson or preach a sermon, and to do that it would have to learn to be expressive [...]. One could make moral and educational films and still lose the audience if they were dull or if the audience could not understand them.²⁰⁵

Screenwriting teachers would provide important detailed instructions on how to write creatively within this strict moral framework and not infringe its parameters.

Copyright

The demand for potential film topics had led producers to turn, even more than before, to the adaptation of theatre and literature subjects into scenarios. The practice of unauthorised use of extant material was widespread. In 1907, Gene Gauntier, who worked for Kalem, used all sorts of material as ideas for scenarios:

a poem, a picture, a short story, a scene from a current play, a headline

²⁰³ Azlant, 'Theory, History and Practice of Screenwriting,' 112.

²⁰⁴ Sargent, 'Another Censorship Angle,' *MPW*, October 30, 1915, 806.

²⁰⁵ Bowser, *Transformation of Cinema*, 54.

in a newspaper. All was grist that came to my mill. There was no copyright law to protect authors and I could, and did, infringe upon everything.²⁰⁶

Gauntier prepared a 'working synopsis' for Kalem's one-reel production of *Ben Hur* (1907), but had failed to acquire any rights from the publisher of the novel and Kalem was sued by the author's estate. A 1908 court ruling meant that motion pictures were now subject to the same copyright restrictions as other dramatic productions, and in 1911 Kalem was forced to pay a \$25,000 royalty under a Supreme Court ruling.²⁰⁷ This judgment would have profound effects on screenwriting, as the supply of classic plays and novels available in the public domain was soon exhausted. This not only served as a warning to prospective writers not to plagiarise, but left them fearing that this might even happen to their own work. They would need assurances about this and encouragement in making the most of the opportunities presented by the explosion in demand for original stories. Azlant observes that:

Producers began aggressively soliciting the submission of original material, from known writers, the photoplay agencies and brokers that were springing up and the general public.²⁰⁸

Freelance writers would increasingly look to screenwriting teachers for guidance on what amounted to copyright infringement, how to protect their own work and how to meet the challenge of creating original material for the market.

Stardom

The cinema had created stars and popular heroes, and screenwriting teachers would address the issue of how to write for these individuals. Theatre, opera and vaudeville already operated on the basis of the star system, but according to Staiger the:

industrialists who organised the film business did not take the star system into account. [...They] were manufacturing a product, trying their best to standardize it, and expecting the audience to ask for it by brand

²⁰⁶ Gene Gauntier, 'Blazing the Trail,' unpublished manuscript (New York: MOMA, 1928), 21; cited in Stempel, *Framework*, 8.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid*, 8.

²⁰⁸ Azlant, 'Theory, History and Practice of Screenwriting,' 104.

name.²⁰⁹

Once the film industry had been regularised through the nickelodeon boom and the Motion Picture Patents Company (MPPC) in 1908, films were sold by brand name. Manufacturers hoped that audiences would associate a film they enjoyed with its studio, such as Edison, Vitagraph or Biograph. Filmmakers and actors at this point received no screen credit: their identities had been kept anonymous in order to give preference to the film and to prevent performers from overvaluing themselves and demanding higher salaries. By 1909, however, it was clear that filmgoers were demonstrating interest in their favourite actors. Bradley points out that every member of the audience had equal access to a star when the camera moved in on a face, in ‘the proportions they had only experienced in life in the most intimate setting’ as a child, lover or under threat and this drew on primal emotions.²¹⁰ By 1910, some companies were exploiting their popular actors for publicity purposes. For example, Kalem supplied theatres with photographs to display in their lobbies.

Laemmle, who had formed the Independent Moving Pictures Company (IMP), realised how much audiences wanted to know the names of the unaccredited performers. He managed to lure to IMP the previously unnamed but hugely popular “Biograph Girl”, Florence Lawrence, who had featured in Griffith films from the Biograph Studios, and revealed her name. Other studios soon followed suit and created their own stars by displaying lobby posters and film advertisements.²¹¹ Once the film companies began to name their stars, it led to a blitz of publicity in the form of photographs, posters and postcards. In 1911, the first fan press appeared – *The Motion Picture Story Magazine*, featuring the favourite stars. However, films seldom included credits before 1914.

The public identification of players would have its effect on screenwriting. Scenarists would become well aware of those aspects of character that were generated by the personality of the player. As Azlant points out, ‘the star system would require screenplays [...] to serve as precise “vehicles” for pre-ordained characters in

²⁰⁹ Bowser, *Transformation of Cinema*, 106.

²¹⁰ Bradley, *Making American Culture*, 59-60.

²¹¹ Dirks, ‘The History of Film,’ in *Early Cinematic Origins and the Infancy of Film*, 4, <http://www.filmsite.org/pre20sintro4.html>

characteristic narrative patterns.²¹² Some film companies would also remind prospective writers in their own publicity that they should ‘keep in mind the personalities of their top stars’ when they wrote.²¹³ The development of the star system would prompt wide-ranging advice from screenwriting teachers on which stars to write for and how to write effectively for them.

²¹² Azlant, ‘Theory, History and Practice of Screenwriting,’ 102.

²¹³ Pamphlet on ‘How to Write Motion Picture Plays’ (New York, MOMA, 1912); cited in Stempel, *Framework*, 13.

3. Scenario Fever

By the early teens of the twentieth century, there was such a demand for new material that the film companies opened themselves up to outside ideas and submissions by advertising in the fan and trade press. They ran promotional campaigns and even made direct appeals to the general public. Poor overall organisation and the change to 'two week releases' (fortnightly programme changes) meant that directors no longer had time to devise their own scenarios and meet the level of demand. Ramsaye observed that, as early as 1909:

The demand for screen stories was growing with the industry and rumors of easy money 'writing for the pictures' went through the gossip channels of the actor tribes, reaching the picture patrons as well. The beginning of the scenario writing craze was in sight.²¹⁴

Most film companies were sending out free 'form sheets' or 'instruction sheets' on scenario formats to writers on request. It began with Vitagraph, but soon Essanay, Lubin and others were providing them too.²¹⁵ By 1909, the industry also began to mail out pamphlets on how and what to write. These were among the first written materials offering advice. Studios communicated the kind of stories they required according to their particular strengths; for example, a pamphlet from the Associated Motion Picture Schools²¹⁶ entitled 'How to Write Motion Picture Plays', written about 1912, allowed several story editors from various companies to detail 'What We Want.' Requested material ranged from problem stories contrasting the plights of rich and poor, and melodrama, to comedy, drama, and Westerns.²¹⁷ Companies regularly made their requirements known through the trade press:

ATTENTION SCENARIO WRITERS. The staff of the Scenarior

²¹⁴ Ramsaye, *A Million and One Nights*, 512.

²¹⁵ 'Inquiries', *MPW*, November 11, 1911, 486; James O'Neill, 'Technique and the Tale,' *MPW*, November 18, 1911, 541 and The Hermit, 'The Photoplaywright's Earnings,' *Motography*, May 1911, 93.

²¹⁶ E. F. McIntyre of Chicago founded Associated Motion Picture Schools in January 1911 with the backing of a trade magazine, *MPN*. It was the first of the correspondence schools and apparently received some encouragement from manufacturers and claimed its writers had successfully sold scenarios to them. See 'Associated M. P. Schools,' *MPN*, 30th September 1911, 20 and 'Plots Wanted for Motion Picture Plays,' advertisement that lists companies who have bought scenarios, *MPM*, August 1914, 164.

²¹⁷ Pamphlet on 'How to Write Motion Picture Plays' (New York, MOMA, 1912); cited in Stempel, *Framework*, 13-14.

Department of the Universal Film Mfg. Co., Inc., will examine, edit and pass upon your scenarios, free of any charge whatsoever.²¹⁸

Another example was *The Photo Playwright*, which printed a section called 'The Photoplay Mart' every month, detailing what the various film companies were looking for, but it was invariably 'original stories.'²¹⁹

Mutually interested newspapers and magazines, film producers and journalists also collaborated to promote public excitement. The motion picture serial, a hybrid format between the short film and the multi-reel feature, was an ideal vehicle for launching screenwriting contests. In 1912, *What Happened to Mary?* an original scenario by Bannister and Ann Merwin, was released by the Edison Company in a series of one-reel films simultaneously. *The McClure's Ladies World Magazine* published each short plot, with an offer of a \$100 prize for anyone who could finish an episode. With this came the promise of film production for the winning story. The response was very strong, and circulation of the magazine increased.²²⁰

This spurred other magazines and newspapers to adopt similar marketing strategies. The *Chicago Tribune* ran a contest for an original story, offering a \$10,000 prize; it generated an impressive 19,003 entries and the contest was won by a story entitled *The Diamond from the Sky*, written by Roy L. McCardell, a journalist who would go on to be a successful scenarist. Ramsaye, the then editor of the *Tribune*, explained this by saying it 'was the only professional offering in the contest. He had to win.'²²¹ This perhaps suggests that the competition was not such an open process as it appeared to be.

Sargent claims that McCardell was 'the first man [...] to be hired for no other purpose than to write pictures' for Biograph.²²² His salary was \$200 a week, and this would soon draw other newspapermen, who were only earning around \$25 a week, into the business. McCardell possessed composite skills, bringing his knowledge of comic

²¹⁸ Advertisement in *MPW*, September 14, 1912, 1098.

²¹⁹ 'The Photoplay Mart,' *Photo Playwright*, June 1912, 13-16.

²²⁰ Azlant, 'Theory, History and Practice of Screenwriting,' 127-128.

²²¹ Ramsaye, *A Million and One Nights*, 668.

²²² Sargent, 'The Literary Side of Pictures,' *MPW*, July 11, 1914, 199.

strips, Broadway musicals and comedies, newspaper vignettes and serials, poetry, narrative, photography and popular fiction to the process of writing scenarios.²²³ Sargent, who was also a journalist, would draw on his professional skills and interests derived from popular culture in a similar way. The other key screenwriting teachers examined in this study would also come from a comparable background. The initial involvement of someone of the calibre of McCardell was perhaps a sign of what was to come: the eventual exclusion of screenwriting submissions from the general public in favour of professional writers.

However, in the early 1910s the lure of fame and fortune was drawing amateur writers to try their hand. This was fuelled by high prices paid for some well-publicised story materials. Azlant records that in 1910, Vitagraph paid the scenarist Nell Shipman a substantial \$100 (worth around \$2500 today²²⁴) a reel for an original scenario.²²⁵ This was uncommon, as prices in 1911 generally ranged from \$10 to \$15, with the rare price of \$50 for exceptional work.²²⁶ According to *Motography*, the average price paid for a scenario was around \$25, and only in exceptional cases did it rise to \$100.²²⁷ Nevertheless, the trade literature indicated an ever-upward trend in prices that further stoked interest. By early 1912, the regular price had become \$50 and by 1914, Sargent confirmed that this had potentially risen to \$100.²²⁸ There were fairly optimistic articles by screenwriting teachers such as Wright, who recounts in *The Motion Picture Story Magazine* in 1912 how a former farmer was now earning \$2500 a year and a carpenter who once earned only \$2 a day was now a successful scenario writer. This was the exception rather than the rule, and even he adds a note of caution, saying there are: 'ten thousand writers in the Moving Picture scenario

²²³ Stempel, *Framework*, 4-6.

²²⁴ For the changing value of money see 'Inflation Calculator' in *DaveManuel.com*, <http://www.davemanuel.com/inflation-calculator.php>

²²⁵ Azlant, 'Theory, History and Practice of Screenwriting,' 141.

²²⁶ 'Letters to the Editor,' *MPW*, July 22, 1911, 131 and The Hermit, 'The Photoplaywright's Earnings,' *Motography*, May 1911, 93.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 93.

²²⁸ Richard Spencer, 'Fifty Dollar Scenarios,' *Photoplaywright*, November-October 1912, 5 and Sargent, 'The Photoplaywright,' *MPW*, January 17, 1914, 282-283.

field and one in one hundred are fairly successful.²²⁹

Many thousands of story ideas, synopses, scripts and scenarios were submitted. Story departments were set up to sift these unsolicited manuscripts and, even as early as 1909, *Moving Picture World* recorded that 'large numbers of scenarios are offered and very few of them accepted.'²³⁰ A popular myth had developed that writing for film involved no literary skill and those who had only a basic education could succeed. This was fuelled initially by the belief among a number of the artistic community that film was not a real art. Even so, one of the fears of scenario writers was that their original work would be stolen. Although there were many assurances in the manuals that ideas were rarely plagiarised and that scenario editors were honest, it was thought the sheer amount of material pouring into the studios could provide inspiration to staff writers. Harrison, a regular columnist for *Moving Picture World*, was emphatic about the unlikelihood of this occurrence and insisted that producers were at great pains to avoid accepting any ideas from writers they could not vouch for. Harrison advised that the best way to ensure that nobody else writes your story was not to submit a synopsis, but 'a scenario of masterly composition.'²³¹

'Scenario fever' also spread to the universities. In 1915 Famous Players-Lasky awarded a \$350 prize and a trip to Hollywood for the best screen story. The winner came from Columbia University and had attended one of the courses in 'Photoplay Composition' run by Freeburg.²³² This further emphasised the considerable literary skills required in succeeding and that, for the most part, such competitions only gave the general public the illusion of participation rather than anything more substantial. Nationally advertised courses and schools also began to appear during this period. An industry directory published in 1915 listed 61 such scenario or photoplay schools throughout the country.²³³ At first, a large number of these schools were scorned and criticised, and with justification, for many claimed they could teach the art of photoplay writing in just a few lessons. In 1915, The Photoplay Authors' League

²²⁹ Wright, 'The Spark of Genius,' *MPSM*, September 1912, 135-136.

²³⁰ Editorial, 'Old Wine in New Bottles,' *MPW*, July 24, 1909, 115.

²³¹ Louis Reeves Harrison, 'Stealing Plays,' *MPW*, June 24, 1916, 2208.

²³² Patterson, *Cinema Craftsmanship*, 184.

²³³ *The American Motion Picture Directory, 1914-15* (Chicago: American Motion Picture Directory Co., 1915); 51, cited in Azlant, 'Theory, History and Practice of Screenwriting,' 131-132.

campaigned against them, with Sargent as its first president.²³⁴ However, by the late teens some students of these courses had achieved considerable success and a number of those running them had courted the interest of some big studio names. For example, the Palmer Institute of Authorship, led by Frederick Palmer, who founded the Photoplay Correspondence School, could boast an eminent advisory council comprised of Ince and Sullivan.²³⁵ The fact that one of their students was a life prisoner at Arizona State Penitentiary, who had sold a scenario to Universal for \$500, was certainly trumpeted.²³⁶

Morey has drawn attention to the fact that this kind of school could be another possible contributory factor to 'scenario fever.' Such schools promised access to scriptwriting and 'could offer men the recognition and wealth they craved,' but as mentioned earlier, Morey indicates they were also part of a wider handbook culture of the time, that offered 'self-cultivation' and 'self-improvement' and 'appeared to promise individual social rise through the mastery of some aspect of the film industry.'²³⁷ According to Morey, it tapped into the wider sense of disenfranchisement on the part of those who felt excluded from the dominant culture of American society during this period.

The poor quality of many of the submissions led many to ask why the matter of 'How a scenario should be written' had received so little attention.²³⁸ An editorial in *Moving Picture World* in March 1911, titled 'The Scenario School,' expressed relief at the setting up of a 'school for scenario writers,' although the name of the school is not given:

Whether the school succeeds or not, depends upon the aptitude of the individuals requiring the necessary instruction [...] The school may accomplish some practical good if it will teach its students the formula or

²³⁴ Ibid., 132.

²³⁵ Brownlow, *Parade's Gone By*, 278.

²³⁶ Roy L. Manker, 'The New Way to Enter Motion Pictures,' *Opportunities in the Motion Picture Industry* (1922, repr., Los Angeles: Nabu, 2013), 7.

²³⁷ Morey, *Hollywood Outsiders*, 4-22.

²³⁸ R.V.S., 'Scenario Construction,' *MPW*, February 11, 1911, 294.

technique of scenario writing.²³⁹

The opening up of companies to outside submissions led to successful scenarists and scenario editors eventually responding to this call and writing in trade journals about how to write scenarios, which further spurred public interest. Many of these authors or screenwriting teachers eventually published their ideas in the first screenwriting manuals, since there were considerable commercial rewards for doing so, although their motives also appeared to be mixed with altruism or a genuine desire for improvement. For example, in 1911 Sargent, along with others, realised that there was already a need for new blood in the industry. This would counteract, in his terms, the 'sameness of the films' that resulted from a naturally inbred company of directors who stifled the originality of authors.²⁴⁰ The growth in instruction was phenomenal, as Azlant records that over 90 manuals were published between 1910 and 1920.²⁴¹

Stempel claims that 'what the books and articles by Sargent and the others did was to create what would later be called "scenario fever."²⁴² It is likely that this literary response to public interest further added to its rapid spread, particularly with the boom in trade and fan magazines, which would reach a combined circulation of several million by the early teens. However, Stempel probably overstates the case, as this study has already indicated that instructional literature was only one of the factors that had led to this phenomenon. Azlant sums up the situation in the early teens:

[G]iven the advertisements for stories and writing talent, the distribution of scenario formats, the scenario writing contests, the nationally advertised schools and courses, the coverage of the craft, successful scenarists, and stellar literary figures in the burgeoning trade and fan magazines, and the tide of handbooks and manuals on screenwriting, it is understandable that screenwriting had, by the late teens, become a

²³⁹ 'The Scenario School,' *MPW*, March 18, 1911, 573-574.

²⁴⁰ Sargent, 'The Earmark on the Film,' *MPW*, August 26, 1911, 521.

²⁴¹ Azlant, 'Theory, History and Practice of Screenwriting,' 134.

²⁴² Stempel, *Framework*, 14-15.

swollen public fantasy.²⁴³

²⁴³ Azlant, 'Theory, History and Practice of Screenwriting,' 138.

4. Summary

The origins of early screenwriting teachers can be traced, firstly to a complex array of literary traditions that delivered writing models which could be drawn upon, and secondly to economic factors in the film industry that provided opportunities for new writers, who would in turn seek out instruction.

Early screenwriting teachers, including the key screenwriting teachers who form the subject of this study, were strongly influenced by theatrical practice. Some had worked as critics, directors, writers or actors in the theatre, but all had grown up in an era when this form of entertainment was one of the most powerful mediums of communication, before the advent of film. Notions of how to write for film had evolved mainly from a theatrical base, but were also influenced by literature and other forms of artistic expression. Exploring all the links that are shared between playwriting, story writing and photoplay manuals is beyond the scope of this study; however, there are clear indications that they are considerable and that screenwriting teachers drew heavily on these sources, and in particular on theatrical tradition, to craft their own manuals.

Aspects of melodramatic tradition and the narrative conventions of the theatre influenced screenwriting teachers. Melodrama had provided sharply delineated characters with few moral ambiguities, who could represent good or evil in the choices they made. The combination of music and silent imagery could be effective in eliciting strong emotions and pathos from spectators. Screenwriting teachers had inherited a sharp visual understanding of the pictorial elements of theatrical melodrama and understood the potential of film to outstrip it with photographic realism. However, their acceptance of the influence of these melodramatic elements did not, on the whole, extend to non-classical narrative structure along with its implausible and coincidence-laden plots. Screenwriting teachers preferred mainly to draw on the tried and tested theatrical narrative tradition that demanded tight plot construction and highly developed character psychology. This will become evident later in this study, through the detailed analysis of the advice given by key screenwriting teachers. They were also aware of the many playwriting manuals that housed this tradition and freely accessed this material as a basis for their ideas.

Film had begun with novelty and spectacle, followed by simple story films and basic scripting and developing through to complex feature films that required narrative clarity and detailed scenarios. Early films had a storyline laid out in the script, but the details of the action were left to the actors as 'business' to be worked out. The changing production process and nature of films created a need for more developed and sophisticated scenarios with narrative clarity, to ensure that their content could be understood by all sectors of society. The making of films had moved from informal to highly formal planning. The development of the scripting process was central to this change and ultimately the means of controlling it, which was important for commercial reasons. Mack Sennett, founder of Keystone, comments about the growing realisation of the centrality of the script:

A new theory of motion-picture economics smote us pretty forcefully. It was this: the more money we spent on the script, on writing the story, the less money it cost us to shoot the pictures when we put the actors to work.²⁴⁴

Narrative film, with its clear structural norms, guaranteed a measure of control over the costs and logistics of production. The scenario or continuity script became an increasingly important document for effecting such gains, because it allowed for the process of planning. In that sense, screenwriting was a natural concomitant of more complex narrative film and the intricate production processes required to create it. As a result, it is likely that many of those who would create these scenarios would also seek the assistance of screenwriting teachers.

Rising levels of wealth also meant increasing social mobility and time for leisure activity, which led to higher film attendance by rich and poor alike. Large-scale attendance at film theatres led to increasing concern over the content of films; this was soon taken up by social reformers and moralists who demanded censorship. Manual writers offered extensive advice on what would be tolerated, as this was best solved at the writing stage. Depletion of the ready supply of classic literature and plays, compounded by copyright issues, led to a crisis of scenario material between 1908 and 1917. This massive growth in the need for synopses and scripts would also spur those who aspired to write them to seek out screenwriting teachers for

²⁴⁴ Mack Sennett, *The King of Comedy* (1954: repr., iuniverse.com, 2000), 126.

advice. Rapid expansion in film as a product would inevitably lead to the commodification of particular actors. New writers had to negotiate the difficulties presented by censorship, the opportunities afforded by copyright restrictions, and how to write for these new film stars.

I contend that the evidence I will present strongly suggests that inexperienced writers increasingly turned to screenwriting teachers to help them write scenarios. As a result, I argue that screenwriting teachers were at the heart of this development process and were also a product of it. America had become a nation of filmgoers and the demand for scenario material was insatiable. Screenwriting teachers would advise the industry and freelance writers on how to meet this challenge.

PART TWO – CONTRIBUTION

Section 1 – Screenwriting Teachers

Before closely examining the contribution of the key screenwriting teachers who form the main substance of this thesis, it is necessary to consider the context in which the first screenwriting teachers arose. A set of robust criteria then needs to be established, to distinguish between screenwriting teachers who were on the periphery and those who played a key role; these criteria will be applied to eliminate peripheral screenwriting teachers from the core study. The criteria will again be applied to corroborate why only five key screenwriting teachers should be considered as potentially making the greatest contribution to the discourse on early screenwriting.

1. The First Screenwriting Teachers

The debate about writing narrative film took place across a range of printed media and interest groups: journalists in the national press; studio heads and film directors; scenario editors and staff writers; actors of the emerging film companies; and the general public. Most crucially, it took place in the fan and trade press and in the many screenwriting manuals that were produced by those who would come to be regarded as screenwriting teachers.

From 1910 onwards, articles began to appear in both the trade and fan press about the content and construction of scenarios, perhaps an indication of the increasing level of interest in writing for the screen. In one such article in *Moving Picture World*, Bedding was absolutely clear about what he considered to be the most important aspect in a scenario: 'I have no hesitation in saying it is what is called the dramatic moment. The climax of the story.'¹ The same article also points out the importance of emotionally engaging the audience because:

moving picture audiences like other audiences are influenced very much

¹ Bedding, 'The Dramatic Moment,' *MPW*, March 12, 1910, 372.

by the mood of the moment [... and] the average audience responds to the moods or sentiment shown on the screen.²

Another article in *Moving Picture World* in 1910 acknowledged the centrality of the scenario in the production process, but also lamented the lack of recognition given to these writers:

What is the first requisite in the manufacture of moving picture film? No one, understanding, will gainsay the assertion that it is the scenario. Who, filling a dominant requirement, is held in such complete obscurity as the writer of the scenario?³

This same article recognised 'the writing of a scenario as a distinct profession,' which, the author lamented, was quite badly paid; a fact that 'deters many from considering this new branch of literature.'⁴ At this point, scenario writing was still considered the preserve of the professional writer, even though it was not a financially attractive option. However, this viewpoint was shifting: Rockhill Crow commented in one of his early articles for *Moving Picture World* that: 'The picture play dramatist may be an amateur or a professional.'⁵

The overall lack of recognition for the writer as part of the film production process was more persistent. Ada Barrett (critic and journalist), in 'A Plea for the Photoplay,' lauds this new form of silent drama as 'literature, drama and amusement, brought into the life of the poorest and most ignorant.'⁶ However, she says nothing of the role of the writer behind it, even though her article is supposed to be about 'the photoplay,' which it seems for her had become a way of referring only to the finished film. Others had more foresight about the potential for writing scenarios. Grau comments in *The Motion Picture Story Magazine* on the growing respectability of picture plays and remarks on their potential profitability. However, he also foretells the ultimate fate of the amateur writer, in his recognition of the writing opportunity the industry would present: 'The Moving Pictures field is now emerging into an era

² Ibid., 372.

³ Emar, 'Concerning Scenarios,' *MPW*, July 7, 1910, 76.

⁴ Ibid., 76.

⁵ Rockhill Crow, 'The Technique of the Picture Play,' *MPW*, January 2, 1911, 126-127.

⁶ Ada Barrett, 'The Plea for the Photoplay,' *MPSM*, July 1911, 115-116.

[...when] the world's greatest playwrights will provide the scenarios.'⁷

Open discussion in trade journals about what photoplaywrights might earn was beginning to make writing for films seem more financially viable. By May 1911 *Motography* was quoting between \$10 and, in exceptional cases, \$100 for a single scenario, although it admitted the upper limit was usually around \$50.⁸ The fact there was money to be made also attracted more unscrupulous elements, and it was not long before fan press advertising sections were filled with all sorts of advertisements for film writing correspondence schools, some of which were charlatans touting their wares to a gullible public.

LEARN TO WRITE
PHOTO PLAYS
Big money in the
business
OUR BOOK
TEACHES YOU
HOW

**HOW TO WRITE AND MARKET
MOVING PICTURE PLAYS**

is undoubtedly the most far-reaching work on scenario writing now in print. Read what
PATHÉ FRÈRES SAYS:
"We have perused carefully and with great interest your book, 'How to Write and Market Moving Picture Plays,' and we can only endorse all that you state concerning the writing of moving picture plays.
"Let us hope that all scenario writers will follow your instructions to the great pleasure and comfort of all moving picture manufacturers now compelled to read an ever increasing number of poor productions in the hope of finding a gem amongst them."
It will sell your manuscripts if you can read English, and remember what you read.
PRICE \$1.50. Mailed anywhere in the United States
Send today—Now—before the second edition is gone
Photoplay Enterprise Association
Book Department BOONVILLE, INDIANA

MPSM, April 1912,

Such advertisements appeared across the fan press from early 1911 onwards and also started to infiltrate the more conservative trade press. One advertisement from *Photoplay* reads:

PLOTS WANTED FOR MOTION PICTURE PLAYS. You can write them. We can teach you by mail in 10 easy lessons [...]. No experience and only common school education necessary. Writers can earn \$50 a week [...]. Ass'd Motion Picture Schools.⁹

Associated Motion Picture Schools was the first of these correspondence schools and received recognition and backing from the trade magazine *Moving Picture News*, which carried similar advertisements from August 1911.¹⁰ By December the following advertisement also appeared in *Moving Picture World*:

⁷ Robert Grau, 'The Potency of the Motion Picture,' *MPSM*, November 1911, 118-119.

⁸ The Hermit, 'The Photoplaywright's Earnings,' *Motography*, May, 1911, 93.

⁹ Advertisement in *MPSM*, April 1911, 130.

¹⁰ 'Associated M. P. Schools' advertisements in *MPN*, September 30, 1911, 20 and 34.

NEW FIELD, BIG MONEY, EASY WORK. Why don't you think up plots for motion picture plays? It's easy and pays well. We teach you by mail how to write and sell your plots. [...] Associated Motion Picture Schools.¹¹

Another of these schools was called the National Authors' Institute, based in New Jersey. The draw in the advertisement was 'Cash for Picture-Play Scenarios,' its main claim being: 'We'll teach you the technical secrets.'¹² The Photoplay Enterprise Association also advertised its wares aggressively in the fan press, with claims such as: 'Big money in the business. Our book teaches you how,' but these claims were considerably toned down in the trade press.¹³ This organisation published the monthly journal *The Photo Playwright*, with the successful scenarist Monte M. Katterjohn as editor, and reputable contributors. Some of the key screenwriting teachers featured in this study wrote regularly for this journal and this enhanced its legitimacy, and by implication, its school too.¹⁴

It seems that such schools were initially tolerated, but eventually legitimate manual and column writers actively campaigned against them. Even in 1911, Grau had some misgivings about Associated Motion Picture Schools and the many others whose advertisements proliferated in the fan and trade press. He said: 'The layman would be astonished were the vogue of these schools completely revealed.'¹⁵ During the early teens there were hundreds of similar advertisements. A single edition of *The Motion Picture Story Magazine* in August 1913 carried no fewer than ten advertisements for schools or photoplay brokerages.¹⁶ By November 1914, The Authors' Motion Picture School had even managed to secure the endorsement of the

¹¹ Advertisement in *MPW*, December 30, 1911, 1113.

¹² Advertisement in *MPSM*, August 1911, 157.

¹³ Compare the advertisements in *MPSM*, March 1912, 159 with those in *MPN*, January 25, 1913, 31.

¹⁴ *Photo Playwright* featured articles by Horace G. Plimpton, Studio Manager at Edison and the key screenwriting teachers Sargent, Wright and Ball. See *Photo Playwright*, April to December 1912 and the feature article on their work by Monte M. Katterjohn, 'The Photoplay Dramatist,' *MPSM*, June 1912, 145-147.

¹⁵ Grau, 'The Picture Play,' *MPN*, December 30, 1911, 9.

¹⁶ They included the Chicago Photo-playwright College, National Authors' Institute, Phillip's Studio, Authors' Motion Picture School, United Play Brokerage, American School for Photoplaywriters, The United Correspondence College, The Photoplay Clearing House, Photo-play Syndicate and Associated Motion Picture Schools. See *MPSM*, August 1913, 143, 147, 159, 171 and 174-175.

film star Francis X. Bushman for its advertisements.¹⁷

As already stated in my introduction, *Photoplay* finally decided to 'eliminate motion picture school advertising' in April 1915 and replaced it with a legitimate regular monthly column called 'Hints on Photoplay Writing,' by Peacocke, from May 1915 onwards.¹⁸ For a short period, the most aggressive forms of advertising disappeared but within a month Atlas Publishing had returned.¹⁹ Below is their standard advertisement that appeared in *Photoplay*. In order to avoid the ban, it stressed that no correspondence course was required, although the promise of substantial financial rewards had crept back in.



Photoplay, July 1915, 8.

Sargent's views about such institutions were clear enough and he probably had Associated Motion Picture Schools of Chicago in mind when he wrote about the many difficulties writers faced when trying to write scenarios:

The fake correspondence school is the most vicious form of graft because it harms not alone those who take the course but also those who merely read the advertising with its specious and misleading statements about 'anyone' can learn to write plays, that no literary ability is required, that an income of at least \$50 weekly is [e]nsured.²⁰

In a ten-year review (1907-1917) of how far writing for film had developed,

¹⁷ Advertisements in *Photoplay*, November 1914, 2 and *MPM*, November 1914, 169.

¹⁸ In backing this decision, Peacocke quotes his own experience as a staff writer with Universal, saying that 'no scenario was ever accepted from a so-called school or clearing house.' See 'Scenario School Advertising Barred by Photoplay Magazine,' *Photoplay*, April 1914, 114-117.

¹⁹ Atlas Publishing Co. advertised its materials under the guise of 'no correspondence course' and had toned down its rhetoric. See *Photoplay*, May 1915, 164.

²⁰ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., (New York: Moving Picture World, 1916), 351.

'Photoplay Writing, Then and Now', Sargent refers to the first correspondence school based in Chicago, claiming that this course, 'poor as it was' formed the basis for innumerable other courses and that those involved had made 'Profits of from \$10,000 to \$30,000 yearly [...]. Literally thousands took the course, misled by the glowing promises.'²¹

In another article, Sargent recounts the problems that even genuine teachers were experiencing and the fact that some had dubious connections to these schools. Apparently, another Chicago-based enterprise, called the Photoplaywrights' Association of America, had in some way connected itself to Arthur Winfield Thomas (who had also worked as an editor of *Photoplay*) as a way of legitimising its activities. This organisation had produced a book called *Wanted: More Photoplays*, with the owners' claim that, 'Mr. Wm. Lord Wright [...] has helped me' and was 'Consulting Editor' and Capt. Leslie T. Peacocke was also named as an associate editor.²² The lure of financial gain seemed to have dragged Thomas and Peacocke into the row and Thomas and Wright fell out over the pending court action.²³ Phillips, another of the key screenwriting teachers of this study, even ran his own correspondence school, The Phillip's Studio, although this appears to have been more legitimate.²⁴ Nevertheless, this brief survey reveals that the relationship between even the *bona fide* screenwriting teachers and correspondence schools was complex.

The role of the fan and trade press in disseminating information about how to write scenarios gradually grew in importance and would help popularise the work of a number of the emerging teachers of the screen.

Fan magazines had a much larger audience than the trade press, as they sought to engage the wider public They were also an important promotional tool for the

²¹ Sargent, 'Photoplay Writing, Then and Now,' *MPW*, March 10, 1917, 1491-92. Sargent may have had in mind the same 'Chicago man [who] was the first to conceive the idea of a writing school course' as the Chicago firm featured in the advertisements, which was likely to be Associated Motion Picture Schools.

²² Advertisement in *Photoplay*, November 1914, 7.

²³ See Sargent, 'The Photoplaywright,' *MPW*, December 26, 1914, 1834 and February 6, 1915, 821. Thomas was voted 'Out' of the Photoplay Author's League, presumably as a result of his suspected questionable activities.

²⁴ Advertisement in *Photoplay*, November 1914, 181.

industry; offering readers portraits of their favourite stars and stories about their personal lives. According to Lewis Jacobs, initially:

They only rarely ventured into criticism, but this restraint was not prolonged. *Photoplay* Magazine [...] set up new standards for fan journals by vigorously applauding the best pictures and staunchly condemning the mediocre.²⁵

Koszarski confirms this change of direction and their attempt to promote critical judgment and to influence the viewing habits of their readers:

For the most part, fan magazines [...] served a highly educative function [...] and] did suggest various aesthetic bases for differentiating 'good' from 'bad' and supplied their readers with enough technical, social and economic background to help inform their decisions.²⁶

To begin with, articles were mainly directed at the filmgoer, but they soon extended to instructing the public how to write scenarios. The shortage of material experienced by the industry, as has already been established in the first part of this thesis, drove this process and created opportunities not previously open to the public. Column writers such as Peacocke, who wrote for *Photoplay*, tried to bridge the gap between the industry and freelance writers. There was a certain ambiguity about the position of such figures, in that they were industry insiders, but were often addressing an enthusiastic public who had little idea their offerings would only be acceptable to the industry in rare cases. Fan press editors were not concerned with launching the careers of scenario writers, however, but with improving their sales figures.

Koszarski identifies the key fan press magazines as *Photoplay*, *Motion Picture Story Magazine* (which became *Motion Picture Magazine* in 1914) and *Motion Picture Classic*.²⁷ Existing circulation figures for *Photoplay*, the most prominent of these publications, are an indication of very wide readership.²⁸

²⁵ Lewis Jacobs, *The Rise of the American Film: A Critical History* (1939: repr., New York: Teachers College Press, 1967), 134.

²⁶ Koszarski, *Evening's Entertainment*, 195.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 193.

²⁸ *Photoplay* was established in 1911 and based in Chicago; by 1915 it had a circulation of 100,000 and this had increased to 495,232 by 1925. These figures are courtesy of David Pierce and Eric Hoyt of the *Media*

The audience for the trade press was far more select and these publications were initially geared to exhibitors and industry insiders only. The trade papers all wanted to be able to tell their advertisers that they reached the most important buyers and people in the industry who mattered. For them, it was not so much the quantity of readers but their quality. According to Koszarski: 'For those within the industry, information and opinion were shaped [by these] aggressive trade papers, each competing for the same limited number of subscribers.'²⁹ The trade journals contained film reviews, summaries of the programmes of theatres across the nation, activities of regional exchanges in the cities and coverage of the major New York theatres. They also covered issues such as censorship and copyright. Koszarski identifies the main trade press as comprising the *New York Dramatic Mirror*, *Moving Picture World* and *Motion Picture News*. *Moving Picture World* was unrivalled from the early to mid-1910s, as it had the largest circulation. It saw itself as the leader in the discourse on writing for film, but all of these publications ran regular columns. *Motion Picture News* was originally the voice for the independent, non-trust producers, but would soon come to speak for the whole industry. It would overtake *Moving Picture World* in popularity by the early 1920s and have a much larger circulation.³⁰ Both *Motion Picture News* and *Moving Picture World* would establish regular departments devoted to movie reviews and editorial criticism, and this would eventually be extended to columns on how to write scenarios. The *New York Dramatic Mirror*, although primarily a theatrical journal, also became an important trade organ for film. It had run a column by Frank Woods since 1909 and prided itself on the fact that: 'Photoplays were to be handled with the same respect, seriousness and freedom that have always characterised this publication's treatment of the stage

History Digital Library and were taken from N. W. Ayer and Sons' *Newspaper Annuals*, 1900-1960. Ayer & Son audited the circulation figures on behalf of advertisers. See *Media History Digital Library*, <http://mediahistoryproject.org>

²⁹ Koszarski, *An Evening's Entertainment*, 195.

³⁰ *Moving Picture World* was formed in 1907 and published in New York on a weekly basis. By 1915 the paper had a circulation of 17,200. In the 1920s it gradually lost ground to other trade papers and by 1925 circulation had fallen to 8,503. It ceased publication in 1927. The *Motion Picture News* was published from 1913 to 1930. The publication was created through the 1913 merger of *Moving Picture News* founded in 1908 and *The Exhibitors' Times*, founded in 1913. It was also published on a weekly basis. It was formed as a counterweight to the dominant *Moving Picture World*. By 1915 it had a circulation of 6,800. It became the leading trade journal of the 1920s and by 1925 its circulation had reached 10,000. These figures are courtesy of Pierce and Hoyt of the *Media History Digital Library* and were originally taken from Ayer and Sons' *Newspaper Annuals*, 1900-1960. See *Media History Digital Library*, <http://mediahistoryproject.org>

productions.³¹

According to Charlie Kiel, in terms of its level of industry access and linkage, and more directly its influence on film writing, the trade press:

functioned as an arbiter of taste, emphasizing certain tenets of classicism that would be absorbed over time [... and] did provide expertise in particular realms (such as narrative construction) that helped establish certain norms. [...W]riters and critics within industry journals helped map out some of the possible options for filmmakers and conveyed a mediated version of public response to developing formal tendencies.³²

In other words, the trade press provided a useful forum for debate among the various interested parties about how films were constructed and to some extent this discourse helped consolidate practice within the industry. On the other hand, Liepa adds a note of caution for those who would make too many assumptions about this:

One should be wary, however, of considering trade press discourse as indexically related to the film industry or film culture more generally. The film trade press addressed exhibitors, distributors and suppliers of exhibition materials and hardware, and tended to cater to their needs and interests.³³

Richard Abel confirms this view and argues that, from their establishment, the trade papers aggressively targeted the exhibitor and were almost totally focused on industry needs.³⁴ However, Jordon Brower and Josh Glick point out that *Moving Picture World* also embraced the wider needs of the industry and served as a space for discourse, as:

many of the paper's staff members were professional scenario writers, theater operators, or technicians [...and as such it] served as a forum for

³¹ The *New York Dramatic Mirror* was founded in 1879 and had taken up the cudgels of film comment because up until 1911 there was still 'no organized commentary concerning the motion picture.' See Tibbetts, *American Theatrical Film*, 6 and 56.

³² Kiel, *Early American Cinema in Transition*, 43.

³³ Liepa, 'Entertaining the Public Option,' in *Analyzing the Screenplay* ed. Nelmes, 17.

³⁴ Richard Abel, *The Red Rooster Scare: Making Cinema American, 1900-1910* (Berkeley: University of California, 1999), 80-86.

the film industry to speak to itself, about itself, but also mediated between the industry and the culture in which films were produced and viewed.³⁵

At best, it seems, the trade press provided an inside view through which the American public could understand the various technological developments, the evolution of 'best practice' and could to some extent observe and gain access to the industry. It performed the role of interlocutor and offered a forum for dialogue and discussion about all aspects of film production, exhibition and reception or the inner workings of the industry. In his work on how the use of intertitles developed between 1909 and 1916, Liepa claims that the trade press also performed a more nuanced role in mediating the relationship between industry outsider and insider:

Trade journalists in the 1910s wrote ambiguously and simultaneously for interested amateurs, budding professionals and industry insiders. Perhaps even more so than films themselves, which, due to the nature of the medium retained an element of communicative unidirectionality, the trades served as an important forum [... of] negotiation [...], serving both popular and industrial interests.³⁶

Santiago Hidalgo agrees and sums up their role as a forum for discussion and a focus for the developing discourse:

They mediated one of film's most intense periods of transformation – between roughly 1907-1914 – with the move from single reel to feature length films, and with significant changes to film aesthetics, narrative construction, production practices, exhibition conditions and audience spectatorship.³⁷

It is a continuing point of debate as to how in touch with the mores of the industry the fan press and trade journals really were. A full discussion of this issue is beyond the reach of this thesis, but it seems likely that the fan and trade press did have an

³⁵ Jordon Brower and Josh Glick, 'The Art and Craft of the Screen: Louis Reeves Harrison and the Moving Picture World' in *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 33:4, (2013) 535, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01439685.2013.847652>.

³⁶ Liepa, 'Figures of Silent Speech,' 122-123.

³⁷ Santiago Hidalgo, 'Early American Film Publications' in *A Companion to Early Cinema*, eds., Andre Gaudreault, Nicholas Dulac and Santiago Hidalgo (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 205.

influence on the development of screenwriting within the industry, although the extent of that influence is hard to measure.

Moreover, it appears likely that information from the trade press was increasingly accessed by those among the general public who wished to familiarise themselves with the latest information about studio and production company requirements and writing opportunities. Screenwriting manuals of the period regularly direct prospective amateur writers to the trade press as a source of current market information about the industry. Ball encouraged his readers to access trade papers, such as *Moving Picture World*, *Motography* and the *New York Dramatic Mirror*. Similarly, Wright urged his readers to study key trade journals, such as *Moving Picture World*, and *Motion Picture News*.³⁸ In response to this level of interest the trade press developed a significant discourse on film writing.

Sargent's columns in *Moving Picture World* and Wright's in the *New York Dramatic Mirror* are full of examples of their responses to letters and questions from the general public about how to write and writing opportunities. These columns would regularly provide information about what film companies were looking for. For example, in 1914 Sargent writes: 'Frontier is in the market for scripts, and is willing to pay top-notch prices for high-class stories,'³⁹ and Wright advises that 'Civil War plots are not at a premium. The World Film Company is not buying at present.'⁴⁰ Sargent included an 'Inquiries' section in his column, which printed comments from readers' letters. These recorded the successes and failures of writers with various companies and which were best for pitching future scripts. Sargent sometimes quoted whole sections of letters on writer's experiences:

Here is part of a letter from an author whose success represents about the average writer who cannot devote his entire time to plays. [...] 'Had good business with the plots in November: sold four, one to _____ for \$25, one to _____ for \$30, and two to _____ (half-reels) for \$20.'⁴¹

³⁸ See Ball, *The Art of the Photoplay* (1913; repr., Forgotten Books, 2012), 28-30 and Wright, *Photoplay Writing* (1922: repr., Nabu, 2012), 197.

³⁹ Sargent, 'The Photoplaywright,' *MPW*, January 24, 1914, 406-407.

⁴⁰ Wright, 'Photoplay Authors, Real and Near,' *NYDM*, 1914 May-Jun 1915, 2013.pdf: *Fulton History*: <http://fultonhistory.com/Fulton.html>

⁴¹ Sargent, 'The Photoplaywright,' *MPW*, January 17, 1914, 282-283.

Wright also found himself constantly answering practical enquiries from the readers of his column. He writes: 'Came several letters the past few days asking if we supported the synopsis-only theory.'⁴² From another letter he quoted a regular question he was asked:

If I sell a photoplay to a company and they produce that play, giving it another title [...] have I the right [...] to claim authorship under their title?

43

Even a cursory examination of these columns indicates that they were being accessed by a whole range of people, from professional writers through to their most amateur counterparts.

The first recorded instruction on screenwriting began to appear in the fan and trade press in early 1911. These initial column writers did not necessarily gain the renown of those who followed later. A. W. Thomas and the scenarist Marc Edmund Jones wrote a column for *Photoplay* in 1911. Thomas was also editor for *Photoplay* but would not produce a manual based on his columns until 1914, and by then his influence had waned. Sargent said of his achievements: 'He has done a few plays but nothing to attract marked attention. He holds pretty closely to the editorial end.'⁴⁴

In 1917 Sargent records that in 1912, Thadée Letendre of Universal had established the first trade journal that was totally dedicated to photoplay writing, called *The Scenario Writer*. It would later become known as *Photoplay Author*. He also said that Letendre wrote the first book of instruction and 'this was presently followed by one from Wright.'⁴⁵ However, Sargent appears to contradict himself, as on at least two other occasions in 1914 he had claimed that Wright had produced the first manual.⁴⁶

⁴² Wright, 'Photoplay Authors, Real and Near,' *NYDM*, 1914 May-Jun 1915 - 2133.pdf: *Fulton History*: <http://fultonhistory.com/Fulton.html>

⁴³ Wright, 'Photoplay Authors, Real and Near,' *NYDM*, 1914 May-Jun 1915 - 1539.pdf: *Fulton History*: <http://fultonhistory.com/Fulton.html>

⁴⁴ Arthur W. Thomas, *How to Write a Photoplay* (Chicago: Photoplaywrights' Association of America, 1914). The surviving six chapters of this manual are relatively well developed and their content reflects the level of advancement by 1914, <http://www.oocities.org/emruf1/photoplay.html>. See also Sargent, 'The Literary Side of Pictures,' *MPW*, July 11, 1914, 199-202.

⁴⁵ Sargent, 'Photoplay Writing Then and Now,' *MPW*, March 10, 1917, 1491.

⁴⁶ See Sargent, 'Wright's Second' in the 'The Photodrama,' *MPW*, July 18, 1914, 425 where Wright is credited as 'the author of the first book on photoplay writing to come from the press [...] about four and a half years

Liepa takes the view that ‘Sargent erroneously credited Wright in 1914 as “the author of the first book on photoplay writing”’ and later corrected this in his article in 1917. But this would mean Sargent had made the same error twice in 1914, which seems unlikely.⁴⁷ As the publication date of Letendre’s manual remains unknown, there is no way of resolving this issue. Wright’s short 30-page work was probably published in late 1910 and was called *The Art of Writing Scenarios*; it could well have been the first.⁴⁸ Sadly, it appears that neither Letendre’s or Wright’s early manuals have survived, although Wright would go on to author two further manuals, which are still available and will be examined in this thesis. Wright would also exert considerable influence as a column writer for *Motion Picture News* and the *New York Dramatic Mirror*.

Early in 1911, a short series of articles appeared in *Moving Picture World*, called ‘Technique of the Picture Play’ by George Rockhill Crow; they dealt with basic scenario structure and writer concerns, but no manual would result.⁴⁹ This series was followed by a series of articles on photoplay writing by Louis Reeves Harrison, an editor and staff writer for *Moving Picture World*, covering subjects such as plots, characterisation, settings, scenario construction and rejected manuscripts.⁵⁰ These would later form the basis for his manual, *Screencraft*, which would not be published until 1916.

Within a relatively short period, regular columns and photoplay departments were created in all the major fan and trade press publications in an effort to educate the

ago,’ and ‘The Literary Side of Pictures,’ *MPW*, July 11, 1914, 199-202 where he says, ‘William Lord Wright was the first in the field with a book.’

⁴⁷ Liepa, ‘Figures of Silent Speech’, 233.

⁴⁸ Advertisements in mid-1914 about Wright’s upcoming book, *The Motion Picture Story*, mention the earlier book, *The Art of Scenario Writing*, which has now presumably been lost. This is probably the book Sargent is referring to. See Advertisement in *Movie Pictorial*, June 13, 1914, 4 for *The Motion Picture Story* (1914), which credits Wright as ‘author of *Art of Scenario Writing*’ too. The same credit appears in the prefaces to his manuals, *The Motion Picture Story* (Chicago: Cloud Publishing, 1914) and *Photoplay Writing* (1922). It was also given a favourable review, ‘The Art of Writing Scenarios,’ in *MPW*, February 25, 1911, 419. This review means a likely publication date in the autumn of 1910.

⁴⁹ Rockhill Crow, ‘Technique of the Picture Play,’ *MPW*, January 21, 1911, 126-127; January 28, 1911, 178-180 and February 4, 1911, 229. This series by Crow halted, but he did continue to write regular features on various topics.

⁵⁰ Harrison, ‘The Rejected Manuscript,’ *MPW*, April 1, 1911, 695; ‘Characterization,’ April 29, 1911, 937; ‘Superior Plays: The Important elements of their Construction,’ June 3, 1911, 1233-1234; ‘Settings,’ June 17, 1911, 1360 and ‘Plots,’ July 1, 1911, 1493-1494.

public and, in all probability, to keep industry insiders informed about the current thinking on how to write scenarios. This intense interest in writing for the screen coincided with a 'boom in trade and fan magazines that appeared throughout the teens, reaching a combined circulation of several million copies.'⁵¹ Those who wrote regularly for these publications therefore had the potential to influence the debate about screenwriting.

The other earliest surviving manuals include works by Ralph Perkins Stoddard (1911) and James Slevin (1912). These manuals are of a basic nature and indicate the infancy of the craft at this point. Stoddard's book restricts itself to basic advice on the story idea, plotting and formatting, and focuses on simplicity of approach. Slevin's manual, though more developed, views film in theatrical terms, as indicated by its title, *On Picture-Play Writing: A Handbook of Workmanship*, and makes extensive references to Aristotle.⁵² Herbert Case Hoagland, editor for Pathé Frères, wrote a slightly more sophisticated manual, *How to Write a Photoplay*, in 1912. However, it was not only short but also simplistic in its approach to structure, as indicated by these comments:

To write a photoplay requires no skill as a writer, but it does require a 'constructionalist.' It requires the ability to grasp an idea and graft (please use in the botanical sense) a series of causes on the front end of it and a series of consequences on the other end.⁵³

By far the most outstanding early publication, for reasons that I will address later, was the first edition of Sargent's *The Technique of the Photoplay*, published in 1912, which was based on his columns in *Moving Picture World*. The popularity of Sargent's manual would spawn two further editions in 1913 and 1916, both of which were substantial revisions of the previous work. In Azlant's opinion, 'it represents a distillation and on-going revision of public instruction which appeared in a respected

⁵¹ Azlant, 'Theory, History and Practice of Screenwriting,' 133.

⁵² See Ralph Perkins Stoddard, *The Photoplay: A Book of Valuable Information for Those Who Would Enter A Field of Unlimited Endeavor* (1911: repr., Kessinger Legacy, 2013), 5-6 and James Slevin, *On Picture-Play Writing: A Handbook of Workmanship* (1912: repr., Bibliobazaar, 2013), 57-64.

⁵³ Herbert Case Hoagland, *How to Write a Photoplay* (1912: repr., Nabu, 2012), 6.

trade journal written by an eminently qualified scenarist.⁵⁴

If we compare Hoagland's approach, which appears to belittle proper story writing skills and the role of the writer, with the opening statements in Sargent's column, 'Technique of the Photoplay', about the nature of the photoplay and the role of the photoplaywright, it is clear that Sargent has a more developed understanding of the skills required of the writer and their role in the production process:

The photoplay [... is] a story told in action instead of words, and therefore is written in action instead of dialogue or polished phrase. The author supplies the groundwork of action and idea, but he is dependent on the director and the actor for proper interpretation and expression.⁵⁵

The writers of other screenwriting columns in the fan and trade press would also produce manuals as a result of their popular success. Many other scenario writers, directors and actors would also soon follow suit and, within a relatively short period, a steady supply of manuals was published. As already noted and reiterated by Azlant :

Over ninety books in English on the silent scenario, many by accomplished scenarists or scenario editors, were published between 1910 through 1920, perhaps the largest body of instruction in an aspect of film production within the materials of film history.⁵⁶

These manuals provided instruction in film writing technique, format and generic and moral constraints, and they helped to promote the interest of the general public. Liepa elaborates on the role they played in mediating a space between freelance writers and the film studios and ultimately helping the industry as a whole to define what it meant to write professionally for the screen. For Liepa:

manuals helped regulate the body of material being produced. From simple instructions on format and presentation, to specific industry requirements, these manuals collectively promoted and orchestrated a

⁵⁴ Azlant, 'Theory, History and Practice of Screenwriting,' 211.

⁵⁵ Sargent, 'Technique of the Photoplay,' *MPW*, July 22, 1911, 108-109.

⁵⁶ Azlant, 'Theory, History and Practice of Screenwriting,' 134.

massive cultural movement of independent writing. Such instruction helped ease the industry's incorporation of writing as a fundamental element of film production. Increasingly complex, the industry needed to develop a degree of rationalization in order for writing to maintain a significant position within the process.⁵⁷

By way of summary, the evidence seems to suggest a more industry-inclusive and broader involvement in the American film industry by screenwriting teachers in this early period than at any other point in screenwriting history.

As it is not possible to survey all the material that these people produced, it is important to justify why a number of apparently important texts will be laid aside. Some of these will include manuals by well-known scenario writers, trade and fan press columnists, critics, filmmakers and film stars. However, excluding these will enable the most important texts to be examined so as to test the contention that certain key screenwriting teachers made a significant contribution to the development of the American film industry during this early period.

A set of criteria will be established in order to both eliminate the work of certain individuals from the study and also validate why the contribution of only five screenwriting teachers should be examined in detail.

⁵⁷ Liepa, 'Figures of Silent Speech,' 232-233.

2. Five Important Criteria

It is not practical to scrutinise closely all of the manuals published during this period, because there are so many, but it is important to select those of most significance. This is why it is necessary to establish criteria that can help decide which of these manual writers are worthy of closer examination. Applying such criteria will also go some way to ascertaining the possible significance of the contribution of those selected for further consideration: it will also assist in determining how central and integral their role was in the early film industry, and how they might have influenced early screenwriting development. It will then be possible to proceed to a consideration of the advice and guidance that these key screenwriting teachers offered and its potential relevance to the industry and those individuals, both amateur and professional, who sought to pursue or further their career in screenwriting.

The following five criteria have been selected. Screenwriting teachers must have:

1. Achieved significant writing credits
2. Worked as scenario editors
3. Written extensively for the fan or trade press
4. Written more than one manual or written a manual that was published in more than one edition
5. Had considerable industry connections.

1. Writing Credits - The influence and authority of those who claimed to be screenwriting teachers would be considerably enhanced if they had demonstrated they could write. Although it is not essential to be able to do something in order to be able to teach it, it is a fillip to credibility if the screenwriting teachers selected had succeeded at what they were asking others to master. Therefore, the first requirement is that the screenwriting teachers should be scenario writers with a significant number of script credits and evidence of critical success. In addition, they may also have evidenced they were accomplished writers in other fields, such as journalism and in writing plays or short stories.

2. Scenario Editors - As it is likely that those considered to be more central to the industry would have worked as scenario editors for a major studio or film company, this will also be a requirement. Azlant notes the importance of this role:

The evolving studio system advanced not only the craft of screenwriting, but also the separate role of the scenario or story editor, who managed the various aspects of the studio's use of story materials and writing skills.⁵⁸

Those who were appointed as gatekeepers to make judgments about scripts and to verify what was suitable for purchase performed a vital function. Most companies advertised widely for scripts, and the scenario editor on the staff read, selected and adapted these submissions. Bowser confirms the importance of these individuals, and how they were selected:

Out of the hundreds of journalists, magazine story writers, actors and amateurs who submitted scripts, a handful developed into professional scriptwriters and were hired as scenario editors of production companies.⁵⁹

Legitimacy in such a context came from their ability to show they had the relevant experience to instruct others and not just demonstrate an understanding of theory. Louella Oettinger Parsons legitimises her own work as a screenwriting teacher and manual writer by alluding to her professional experience as a scenario editor with Essanay:

I have studied the subject of the photoplay from every angle, and it is from my actual experience with the scenario writer that I have evolved this series of lessons for the help of those who have photoplay ambitions.⁶⁰

Wright agrees that scenario editors are at the heart of the industry:

The scenario editor is a very important functionary because he not only must be a writer with a keen sense of dramatics, but he must understand

⁵⁸ Azlant, 'Theory, History and Practice of Screenwriting,' 85-86.

⁵⁹ Bowser, *Transformation of Cinema*, 256.

⁶⁰ Louella Oettinger Parsons, *How to Write for the 'Movies* (1916: repr., Nabu, 2012), 3.

the policy of the producing company for which he works, and he should also have had experience in the sales end of the business.⁶¹

Those selected for closer scrutiny in this study will be from among the most expert and highly regarded scenario editors and were recognised as such by their peers and other industry professionals.

3. Fan or Trade Press - Potential candidates for closer study should have written for key fan or trade press publications about screenwriting. Regular columns or special departments dedicated to this purpose were established in most of these publications, and writing for these indicates that the teacher had a demonstrable audience and could have had considerable influence over the amateur writing public and/or the professional writing fraternity. It is important to consider both teachers who featured in the fan and in the trade press as they addressed different, but in their own way equally significant, audiences.

4. Multiple Manuals - The candidates should have written more than one manual, or a substantial manual that was published in more than one edition, which would be an indication of wide readership and popularity. Those who wrote regular columns and features in the fan or trade press were more likely to have also gained a wider readership of their manuals, due to the press coverage they received and the advertising potential of their copy.

Many wrote manuals based on their experience as scenario writers or directors, or they were actors who had profile and this expertise was demonstrated in their texts. In considering various manual writers, it will be important to examine the context from which they arose: for example, it may be necessary to distinguish between individuals who devoted themselves to the education of screenwriters as a main priority and those who merely wrote manuals as a means of furthering their own reputation or celebrity status. Although intention is not a test of quality, if the work was not born out of dedication, and was not continuous and sustained, this might signal a lack of depth or worth.

5. Industry Connections - The candidates should have had some other significant

⁶¹ Wright, *Photoplay Writing*, 55.

industry connections, as further evidence of their centrality. They might have been producers, studio executives, directors, actors, or have actually formed, owned or run film companies. They may have established, run or partaken in writing clubs or organisations, federations, leagues or courses, or adjudicated in scenario competitions. Such work may have earned them plaudits or citations from others in the industry who recognised their contribution.

While this study attempts to establish robust criteria to assess the level of influence of various screenwriting teachers, I recognise that in this kind of historical research it is always difficult to measure, or arrive at fully accurate judgments about, who is more or less influential, since the surviving historical documentation is rarely neutral and without bias. However, in recognition of these limitations I have attempted to mitigate the problem by drawing on multiple bases, in an attempt to make my judgments more secure and to gain some kind of consensus. In establishing the reputation of each of the various screenwriting teachers, the Internet Movie Database for Professionals (*IMDbPro*) has been consulted as a starting point. This source has been checked and greatly expanded upon by accessing the fan and trade press extensively and any other available online resources that can be located. The views of respected contemporary commentators such as Grau, and the expertise of earlier and more modern film historians, have also been consulted where appropriate.

3. Peripheral Screenwriting Teachers

There were many contributors to the screenwriting discourse during the early years of the American film industry. I have sifted through these materials and have discarded many of them from this study because they do not even come close to meeting the criteria I have set out.⁶² Application of the criteria did identify a number of potentially significant candidates and it was then possible to separate those of lesser importance from the most significant of these contributors. Those screenwriting teachers who only partially fulfilled the criteria, and were therefore judged to be of more marginal significance, will be considered first:

Joseph Berg Esenwein (1867-1946) co-wrote a manual with Arthur Leeds, entitled *Writing the Photoplay* (1913). Esenwein was a published author, novelist and academic, and became the editor of 'The Writer's Library' for the Home Correspondence School in 1914.⁶³ This organisation published material on many subjects, such as 'Writing for Vaudeville,' 'The Art of Short Story Writing' and 'The Art of Public Speaking.' Esenwein's literary pursuits were wide-ranging and screenwriting was just one of his interests. Leeds had written photoplays for Selig and Essanay and became scenario editor for Edison in 1915.⁶⁴ Leeds was also an editor of, and a regular contributor to *The Photoplay Author* along with Esenwein.⁶⁵ He was also the head of the photoplay section of the Home Correspondence School

⁶² Among others surveyed but not included were: Ardon Van Buren-Powell, *The Photoplay Synopsis* (1919: repr., Memphis, General Books, 2013); Clarence J. Caine, *How to Write Photo-Plays* (Philadelphia: McKay, 1915); Carl Charlton, *How to Write Photoplays*; Charles Donald Fox, *The Fox Plan of Photoplay Writing* (1922: repr., Kessinger Legacy, 2013); William Lewis Gordon, *How to Write Moving Picture Plays* (1914: repr., Nabu, 2013); James Irving, *The Irving System: A New Easy Method of Story and Photoplay Writing* (1919: repr., Memphis: General Books, 2012); Grace Lytton, *Scenario Writing Today* (1921: repr., Miami, Hard Press, 1913); Elbert Moore, *Elbert Moore's Textbook on Writing the Photoplay* (1915: repr., Memphis, General Books, 2012); Earnest N. Ross, *Scenario Writing* (Philadelphia: Penn Association, 1912); James A. Taylor, *The Photoplay* (Washington: Washington D. C. Printing, 1914) and C. G. Winkopp, *How to Write a Photoplay* (1915: repr., Kessinger Legacy, 2013).

⁶³ J. Berg Esenwein was editor of *Lippincott's Magazine* from 1905-1914; the magazine was inaugurated in 1868 and according to Mott 'must be given a high rank among American Magazines.' It had published the likes of Arthur Conan Doyle, Oscar Wilde and Rudyard Kipling. See Frank L. Mott, *A History of American Magazines, 1865-1885 Vol.3* (London, OUP, 1938), 399-401.

⁶⁴ See 'Arthur Leeds', *MPW*, March 20, 1915, 1777. Leeds was an actor, director, short story and scenario writer and editor of *The Photoplay Author* (journal of The Home Correspondence School and known as *The Writer's Monthly* from 1916 onwards) and 'Edison's New Editor,' *NYDM*, 1914 May-Jun 1915 - 1821.pdf. *Fulton History*: <http://fultonhistory.com/Fulton.html>

and was a member of the Ed-Au (Editors and Authors) Club, as was Sargent.⁶⁶ The Ed-Au Club was exclusive, as membership was only granted to writers who had six scripts produced. Leeds later became President of the Ed-Au Club and was made Vice-President when the Club's name changed to the Photodramatists Inc.⁶⁷

Both Leeds and Esenwein were, no doubt, figures of some importance and worthy of attention. Sargent was highly critical of correspondence schools, but he seems to have been prepared to make an exception in this case and is instead complimentary:

Arthur Leeds and Dr. J. Berg Esenwein are working on a book for a course of lessons by Mr. Leeds. We are inclined to think that this will be decently administered [...] but it is very plain that most of the correspondence schools first lie to their would-be pupils and then swindle them.⁶⁸

Esenwein's reach in terms of screenwriting was more limited, because his activities were so diffuse and he was first and foremost an academic. Although Leeds had managed to distinguish himself with a number of writing credits, by being a scenario editor and an occasional contributor to the trade press, Sargent's opinion of his diminishing importance by 1914 is clear:

Another book author is Arthur Leeds, who used to be a star Selig and Essanay writer. He was once an actor and a lecturer. [...] He is doing very little original work at present.⁶⁹

The manual is detailed and thorough, but only one was written and because it was a collaborative effort, it lessens the individual achievements of its authors.⁷⁰ It often appears on recommended reading lists by screenwriting teachers, which lends it some credibility. However, those who made these recommendations had far more

⁶⁶ Sargent, 'The Photoplaywright,' *MPW*, January 24, 1914, 406-407.

⁶⁷ 'Sifted from the Studios,' *Motography*, May 27, 1916, 1232.

⁶⁸ Sargent, 'The Photoplaywright,' *MPW*, June 21, 1913, 1246-1247.

⁶⁹ Sargent, 'The Literary Side of Pictures,' *MPW*, July 11, 1914, 199-202.

⁷⁰ Esenwein and Leeds wrote articles on 'photoplay construction' up to April 1915 in *The Photoplay Author*. This work formed the basis for their book, *Writing the Photoplay*. Esenwein also wrote a column called, 'Letters to Young Authors' from January 1915 and Leeds took over a column from Sargent called 'Thinks and Things' in March 1915.

exposure in trade and fan publications.⁷¹ While Esenwein and Leeds must be acknowledged as respected contributors to the discourse, there were others with potentially far greater influence.

John Arthur Nelson (1874-1960) had an impressive track record in acting, writing, producing and directing for Universal and Warner Features.⁷² He also ran his own film company, was editor of *The Photoplay Dramatist*⁷³ and eventually published his manual, *The Photoplay: How to Write, How to Sell* (1913). Nelson's own character was perhaps questionable, as criminal charges for embezzlement and gun-running were brought against him and, although these charges were later dropped, suspicions remained that were never resolved. Nelson's socialist leanings also meant that he was driven by the desire for political change and a wish to put 'radical ideas across on the screen.'⁷⁴ His one feature film, *The New Disciple* (1921) was a commercial failure because it focused narrowly on particular interest groups, lessening its influence and reach.⁷⁵ Nelson's manual is detailed and well-apportioned covering 'form, structure and technique' but only one was written, although it ran to a second edition.⁷⁶ Nelson made no contributions to the fan or trade press, which would also diminish his influence. Possibly his alleged misdemeanours and propagandist tendencies also caused his influence to wane, as his behaviour did not follow the established patterns of the industry.

Howard T. Dimick (1897-1976) wrote two manuals⁷⁷ on screenwriting, but appears to

⁷¹ Phillips, 'Photodrama in the Making,' *MPM*, March 1918, 108 and 110; Sargent, 'The Photoplaywright,' *MPW*, October 10, 1914, 181.

⁷² Nelson has 20 credits, of which 19 are shorts from 1913-1914. See 'Nelson,' *IMDbPro*: <https://pro-labs.imdb.com/name/nm0625422/>

⁷³ Nelson's editorial role is noted in the press, but copies of *The Photoplay Dramatist* do not appear to have survived, as no records can be located. See 'What Duluth is Reading,' *Duluth MN Evening Herald*, January 28 1916, 7 - 6752 pdf. *Fulton History*: <http://fultonhistory.com/Fulton.html>

⁷⁴ Steven J. Ross, *Working-Class Hollywood* (New Jersey: Princeton University, 1999), 152-153.

⁷⁵ Nelson's feature film, *The New Disciple*, for the Federation Film Corporation, was shot in 1921. It 'shows how worker cooperatives could restore the harmony between employer and employee that was shattered by wartime capitalist profiteering.' See Ross, *Working-Class Hollywood*, 158. It was slated by *Variety's* critic Jolo, who said, 'It has little entertainment value and even less value as propaganda [...] and the story by John Arthur Nelson isn't convincing.' See 'The New Disciple,' *Variety*, December 23, 1921 - 1072 pdf. *Fulton History*: <http://fultonhistory.com/Fulton.html>

⁷⁶ Nelson, *The Photoplay*, 19.

⁷⁷ See Dimick, *Photoplay Making* (New Jersey: Editor Company, 1915) and *Modern Photoplay Writing* (a second

have had no film credits and little or no fan or trade press coverage, although Wright does mention in one of his articles that ‘he is a successful photoplay author.’⁷⁸ Not a great deal is recorded about Dimick, apart from the fact he seems to have been some kind of theatrical agent and a vaudeville comedy sketch writer,⁷⁹ was interested in religion and was a historian of sorts, with a particular interest in the Civil War period. All of his books, apart from the screenwriting manuals, are out of print or unavailable.⁸⁰ One reviewer of his manual, *Photoplay Making* (1915), claims he was ‘a disciple of W. T. Price, and his present work an attempt to adapt that stage authority’s rules of play making to the newer art of the screen,’⁸¹ and this perhaps explains his virtual plagiarising of some of Price’s statements, which I referred to earlier. The foreword of Dimick’s main manual, *Modern Photoplay Writing: Its Craftsmanship*, which appeared in two volumes in 1922 (which included the first manual), indicated that it was ‘intended for the intelligent aspirant with latent ability’ and also for use in ‘educational establishments.’ He hoped that leading universities might set up photoplay writing departments with the use of his material:

It has been the aim of the author to adapt this book to college use by a graded series of exercises, beginning with analysis and proceeding to creative writing.⁸²

The manual is thorough and the aim laudable in itself, but as the freelance market in screenwriting had virtually collapsed by 1922, this may have been his only viable audience.

Louis Reeves Harrison (1857-1921) was an important voice in the industry. He was a

manual was combined with the earlier manual and sold as one book).

⁷⁸ Wright, ‘Photoplay Authors, Real and Near,’ *NYDM*, 1913 Mar-Apr 1914 - 2440 pdf. *Fulton History*: <http://fultonhistory.com/Fulton.html>

⁷⁹ See ‘The Vaudeville Spotlight,’ *NYDM*, December 4, 1915. 1915 Jul-Aug 1916 - 0825 pdf, which records that he was the writer of ‘The Green Woman’, and advertisement in *The Billboard*, December 18, 1915; 1916, 0144.pdf. *Fulton History*: <http://fultonhistory.com/Fulton.html>

⁸⁰ Dimick and Others ed. Halderman-Julius, *The Truth about American Evangelists*, (A Little Blue Book no.1273, 1928); Dimick, *Peace overtures of July, 1864* (1946); *Visits of Josiah Gregg to Louisiana, 1841-1847* (1946); *Reconsideration of the death of Josiah Gregg* (1947); *Ancestry and some descendants of William Gregg* (1948).

⁸¹ ‘Book Review,’ *NYDM*, July 21, 1915 See 1915 Jul-Aug 1916 – 0110.pdf: *Fulton History*: <http://fultonhistory.com/Fulton.html>

⁸² Dimick, *Modern Photoplay Writing*, 8.

relatively successful scenario writer⁸³ and also an editor and staff writer for *Moving Picture World*, regularly contributing on all aspects of film production, including screenwriting. His manual *Screencraft* comprises 18 short essays drawn from articles written for *Moving Picture World* between 1915-1916.⁸⁴ It was not a manual in the conventional sense and, according to Brower and Glick, it is:

a difficult book to define [...and] firm classification even evaded Chalmers Publishing, the parent company, and publisher of both Harrison's book and the *MPW*, which touted *Screencraft* as both an instructional tract and as a quasi-scholarly meditation in advertisements in its trade paper.⁸⁵

Indeed, this is backed up by Harrison's own prefatory note:

This book is intended to help in formulating a new art, not that the art may appeal to the delicate sensibilities of the super-cultivated, but that it may adequately respond to the needs of plain people the world over through addressing their sympathetic intelligence.⁸⁶

Harrison intended to educate his readers as well as to give instruction on writing photoplays. Thus, *Screencraft* could be termed a quasi-manual, as Harrison's objectives were not simply the education of the screenwriter. Brower and Glick observe that Harrison was:

interest[ed] in exploring the composite form of film and defining its place among the arts [...by] analyzing the artistic qualities of contemporary films and how they emerged out of, but were also separate from, literature, theatre, and painting.⁸⁷

Harrison had a broader agenda, as he was a well-known photoplay critic⁸⁸ and film

⁸³ Harrison had seven writing credits and one directing credit. See 'Harrison,' *IMDbPro* - <https://pro-labs.imdb.com/name/nm0365723>.

⁸⁴ Brower and Glick, 'The Art and Craft of the Screen' in *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 33:4 (2013), 540, accessed January 15, 2014, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01439685.2013.847652>.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 540-541.

⁸⁶ Louis Reeves Harrison, *Screencraft* (1916: repr., Memphis: General Books, 2012), 4.

⁸⁷ Brower and Glick, 'The Art and Craft of the Screen' in *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 33:4 (2013), 542, accessed January 15, 2014, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01439685.2013.847652>.

⁸⁸ Harrison was dubbed the 'foremost photoplay critic in the country.' See 'Motion World,' *The Auburn Citizen*,

theorist who wrote on all aspects of film production. This discounts him as a key contributor to the screenwriting discourse for the purposes of this study, as the loci of his interests were wide-ranging and not sufficiently focused on the craft of screenwriting alone.

Frederick Palmer (1881-?), a relatively successful early scenario writer,⁸⁹ formed the 'Palmer Photoplay Corporation', which functioned as a correspondence school for aspiring writers. Morey has indicated that this organisation had a wider agenda, focusing on self-improvement and not just the success of its subscribers as scenario writers:

[Although] such schools promised to prepare men and women for jobs in the film industry, especially as screenwriters [...t]he thriving nature of Palmer Photoplay's business as late as the mid-1920s [...] began to shift its attention to instruction in short story writing and general self expression.⁹⁰

Palmer's organisation could be seen as part of a handbook culture, as mentioned previously, that became popular in the early 20th Century and covered many subjects. Palmer himself published a number of manuals on screenwriting.⁹¹ Very few of his subscribers succeeded in the screenwriting arena and Palmer's own attempts to form a production company in 1922, in order to produce selected scenarios, experienced limited success.⁹² In fact, by the time Palmer had formed his correspondence school in 1918 the phenomenon of 'scenario fever' was largely over 'since the freelance market for manuscripts collapsed in the late 1910s, and the

March 7, 1913, 13. 0071.pdf: *Fulton History*: <http://fultonhistory.com/Fulton.html>

⁸⁹ Palmer claimed that he authored some 52 scenarios in just nine months during the period of 1910-11. However, as Morey points out such scenarios were shorter and less complex in the early period. See Morey, 'Have You the Power?' *Film History* 9, (1997): 310. Palmer's unsubstantiated claims about himself were far wilder when discussing the whole of his screenwriting career, claiming, 'I have written and sold and seen exhibited upon the screen hundreds of my own film stories.' See Palmer, *Palmer Plan Handbook* (1921, repr., Bibliobazaar, 2013), 20 and 'Palmer,' *IMDbPro* only records a modest 39 writing credits from 1917-1930, which does not account for the earlier period. See <https://pro-labs.imdb.com/name/nm0658233>.

⁹⁰ Morey, *Hollywood Outsiders*, 70-71.

⁹¹ *The Essentials of Photoplay Writing* (1921); *Palmer Handbook of Scenario Construction* (1922); *Photoplay Plot Encyclopedia* (1922); *Author's Photoplay Manual* (1924); *Technique of the Photoplay* (1924); *The Business of Writing* (1925), (Los Angeles: Palmer Photoplay Corporation).

⁹² According to *IMDbPro* Palmer Photoplay Corporation had only 3 production credits for 1924. 'Palmer Photoplay Corporation,' *IMDbPro*: https://pro-labs.imdb.com/company/co0035001/?ref_=sch_int

likelihood of a private individuals placing a screenplay with a studio was small.⁹³ His organisation commissioned prominent industry professionals to write booklets and short manuals, although their effectiveness in influencing the industry is debatable, as they were all published in and around 1920.⁹⁴

It is also important to give some consideration to a number of women writers who rose to prominence in early Hollywood. These women were gradually 'marginalized as the film industry became a Wall Street-defined, vertically integrated big business' before 1920.⁹⁵ The *Women's Pioneer Project*, conducted by Columbia University, has provided substantial research on their activities during the early period and has sought to highlight their significance before its decline.⁹⁶ According to Lizzie Francke, 'half of those 25,000 scripts stored away in the Library of Congress Copyright Office were written by women.'⁹⁷ Karen Maher makes the point that: 'Female scenario department heads were common. Indeed, many women writers in the 1910s literally defined the craft.'⁹⁸ A number of these women also wrote manuals as a result of their success as writers and scenario editors, or their popularity as actresses and celebrities.

These include manuals by Leona Radnor, who wrote *The Photoplay Writer* (1913),⁹⁹ Florence Radinoff, *The Photoplaywright's Handy Text-Book* (1913)¹⁰⁰ and Elizabeth

⁹³ Morey, 'Have You the Power?' *Film History* 9, (1997): 300.

⁹⁴ Palmer Photoplay Corporation published the following booklets: Adeline M. Alvord, *Practical Research in Photoplay Writing*; Badger, *The Point of Attack*; George Beban, *Photoplay Characterization*; Jasper Ewing Brady, *The Necessity of Original Photoplay Material*; Al E. Christie, *The Elements of Situation Comedy*; Kate Corbaley, *Selling Manuscripts in the Photoplay Market*; Denison Clift, *Dramatic Suspense in the Photoplay*; Eric Howard, *Photoplay Plots and Plot Sources*; Frank Lloyd, *The Dramatic and Undramatic in the Photoplay*; Jeanie Macpherson, *The Necessity and Value of Theme in the Photoplay*; Hugh C. McClung, *Camera Knowledge for the Photoplaywright*; Rob Wagner, *Picture Values from an Artist's Viewpoint* (Los Angeles: Palmer Photoplay Corporation, 1920).

⁹⁵ Karen Ward Maher, *Women Filmmakers in Early Hollywood* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University, 2006), 8.

⁹⁶ *Women Film Pioneers Project at Columbia University*: <https://wfpp.cdrs.columbia.edu>.

⁹⁷ Lizzie Francke, *Script Girls: Women Screenwriters in Hollywood* (London: BFI, 1994), 6.

⁹⁸ Maher, *Women Filmmakers in Early Hollywood*, 182.

⁹⁹ Radnor is credited with writing only two shorts. See 'Radnor,' *IMDbPro*: <https://pro-labs.imdb.com/name/nm1311093/>

¹⁰⁰ Radinoff has 21 acting credits but none for writing. See 'Radinoff,' *IMDbPro*: <https://pro-labs.imdb.com/name/nm0705627/>

Frye Barker, *The Art of Photoplay Writing* (1917).¹⁰¹ These particular works are basic, short, and of a less scholarly nature than others that followed. Some guidance is offered on constructing a story and what subjects to write about, along with formatting advice and the necessary technical knowledge to prepare a manuscript and synopsis. As in many handbooks, a 'model' scenario is provided by way of example.

More serious offerings came from Marguerite Bertsch (1889-1967), who was hired as a staff writer by Vitagraph in 1913. She eventually became a scenario editor and also directed for Vitagraph. Bertsch wrote a manual, *How to Write for Moving Pictures* (1917). Her career was perhaps cut short, as she left the business when Vitagraph lost its competitiveness in 1918. It was eventually sold to Warner Brothers in 1925.¹⁰²

Catherine Carr (1880-1941) was also a successful scenario writer, employed by The North American Film Co. (it became the Kinetophote Co. in New York) as scenario editor.¹⁰³ She had enough profile to be the subject of a feature in *The Photoplay Author* in 1914 after only being in the business for three years.¹⁰⁴ She wrote a fairly substantial manual, *The Art of Photoplay Writing* (1914) on the back of this success.

Louella Parsons (1881-1972) was a former journalist of the *Chicago Tribune* who worked as a scenario writer and editor at Essanay and later became a premier gossip columnist.¹⁰⁵ She wrote a manual, *How to Write for the Movies* (1915), of which Sargent spoke in a complimentary way: she 'has written little, but many

¹⁰¹ No writing credits are recorded for Barker. She appears to have founded the 'Barker Society of America' in 1928, although no details are known of its function. See *Brooklyn NY Daily Eagle*, June 30, 1938, 10; 1938. 5415 pdf: *Fulton History*: <http://fultonhistory.com/Fulton.html>

¹⁰² Bertsch is credited with 51 screenwriting and four directing credits. See Jennifer Parchesky, 'Profile: Marguerite Bertsch,' *Women Pioneers Project*: <https://wfpp.cdrs.columbia.edu/pioneer/ccp-marguerite-bertsch/> and 'Bertsch,' *IMDbPro*: <https://pro-labs.imdb.com/name/nm0078442/>

¹⁰³ Carr is credited with 58 screenwriting titles. See 'Carr,' *IMDbPro*: <https://pro-labs.imdb.com/name/nm0139636/>

¹⁰⁴ E.M. Wickes, 'So You'll Know Them Better – Catherine Carr, Editor of Kinetophote Company,' *The Photoplay Author*, November 1914, 134-138.

¹⁰⁵ Parsons has nine credits in all, but only four writing credits. See 'Parsons,' *IMDbPro*: <https://pro-labs.imdb.com/name/nm0663860/>

promising writers owe much to her helpful advice.¹⁰⁶ Her handbook was popular enough to be published in another edition in 1917 and this version contains a chapter written by Maibelle Heikes Justice (a successful scenarist) on 'The Photodrama'. She says that Parsons is 'probably the best-known freelance scenario writer in America', praising her handbook for its excellent handling of 'the technique of writing for the screen.'¹⁰⁷

A sign of the prominence of these last three women writers is their presence at the Ed-Au club in 1914.¹⁰⁸ However, while these women were successful writers, none of them wrote for the fan or trade press, which would have limited the exposure of their work on the teaching of screenwriting.

Of greater significance is the work of Anita Loos (1888-1981), a highly successful scenario writer, producer and actress. According to JoAnne Ruvoli, 'she wrote over one hundred and fifty scripts in her thirty years as a Hollywood screenwriter and elevated intertitles to an art.'¹⁰⁹ The studios' initial policy of maintaining the anonymity of writers was finally lifted around 1915-16. According to Ian Hamilton, Loos 'became one of the first "name" writers to have any sort of presence in the public consciousness' and she was, in his opinion, 'the first literate screenwriter.'¹¹⁰

Loos began her writing career with the Biograph Company and Griffith directed one of her first scenarios, *The New York Hat* (1912). She wrote for Mary Pickford, Lillian and Dorothy Gish and Lionel Barrymore. Loos is credited with possessing a very specific gift with dialogue, pioneering the use of witty and humorous comment in titles, which enhanced the appeal of stars such as Douglas Fairbanks Junior and helped him to major stardom. She would continue to be successful as a writer into

¹⁰⁶ Sargent, 'The Literary Side of Pictures,' *MPW*, July 11, 1914, 202.

¹⁰⁷ Parsons, *How to Write for the 'Movies,'* 2nd ed. (Chicago: A. C. McClung, 1917), 237 and 251; cited in Maras, *Screenwriting*, 143.

¹⁰⁸ Carr, Parsons and Bertsch were 'admitted as new members' of the Ed-Au Club in New York. See 'New Ed-Au Officers,' *New York Dramatic Mirror*, April 15, 1914; 1913 Mar-Apr 1914. 2385.pdf. *Fulton History*: <http://fultonhistory.com/Fulton.html>

¹⁰⁹ JoAnne Ruvoli, *Profile: Anita Loos, Women Pioneers Project*: <https://wfpp.cdrs.columbia.edu/pioneer/ccp-anita-loos/> However, *IMDbPro* only credits her with 148 screenwriting, eight producing and one acting title(s). This apparent discrepancy could be accounted for by her collaborations with John Emerson. See *IMDbPro*: <https://pro-labs.imdb.com/name/nm0002616/>

¹¹⁰ Ian Hamilton, *Writers in Hollywood: 1915-16* (New York: Harper-Collins, 1990), 8.

the 1950s, her scripts including the acclaimed *Gentleman Prefer Blondes* (1953), which starred Marilyn Monroe.¹¹¹

Loos worked closely with her husband, John Emerson (1874-1956), on many writing projects. This included her collaboration on a number of articles on screenwriting for the fan press. Loos and Emerson co-wrote a series of six articles for *Photoplay* in 1918, which more than likely was a replacement for the successful run of articles by Peacocke that ended in 1917.¹¹² They followed this with another series of eight varied articles in *Motion Picture Magazine* in 1921.¹¹³ The coverage of these articles is impressive and their substance was published as a manual, *How to Write Photoplays* (1920). A second book, *Breaking into the Movies* (1921), dealt mainly with acting and other opportunities in the business, but there is a very short section on writing scenarios.¹¹⁴ This latter book is indicative of the eclectic and broad interests Emerson and Loos had in the film industry in all its guises.

The popularity of Loos as a celebrity, actor, director and writer meant that she could use the fan press to promote her ideas about how to write. However, brilliant though she was as a writer, the locus of her work was not the education of the screenwriter. The fact that her material on screenwriting was co-written with her husband diminishes her achievements in this realm. It is also worth noting that the freelance market in scenario writing was largely extinguished by the time both these sets of articles and the manuals were published.

Frances Taylor Patterson ran screenwriting courses at Columbia University, but her links with the industry were tenuous and she was hardly credited as a writer.¹¹⁵

¹¹¹ Camille Scaysbrook, 'Anita Loos – Biography'. See 'Loos,' *IMDbPro*: <https://pro-labs.imdb.com/name/nm0002616/>

¹¹² Loos and Emerson, 'Photoplay Writing,' February 1918, 51-52; March 1918, 53-54; April 1918, 81-82; 'About the Development of Theme,' May 1918, 81-82; 'On the Study of Continuity,' June 1918, 78-79; 'On the Subtitle and the Speech,' July 1918, 88-89 and 121 in *Photoplay*.

¹¹³ Loos and Emerson, 'What's What in Scenarios,' February 1921, 38-39, 114 and 116; 'What Makes a Photodrama?' March 1921, 60-61 and 121; 'Building the Scenario,' April 1921, 40, 96 and 98; 'The Plot Thickens – Construction Information on Scenarios,' May 1921, 60-61 and 105; 'Checks and Checkmates – Instruction on Scenario Writing,' June 1921, 40-41, 98; 'Title Technique,' July 1921, 30, 82 and 86; 'Plot Mechanics,' August 1921, 65 and 111; 'The Full Close,' September 1921, 45 and 94 in *The MPM*.

¹¹⁴ Emerson and Loos, 'Scenarios' in *Breaking into the Movies* (Philadelphia: George W. Jacobs & Co., 1921), 41-43.

¹¹⁵ Patterson had one produced screenplay, *Broken Hearts* (1926). See 'Patterson,' *IMDbPro*: [https://pro-](https://pro-labs.imdb.com/name/nm0002616/)

Patterson helped set up, with Freeburg, one of the first courses in photoplay composition; she also wrote home study courses. She soon made the university course her own, her pedagogy focusing on 'plot construction and character [...] and she clearly saw her role as instructing writing students to craft effective narrative.'¹¹⁶ Patterson would produce two books, *Cinema Craftsmanship* (1920) and *Scenario and Screen* (1928), which were 'practical guides rather than broad philosophical manifestos [... although] we can find in her writings the rudiments of a general aesthetics of film.'¹¹⁷ Polan observes that:

Throughout her career [... Patterson] was [...] concerned with encouraging higher quality in photoplay scenarios [... and through] her occasional writings, Patterson gained some influence beyond the classroom.¹¹⁸

Patterson's first book, *Cinema Craftsmanship*, did extend to two editions and Paramount Studios produced a pedagogical film about cinema techniques for her to use in her teaching programmes.¹¹⁹ However, Patterson's own views about the students for whom her Courses in Photoplay Composition were intended are revealing and indicate a broader educative agenda:

Some of those interested in it are interested purely from the point of view of a spectator, but there are many who are interested from the point of view of the writer.¹²⁰

Patterson was an educator with a practical bent, but she was not really a practitioner herself and the fact that her courses contained some elements of critical analysis was perhaps 'an early intimation of the division of film studies into the sorts of tracks that would remain with the discipline throughout its history: there would be those who write creative works and those who write criticism.'¹²¹ Polan concludes:

labs.imdb.com/name/nm0666207.

¹¹⁶ Polan, *Scenes of Instruction*, 58.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹¹⁹ Polan, 'Profile: Frances Taylor Patterson,' *Women Film Pioneers Project*: <https://wfpp.cdrs.columbia.edu/pioneer/ccp-frances-taylor-patterson>.

¹²⁰ Patterson, 'University Training at Home,' *Photoplay*, December 1920, 126.

¹²¹ Polan, *Scenes of Instruction*, 73.

It is hard to know the extent to which Patterson's pedagogy or writing had any direct impact on the motion picture industry and its films, but she did receive some support from the studios [and] (she was a vocal and active member of the National Board of Review) [and that] bought her a certain regular attention in the trade press.¹²²

In some ways Patterson resembles some modern screenwriting gurus, in demonstrating that she could run courses in screenwriting without necessarily being a practitioner and this sets her apart from the key screenwriting teachers of the early period. The quasi-academic nature of her course is also a forerunner of the type of modern screenwriting education offered in much of the university sector today.

To summarise: Lizzie Francke, when discussing women writers, points out that 'the publication of books by *big names* (my emphasis) advising on how to craft scenarios became an industry in itself.'¹²³ This observation must be borne in mind when considering any of these lesser screenwriting teachers, male or female: they were generally capitalising on their own popularity as writers, celebrities or actors and the potential financial gain in producing a manual, although some wrote for social or educational reasons. In other words, teaching screenwriting for these individuals was not a principal activity but a sideline. This is perhaps one explanation for the sheer number of manuals in this period. This is not to say that they did not make a contribution to the discourse: many of them developed a genuine interest in the craft of screenwriting, and some achieved a level of recognition, which means they probably exerted some form of influence over the discourse through their writings.

Again I refer to the comments of Thompson, who, when discussing screenwriting manuals right back to the 1910s, admitted she had 'not attempted to survey such handbooks systematically, since they often repeat the same information with minor variations'.¹²⁴ With this I concur, as within the remit of this study it is not possible to fully analyse the content of all the extant materials that exist. However, this cursory inspection of the aforementioned manuals indicates that Thompson's assumptions

¹²² Polan, 'Profile: Frances Taylor Patterson,' *Women Film Pioneers Project*: <https://wfpp.cdrcs.columbia.edu/pioneer/ccp-frances-taylor-patterson>.

¹²³ Francke, *Script Girls*, 18.

¹²⁴ Thompson, *Storytelling in the New Hollywood*, 11.

are broadly correct. It appears that many of these manuals contain pertinent but similar advice. However, what is at issue in my thesis is not their content in the main, but the extent of their impact.

Although it is important to acknowledge the role of these lesser figures, it is unlikely that they were key players in the debate over screenwriting development. Of the writers mentioned so far, most did not have a sustained presence in the fan or trade press; a number of them had limited experience as writers; others only produced a single manual without repeat editions, or their manuals were published later and simply replicated the content of earlier manuals; some did not become scenario editors; and others had limited connections with the industry itself. Their failure to fulfil important aspects of the five criteria mean that in terms of scope, reach and influence, these screenwriting teachers should be regarded, for the purpose of this study, as of secondary importance.

It is with this in mind that I now turn to the screenwriting teachers selected for closer scrutiny. They were individuals whose main focus was to improve the craft of screenwriting. In terms of quality or relevance of content, they embrace all the elements contained in the other works, but with one key difference: they mostly fulfil the five criteria. Thus, the impact and effect of their advice both on the industry as a whole and on the screenwriting discourse is likely to have been greater and more lasting. While the difference between the peripheral and the key screenwriting teachers is relative rather than absolute, I also contest that the depth and the breadth of the work the latter engaged upon as screenwriting teachers means there is a stronger possibility that they were more instrumental in significantly shaping the discourse and helping to develop the craft of screenwriting within the industry.

4. The Five Key Screenwriting Teachers

I contend in this study that five key screenwriting teachers in the early film period merit special consideration and that the contribution of two of these individuals was of the greatest significance. Epes Winthrop Sargent and William Lord Wright appear to have wielded the greatest influence. Leslie Tufnell Peacocke, Eustace Hale Ball and Henry Albert Phillips also held considerable sway, but were subordinate to Sargent and Wright. This will be argued by piecing together the biographical record of each from existing primary sources and by examining important endorsements given by the various authorities and commentators of the period, including the key screenwriting teachers' commendations of each other's work. This evidence will indicate that these particular screenwriting teachers fulfil the criteria almost completely and are likely to have exerted the most influence and made the greatest contribution to the screenwriting discourse during this period.

Epes Winthrop Sargent (1872-1938)



Sargent meets all five criteria. He was a successful writer and a scenario editor, wrote extensively for the trade and fan press, produced a seminal manual and had significant industry connections.

Sargent began his career in amusement trade journalism but soon gravitated to becoming vaudeville editor at the *Dramatic News*, a theatrical journal, which was eventually taken over by the *Daily Mercury*. He wrote caustic and critical reviews about vaudeville acts under the pseudonym 'Chicot.' By the mid-1890s the *Mercury* had been acquired by the *New York Morning Telegraph*, but 'Chicot' was still writing

his reviews about lacklustre performances and dishonest business practices. In 1903 Sargent moved to the *New York Evening World* for a brief stint, but by 1905 had left to help Sime Silverman found *Variety*, becoming its associate editor. Within six months he left *Variety* to start up his own theatrical publication, *Chicot's Weekly*, although this was short-lived.

In 1906 Sargent spent a brief period as a press representative and agent and then settled down to short story writing and screenwriting.¹²⁵ As there was a close relationship between vaudeville and early cinema, it seemed logical that Sargent would end up in the movies. However, his decision may also have been influenced by the fact that, by around 1910, vaudeville was in decline. Allen observes that: 'By the mid-teens, big-time vaudeville had lost its position as premiere American popular entertainment form – that place taken by the motion picture.'¹²⁶ Sargent would not return to reviewing entertainment, albeit on a broader basis, until 1930, when he wrote a column for *Variety* which he continued until his death in 1938.¹²⁷

Sargent was a prolific short story and novelette writer.¹²⁸ An indication of his meticulousness and work-rate is contained in Wright's recollection that he possessed 'one of the most complete card index systems known in the business.'¹²⁹ Despite the modern and somewhat unscholarly assumptions of Norman, who claims that Sargent was 'the first in the tradition of noted film teachers with no writing credits,'¹³⁰ Sargent had in fact written many scenarios. According to a post-script in one of Sargent's articles in *Moving Picture World*, he had authored:

¹²⁵ See 'Authors' in John Francis Barry and Sargent, *Building Theatre Patronage: Management and Merchandising* (New York: Chalmers, 1927).

¹²⁶ Allen, 'Vaudeville and Film,' 298.

¹²⁷ Azlant provides a cogent summary of Sargent's career. See Azlant, 'The Theory, History and Practice of Screenwriting,' 105-111.

¹²⁸ The *FictionMags Index* lists 33 published short stories by Sargent, <http://www.philsp.com/homeville/FMI/s/s4596.htm>. Of particular note is a novelette, *Beyond the Banyans* (1909), which tells the story of an explorer encountering evil in the mountains of Africa. Georges Dodds argues that this story is among a number of texts that prepared the advent of Edgar Rice Burrough's story, *Tarzan of the Apes* (1912), <http://www.erbzine.com/mag18/banyans.htm>. Sargent also wrote under a number of pseudonyms and contributed several hundred stories to newspapers and magazines. See Azlant, 'Screenwriting for the Early Silent Film,' *Film History* 9, (1997): 248.

¹²⁹ Wright, 'For Photoplay Authors, Real and Near,' *NYDM*, 1914 May-Jun 1915 - 0709 pdf: *Fulton History*: <http://fultonhistory.com/Fulton.html>.

¹³⁰ Norman, *What Happens Next*, 65.

several hundred stories for Lubin, two for IMP, two for Vitagraph and seven for Edison. Also about half a mile of photoplay advice and several miles of short stories and novelettes.¹³¹

Other sources are more conservative, but writers did not always receive credits before 1916, making it impossible to be sure of his actual output. His scenarios were mostly split-reel comedy shorts containing elements of slapstick and classic comic misunderstandings and more than likely exceeded two hundred in number.¹³² Most of Sargent's scenarios had been produced at Lubin and in 1909 he was appointed their scenario editor; a job he held for about a year and a half.¹³³ Grau writes in 1914, little doubting Sargent's versatility and talent as a writer, that:

Mr Sargent's activities are truly prodigious. [...] Scarcely a week ever passes that one of Sargent's photoplays is not released. The Lubin Company has released the greatest number, but at the time of this writing the Edison Company is producing some of the best work this author has ever done. In addition, Sargent contributes fiction stories galore to the magazines and special articles to magazines and newspapers alike.¹³⁴

Liepa expresses some doubts about Sargent's scenario writing ability because he only wrote comedy shorts:

Despite his elevated self-esteem, [...] he] seems to have penned quite pedestrian stories himself [...]and] the simplicity of Sargent's work contrasts with the lofty stylistic goals he prescribed for the medium.

However, it should not be surprising that Sargent wrote comedy shorts, since he came from a vaudeville tradition and had written for this particular market. His

¹³¹ Sargent, 'The Literary Side of Pictures,' *MPW*, July 11, 1914, 202.

¹³² Sargent has 144 writing credits and one acting credit recorded between 1912 and 1918. See 'Sargent,' *IMDbPro*: <https://pro-labs.imdb.com/name/nm0765104>.

¹³³ See 'The Authors' in Barry and Sargent, *Building Theatre Patronage*.

¹³⁴ Robert Grau, *The Theatre of Science: The Volume of Progress and Achievement in the Motion Picture Industry* (New York, Broadway, 1914), 308. Grau was a theatrical agent and renowned critic of the period and his book, published in a limited edition of 3,000, has become a standard reference source for the early cinema period. It provides detail on the history and development of motion pictures in America to 1914 and champions the names of pioneers of the industry who would otherwise be forgotten. See Urbanora, 'The Theatre of Science,' August 29, 2007 in *The Bioscope*, <http://thebioscope.net/2007/08/29/the-theatre-of-science/>

writings as a journalist and screenwriting teacher gradually took over as the feature market was developing, which possibly explains why he never wrote features. Oliver Hardy had forged his early career as 'Babe Hardy' by acting in scenarios written by Sargent. At least three of these films are still available: *The Smuggler's Daughter* (1914), *The Servant Girl's Legacy* (1914) and *They Looked Alike* (1915).¹³⁵ Despite Liepa's criticism of Sargent, he accepts, when commenting on *The Servant Girl's Legacy*, that the 'story accords perfectly with his show business sensibility towards filmmaking.'¹³⁶

As a vaudevillian journalist Sargent had learnt his trade well, as Judith Stevens Pratt points out:

Sargent provides a coherent point of view on [...] the development of the comic sketch from the one-act play, the changes in comedy from slapstick to sophistication, and the range of the permissible in language and nudity.¹³⁷

As soon as Sargent began to write scenarios and work as an editor, it was likely he would begin to cast his critical eye over the movie output and start to write about it. Azlant claims that Sargent was about to do what he 'had already done for vaudeville, helping to refine the art through intelligent, uncompromising criticism.'¹³⁸ This began in earnest in 1909 when he started writing film criticism as 'Chicot' for the *Film Index*, the *Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly* and the *Moving Picture World*, when it absorbed the *Index* in 1911.

Moving Picture World soon established a regular feature on scenario writing, headed by Sargent, to instruct his readers in the craft. His first articles appeared in October 1910, but his column, 'Technique of the Photoplay', was not launched until July 1911. As mentioned earlier, even from the opening statements in the first article, Sargent was characteristically clear about the nature of the photoplay. He says it is

¹³⁵ Oliver Hardy starred in at least 29 scenarios written by Sargent. See *IMDbPro*: <https://pro-labs.imdb.com/name/nm0765104>.

¹³⁶ Liepa, 'Figures of Silent Speech,' 125.

¹³⁷ Judith Stevens Pratt, 'The Vaudeville Criticism of Epes Winthrop Sargent 1896-1910 (abstract)' (PhD diss., Nebraska University, 1985, *Proquest* UMI 303387823), <http://search.proquest.com//docview/303387823>

¹³⁸ Azlant, 'Screenwriting for the Early Silent Film,' *Film History* 9, (1997): 248.

'a distinct dramatic form, [...] a story told in action instead of words.'¹³⁹ This initial series of articles ran until September 1911;¹⁴⁰ Sargent then decided to publish his articles in book form. The column commenced again in mid-December 1911, under the new name, 'The Scenario Writer,' until mid-April 1912.¹⁴¹ It then became 'The Photoplaywright,' which continued periodically until 1919.¹⁴² In addition, Sargent was also managing editor of *Moving Picture World* for a time.

Sargent also wrote a regular column, 'Thinks and Things,' for *The Photoplay Author* (later called *The Writers' Monthly*) under the pseudonym of 'Gorenflot.' This was a humorous, chatty, but informative column about daily concerns, requirements and any relevant industry news for writers. The style was an indication of his versatility, and the content a sign of his knowledge about what was current in the business.¹⁴³

Sargent's contributions to the trade press were sustained, exhaustive and unrivalled in content and became important in the discourse on screenwriting. Kiel agrees, saying that: 'Sargent examined the principles of crafting a successful scenario in painstaking detail.'¹⁴⁴ This was another crucial difference between Sargent and those considered to be peripheral by this study.

Sargent would also give news in his columns about the screenplay trade, about new writing recruits and established writers, rates of pay and the whims and fancies of story editors. These details were of direct relevance to actual and aspiring writers. Wright, another of the key screenwriting teachers and trade press contributors, makes constant mention of Sargent in his own column, 'Photoplay Authors Real and Near,' naming him as 'one of Those Who Help You' and tagging him as a 'pioneer of

¹³⁹ Sargent's column 'Technique of the Photoplay' made its first appearance in *MPW*, July 22, 1911, 108-109.

¹⁴⁰ The last edition of this 8-week run of articles appeared in *MPW*, September 9, 1911, 696-697.

¹⁴¹ 'The Scenario Writer' first appeared in *MPW*, December 16, 1911, 895-896 and it ran until April 13, 1912, 134-135.

¹⁴² 'The Photoplaywright' first appeared in *MPW*, April 20, 1912, 226-227 and last appeared in September 13, 1919, 1674.

¹⁴³ Sargent's last contribution to 'Thinks and Things' in *The Photoplay Author* was in February 1915. It was taken over by Leeds in March 1915 and assumed a more formal style.

¹⁴⁴ Kiel, *Early American Cinema in Transition*, 36.

the scriptwriting game.¹⁴⁵

There are many indications of Sargent's influence on film companies and of his standing within the industry. For example, Kalem's release of the 1912 Pathé film, *Passion Play*, was particularly sensitive due to the religious nature of the subject matter. Sargent was one of the *Moving Picture World* columnists who made suggestions on how it was to be handled. Martin Marks says that Sargent 'outlined a "dignified and simple" promotional campaign for the film, and [...] the film's presentation.'¹⁴⁶ Sargent suggested in an article that a musical 'quartette [...] be used [...], though it should be seriously impressed upon the singers that they are accompanying the film and are not rendering a number.'¹⁴⁷ Marks records that this advice was heeded and: 'As envisaged by Sargent and carried out by Kalem, the presentation featured an unusual performing ensemble.'¹⁴⁸

According to Grau, the first edition of Sargent's manual, published in 1912, achieved considerable readership and there was 'an overwhelming receipt of advance orders' for the second edition, which was published in 1913.¹⁴⁹ Wright says of the third edition, published in 1916, that it was a 'bully good volume' and of the first and second edition that 'Sargent is the author of two mighty excellent works that have aided many a photoplay author near and far.'¹⁵⁰ Grau continues:

As scenario editor and a photoplaywright, Sargent's experience has been of that character to wholly justify his being accepted as an authority on photoplay construction from almost any angle; hence, his first volume on 'The Technique' was widely distributed and favorably reviewed all over the world.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁵ Wright, 'For Photoplay Authors, Real and Near,' *NYDM*, 1914 May-Jun 1915 - 0709 pdf: *Fulton History*: <http://fultonhistory.com/Fulton.html>

¹⁴⁶ Martin Miller Marks, *Music and the Silent Film: Context and Case Studies, 1895-1924* (Oxford: OUP, 1997), 90.

¹⁴⁷ Sargent, 'Handling the Kalem Release,' *MPW*, October 19, 1912, 233.

¹⁴⁸ Marks, *Music and the Silent Film*, 91.

¹⁴⁹ Grau, *Theatre of Science*, 308.

¹⁵⁰ Wright, 'Photoplay Authors Near and Far,' *NYDM*, 1915 Jul-Aug 1916 - 1906.pdf. *Fulton History*: <http://fultonhistory.com/Fulton.html>

¹⁵¹ Grau, *Theatre of Science*, 308.

Many held Sargent in high esteem, including other well-known authors who had written about screenwriting. Freeburg suggests that his own readers should have to hand 'Mr. Epes Winthrop Sargent's *Technique of the Photoplay*, which discusses the practical side of plot building, scenario writing and photoplay filming.'¹⁵² Manual writers such as Dimick were also keen to recommend Sargent's book along with their own,¹⁵³ while Thomas, editor of *Photoplay*, says 'Sargent's *Technique of the Photoplay* (the first edition) is the best book, but the edition is sold out just at the present,' indicating its popularity.¹⁵⁴

Sargent was so widely established in his position that contemporary figures, as well as more recent academic commentators, acknowledge him. Even earlier film historians, such as Jacobs, not known for their coverage of screenwriting, gave Sargent's work some credence:

These magazine articles explaining the principles and technique of movie construction were, although rudimentary, subsequently incorporated in the book *Technique of the Photoplay*, which was one of the first of its kind and which crystallized a method and bred many subsequent scenarists.¹⁵⁵

Jacobs also recognises that Sargent was one of those trade-paper critics who continually agitated for higher standards and can take credit for the improvement of movie art.¹⁵⁶ Bordwell comments on the first edition of Sargent's 1912 manual and the extensively revised edition of 1913: 'Although other handbooks of film practice preceded his, Sargent's work became a classic in a field that from that point rapidly expanded.'¹⁵⁷ Azlant, similarly, claims that the reason why he views the third edition of Sargent's manual to be 'exemplary' and worthy of close examination is because:

In the contemporary literature on screenwriting Sargent is consistently regarded as a respected authority, and his manuals are viewed as the

¹⁵² Freeburg, *Art of Photoplay Making*, The Foreword.

¹⁵³ Dimick, *Modern Photoplay Writing*, 392.

¹⁵⁴ Arthur W. Thomas, 'The Photoplaywright and His Art,' *Photoplay*, August 1914, 85.

¹⁵⁵ Jacobs, *Rise of the American Film*, 131.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 134.

¹⁵⁷ Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, *Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 106-107.

best available.¹⁵⁸

Of all the screenwriting teachers considered in this study, Sargent has received the most attention and recognition from film academics. However, the extent and breadth of his contribution and influence across the industry and the writing fraternity has not been adequately explored nor investigated.

The extent of his influence and expertise is demonstrated by the fact that, as well as his regular column for *Moving Picture World*, Sargent also wrote 'Advertising for the Exhibitor', which carried useful trade information and advice on how advertising worked best in theatres. He published a book of the same title in 1915.¹⁵⁹

Sargent helped to run various film-writing groups in New York, which met on a monthly basis from late 1912 until 1914 and more sporadically up to 1916. Two of the most prominent were the Inquest Club, which Sargent helped to form and was open to all, and the Ed-Au Club. Other branches of the Inquest Club were soon founded in Chicago, Ohio, Boston and Pittsburgh. By 1916 this organisation had been replaced by Photodramatists Inc. and, according to the trade press, was 'composed of members, all of whom are recognised screen dramatists.'¹⁶⁰ Liepa has recounted the history of these clubs in more detail and notes that Sargent's columns provided a focus for announcements about club meetings and writing forums. He also records that some of the best-known scenario writers and industry insiders attended clubs, making them important forums for discussion and debate about film form.¹⁶¹ Wright recalls the work of Sargent with regard to the Inquest Club:

We remember in 1913 the formation of the 'Inquest Club', originated by E. Winthrop Sargent, then a staff writer for the old Lubin Film Mfg. Company, now staff writer for the [Moving] Picture World. [...] So far as we know, the Inquest Club was the first regular gathering of the writers

¹⁵⁸ Azlant, 'Theory, History and Practice of Screenwriting,' 211.

¹⁵⁹ Sargent, *Picture Theatre Advertising*, (New York, Chalmers, 1915) and Barry and Sargent, *Building Theatre Patronage*. See *OCLC WorldCat* for a full history of Sargent's books and editions, <http://www.worldcat.org/search?q=kw%3AEpes+Winthrop+Sargent&fq=yr%3A1900..1938+%3E&qt=advanced&dblist=638>.

¹⁶⁰ 'Activities of Photodramatists Club,' *Motography*, July 1, 1916, 10.

¹⁶¹ See Liepa, 'Figures of Silent Speech,' 193-200.

of film plays, real and near, ever held.¹⁶²

According to Liepa, Sargent 'often transferred these discussions to his columns, bringing the discourse both to the industry and the wider public.'¹⁶³ Sargent announced the formation of the Photoplay Authors' League in February 1914 and would also be one of its founder members.¹⁶⁴ The League was formed to protect the interests of writers: it exposed false correspondence schools, fought for a copyright bill to include photoplays and demanded payment for authors whose magazine stories were turned into films. The eminent screenwriter and reviewer, Frank E. Woods, was its first president and its main publication became *The Script*.¹⁶⁵

Wright discusses these clubs in one of his articles in 1913, suggesting that their purpose was to foster closer relationships between authors, to help get writers credited, to influence legislation, to protect against infringement and plagiarism and to raise the standard of the photoplay or 'the craft.' However, we can see a clear move towards the professionalisation of writing for the screen, as the Photoplay Authors' League required applicants to show that they had 10 produced scripts before they qualified for membership, rather than the six requested by the Ed-Au Club. Nevertheless, Wright claimed that: 'All these organisations tend to accomplish good, not only to the members, but to the industry in its entirety.'¹⁶⁶

Perhaps the respect that Sargent engendered in his contemporaries is best encapsulated in the accolade he received from Thomas, the editor of *Photoplay*: 'Sargent has had more experience in photoplay work, editorial writing and criticizing, than any other man of our acquaintance.'¹⁶⁷ Of Sargent, Wright comments: 'He has every branch of the industry at his finger ends and he has possibly accomplished more for the struggling picture playwright [...] through practical instruction than any other writer in the same line of work, for he has been in the business since its

¹⁶² Wright, *Photoplay Writing*, 217.

¹⁶³ Liepa, 'Entertaining the Public Option' in *Analyzing the Screenplay*, ed. Nelmes, 15.

¹⁶⁴ Sargent, 'The Photoplaywright,' MPW, March 28, 1914, 1674.

¹⁶⁵ Anthony Slide, 'Photoplay Authors' League,' in *The New Dictionary of the American Film Industry*, (Maryland: Scarecrow, 1998), 158.

¹⁶⁶ Wright, 'For Photoplay Authors, Real and Near,' *NYDM*, 1913 Mar-Apr 1914, 2235.pdf. *Fulton History*: <http://fultonhistory.com/Fulton.html>

¹⁶⁷ Thomas, 'The Photoplaywright and His Art,' *Photoplay*, August 1912, 88.

inception.¹⁶⁸

When asked in a letter: ‘How would you go about it to become an author of photoplays?’ Sargent finishes his long explanation of the process of film education with a recommended reading list. He suggests: ‘The books by William Lord Wright and Eustace Hale Ball, [... and] Phillip’s, *The Plot of the Short Story*.’ In one statement, he endorses three out of the four others to whom I have devoted this study.¹⁶⁹ Given the apparent reputation and high regard in which Sargent was held across the industry, his backing of other screenwriting teachers is also an indicator of their potential contribution to the screenwriting discourse.

William Lord Wright (1879-1947)



WILLIAM LORD WRIGHT
On staff of "Dramatic Mirror"

William Lord Wright also meets all five criteria. He was a prolific writer, headed a scenario department, wrote for both the trade and fan press, published three manuals and was employed by a studio as a writer and producer, well into the sound era.

Wright was a journalist by background and worked in a number of US cities writing many magazine features.¹⁷⁰ By 1915 he was writing scenarios for the Selig

¹⁶⁸ Wright, ‘William Lord Wright’s Page,’ *MPN*, May 25, 1912, 12-13.

¹⁶⁹ Sargent, ‘The Photoplaywright,’ *MPW*, February 7, 1914, 670-671.

¹⁷⁰ ‘Wright’ in *Motion Picture Studio Directory and Trade Annual* (New York, Motion Picture News, 1916), 158.

Polyscope Company and from this point onwards he was to have a long and illustrious career in the film business. Wright was truly prolific, writing many of Selig's early successful shorts; he moved on to join Pathé Exchange as chief story editor. He then worked for Universal Studios, becoming one of its top writers and heading the scenario department for serials and Westerns.¹⁷¹ This contract was renewed in 1926 and Wright continued to work for Universal until the early 1930s.¹⁷²

Wright's first column for the trade press, possibly inspired by Sargent's, was in *Moving Picture News* (became *Motion Picture News* in 1913), where he eventually became an editor. It began in November 1911 as 'Wm. Lord Wright's Page' and dealt with general movie topics, reviews and comment, with an occasional emphasis on writing scenarios.¹⁷³ The column soon grew to more than a page, as an adjunct appeared in February 1912 under the heading, 'For Those Who Worry O'er Plots and Plays,' which dealt more specifically with writing issues. These columns were eventually integrated into one extended column that ran until March 1914.¹⁷⁴

Wright wrote for *The Motion Picture Story Magazine* (renamed *Motion Picture Magazine* in 1914) from 1912 to 1919, on most things filmic, and some of these articles were on writing scenarios.¹⁷⁵ He also wrote periodically for *The Photo Playwright*¹⁷⁶ and *The Photoplay Author*, where in one article he comments on the use of the synopsis and other topical writing issues.¹⁷⁷ In 1914, Grau bestows upon him the highest of praise:

there is no better qualified writer on the subject in this country today. [...] as editor of Moving Picture News, Mr. Wright conducted two distinct

¹⁷¹ According to *IMDbPro* Wright had 24 credits for writing, producing and script supervision. Of note are *The Indians are Coming* (1930) based on the life of Buffalo Bill (William F. Cody), a sound film, which is alleged to have saved Universal's serial format into the sound era; and *Perils of the Wild* (1925), a serial directed by Francis Ford. See *IMDbPro*: <https://pro-labs.imdb.com/name/nm0942936/>

¹⁷² 'Wright Signs New Universal Contract,' *Exhibitors Trade Review*, February 27, 1926, 8.

¹⁷³ See 'Wm. Lord Wright's Page,' *MPN*, November 18, 1911 for the column's first appearance.

¹⁷⁴ Wright, 'For Those Who Would Worry O'er Plots and Plays,' *MPN*, February 17, 1912, 12-13 and *MPN*, March 14, 1914, 31-32 for its first and last appearance.

¹⁷⁵ Wright, 'The Spark of Genius,' September 1912, 135-36 and 'The Tremolo Touch,' December 1912, 130 in *MPSM*.

¹⁷⁶ Wright, 'The Idea is the Thing,' *Photo Playwright*, September/October 1912, 11-13 and 'The Successful Plot,' October/November 1912, 9.

¹⁷⁷ Wright, 'Looking Over the Field,' *Photoplay Author*, October 1914, 117-119.

departments which represented the best subject matter contained in that publication, while his contributions to the Motion Picture Story Magazine have been, and still are, a feature of that amazingly successful publication.¹⁷⁸

In the spring of 1914, Wright left *Motion Picture News* to become editor of the Photoplaywrights' Department of the *New York Dramatic Mirror* and write a new weekly column, 'For Photoplaywrights, Real and Near.' The editorial announcement of this new departure was marketed as a positive coup:

TO PHOTOPLAYWRIGHTS! - We have discovered since announcing our new Department that the friends and admirers of Mr. William Lord Wright number thousands and that they can be found in every section of this country.¹⁷⁹

Readers were reminded in every issue that 'Mr. William Lord Wright will be pleased to answer all personal inquiries by mail', as long as there was a self-addressed envelope. This is perhaps indicative of Wright's phenomenal work rate and his intention to engage with the public on all matters of writing.¹⁸⁰

Grau extends his positive comments on Wright's joining *The New York Dramatic Mirror* and of the new column by saying that:

in 1914 the editorial staff in this department was materially augmented by William Lord Wright, long contributing to various trade issues and magazines and a recognized authority on all scenario questions.¹⁸¹

It seems that Sargent and Wright knew each other very well and were friends. Sargent refers to Wright as 'Bill' and the nickname 'Willord' on updating readers about his work in Chicago. He appears to hold Wright in very high regard, commenting that 'Bill not only knows how to tell you how to do it, but if he has to he

¹⁷⁸ Grau, *Theatre of Science*, 311.

¹⁷⁹ Editorial announcement, 'To Photoplaywrights' in Wright, 'For Photoplaywrights, Real and Near,' *NYDM*, 1913 Mar-Apr 1914, 2476 pdf: *Fulton History*: <http://fultonhistory.com/Fulton.html>

¹⁸⁰ Wright, 'For Photoplaywrights, Real and Near,' *NYDM*, 1915 Jul-Aug 1916, 0148.pdf: *Fulton History*: <http://fultonhistory.com/Fulton.html>

¹⁸¹ Grau, *Theatre of Science*, 253.

can jump in as overflow man and do it himself.¹⁸² Sargent laments in his own column, 'Wright quits Mirror' when Wright's work with the *New York Dramatic Mirror* ends in 1917, believing this would terminate his work as a screenwriting teacher.¹⁸³ However, by December of that year Wright had joined *Picture-Play Magazine* to write another column called 'Hints for Scenario Writers.'¹⁸⁴ From May to November 1919 he also assumed responsibility for another department, 'The Picture Oracle,' in the same publication, which focused on questions and answers about the screen.¹⁸⁵ He finally stopped writing for the fan and trade press in 1921, after ten years of writing columns on screenwriting, in order to focus on his work with Selig and Universal.

Wright wrote three manuals. The first, *The Art of Writing Scenarios*, was initially advertised in February 1911.¹⁸⁶ It sold out quickly and the second edition was published in-house by *Moving Picture News* and offered for \$2 or \$1, with a yearly subscription. Full-page advertisements in *Moving Picture News* with endorsements from major film companies such as Essanay and IMP lauded its merits.¹⁸⁷ It was only a 30-page book, but its contents seem to have been highly respected, although it has now been lost. One reviewer says: 'We invite all our readers in this department of dramatic work, to get a copy of his book and study the formula he gives.' He does add a note of caution, however, to the effect that talent is required and no amount of study will replace it:

The poet is born not made. So we believe is the scenario writer. Still, for the benefit of those who are not born and who think they can be made, Mr. Wright's book should be of great value.¹⁸⁸

The Motion Picture Story was published in 1914. Sargent pays 'Wright's Second'

¹⁸² Sargent, 'The Photoplaywright,' *MPW*, February 6, 1915, 821-822.

¹⁸³ Sargent, 'The Photodrama,' *MPW*, March 10, 1917, 1562.

¹⁸⁴ Wright took over a column from Clarence J. Caine, 'Hints for Scenario Writers' in *Picture-Play*, December 1917, 246-253 continued until July 1921, 8, 10-11.

¹⁸⁵ See Wright, 'The Picture Oracle,' *Picture-Play Magazine*, May 1919, 142 and November 1919, 86 and 88.

¹⁸⁶ Advertisements in February 1911 are proof of its publication in late 1910. See advert in *MPW*, February 18, 1911, 385.

¹⁸⁷ Wright, *The Art of Writing Scenarios* (Chicago: Cloud, 1st ed., 1911 and Cinematograph, 2nd ed., 1911). There is some confusion over the title as it is also called *The Art of Scenario Writing*. See Advertisement in *MPN*, January 6, 1912, 39.

¹⁸⁸ 'The Art of Writing Scenarios,' *MPW*, February 25, 1911, 419.

manual high compliments:

Mr. Wright not only offers sound advice, but he avoids the erroneous information that mars some otherwise helpful publications. He writes fluently and understandingly and with comprehensive knowledge of his subject.¹⁸⁹

Wright's final offering, *Photoplay Writing*, was published in 1922 and was a summation of all he had learnt. It was used as a supplementary text in the New York Institute of Photography, which was founded in 1910 and still exists today.¹⁹⁰ The other key screenwriting teachers included in this study, Sargent, Peacocke and Ball, endorsed this 240-page book in an advertisement.¹⁹¹ The fact that these screenwriting teachers gave such recommendations and lavished praise on each other's work might suggest that they engaged in mutual back-scratching in order to boost their own reputations, and this is certainly possible. However, as demonstrated in this study, they also received accolades from a broad base of admirers and numerous sources, lending weight to the notion that these views of their work were widely held by others too.

As well as being a prominent member of the Ed-Au club, along with Sargent, Wright was also elected as one of the two Vice Presidents of the Photoplay Authors' League at its first annual meeting in 1915. He would work under Frank E. Woods as President and alongside board of control member, D. W. Griffith.¹⁹² As one of his many respected roles he was asked, along with Sargent to judge writing contests.¹⁹³ Wright also toiled to achieve copyright protection for photoplay authors by working with Congress on a new law and campaigning tirelessly against state censorship of the film industry.¹⁹⁴

¹⁸⁹ Sargent, 'The Photodrama,' *MPW*, July 18, 1914, 425.

¹⁹⁰ On the cover of Wright's 1922 manual, *Photoplay Writing* it says it was 'used as a supplementary text in the New York Institute of Photography.'

¹⁹¹ 'The Motion Picture Story' (Advertisement), *MPW*, August 14, 1915, 1184.

¹⁹² 'Photoplay Authors' League,' *MPW*, July 10, 1915, 268.

¹⁹³ Wright and Sargent sat on a panel of judges for the Vitagraph Contest, to write a suitable ending for *The Diamond Mystery* (1913); over 3,000 manuscripts were submitted. See 'The Great Diamond Mystery,' *MPSM*, April 1913, 78.

¹⁹⁴ 'Scenario Copyright Law in View,' *MPN*, April 4, 1914, 22 and Wright, 'Censors a Costly Luxury for Ohio,'

Captain Leslie Tufnell Peacocke (1891-1941)



Peacocke is another who meets all five criteria. He was an accomplished writer and scenario editor. He wrote exclusively for the fan press and produced a manual that was published in more than one edition. Peacocke was also an actor, director and producer.

Peacocke was born in India, educated at Eton and trained as an army officer at Sandhurst; he saw action in a number of military campaigns.¹⁹⁵ These exploits no doubt furnished him with inspiration for his many scenarios. While in India, Peacocke began writing for the *Irish Times* as a military correspondent, and he also wrote plays for his regimental theatre company, even performing them before the Viceroy.¹⁹⁶ He travelled to the USA in 1899, where he initially worked in vaudeville and wrote articles for the *Los Angeles Times*. Peacocke became a fecund writer with many novels, poems, plays and short stories to his name. He was an eccentric, engaging and exceptionally literate individual.¹⁹⁷

MPN, May 30, 1914, 25-26.

¹⁹⁵ Peacocke served as a British Army Captain in India, Burma, Africa and China and he also spent time with the French Foreign Legion fighting the Turks in Greece. He was a colourful character with a thirst for adventure and even escaping after falling into enemy hands. He had a sabre scar on his face to prove it.

¹⁹⁶ Biographical details compiled from the following articles: Frederick James Smith, 'The Evolution of the Motion Picture, An Interview with Captain Leslie T. Peacocke, special Scenario Writer with the Universal Company,' *NYDM*, 1913 Mar-Apr 1914. 0771.pdf: *Fulton History*: <http://fultonhistory.com/Fulton.html>; 'This is the Man,' *Photoplay*, April 1915, 117 and 'Captain Leslie T. Peacocke,' *MPW*, July 11, 1914, 238.

¹⁹⁷ Monte M. Katterjohn describes a convivial meeting with the chain-smoking Peacocke after a performance of *Neptune's Daughter* at the Globe Theatre in New York. Peacocke, whom Katterjohn respectfully dubs the 'master playwright', had viewed his own film 'many times' so he could 'remedy any faults' with 'technique.' See Katterjohn, 'Captain Leslie T. Peacocke: And What He Thinks is in Store for the Picture Play,' *Movie Pictorial*, August 15, 1914, 16-17 and 32. He jokingly explained that his reason for returning to acting in the

His rise to prominence was recorded in the *New York Dramatic Mirror* in 1913, where he is named as 'special scenario writer with the Universal Company.'¹⁹⁸ Peacocke was very productive within a relatively short period of activity between 1911 and 1923, becoming a highly successful scenario writer with allegedly more than 350 produced scenarios to his name.¹⁹⁹ He wrote for a number of the new stars of the screen, notably the previously mentioned 'Biograph Girl', Florence Lawrence.²⁰⁰

Peacocke's 1914 scenario *Neptune's Daughter* was costly to produce, but Laemmle was confident enough in Peacocke's skills to give it the green light. Herbert Brenon, who, according to Koszarski, would go on to be one of the most successful silent movie directors in the 1920s, directed it.²⁰¹ The film was a smash hit and Katterjohn, a former Universal scenario editor, said it 'broke the mold.'²⁰² Up until that point scenario writers were not regarded in the same class as established writers of novels and plays because film did not have the status of an art form. Katterjohn comments that *Neptune's Daughter*:

has been exhibited for twenty weeks to capacity business, afternoon and night – the longest run ever known on Broadway for a photoplay. In cities like Chicago, Philadelphia, Denver and San Francisco *Neptune's Daughter* is going just as big [... and] the photoplay world knows

film *Betty Be Good* (1917) was that he had 'amassed a total of 42 waistcoats of which he was eager to give the public the benefit'. See *Photoplay*, August 1917, 109.

¹⁹⁸ Smith, 'The Evolution of the Motion Picture,' *NYDM*, 1913 Mar-Apr 1914. 0771.pdf: *Fulton History*: <http://fultonhistory.com/Fulton.html>

¹⁹⁹ Figures on how prolific a scenario writer Peacocke was vary greatly. According to *IMDbPro*, Peacocke only had 65 credits (58 writing, 19 directing and 10 acting) of which over 20 are features. See <https://pro-labs.imdb.com/name/nm0668813/>. However, in a biographical extract in 1914, 338 scenarios are recorded. See *MPW*, July 11, 1914, 238. By 1915, *Photoplay* records it as 400 works. See *Photoplay*, April 1915, 117. A year later, in 1916, it is still recorded as over 400, but rises to a staggering 600 scenarios by 1917 and is recorded as the same for 1918. See the *Motion Picture Studio Directory and Trade Annual*, 1916, 134; April 12, 1917, 144 and 1918, 188.

²⁰⁰ Florence Lawrence appeared in *The Closed Door* (1913), *The Girl and Her Money* (1913), *The False Bride* (1914) and *Face on the Screen* (1917) written by Peacocke. See *IMDbPro*: <https://pro-labs.imdb.com/name/nm0668813/>

²⁰¹ Herbert Brenon tried to top his success on *Neptune's Daughter* by working with William Fox on an epic sequel, *A Daughter of the Gods* (1915-1916), which was not entirely successful. He went on to work for Paramount and was named best director of 1927-28 in a *Film Daily* critics' poll. See Koszarski, *An Evening's Entertainment*, 220-222.

²⁰² Monte M. Katterjohn, 'Captain Leslie T. Peacocke,' *Movie Pictorial*, August 15, 1914, 16-17 and 32.

(Peacocke) to be the foremost playwright in America.²⁰³

It continued its run at the Globe Theatre in New York for a total of 26 weeks, a record not matched until the showing of *Birth of a Nation* in 1915.²⁰⁴

Neptune's Daughter owed its success not only to the skill of Peacocke as a writer and Brenon's direction, but also to the engagement of a major swimming and diving star, Annette Kellerman, to play the lead. Sex appeal played a part, as Kellerman appears in a swimming suit that portrays her as all but naked, which titillated but did not flout the common mores of the period. Nevertheless, *Moving Picture World* credits Peacocke for 'telling a story independent of her and doubly strong by reason of that fact.'²⁰⁵ Grau also acknowledged that it was a 'remarkable production' and 'the achievement was a triple triumph for the director, the author and the star.'²⁰⁶

Alan Langdale points out that seeing *Neptune's Daughter* first drew Münsterberg to the artistic possibilities that film afforded in 1914. He records Münsterberg's reaction:

Until a year ago I had never seen real photoplay. Although I was always a passionate lover of the theatre, [... I] risked seeing *Neptune's Daughter*, and my conversion was rapid. I recognized at once that here marvelous possibilities were open, and I began to explore with eagerness the world which was new to me.²⁰⁷

Langdale says that the 'epic qualities' of this 'fantasy' film led Münsterberg to launch 'himself into the study, and later even the modest production, of films.'²⁰⁸ Although Münsterberg says nothing of the writing of this photoplay and only focuses on the effect the film had on him, it is evident that the work of Peacocke, even if by proxy, played a part in turning his attention to film theory.

²⁰³ Ibid., 16-17 and 32.

²⁰⁴ 'Great Directors and their Productions,' *NYDM*, July 1916, 26; cited by Koszarski, *An Evening's Entertainment*, 222.

²⁰⁵ George Blaisdell, 'Neptune's Daughter,' *MPW*, May 9, 1914, 796-797.

²⁰⁶ Grau, *Theatre of Science*, xviii and 278.

²⁰⁷ Allan Langdale, ed., 'The Stimulation of the Mind: The Film Theory of Hugo Münsterberg,' in *Hugo Münsterberg on Film - The Photoplay: A Psychological Study and Other Writings* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 7-8.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 7.

Even though Peacocke was never officially credited, it appears he was one of the writers of the highly acclaimed and controversial film, *Traffic in Souls*, released by Universal in 1913.²⁰⁹ As he was also chief scenario editor at Universal at the time, this seems likely and it is also confirmed in a number of biographical features on him.²¹⁰ Peacocke does appear to have been a writer with a social conscience, as he also worked with the 'all negro' Democracy Film Company on a film about the role of black Americans in WW1. Its purpose was to work toward 'eliminating race prejudice,' although there is no record the film was ever made.²¹¹

Peacocke was the writer and director for *O, It's Great to Be Crazy*, a 1918 short that starred a young Stan Laurel before he teamed up with Hardy.²¹² He also worked for the Metro, Titan and Venus Film Companies during his career.²¹³ Peacocke wrote *The Wonderful Eye* (1911), a short directed by Sennett.²¹⁴ He also worked with the well-known playwright Edward Brewster Sheldon²¹⁵ and co-wrote with Catherine Carr, who was another highly successful scenario writer who wrote her own screenwriting manual.²¹⁶

Peacocke's skills extended to acting in many successful shorts under the direction of Porter²¹⁷ and in a number of prominent features. Of particular note was the 1921

²⁰⁹ The film highlighted the social evils of prostitution. The sensational subject matter led to moral panic, which resulted in the inclusion of the 'white slave trade' in the topics explicitly barred under the Hays Office's Production Code in 1921. See Ben Brewster, 'Traffic in Souls': An Experiment in Feature-Length Narrative Construction', *Cinema Journal* 31, No.1, 1991, 37-56.

²¹⁰ *Traffic in Souls* (1913) is listed as one of Peacocke's writing credits. See *MPW*, July 11, 1914, 238 and *Photoplay*, April 1915, 117.

²¹¹ A. H. Giebler, 'News of Los Angeles and Vicinity,' *MPW*, June 7, 1919, 1491.

²¹² Peacocke is listed as writer and director for *O' It's Great to be Crazy*. See *IMDbPro*: <https://pro-labs.imdb.com/name/nm0668813/>

²¹³ See 'Peacocke' in *Motion Picture Studio Directory and Trade Annual*, 1917, 144.

²¹⁴ Peacocke is listed as writer for *The Wonderful Eye*. See *IMDbPro*: <https://pro-labs.imdb.com/name/nm0668813/>

²¹⁵ Peacocke wrote the scenario for Sheldon's play, *Salvation Nell* (1915). This play was filmed again in 1921 and 1931. Edward Sheldon (1886-1946) was a successful playwright. *Romance* (1930), starring Greta Garbo and *The Song of Songs* (1933) starring Marlene Dietrich were based on his plays. See *IMDbPro*: <https://pro-labs.imdb.com/name/nm0791017/>

²¹⁶ Carr wrote the scenario for Peacocke's story, *The Limousine Mystery* (1916) and *The Untamed* (1917) and was author of *The Art of Photoplay Writing* (1914). See *IMDbPro*: <https://pro-labs.imdb.com/name/nm0139636/>

²¹⁷ Peacocke worked under the direction of Porter in *His Neighbour's Wife* (1913). See *IMDbPro*: <https://pro-labs.imdb.com/name/nm0139636/>

Vitagraph production of *Black Beauty*, which still survives in the Library of Congress. In this he plays with great aplomb the dashing villain, Lord Wynwaring.²¹⁸ Peacocke also wrote for, directed and acted with a host of other early silent film stars, such as Mary Fuller of Universal, Ethel Grandin, Maurice Costello and Harold Lockwood.²¹⁹ He directed many shorts and features, including an expensive sequel to *Neptune's Daughter* entitled *Neptune's Bride*, which was also a critical success.²²⁰ Towards the end of his active period, he also worked as a producer.²²¹

Peacocke worked for Universal from early 1913, under Laemmle, initially on its editorial team but eventually becoming chief scenario editor. In late 1914 he moved to The World Film Corporation under Lewis J. Selznick; then in 1916 he worked briefly for the California Film Corporation, only to re-join Universal in 1917. By 1923, Peacocke had formed his own production company, Peacocke Productions, and in 1924 he founded the New Orleans Feature Film Corporation, but by then he had faded from public view.²²²

Peacocke was regularly featured and written about in the fan and trade press throughout his active period, in publications such as *Moving Picture World*, *Motion Picture News*, *Motography*, *The Movie Pictorial*, *Motion Picture Magazine*, *The Film Daily* and *Photoplay*.²²³ Following *Photoplay's* pledge to rid itself of advertising from unscrupulous scenario correspondence schools and dodgy clearing-houses,

labs.imdb.com/name/nm0668813/

²¹⁸ For a full synopsis, see entry for *Black Beauty* (Vitagraph, 1921) at www.movies.msn.com. The seven-reel original survives in fragments of two and half reels from a 1929 re-release and can be accessed at www.harpodeon.com

²¹⁹ See directing and writing entries for Peacocke, where these stars are listed in the credits of his films at *IMDbPro*: <https://pro-labs.imdb.com/name/nm0668813/>

²²⁰ Peacocke was the writer and director of *Neptune's Bride* (1920), at www.tcm.com. The picture had a cast of over 700 and premiered in Los Angeles with a full Philharmonic orchestra and according to the 25th July issue of the *Los Angeles Times* was held over for a second week. It was still playing to limited audiences in 1922. See John T. Soister, *American Silent Horror, Science Fiction and Fantasy Feature Films* (North Carolina: McFarland, 2012), 427-428.

²²¹ *The Wheel of Fortune* (1923) was produced by Peacocke Productions. See 'The Wheel of Fortune,' *MPN Booking Guide* (Los Angeles, *MPN*, April 1923), 106.

²²² 'Captain Leslie T. Peacocke,' October 31, 1914, 648 in *MPW*; 'Beyfuss signs Capt. Peacocke,' March 11, 1916, 594 and 'Three Authors Added to Universal Forces,' October 20, 1917, 812 in *Motography*; and 'Old Lady Astor Says,' *Exhibitors' Trade Review*, June 14, 1924, 17.

²²³ A small survey of advertisements indicates his profile as a writer. See 'The Woman Who Dared' in *MPN*, May 20, 1916, 2975; 'Checkmate' in *MPW*, May 26, 1917, 1229; 'The Heart of Juanita,' *The Film Daily*, December 14, 1919, 25; 'Neptune's Bride,' *Exhibitors' Herald*, December 25, 1920, 39.

Peacocke was employed in 1915.²²⁴ He was in full approval of ‘the successful campaign *Photoplay Magazine* has waged against dishonest “schools” purporting to teach the art of scenario writing for a price.’²²⁵

Peacocke wrote a series of articles called ‘Hints on Photoplay Writing’ over the period of a year (1915-16). This was so popular he was invited to write another series in 1917.²²⁶ In the initial article in 1915, there was an offer to answer questions if an SAE was enclosed but he was so inundated with requests to read screenplays that after this he just directed readers to submit their scenarios to film companies.²²⁷

The success of Peacocke’s articles led to their publication in manual form in 1916, under the same title, *Hints on Photoplay Writing*. This manual was widely publicised in *Photoplay* and the rest of the fan press subsequent to its publication.²²⁸

Advertisements seem to suggest there may have been a further manual called *Scenario Writing*, published in 1918, but on closer examination it appears that this is likely to have been another edition of the same work, advertised in a different way in order to boost sales.²²⁹

Those who wrote for the trade press, such as Sargent and Wright, do not reference Peacocke as regularly as they do each other. Nevertheless, Peacocke should be counted among their number, as his easy and accessible style appealed to the amateur fraternity and he was widely respected. Wright does endorse Peacocke in

²²⁴ Peacocke is featured at the end of an article called ‘Scenario “School” Advertising’. The fact that he was chief scenario editor for Universal and well respected within industry circles made him the ideal candidate to clean up *Photoplay’s* image when it came under new management. See *Photoplay*, April 1915, 114-117.

²²⁵ Peacocke, *Hints on Photoplay Writing*, 4.

²²⁶ Peacocke was asked to write again at ‘Photoplay’s earnest solicitation,’ due to the popularity of his articles. See ‘Captain Peacocke Returns Next Month,’ *Photoplay*, February 1917, 114.

²²⁷ Compare Peacocke’s closing comments in his articles on ‘Hints on Photoplay Writing,’ May 1915, 129-132 and July 1915, 129-132 in *Photoplay*.

²²⁸ Peacocke’s, *Hints on Photoplay Writing* was advertised over a four-year period. See *Photoplay*, August 1916, 176 and August 1919, 15.

²²⁹ An advertisement for *Hints on Photoplay Writing* and *Scenario Writing* occurs in the same edition of *Photoplay*. It has ‘Scenario Writing’ as a header. However, on closer examination, the advertisement for *Scenario Writing* reads ‘Peacocke’s remarkably popular book on Scenario Writing,’ which includes the header. The text of the advertisement of *Scenario Writing* is almost identical to the text of the advertisement for *Hints on Photoplay Writing*. The drive for this advertising appears to be that it was re-published by the Photoplay Publishing Co, *Photoplay’s* own publishing arm, which indicates the high esteem the magazine editors had for Peacocke. Compare advertisements in *Photoplay*, April 1918, 10 and 122.

one of his articles by including his advice on writing features, and he says 'there is no script writer better qualified than Captain Peacocke to discourse on the subject of the multiple reel.'²³⁰ Sargent recorded Peacocke's election to membership of the Ed-Au Club in 1914, indicating his acceptance into the fold.²³¹ The phenomenal success achieved by the likes of Peacocke and Wright led those of lesser fame such as Thomas to seek their endorsements for his own work in order to give it more validity. Hence, Thomas's *How to Write a Photoplay*²³² offers thanks 'for courtesies extended in the preparation of the work' to both Peacocke and Wright on its title page.²³³

Peacocke directed his last films in 1923 and returned to the stage in 1924.²³⁴ He gradually disappeared from the public arena after this period and has been largely forgotten, along with others who were likely important contributors to the early discourse on screenwriting.

²³⁰ Wright, 'For Those Who Worry O'er Plots and Plays,' *MPN*, September 27, 1913, 22-24.

²³¹ Sargent, 'The Photoplaywright,' *MPW*, March 28, 1914, 1674.

²³² See 108, footnote 44. An examination of the surviving six chapters of Thomas's *How to Write a Photoplay* shows that the advice he offered is not essentially different from that of the key screenwriting teachers.

²³³ 'New Photoplay Textbook,' *Motography*, December 19, 1914, 851.

²³⁴ Peacocke is listed for a Vaudevillian playlet based on *Neptune's Daughter* in New York and a production of his play *The Bride* in London, based on an earlier work called *The Gay Young Bride*, written 11 years previously. See *Variety*, September 1924, 'Maddock's Playlets,' 7 'Inside Stuff,' 14.

Eustace Hale Ball (1881-1931)



EUSTACE HALE BALL
Author and Director

Eustace Hale Ball fulfils all but one of this study's five criteria. He was an outstanding writer, worked as a scenario editor, made some important contributions to the fan and trade press, wrote two manuals and worked closely with the industry as a director and producer. As will become clear, although Ball never authored a regular column for the fan or trade press, he fulfils the other four criteria in such an exemplary way that his inclusion is justified.

Ball was educated at Harvard, was an accomplished musician and became a sophisticated multi-faceted writer, journalist, critic, satirist, scenarist, short story writer and novelist of considerable prowess. For several years in New York he held the record for marathon fiction writing, penning 60,000 words on a weekly basis for various publishers.²³⁵ He authored a novelised version of the popular *Traffic in Souls* (1914) based on the controversial film of the same title (1913); a film in which Peacocke also had some involvement. This volume contained 'sensational subject matter' on prostitution among the white community,²³⁶ as indicated by the frontispiece of the book that bears a provocative image from the film.²³⁷ Ball also collaborated with Charles W. Goddard on a novelisation of the famous 1916 silent

²³⁵ 'Eustace Hale Ball,' *MPN*, March 29, 1913, 13.

²³⁶ Ben Brewster, 'Traffic in Souls: An Experiment in Feature-Length Narrative Construction' in *Cinema Journal* 31, no.1 (1991): 37-56. *Traffic in Souls* (1913) was written by Walter MacNamara and produced by Universal. See also *IMDbPro*: <https://pro-labs.imdb.com/title/tt0003471/>

²³⁷ Shelley Stamp, *Movie Struck Girls: Women and Motion Picture Culture After the Nickelodeon* (New Jersey: Princeton University, 2000), 74.

horror serial *The Mysteries of Myra*.²³⁸ He authored the popular Jack Race novels among many others²³⁹ and also wrote a number of long-running syndicated newspaper serials.²⁴⁰

When Ball turned his attention to the movies, he soon became a prolific and highly successful scenarist. He wrote for major stars such as Clara Bow and Douglas Fairbanks, and when these films were also serialised as popular novels he would author them.²⁴¹ According to *Motion Picture News*, the film serialisation of his own novel *The Voice on the Wire* (1917) released by Universal:

opened in all the big Broadway and Brooklyn houses in the circuit to tremendous houses. The deep mysterious plot captured the first episode audiences, and the following episodes showed record attendances.²⁴²

The critic Robert L. McElravy, who said it was a 'clever combination of mystery and thrills,' favourably reviewed it.²⁴³ As confirmed by Sargent, Ball had an ability to turn his hands to most types of writing:

Eustace Hale Ball is an old hand at the writing game. He is one of the few who can write a good dime novel (and few can) or he can write pretentious stuff. But he writes action when he writes photoplay, because whatever the tendency toward literature in the script he may have had that beaten out of him when was editor for Éclair and others.²⁴⁴

²³⁸ Charles W. Goddard and Eustace Hale Ball, *The Mysteries of Myra*, (Stedman, 2010). The book is illustrated with shots from the 1916 film serial, which has almost been fully restored. See *The Mysteries of Myra: The Astonishing 1916 Cinema Serial*, <http://www.mysteriesofmyra.com> and *IMDbPro*: <https://pro-labs.imdb.com/title/tt0007107/>

²³⁹ 'Ball' in *Motion Picture Studio Directory and Trade Annual*, 1918, 210.

²⁴⁰ Ball wrote the long-running serialised novels, *Marigold* for the *Buffalo New York Courier* (1926), *Tiger Love* for *Brooklyn NY Standard Union* (1929) and *The Scarlet Fox* for *Binghamton NY Press* (1930). See *Fulton History*: <http://fultonhistory.com/Fulton.html>

²⁴¹ According to *IMDbPro*, Ball only had ten writing and five directing credits, but this record is seriously deficient. His adaptation *Beyond the Rainbow* (1922) featured Clara Bow, a major star in the 1920s, and his popular novel, *The Voice on the Wire* (1917) became a long running serial. See 'Ball' in *IMDbPro*: <https://pro-labs.imdb.com/name/nm0050369>. Ball collaborated with Fairbanks in the writing of *The Gaucho* (1927) starring Douglas Fairbanks, which was also novelised (New York: Grosset & Dunlop, 1927). See Ball, *The Art of the Photoplay*, inside cover for more details.

²⁴² 'Universal Bulletin – Big Booking Records,' *MPN*, May 12, 1917, 3000.

²⁴³ Robert L. McElravy, 'The Voice on the Wire,' *MPW*, March 24, 1917, 1948.

²⁴⁴ Sargent, 'The Photoplaywright,' *MPW*, September 11, 1915, 1825.

The producer W. F. Haddock said of him: 'In my opinion [...] Mr. Eustace Hale Ball is the most capable scenario writer in the business today.'²⁴⁵ One New York paper recorded in 1913 that he had 'sold 80 of his scenarios to the different moving picture companies in less than 11 months.'²⁴⁶ He was also the first director to have managed and produced his own mid-air thriller with aerial stunts, called *Saved by Airship* (1913).²⁴⁷ Jacobs recognises that as a writer Ball was deserving of 'special mention' for 'being among the first to convert stories into an effective screen idiom.'²⁴⁸ Grau says in 1914 that Ball had 'prepared the scenarios for a dozen big features [...] and] produced about 250 comedies, dramas, and is now busier than ever.'²⁴⁹

Ball worked for the Éclair Company as an advertising agent in 1912, where he later became scenario editor, and in same year he helped to form the All-Star Feature Film Corporation, which took many of the plays of the successful theatrical producer Charles Frohman and brought them to the screen.²⁵⁰ Ball distinguished himself as a staff writer, scenario editor, and director at a number of other companies, including Reliance, Solax, Majestic and Excelsior.²⁵¹ He became the President of the Historical Film Company in 1913, with the intention of producing films about the history of the United States; a venture that appears not to have succeeded.²⁵² Ball also worked as successful producer for Universal Studios.²⁵³

²⁴⁵ Haddock was a producing director with Edison, Éclair and All Star and President of Mirror Film Corporation. His comments were released by the publishers. See G. W. Haddock, 'The Art of the Photoplay' (New York: G. W. Dillingham, 1913), <http://tera-3.ul.cs.cmu.edu/NASD/4dcb85c3-9fee-4c83-9e6d-fe6ce5522b59/China/disk2/20050318-062/31004109/HTML/00000004.htm>

²⁴⁶ 'Personalities of Writers and Players,' *Syracuse NY Daily Journal* - 0802.pdf: *Fulton History*: <http://fultonhistory.com/Fulton.html>

²⁴⁷ 'Eustace Hale Ball,' *MPN*, March 29, 1913, 13.

²⁴⁸ Jacobs, *Rise of the American Film*, 132.

²⁴⁹ Grau, *Theatre of Science*, 310-311.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 310-311.

²⁵¹ 'Ball' in *Motion Picture Studio Directory and Trade Annual*, 1918, 210.

²⁵² Ball became General Manager of The Historical Film Company in 1913. It had offices in New York and London and was formed to make 3-4 reel features on American and English historical themes. He was in consultation with the historian Edward S. Ellis about this. See 'The Historical Film Company' in *MPW*, April 12, 1913, 177 and *Exhibitors Times*, August 16, 1913, 7.

²⁵³ Ball was producer of 'the wonder drama, "20,00 Leagues Under the Sea."' See 'Universal Bulletin' *MPW*, May 26, 1917, 1204.

Ball's writing talent, more than his contributions in the fan and trade press arena, seems to have pushed him to the forefront of the general public's mind and gained him industry respect. However, he was an occasional contributor on issues that he considered important. His trade press offerings include a pithy checklist for budding scenarists; 'Ten Things I Would Tell a Beginner.'²⁵⁴ He also wrote more specifically about how to negotiate the thorny and tricky issue of censorship and provided some guidelines for writing scenarios. This article had been occasioned by the setting up of a voluntary body in New York, called the National Board of Censorship, by interested parties connected with the industry, in an attempt to avoid legislation.²⁵⁵ Novelised forms of his scenarios regularly appeared in the fan press. For example, his story, *The Ocean Waif*, was published in *The Photoplay Journal*. The same story also appeared in *The Washington Times*.²⁵⁶ His status as a highly competent journalist was also confirmed when in 1919 he became Feature Editor of the *New York Sun*.²⁵⁷

Ball produced two screenwriting manuals, the reach of which is indicated by the fact that both ran to a number of editions. The first, *The Art of the Photoplay* (1913), was published in three editions by two publishing houses.²⁵⁸ Grau comments on the first publication:

Eustace Hale Ball, like Mr. Sargent, has had a long career as writer and photoplaywright to justify the publication of his new volume, *The Art of the Photoplay* (at least three other books have the same title).²⁵⁹

Sargent himself gives his own endorsement to the volume by including it in his

²⁵⁴ Ball, 'Ten Things I Would Tell a Beginner,' *Photoplaywright*, July 1912, 5. Ball gives basic advice on formatting, censorship and being economical with casts, scenes and locations.

²⁵⁵ Ball, 'The Scenario Writer, the Director and the Censor,' *MPN*, December 26, 1914, 36.

²⁵⁶ Ball, 'The Ocean Waif' in *The Photoplay Journal*, December 1916, 26-31 and *Washington Times*, November 19, 1916, 13. *Newspapers.com*, <http://www.newspapers.com/newspage/79979449/>

²⁵⁷ As Feature Editor in 1919, Ball wrote articles on high-profile people such as the millionaire railway magnate and antiquarian Henry Edwards Huntington. His imaginative descriptions of the maverick tycoon who, Ball claimed, possessed 'the greatest private library in the world, won him praise and were published in many newspapers.' See James Ernest Thorpe, *Henry Edwards Huntington: A Biography* (Los Angeles: University of California, 1994), 353-354.

²⁵⁸ Ball, *Art of the Photoplay* published by Veritas in two editions in 1913.

²⁵⁹ Grau, *Theatre of Science*, 310.

essential library that every scenario writer should have.²⁶⁰

The second, *Photoplay Scenarios: How to Write Them, How to Sell Them*, was published in 1915 and again in 1917 in America. The British version of the same book, *Cinema Plays, How to Write Them, How to Sell Them*, was published in 1917 and 1920 in Britain.²⁶¹ There is only a two-year gap between the publications of Ball's two manuals. This is indicative of the speed of change in the industry and Ball's desire to keep up with developments – an issue that will be considered later.

Ball was a member and librarian of the Screen Club of New York.²⁶² This organisation attracted major stars and figures of note in the film industry to its events. Big stars such as Mary Pickford attended the annual ball in 1914. The heads of virtually all the studios were there and Ball would also have been in attendance, which indicates that he was counted among their number and regarded as an important industry insider.²⁶³

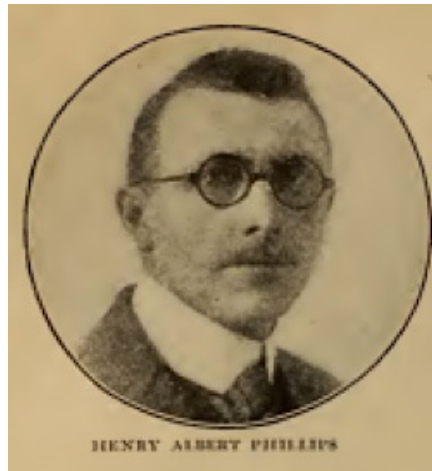
²⁶⁰ Sargent, 'The Photoplaywright,' *MPW*, February 7, 1914, 670.

²⁶¹ Ball, *Photoplays, How to Write Them, How to Sell Them* (New York: Hearst's, 1915 and 1917) and *Cinema Plays: How to Write Them, How to Sell, Them*, (London: Paul, 1917 and 1920). See *OCLC WorldCat* http://www.worldcat.org/search?q=au%3ABall%2C+Eustace+Hale%2C&fq=&dblist=638&start=1&qt=page_number_link

²⁶² See Ball, *Art of the Photoplay*, 1 and 'The Historical Film Company' in *MPW*, April 12, 1913, 177.

²⁶³ 'The Third Screen Club Ball,' *Motography*, December 12, 1914, 799-800.

Henry Albert Phillips (1880-1951)



Henry Albert Phillips also meets all but one of the five criteria. He was a versatile and highly successful writer, contributed mainly but not exclusively to the fan press, produced four manuals and lectured on one of the first photoplay courses. Even though he never worked as a scenario editor, he is too important an industry figure to omit. He was the only one of those examined in this study to teach a public course of instruction in screenwriting. Phillips also wrote more manuals than any of the others and, although less known than Ball, was more recognised and celebrated as a novelist and screenwriter than Sargent, Wright or Peacocke.

Phillips was a talented short story writer, playwright, biographer, novelist, travel writer, and lecturer.²⁶⁴ He was also a very successful as a journalist, taking on a number of significant editorial roles, and was founder of the Playwrights' Club. Phillips ran his own photoplay correspondence school, offering one-to-one tuition, and this was regularly advertised in the fan press.²⁶⁵ He also gave lectures on photoplay writing at the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences and the YMCA in New York. Eugene Brewster, editor of *Motion Picture Magazine*, says that Phillips authored three produced stage plays, 100 published stories, 100 special articles, five

²⁶⁴ Phillips was a novelist, travel writer, political commentator and biographer. A total of 8 travelogues covering Germany, Spain, South America, Japan, the Caribbean and South Africa; a comedy play, *Twelve Men in a Box* (New York); a biographical work, *Other People's Lives* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1924) and a novel *Garden of Contemplation* (Boston: The House Beautiful Pub. Corp., 1932) are listed. See *OCLC WorldCat*, http://www.worldcat.org/search?q=Henry+Albert+Phillips&fq=ap%3A%22phillips%2C+henry+albert%22&dblist=638&start=1&qt=page_number_link

²⁶⁵ Advertisement for The Phillips School, *MPSM*, February 1914, 163.

books of constructive literature and 50 produced photoplays. The numbers seem too exact and were possibly exaggerated, but do indicate that Phillips was probably extremely productive.²⁶⁶ He wrote for important film companies such as Edison, where he was a staff contributor, and also Kalem, Vitagraph, Majestic, American and Pathé Frères. He worked with filmmakers such as Griffith and Billy Bitzer and wrote for stars such as Lillian Gish and William Farnum.²⁶⁷ Phillips was also a member of the Ed-Au Club, which was frequented by the other screenwriting teachers in this study,²⁶⁸ and he was a member of the Photoplay Authors' League, as were Wright and Ball.²⁶⁹

Phillips made regular contributions to *Motion Picture Magazine*, a popular fan press publication, where he was also appointed associate editor.²⁷⁰ Before his column proper was instituted, Phillips was only an occasional contributor to the magazine, writing on selective photoplay issues.²⁷¹ His articles were generally forward-looking, and in one he expresses his belief that one day 'Photoplaywriting is bound to become a dignified profession,' a sentiment that certainly came true.²⁷² Phillips also published the full stories of many of his films in fan press publications such as *The Motion Picture Story Magazine* and *Motion Picture Magazine*.²⁷³

His column, 'The Photodrama,' first appeared in January 1917 and ran under this

²⁶⁶ Brewster also notes that Phillips had held editorial roles at *The Metropolitan Magazine*, *People's Magazine*, *The Scenario* and *Motion Picture Mail*. See Eugene V. Brewster, 'A Few Words from the Editor in Phillips,' 'The Photodrama,' *MPM*, January 1917, 119-120.

²⁶⁷ According to *IMDbPro*, Phillips only has 13 writing credits between 1913 and 1920. Of particular note is his film, *The Battle of Elderbush Gulch* (1913), which was directed by Griffith, filmed by Billy Bitzer and starred Lionel Barrymore and Lillian Gish. William Farnum starred in *Heart Strings* (1920). See *IMDbPro*: <https://pro-labs.imdb.com/name/nm0680450/>. A further 13 credits not recorded in *IMDbPro* appear in 'Phillips,' in *Motion Picture Studio Directory and Trade Annual*, 1918, 224 & 226 and 1921, 292. A full survey of the available fan and trade press literature reveals a further eight credits, making a total of 34 attested credits.

²⁶⁸ Mr. and Mrs. Phillips were recorded as 'present' at the monthly New York meeting on 3rd October 1914. See 'The Ed-Au Club Meeting,' *Photoplay Author*, November 1914, 138.

²⁶⁹ 'Phillips,' in *Motion Picture Studio Directory and Trade Annual*, 1918, 134.

²⁷⁰ *Motion Picture Story Magazine* was founded in 1911 by Vitagraph studio head J. Stuart Blackton and his business partner, the journalist Eugene V. Brewster. It was renamed *Motion Picture Magazine* in 1914. Its circulation reached 400,000 by 1919. See Koszarski, *An Evening's Entertainment*, 193.

²⁷¹ Phillips, 'Where to Get Photoplay Plots,' *MPM*, February 1915, 101-105. This article was a forerunner to the plot system contained in his *Universal Plot Catalogue* (1920).

²⁷² Phillips, 'The New Literary Profession,' *MPM*, October 1914, 81-82.

²⁷³ For example, Phillips's stories included: *A Spartan Mother* (Kalem, 1912), March 1912, 81-89 in *MPSM* and *Ashes of Inspiration* (Biograph, 1915) October 1915, 73-80 in *MPM*.

title until March 1918. In April 1918 it appeared under the new name of 'Photodrama in the Making' and continued in this guise until its close in August 1918.²⁷⁴ Brewster, the editor, commented on Phillips as a department head, claiming that he was one of the 'masters of the art of photoplay writing.'²⁷⁵ Phillips also made contributions to the Home Correspondence School publication *The Photoplay Author*, on a variety of screenwriting issues.²⁷⁶ Always trying to be predictive, Phillips wrote another series of articles entitled 'The New Motion Picture' for *Motion Picture Magazine* from mid-1923 until early 1924, charting possible future developments in technology within the industry, covering issues such as 3D effects, sound, colour and new camera and screen developments.²⁷⁷ However, it seems that by 1924 Phillips was intent on becoming a full-time novelist; according to Brewster, he had left the *Motion Picture Magazine* staff to focus on this.²⁷⁸

Phillips's first manual, *The Photodrama*, was published in 1914. Wright pays compliment to Phillips's work, dubbing it: 'Another "Worth While" Book' and is particularly impressed with its practical usefulness to the working author:

It covers very thoroughly, the philosophy of its (the photodrama's) principles, the nature of its plot, its dramatic construction and technique, illumined by copious examples, together with a complete photoplay and glossary of terms.²⁷⁹

Sargent claimed that it was deserving of 'a thousand other words of praise.'²⁸⁰ As Phillips worked closely with, and wrote for, The Home Correspondence School, it was through them he would publish his second manual *The Universal Plot Catalogue*

²⁷⁴ 'The Photodrama' ran from January 1917, 119-120 to March 1918, 108 and 110. 'Photodrama in the Making' ran from April 1918, 60 and 122 to August 1918, 104 and 113 in *MPM*.

²⁷⁵ Brewster, 'A Few Words from the Editor' in Phillips, 'The Photodrama,' *MPM*, January 1917, 119-120.

²⁷⁶ See Phillips, 'Visualisation,' August 1914, 35-38 and 'Literary Construction – Its Art and Technique,' March 1915, 67-69 in *Photoplay Author*.

²⁷⁷ Phillips wrote a series of five articles for *MPM* in 1923 and 1924 called 'The New Motion Picture.' '1. The Televue,' August 1923, 35-36; '2. The Phonofilm,' September 1923, 39-40 and 93; '3. Pictures in Natural Colors,' November 1923, 57 and 95; '4. The Unknown World Revealed,' December 1923, 61-62 and 110-111; '5. Daylight Movies,' January 1924, 68 and 104-106.

²⁷⁸ Brewster, 'A Word About Henry Albert Phillips,' *MPM*, July 1924, 47.

²⁷⁹ Wright, 'Looking Over the Field,' *Photoplay Author*, October 1914, 117-119.

²⁸⁰ 'Successful Photoplay Writing' advertisement in *MPM*, February 1915, 5.

in 1920, referred to earlier in this study.²⁸¹ This was often sold alongside *The Phillips Automatic Plot Collector, File and Index*, which was some kind of storage system for referencing and categorising potential plot material.²⁸² *The Universal Plot Catalogue* was not a manual in the strictest sense, but a method of organising plot material that could in turn stimulate the imagination and bring about inspiration.²⁸³ Sargent said, if '[u]sed intelligently [it... would] guide the student,' which by implication meant that it was not to be employed slavishly, but for generating ideas.²⁸⁴ Phillips's third manual, *The Feature Photoplay*, was published in 1921. This was followed by a fourth and final manual, *The Art of Writing Photoplays*, in 1922. Three out of four of Phillips's manuals were still being advertised in 1926, which is perhaps indicative of their enduring popularity and relevance.²⁸⁵

Two other books by Phillips are also worthy of note: *The Plot of the Short Story* (1912) and *Art in Short Story Narration* (1913). As already mentioned, other manual writers, in particular, frequently recommended *The Plot of the Short Story* as essential reading. In a special feature article about Phillips, Leeds clearly celebrates the success of this publication:

As for the little book, over two thousand copies were sold during the first nine or ten months, and today seventy-one states and countries possess copies of it. It goes without saying, the author of the textbook has long since taken his place as a writer of helpful books for the literary aspirant.²⁸⁶

The popularity of these works among photoplay writers was yet another indication of the close relationship between this mode of fiction and the photoplay. Phillips gave lectures on the subject of short story writing, as he did for photoplay writing.²⁸⁷ This

²⁸¹ See 46.

²⁸² For reference to the *Plot Collector* see Phillips, *The Universal Plot Catalogue* (1920: repr., Nabu, 2013), 64, 75 and 158.

²⁸³ Phillips, 'Where to Get Photoplay Plots,' *MPM*, February 1915, 101-105.

²⁸⁴ Sargent, 'The Photodrama,' *MPW*, March 24, 1917, 1914.

²⁸⁵ Advertisement in *Screenland*, July 1926, 92.

²⁸⁶ Arthur Leeds, 'So You'll Know Them Better – XVI. Henry Albert Phillips – An Idealist with a Punch,' *Photoplay Author*, September 1914, 69-74.

²⁸⁷ 'Expert and Personal Instruction: Instruction in Short Story Writing' (advertisement) in *MPSM*, May 1912, 171.

particular work again brings forth praise from Sargent: ‘We think the photoplaywright will find many helpful hints in *The Plot of the Short Story*. [...] Mr. Phillips proves himself a teacher as well as an author. The renowned novelist and master of short story writing, Jack London also says of it, “It is an excellent thing excellently done”.’²⁸⁸

²⁸⁸ ‘The Plot of the Short Story,’ Advertisement in Phillips, *Photodrama*, 222. See Sargent’s extended comment in Sargent, ‘The Photodrama,’ *MPW*, September 28, 1912, 1274.

5. Meeting the Criteria

The status of Sargent is recognised in academic study, although the importance of his contribution to the screenwriting discourse will be further enhanced and interrogated by this thesis. However, the other four key screenwriting teachers I have identified have never received such recognition. Wright's achievements do not fall far short of Sargent's and yet he has received scant attention from past and present film historians for his contribution to the screenwriting discourse. Peacocke, Ball and Phillips are often quoted, but there has never been any detailed and extensive assessment of their contribution either.

As discussed earlier in this study, Azlant does recognise Sargent's work as significant in relation to the development of the screenplay, but this study will go further and demonstrate that Sargent's instructive work and that of the other key screenwriting teachers could well have been more central to the education of the screenwriter in the early 1910s than has previously been thought. Azlant does refer to some of the other key screenwriting teachers: for example, he acknowledges that 'Ball was a fascinating figure' and discusses his literary achievements as one who would typify those who went on to become professional writers. However, he makes no reference to his endeavours as a screenwriting teacher.²⁸⁹

Liepa is guarded in his assessment of the overall impact of Sargent's work, but does recognise his role in providing a forum of discussion about screenwriting. He says, 'Though the degree of Sargent's influence can be debated, it is clear that his column functioned as a crucial discursive locus for the field.'²⁹⁰ Liepa refers to Sargent as only a 'relative insider,'²⁹¹ viewing him more as an interlocutor than an instigator of the debates about screenwriting. He comments:

Much of this discourse found its way into the press specifically through Epes Winthrop Sargent's columns. Sargent, in fact, in many ways served as a barometer for changes occurring within scriptwriting in the

²⁸⁹ Azlant, 'Theory, History and Practice of Screenwriting,' 144-146.

²⁹⁰ Liepa, 'Figures of Silent Speech,' 126

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 202.

early 1910s.²⁹²

Despite Liepa's reservations, as this study has already indicated, Sargent was definitely viewed as an 'insider' by the industry. Nevertheless, Liepa's research has identified the significant contribution that Sargent and, to some extent, the other key screenwriting teachers made to the codification and development of the use of intertitles, and his views will be considered later in this thesis.

Stempel makes only a brief factual comment about Sargent and refers to one of Ball's manuals, alongside those of less important manual writers. He says nothing about Wright, Peacocke or Phillips. As indicated before, Stempel also wrongly describes the 'rush of books on writing screenplays,' in response to companies opening themselves up to outside submissions, as the main reason for what came to be known as 'scenario fever.'²⁹³ It is clear that this phenomenon was caused by a far more complex set of circumstances, which have already been alluded to earlier, rather than just the actions of screenwriting teachers.

Thompson, in particular, makes numerous references to the five most important candidates in this study, along with others whom we have denoted as more peripheral. However, these screenwriting teachers are drawn upon merely in relation to Thompson's own contribution to the discourse on the development of classical narrative style. No attempt is made to evaluate or pass judgment on the extent of their influence or to make any distinction between those of lesser or greater significance.²⁹⁴ In another essay celebrating the centenary of cinema, already cited, Thompson compares views on film structure in early manuals to those of the modern era. Thompson again refers to four out of five of the key screenwriting teachers: Sargent, Wright, Ball and Phillips, but appears to give them equal weight alongside Palmer, Nelson, Bertsch, Patterson and Loos who, as indicated by this study, were of less importance.²⁹⁵

²⁹² Ibid., 123.

²⁹³ Stempel, *Framework*, 14-15.

²⁹⁴ Bordwell and Staiger also make mention of screenwriting teachers but only as part of a wider film discourse. See extended essays in Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 3-49 and 87-153.

²⁹⁵ Thompson, 'Narrative Structure in Early Classical Cinema' in *Celebrating 1895: The Centenary of Cinema*,

As referred to earlier, in his contextual analysis of the history of screenwriting Maras makes frequent reference to all the five key screenwriting teachers and some others of lesser note. The manuals of these teachers are drawn upon as historical sources in order to contextualise a broader argument about the development of screenwriting practice and the nature of screenwriting today and in the future. Maras aims to 'challenge [our] understanding of screenwriting [...] and ways of thinking about film in general, the production process, the functions performed by the film script.'²⁹⁶ Again, as Maras's focus concerns viewpoints on the 'scripting' process, he makes little attempt to distinguish between these teachers or to evaluate their level of influence, except in the case of Sargent, whose work he describes as providing 'an interesting archive for developments in photoplay writing.'²⁹⁷ Maras acknowledges that this archive is 'significant' and reiterates Azlant's endorsement that it represents a 'distillation and on-going revision of public instruction.'²⁹⁸ Maras also refers extensively to the work of Patterson as playing a part in institutionalising writing for the screen and setting up formal educational processes for the teaching of screenwriting.²⁹⁹ This has already been acknowledged in this study. However, her role in the early development of screenwriting practice is more questionable; it would be better expressed as codifying existing practice and formalising rather than initiating it, as her first manual did not appear until 1920.

In contrast to the position held by other scholars, I contend that the key screenwriting teachers probably played a far more significant role in the development of screenwriting practice than has previously been recognised, since they meet the five criteria almost in entirety. They were all writers of high regard with a significant number of produced scenarios. All but one, Phillips, worked as scenario editors. In terms of trade and fan press publications, only Ball did not write a regular column. Sargent wrote almost entirely for the trade press, Wright for both the trade and fan press, Phillips mostly for the fan press, and Peacocke only for the fan press. They produced more than one manual, apart from Sargent and Peacocke; however,

ed., Fullerton, 225-238.

²⁹⁶ Maras, *Screenwriting*, 1.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 145.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 148.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 149-152.

Sargent's manual was substantially revised in each of its three editions and Peacocke's was published in more than one edition. They all had significant connections with the industry and were all viewed as industry insiders.

Undoubtedly the most celebrated of these five screenwriting teachers is Sargent, and his commendation of the others is an important recommendation. He endorses three of the four writers of manuals in this study: 'As to the library, here are some suggestions' and they include books by William Lord Wright, Eustace Hale Ball and Henry Albert Phillips, among others.³⁰⁰ Peacocke is one of the few influential writers who are reserved for mention by Sargent in a special feature article 'The Literary Side of Pictures' in 1914.³⁰¹

The five key screenwriting teachers operated in the most fertile period for the amateur scenario market (1910-1917) and while the industry was in a state of flux. Questions about how to write scenarios had largely been internalised by the industry by the late teens, and before the end of the decade the Hollywood industry was virtually a closed shop for outsiders. Those who wrote later, such as Loos (1920), Patterson (1920) and Palmer (1921) were only codifying and confirming practices that had already been established, rather than initiating or engaging in a seminal discourse with the general public and the industry. Although Loos and Emerson wrote columns for the fan press publications, *Photoplay* in 1918 and *The Motion Picture Magazine* in 1921, this activity was possibly linked more to the advancement of their own celebrity status than a desire to help the struggling writer of scenarios. Leeds and Esenwein published their manual in 1915, but Esenwein had eclectic interests and Leeds's star had already begun to wane. The other manual writers whom I have considered either did not have sufficient profile to exert a major influence or their manuals were too simplistic.

It should be noted that all the key screenwriting teachers wrote their columns between 1911 and 1921: Peacocke, 1915-1917; Phillips, 1917-1918; Sargent, 1911-1919; and Wright, 1911-1921. All the initial manuals of these five teachers were published before 1917: Wright (1911), Sargent (1912), Ball (1913), Phillips (1914)

³⁰⁰ Sargent, 'The Photoplaywright,' *MPW*, February 7, 1914, 670-671.

³⁰¹ Sargent only mentions the most significant writers, 'The Universal staff is headed by Captain T. Peacocke who is also a dramatist and novelist.' See Sargent, 'The Literary Side of Pictures,' *MPW*, July 11, 1914, 202.

and Peacocke (1916), which further indicates that all these individuals were involved in screenwriting instruction during the most crucial period of 1911-1917, when they could exert most influence.

PART TWO – CONTRIBUTION

Section 2 – The Discourse

Having established that certain screenwriting teachers were more central than others to the debate about how to write for the screen, it is now possible to turn to the discourse itself. This will involve the following:

Firstly, establishing that the advice taken from the most relevant editions of the manuals of the five key screenwriting teachers focused on three areas – how to train for, write for and sell to the industry;

Secondly, surveying the learning, filmic and storytelling processes that had to be mastered in order to train for the industry;

Thirdly, examining the protocols of visual writing, photoplay form and screen technique that had to be followed in order to write for the industry;

Fourthly, reviewing the manuscript requirements and marketing strategies that had to be employed in order to sell to the industry.

After these issues have been addressed, a comprehensive assessment will be undertaken of the main contribution that the key screenwriting teachers made to the discourse.

This will be followed by a brief summary of the reasons why the era of the early screenwriting teacher suddenly came to an end.

6. The Advice Given by the Key Screenwriting Teachers

The manuals of the five key screenwriting teachers will form the basis of study, because the contents were mainly drawn from their columns in the trade or fan press and/or from their personal experience of writing and editing the work of others, and because they clearly represent the views of these individuals. In addition, all but one of these teachers wrote more than one manual or made significant changes to their original manual in a new edition, which also provides some insight into how they adapted their approaches during periods of transition in the film industry. Where necessary, this research will be supplemented by primary and secondary material

from other sources, and from the fan and trade press.

Sargent only wrote one manual, *The Technique of the Photoplay*, but it appeared in three editions, 1912, 1913 and 1916. As this is a large body of material to examine, the issue of which edition(s) should be mainly utilised presents itself. Maras argues that Sargent's work offers an interesting archive for developments in photoplay form. By way of illustration, Maras compares Sargent's own comments in the first and second editions of his manual, to indicate how Sargent believed the craft of screenwriting had developed over a very short period:

[In] the first edition of his *Technique of the Photoplay* [...] 'the writing of photoplays is at once the most simple and the most difficult form of dramatic construction.' By the second edition, 'the art of writing photoplays has become possessed of a technique that is applicable only to the writing of picture plays and to no other form.' A distinct and separate domain of technique opens up, beyond the normal sphere of dramatic construction.¹

According to Maras, Sargent's second edition viewed screenwriting as a highly specialised craft, which was a clear development from the first. For this reason the second edition should take preference over the first for the purposes of this study. However, Azlant selects the third edition of Sargent's *Technique of the Photoplay* as the basis for his study, because he claims it is a major revision of the second edition (1913) and represents a 'distillation and on-going revision of public instruction' of the period.² Maras quotes this comment from Azlant, but incorrectly attributes it as applying to all the editions by claiming that 'the three editions [...] form a significant archive.' This is not the case, as Azlant only means the third edition.³ A cursory examination of the second edition and comparison with the third edition confirms that there are significant reorganisations of material, substantial additions, and also some extensive revisions of the original content, which comprise Sargent's detailed description of the craft. Given that Azlant appears to provide the clearest endorsement of the value of the third edition, and he is the only scholar to have

¹ Maras quotes from Sargent, *The Technique of the Photoplay*, 1st ed., (New York: MPW, 1912), 3 and *The Technique of the Photoplay*, 2nd ed., (1913: repr., BiblioBazaar, 2012), 7. See Maras, *Screenwriting*, 145.

² Azlant, 'Theory, History and Practice of Screenwriting,' 211.

³ Maras, *Screenwriting*, 148.

carried out an extensive investigation of Sargent's work, his opinion carries weight. And, as this study is not specifically focusing on the development of the screenplay, there is little need to analyse the similarities and differences of these two editions in detail, so a decision has been taken to mostly utilise the third edition as the basis for study. Where necessary, the second edition will feature in a limited way. In support of this decision, I also note that Sargent chose to keep the original title, presumably because he believed it to be fundamentally the same manual, but a much-improved version.

With regard to the other key screenwriting teachers, no such problems are encountered. Wright wrote three manuals, two of which survive: *The Motion Picture Story* (1914) and *Photoplay Writing* (1922). These are fundamentally different books, written years apart, and present very different views of screenwriting practice and the role of the screenwriting teacher in relation to the film industry. Peacocke is the only one of the five key screenwriting teachers for whom there is only one surviving and unchanged manual, *Hints on Photoplay Writing* (1916), although it appeared in more than one edition. The material for this manual was drawn directly from his 1915-16 articles in *Photoplay* and, as a body of work, it is of particular interest with regard to the freelance market for amateurs. Ball wrote two manuals, *The Art of the Photoplay* (1913) and *Photoplay Scenarios, How to Write and Sell Them* (1915), and although these manuals were only written two years apart they are very different books. The second manual is not a revision of the first, and it is clear from the substantially different content that Ball wrote the second book from scratch. These two manuals offer some significant insights into the changes that occurred in the industry, from a writing and instructional perspective, during this short period (1913-15).

The differences between Sargent's second edition of *The Technique of the Photoplay* (1912) and the third (1916) are also considerable but, for reasons already suggested, unravelling all the intricate differences would be beyond the realm of this study. Suffice to say, a cursory examination of these differences does confirm the increasing sophistication of the writing process and, as the opportunity to make these comparisons is already offered by comparing the manuals of three of the other key screenwriting teachers, repeating the process with Sargent's various editions is unnecessary.

Phillips wrote four manuals, but only three are instructional. The first two, *The Photodrama* (1914), and *The Feature Photoplay* (1921), are completely different books, written years apart and offer us an understanding of the many changes that had occurred over this period in the approach of screenwriting teachers. The third, *The Art of Writing Photoplays* (1922), is aimed at the professional writer and focuses on how to write a 'continuity.' It is an interesting addition to *The Feature Photoplay*, which was written for the freelance market and concentrates solely on how to write an extended synopsis.

These five key screenwriting teachers were in a position to shape, influence and guide the debate in three broad areas: how to train for the industry; how to write for the industry; and how to sell to the industry. These three concerns are clearly exemplified in the writings of all five of the key screenwriting teachers.

Although Wright's first manual, *The Art of Writing Scenarios*, cannot be located, an early review of its contents in *Moving Picture World* indicates that it clearly addressed these three questions:

[This...] little book of about 30 pages [...] adds to our knowledge of a subject that has perplexed many would-be moving picture authors, namely; how to set about work; how to acquire its technique; how in fact, to prepare goods suitable for the market.⁴

The hierarchy of importance of these questions for their readers was also a matter of discussion. Some playful comments by Sargent in his own column, in disagreement with comments from Wright's column over the question most commonly asked by the general public, are indicative of this:

Now and then William Lord Wright will step on a banana peel and slip up. He says the question most frequently asked is how to write scripts. That is not so. That is question number two. The most frequent one – and we think he will agree with us – is 'I have written a photoplay. Where can I sell it?' This is before they even dream that what they have done is not a photoplay.⁵

⁴ 'The Art of Writing Scenarios,' *MPW*, February 25, 1911, 419.

⁵ Sargent, 'The Photoplaywright,' *MPW*, March 13, 1915, 1601-1602.

First and foremost, Sargent is concerned that his readers should understand what a photoplay is, as indicated by his final comment. In other words, for him, education about the nature of photoplay writing was paramount. However, he recognised that, for many, the possibility of selling work and making money was the priority rather than first learning 'how to write scripts.' He perceived, perhaps more keenly than Wright, that the general public's priorities needed to be reoriented in this respect. Those who wrote needed firstly to understand the process involved in becoming a writer, secondly to acquire the knowledge and technique to do it, and thirdly to concern themselves with selling their work.

The publishers of Peacocke's book set out its purpose in the Foreword and the same issues are implicit:

Do you want to write a moving picture scenario? Do you want to know how to write it so that it will stand a chance of acceptance? [...] This book is full of instructions – hints and helps [...] and] is published for the purpose of helping YOU [...] become a part in the development of moving pictures.⁶

For Peacocke, a person must understand what is involved in becoming a writer and 'know how to write' material that has 'a chance of acceptance.' Peacocke also raises these three issues sequentially when being interviewed by Katterjohn for a feature article in *Movie Pictorial* in 1914. He sets out the priorities: 'Beginners should study pictures and see how things are done. The motion picture theatre is the best teacher available.' After this opening statement on how a person can school himself to be a writer, he adds, almost as an afterthought, how important it is to gain knowledge of how to write and then to sell: 'Of course one should know plots, and know how to market his scenarios after he has written them.'⁷

Similarly, Ball sums up the aims of his first book, *The Art of the Photoplay*, just as succinctly. They are:

To learn how a scenario is received and produced, through the various stages of the studio and outdoor work; to learn what are its essentials; to

⁶ Peacocke, *Hints on Photoplay Writing*, 1-4.

⁷ Katterjohn, 'Captain Leslie T. Peacocke,' *Movie Pictorial*, August 15, 1914, 16-17 and 32.

learn the technical needs of the companies, and the drawing and selling power of various kinds of motion picture plays.⁸

For Ball, the writer must 'learn' about the writing and filmic process, 'learn [...] its essentials' or how to do it and then gain knowledge about the 'selling power' of their work. Phillips sums up his approach in his column with four statements:

First, learn what a photoplay is. Second, know how to write one. Third, follow the market needs. Fourth, write the photoplay that will sell on its merits.⁹

Phillips's summary repeats the same three-pronged mantra, as his third and fourth statements both address the issue of selling work.

In order to give some consideration to what these five key screenwriting teachers taught about screenwriting, it is helpful to probe their thinking using the three logical questions that they all tried to address. The issues that will be raised in answer to these questions are not exclusive to each question, as their concerns overlapped, just as they are likely to have done in the minds of prospective freelance writers. This can also be demonstrated from the writings of these screenwriting teachers, who do not always address these questions sequentially in designated sections or in an organised chapter-by-chapter manner. However, using these three questions to interrogate the large body of work that these screenwriting teachers produced, both in their handbooks and their columns, allows a more incisive and purposeful investigation and makes it easier to organise and codify their responses in a focused way. As a natural corollary, it will also permit a comparative analysis and evaluation of some of the main similarities and differences that existed between their approaches to screenwriting instruction.

⁸ Ball, *Art of the Photoplay*, 9.

⁹ Phillips, 'The Photodrama,' *MPM*, January 1917, 119-120.

7. How to Train for the Industry

Those who wanted to train for the industry needed instruction in how to approach it; knowledge across the population of how the industry worked was limited in the early years of the century. Frederick Talbot was inspired to write a popular volume about all the technical aspects of the industry, because:

A vast industry has been established of which the great majority of picture-palace patrons have no idea, and the moment appears timely to describe the many branches of the art.¹⁰

The opinion of W. Hanson, scenario editor for Western Vitagraph, about writers' lack of industry knowledge is typical:

The average author has no idea of the close serious study, which must be given to each script previous to production to make the salable scenario a working scenario.¹¹

In answer to these concerns, the key screenwriting teachers would impart information on the distinctive skills required for film writing, basic instruction on how films were made and technical advice on submission formats and the mechanics of scenario writing. For clarity, these three broad realms of knowledge will be addressed separately as: 'The Learning Process,' 'The Filmic Process' and 'The Storytelling Process.'

A. The Learning Process

The advice that the key screenwriting teachers offered in their manuals was always optimistic and positive, as if reading the manual were the first step in a potentially lucrative and successful writing career. In reality, there was probably an element of exaggeration in the claims. Their readers had more than likely purchased a manual after reading a column by the author and/or coming across one of the numerous advertisements in the fan or trade press and/or seeing or reading about a photoplay

¹⁰ Frederick Talbot, *Moving Pictures: How They are Made and Worked* (1912: repr., Kessinger Publishing, 2013), vii.

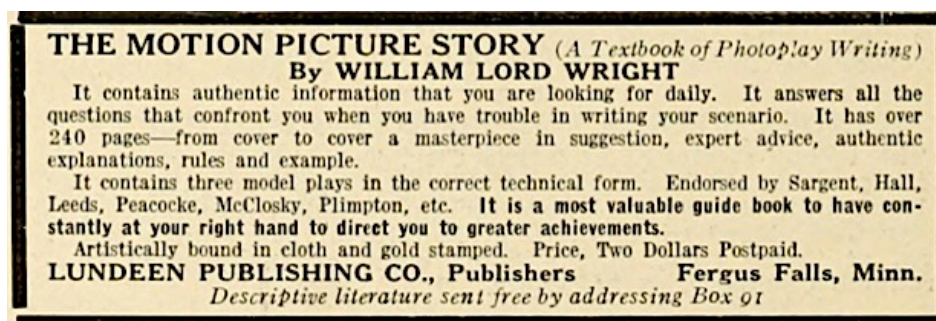
¹¹ W. Hanson, 'A Few Particular Points,' *The Photoplaywright*, November 1912, 4.

the author had written.¹² Advertisements about manuals written by peer authors were also commonly found in the flyleaves of a manual they had already purchased, or the manuals of others were recommended as further reading.¹³ However, as noted earlier, the advertisements of these more legitimate teachers generally contained far more muted claims than those of the correspondence schools.

As a first step, it was important to restate the assurances contained in any advertisements that had originally drawn the fledgling writer to buy the manual. Such opening gambits verged on hyperbole, but were also designed to enthuse, inspire and kindle the fire of ambition in the individual to write for the screen and to convince the prospective writer that the manual they had chosen would not disappoint.

Wright's viewpoint on the potential opportunity in his manual is more measured and is in keeping with the trade literature advertisement below:

Writing the motion-picture story has assumed the dignity of a separate and distinct literary profession. For any one with a fair amount of education and talent may enter it and attain some success.¹⁴



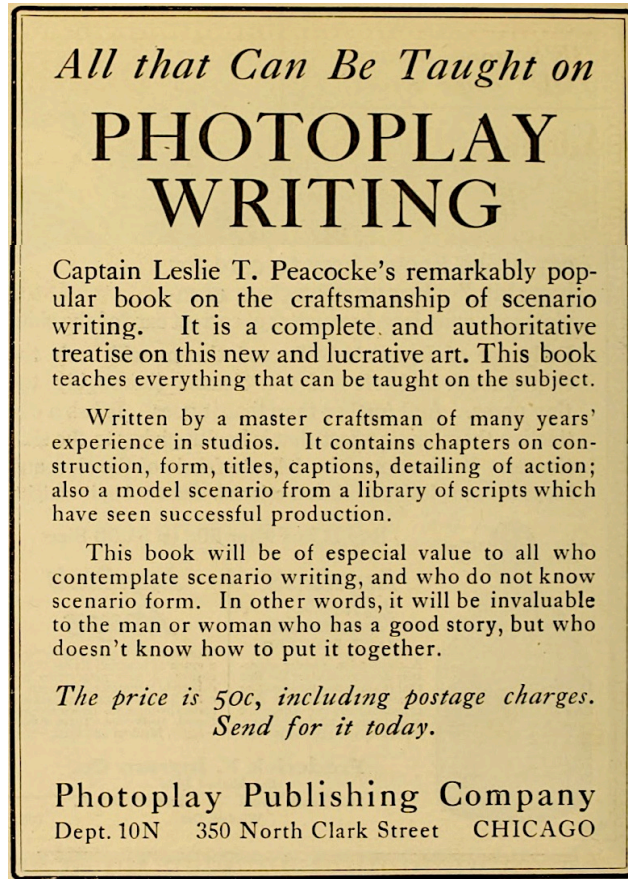
MPW, August 14, 1915, 1184.

¹² See sample advertisements and features for Sargent's 'Technique of the Photoplay,' *MPW*, January 2, 1915, 69 and *Photoplay Journal*, May 1916, 31; Wright's 'The Art of Writing Scenarios,' *MPW*, February 18, 1911, 385; Peacocke's 'Hints on Photoplay Writing,' *Photoplay*, December 1916, 14; Ball's 'Photoplay Scenarios: How to Write Them, How to Sell Them,' *MPN*, January 15, 1916, 248 and Phillips's 'The Photodrama,' *MPM*, March 1915, 181.

¹³ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 358. See also the advertisement for the 2nd edition of Sargent's, 'Technique of the Photoplay' in Wright, *Motion Picture Story*, 229. Esenwein and Leeds endorse the works of Sargent and Phillips in the appendices of their manual. See Esenwein and Leeds, *Writing the Photoplay*, 293-294.

¹⁴ Wright, *The Motion Picture Story* (Chicago: Cloud Publishing, 1914), 8.

The opening statement in Peacocke's manual is brash, to the point and in line with the fan press advertisement that follows: 'This book, by a foremost authority, contains all that can be taught on the conception and preparation of motion picture scenarios.'¹⁵



All that Can Be Taught on
**PHOTOPLAY
WRITING**

Captain Leslie T. Peacocke's remarkably popular book on the craftsmanship of scenario writing. It is a complete and authoritative treatise on this new and lucrative art. This book teaches everything that can be taught on the subject.

Written by a master craftsman of many years' experience in studios. It contains chapters on construction, form, titles, captions, detailing of action; also a model scenario from a library of scripts which have seen successful production.

This book will be of especial value to all who contemplate scenario writing, and who do not know scenario form. In other words, it will be invaluable to the man or woman who has a good story, but who doesn't know how to put it together.

*The price is 50c, including postage charges.
Send for it today.*

Photoplay Publishing Company
Dept. 10N 350 North Clark Street CHICAGO

Photoplay, August 1918, 8.

There was one other ingredient that all the key screenwriting teachers stressed: they argued that proficiency and accomplishment could only be achieved through application and perseverance. According to Sargent, being prepared to face rejection and failure was a prerequisite.¹⁶ Wright also asserted that: 'You may have to write for a year or two before you really know how to do it [...]. It is likely to take time and patience – and a great deal of effort.'¹⁷ Peacocke's upbeat tone is also laced with warnings: 'A lazy person never has time for anything; he is always behind in every

¹⁵ Peacocke, *Hints on Photoplay Writing*, 1.

¹⁶ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 305-306.

¹⁷ Wright, *Photoplay Writing*, 7.

endeavor.¹⁸ In the view of all the key screenwriting teachers, success was never assured, but depended on diligence and dedication as well as ability.

Once students were aware of the commitment, cost and potential rewards of this enterprise, they needed to know how to school themselves in it. In the article: 'How to Become an Author,' Sargent advises that the prospective scenario writer should 'study the screen, and the papers, and the books.'¹⁹

The Study Regime

Without exception, the key screenwriting teachers believed that watching and analysing films was a crucial part of screenwriting education. Wright urged that: 'Repeated visits to the motion-picture theater are recommended to those wishing to write the successful photoplay.'²⁰ This involved more than just passive observation but active notebook 'study' and analysis of all aspects of the film.²¹ Peacocke believed he could improve his writing by going to watch his own successful photoplay, *Neptune's Daughter*, repeatedly, to find 'some discrepancy in the plot or technique.'²² Wright encouraged his readers not only to dissect the plots of films they had seen, but to try to write them out from memory. It was also important to study character development and how the circumstances in the play wrought character change.²³ Sargent believed, as did the others, that his students should put themselves through a rigorous training regime, and the motion picture theatre was their starting point:

There is only one school of experience, and the classroom is the motion picture theatre, but you must regard it, for the time being, as a classroom and not as a place of amusement.²⁴

The key screenwriting teachers also encouraged their students to access the film

¹⁸ Peacocke, 'Hints on Photoplay Writing,' *Photoplay*, March 1916, 125.

¹⁹ Sargent, 'The Photoplaywright,' *MPW*, February 7, 1914, 670.

²⁰ Wright, *Motion Picture Story*, 52-53.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 53.

²² Katterjohn, 'Captain Leslie T. Peacocke,' *Movie Pictorial*, August 15, 1914, 16-17 and 32.

²³ Wright, *Photoplay Writing*, 39-43.

²⁴ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 307.

press for story summaries of the plays they were unable to see. They could then attempt to write their own versions from reviews they had read or titles they had encountered. Ball lists most of the 'trades' as essential reading:

In particular, the *Moving Picture World* contains many interesting articles by well-known critics on photoplay technique [presumably including Sargent and Wright] as well as showing brief synopses of the weekly releases.²⁵

The key screenwriting teachers were keen to make a clear distinction between writing for the screen and for the theatre. However, once these differences were understood, they still believed it was absolutely necessary that their students should comprehend the same skills of dramatic construction as a playwright. Phillips, Ball, Wright and Sargent specifically state this, whereas for Peacocke it is implicit. The fact that Peacocke never openly refers to this connection is rather odd, since he was a successful stage actor and playwright himself and this knowledge more than likely informed his understanding of dramatic technique.

Ball is keen that his students grasp the 'technical knowledge of dramatic construction' and refers them to a well-known work by Price, *The Analysis of Play Construction and Dramatic Principle*, referred to earlier in this study. If the freelance writer was to succeed, he had to:

apply [his] vigorous and unhackneyed thoughts so as to produce artistic results along the lines laid down by centuries of necessary conventions, [which] is the simple and complex art of dramatic technique.²⁶

Ball clearly makes the link between the writing of 'good scenarios' and an understanding of 'dramatic development, professional presentation of theme and movement, which makes a scenario worth while.'²⁷ He is keen that his readers should 'gain a broad technical knowledge of dramatic construction.'²⁸ Ball begins his instruction about photoplay writing with the comment, 'just as with a drama for the

²⁵ Ball, *Art of the Photoplay*, 30.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 34.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 31.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 30.

stage or a novel.²⁹ His choice of description for the film writer is 'photoplaywright', which underscores his particular view that film writing is an extension of writing for the theatre.³⁰ Wright is equally clear about the connection between the principles of play construction and film narrative:

A great deal of theatrical parlance has been handed down to the motion-picture industry for the reason that the majority of the directors of motion pictures are former directors of the spoken drama, as are a majority of the motion-picture supporting casts of today.³¹

Sargent's columns refer to a number of theatrical manuals quite regularly and he encourages his readers to purchase them. On one occasion, he writes a complete article considering the views of Brander Matthews, a well-known dramaturge referred to earlier.³² Sargent also includes Price's *Technique of the Drama* as part of his essential reading list for aspiring photoplay writers.³³ In an attempt to announce his work as definitive, the title of Sargent's manual, *The Technique of the Photoplay*, may have even suggested itself from Price's manual, *The Technique of the Drama*, published in 1892, and Freytag's work of the same name of 1863, although the structure and content of these books is decidedly different from Sargent's.

These commendations were not limited to books about playwriting. As already pointed out, Phillips's *Plot of the Short Story* was recommended by Sargent as well. Sargent quotes from the dramatist Hamilton about the decisions the dramatist must make in the process of writing. When people lose interest in the play, he claims it is due to an 'error of proportion,' where too much secondary material has been used. To illustrate his point, he draws upon *Hamlet* and *Much Ado About Nothing* where he believes this to be the case. The dramatist must make a 'definite selection of events.' Sargent comments: 'All this has been written of the drama of the stage, but it applies

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 33.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

³¹ Wright, *Photoplay Writing*, 176-177.

³² The writings of dramaturges such as Freytag, Price, Archer, Matthews and Andrews were frequently discussed in Sargent's columns. See Sargent, 'The Photoplaywright,' December 18, 1915, 2171; March 25, 1916, 2001; May 13, 1916, 1165 and September 8, 1917, 1537 in *MPW*.

³³ Sargent, 'The Photoplaywright,' *MPW*, February 7, 1914, 670-671.

with equal force to photoplay.³⁴ Similarly, Phillips plainly affirms his trust in theatrical principles when he states that, '[t]he man who writes photoplays should study and master the principles of dramatic construction. Before all things he is a playwright.'³⁵

As well as being recommended by the key screenwriting teachers, Price's manual and manuals by other leading dramaturges, such as Archer, Matthews, Andrews and Hamilton, were regularly advertised and discussed in the fan and trade press.³⁶ Hamilton was also a well-known drama critic, who in 1911 expressed interest in the possibilities that film presented. Both he and Andrews would go on to write successful photoplays.³⁷

There was also awareness among the key screenwriting teachers of the views and contribution of early film theorists to the debate about writing photoplays. These works of theory appear between 1915 and 1918, later than all the first manuals or columns of the five key screenwriting teachers. Therefore, they did not initiate or predate the discourse of the key screenwriting teachers, but did assist in clarifying, formulating and organising some of their ideas. The theorists were trying to get to grips with the new art form and, as such, their books were seen as useful learning tools. While we have already noted that the views of the theorists were not always entirely helpful to the cause of the screenwriter, their work was still often recognised and recommended by the key screenwriting teachers.

William Morgan Hannon's short treatise on film, *The Photodrama: Its Place Among the Fine Arts* (1915), struggled to give film full definition. As a silent medium, film was largely visual (except for musical accompaniment), yet it had a semblance to many art forms, such as sculpture and painting, and obviously exhibited basic dramatic structure for 'the technique and dramaturgy of the photodrama [... were] dynamic

³⁴ Sargent, 'The Photoplaywright,' *MPW*, March 20, 1915, 1757-1758.

³⁵ Phillips, *Photodrama*, 151.

³⁶ See Advertisement in *MPSM*, March 1912, 170; 'The Philosopher's Advice,' *Photo playwright*, September/October 1912, 10; Harrison, 'Theatrical Plots,' *MPW*, October 23, 1915, 586 and Palmer, 'Today and Tomorrow,' *The Story World and the Photodramatist*, September 1923, 70-71.

³⁷ Hamilton, 'The Art of the Moving Picture Play,' *Nickelodeon*, January 14, 1911, 50-52. See 'Hamilton in *IMDbPro*: <https://pro-labs.imdb.com/name/nm0357793/> and 'Andrews': <https://pro-labs.imdb.com/name/nm0028602/>

rather than static.³⁸ He also understood film to be 'allied to the art of pantomime on one side, and to drama proper on the other.'³⁹ Manual writers such as Sargent were aware of Hannon's work; in fact, Sargent is complimentary about Hannon's attempts to define photoplay writing as an art and to compare it to other artistic disciplines. According to a comment from Sargent in one of his columns, Hannon's defence of film as an art form 'assigns it its true place, defining both its advantages and limitations.'⁴⁰

Hugo Münsterberg (1863-1916) was an eminent psychologist and an important early film theorist. He wrote an analytical work entitled *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study* (1916), where he foresaw the possibilities of making 'the art of the film [...] a medium for an original creative expression.'⁴¹ According to Passi Nyysönen, Münsterberg 'draws an analogy between mental processes and cinematic functions [for example] memory corresponds to the "cut back" in the cinema.'⁴² In other words, in Münsterberg's opinion, the medium of film resembled the human thinking process of the spectator with its cinematic elements of close up, cutback, and parallel cutting:

the act which in the ordinary theater would go on in our mind alone is here in the photoplay projected into the pictures themselves [...] and consequently the] objective world is molded by the interests of the mind. Events which are far distant from one another [...] are fusing in our field of vision, just as they are brought together in our own consciousness.⁴³

Sargent also engages with Münsterberg's ideas about film writing and commends his work to his readers. Although Sargent did not agree with Münsterberg's purist ideas on the non-use of subtitles, as will be seen later, he praises him for realising the value of the 'cutback' 'as one of the real individualities of the photoplay.'⁴⁴ Sargent

³⁸ Hannon, *The Photodrama*, 16.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁴⁰ Sargent, 'The Photoplaywright,' *MPW*, October 30, 1915, 784-785.

⁴¹ Münsterberg, *The Photoplay*, 121.

⁴² Passi Nyysönen, 'Film Theory at the Turning Point of Modernity,' in *Film-Philosophy Electronic Salon*, October 17, (1998), 2, accessed September 1, 2014, <http://www.film-philosophy.com/vol2-1998/n31nyyssonen>

⁴³ Münsterberg, *The Photoplay*, 56 and 62.

⁴⁴ Sargent, 'What Is Photoplay?' *MPW*, July 21, 1917, 369-370.

recognises that Münsterberg understood one of the most important differences between stage and screen to be 'liberty of movement from scene to scene and capacity for being in two or more places at seemingly the same time'⁴⁵ and, properly used, the 'cutback' meant 'an annihilation of time and space.'⁴⁶ These features distinguished the screen from the stage, where imagination and memory or 'past fact and future hope must alike be dealt with in the spoken word.'⁴⁷ Sargent realised, that, like himself, Münsterberg grasped the power of cinema to visualise people's very thoughts. He quotes Münsterberg in support of this: 'Our imagination is projected on the screen,' meaning that visions of the future and memories can be visualised.⁴⁸

Vachel Lindsay (1879-1931), a scholar and poet, wrote *The Art of the Moving Picture* (1915). Lindsay approached film as high art and saw it as a means of bringing 'motion' to visual arts such as sculpture, painting and architecture.⁴⁹ He believed 'that the printed page had counted too much' and that, as a visual medium, 'the ideal film has no words printed on it at all.'⁵⁰ For Lindsay, stories were to be told through images redolent with symbolic meanings, and there was no place for subtitles. Egyptian hieroglyphics, as a means of picture writing that also told stories, fascinated him and he drew on them as a model rather than 'Anglo-Saxon' language with its sense of 'algebraic formulas.'⁵¹ As he examined these images, he claimed it was '[as] though I were looking at a "movie" in a book.'⁵² To the modern reader, Lindsay's views can seem rather odd and antiquated, but he does draw attention to the importance of film as a powerful visual medium.

Sargent recommends Lindsay along with Münsterberg as worth reading, but with some qualification: 'Between the somewhat fantastic speculation of Vachel Lindsay

⁴⁵ Sargent, 'Münsterberg on the Photoplay,' *MPW*, July 15, 1916, 436-437.

⁴⁶ Sargent, 'What Is Photoplay?' *MPW*, July 21, 1917, 369-370.

⁴⁷ Sargent, 'Münsterberg on the Photoplay,' *MPW*, July 15, 1916, 436-437.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 436-437.

⁴⁹ Lindsay writes extensively on bringing sculpture, painting and architecture to life. See Vachel Lindsay, *The Art of the Moving Picture*, 2nd ed. (1922; repr., Forgotten Books, 2012), 79-150.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 5 and xxix.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 171-188.

⁵² *Ibid.*, xxxv.

and the scientific exactness of Münsterberg lies the photoplay of the future.⁵³

Sargent acknowledged that both Münsterberg and Lindsay had recognised

that the motion picture is not the bastard offspring of the dramatic stage,
but the legitimate child of drama and story with an entity of its own.⁵⁴

In fact, Lindsay had taken the trouble to list 30 differences between the photoplay and the stage to make this point. Lindsay had identified the potential of film in seeing that '[t]he supreme photoplay will give us things that have been but half expressed in all other mediums allied to it.'⁵⁵

Victor Oscar Freeburg (1882-1953) was an important early film theorist and wrote *The Art of Photoplay Making* (1918). Freeburg's book is more of an academic treatise than a manual in the conventional sense, but recognises the potential of the photoplay. It was based on a series of lectures on photoplay composition delivered at Columbia University between 1915 and 1917. In Freeburg's view, the photoplay 'inherits something from each of the elder arts, and yet differs essentially from them all' because it 'is silent and practically wordless,' which he does not regard necessarily as a limitation.⁵⁶ Freeburg suggests that:

Any means of effective expression which will help us dispense with words is to be welcomed, because the photoplay cannot be developed into great art as long as it remains hybrid, half literary and half pictorial.⁵⁷

In recognition of the visual requirements of photoplay writing, he suggests that the 'scenario writer must not only imagine his pictures, but he must learn to imagine them in terms of the screen.'⁵⁸ Freeburg, uniquely, says that the writer should rank his images according to the:

accelerating progression of the pictorial values in the play, [meaning] the pictures should become more beautiful, more impressive as they

⁵³ Sargent, 'The Photoplaywright,' *MPW*, October 7, 1916, 70

⁵⁴ Sargent, 'Münsterberg on the Photoplay,' *MPW*, July 15, 1916, 436-437.

⁵⁵ Lindsay, *Art of the Moving Picture*, 169.

⁵⁶ Freeburg, *Art of Photoplay Making*, 1.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 29.

progress towards the climax of the play.⁵⁹

This linking of the images to the dramatic structure of the play is insightful. However, he still emphasised a tripartite scenario structure, reminiscent of Aristotle's beginning middle and end, by suggesting that a photoplay should have a 'premise, complication and solution,'⁶⁰ although he did not want it to be directly compared with the stage drama. He insisted that the 'cinema play is a new art distinct from all the other arts which were invented and have been developed before it.'⁶¹

Sargent recommends Freeburg's *The Art of Photoplay Making* as essential reading and describes another book by Freeburg entitled *Disguise Plots in the Elizabethan Drama* (1882) as helpful.⁶² Freeburg returns the compliment and rates Sargent's manual as 'first' in discussing 'the practical side of plot building, scenario writing, and photoplay filming,' presumably in contrast to his own theorising.⁶³ Sargent was supportive of Lindsay's and Freeburg's idea to designate 'Columbia University as the home of the first museum of photoplay writing and production.'⁶⁴ The university would house the first educational centre and seek endowments to allow it to store scripts and other materials as a permanent record. As part of this programme, Sargent recognised that Freeburg had already 'gathered working material for his class in photoplay construction'⁶⁵ and was pleased to record that the third edition of his own manual, *The Technique of the Photoplay*, was to be used 'as a textbook' on the course at Columbia University alongside the books of Münsterberg and Lindsay.⁶⁶ Lindsay was occasionally invited to lecture on this course, but there is no record of Sargent ever doing so. As Freeburg's aesthetics are philosophically oriented, they belong more in the academic tutorial than the world of the practitioner. Much of the work of Patterson in further developing these courses at Columbia University would grow out of Freeburg's efforts and would eventually give rise to her

⁵⁹ Ibid., 255-256.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 238.

⁶¹ Ibid., 205.

⁶² Sargent, 'The Photoplaywright,' *MPW*, October 21, 1916, 386.

⁶³ Freeburg, *The Art of Photoplay Making*, Foreword.

⁶⁴ Sargent, 'Wanted – A Museum,' *MPW*, September 9, 1916, 1704.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 1704.

⁶⁶ Sargent, 'The Photoplaywright,' *MPW*, March 24 1917, 1914.

own manual, *Cinema Craftsmanship* (1920).

The work of these early theorists had positive and negative effects for screenplay writing and on the instruction of the key screenwriting teachers. As already noted, Münsterberg's and Lindsay's approaches tended to downplay the literary merits of screenwriting, although some of their insights were of use to screenwriting teachers. Freeburg's work formed the basis for the study of screenwriting becoming an academic pursuit; Sargent's endorsement of his work, and of that of Münsterberg and Lindsay, indicates his willingness not only to engage with the works of early film theoreticians but to recommend them to his students as a source of enrichment.

The key screenwriting teachers contributed to the discourse about film theory by making comment through their articles, columns, and manuals, but also saw these theoretical works as potentially valuable learning tools for their readers and followers. So where does this place the manuals by the key screenwriting teachers, in relation to these types of theoretical texts? As Macdonald suggests: 'Screenwriting manuals thus represent "metaprescriptive texts" or "low intensity theory," lying between practice and high theory.'⁶⁷ Screenwriting manuals functioned as a bridge between the two and brought the attention of aspiring writers to the more theoretical material, which could act as an additional learning resource.

The key screenwriting teachers argued that their manuals should still be central to the learning process. Sargent said that his manual ought to be a constant point of reference for the prospective writer. He claimed that, once his book had been read, a person had 'received a complete course of instruction in photoplay writing.'⁶⁸ Both Sargent and Wright were not averse to their students reading other screenwriting manuals and encouraged them to build up a library of books about writing.⁶⁹ However, the mere reading of a book was not sufficient and did not mean that its contents had been ingested. Sargent encouraged his readers to apply themselves to 'study the rule and then learn, through experience, to apply it.'⁷⁰ Wright emphasises

⁶⁷ Macdonald, 'Forming the Craft' in *Early Popular Visual Culture*, 8.1 (2010): 79.

⁶⁸ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 356.

⁶⁹ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 358 and Wright, *Photoplay Writing*, 216.

⁷⁰ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 305.

the doing part: 'The best way to learn to write is to write.'⁷¹

Sargent was not against his students accepting constructive criticism from others, providing it was backed by 'practical knowledge.' However, submitting to criticism from just any source was of little value and he admitted that even some editors gave poor feedback. Sargent advocated a process of 'self-criticism' and offered a series of 10 probing questions, originally published in *Moving Picture World* as a test of any work.⁷² Wright also wholeheartedly agreed about the need to be self-critical:

Endeavour to be your own critic. After completing your story, lay it away for a week or so and try and forget it. Later, go over it again carefully, analyze every scene, every action, every motive.⁷³

To further aid the student's development, Sargent included a section at the end of his manual called 'The Unasked Question,' in which he addressed all the things he believed the new writer might ask. He prefaces this by claiming that: 'The questions are those that have been most frequently repeated in the thousands of questions answered by the writer in the past five years.'⁷⁴

As the key screenwriting teachers had supplied a full course of instruction, they suggested that there was little point in their students joining correspondence courses, even those that appeared legitimate. As already mentioned, they characterised most of them as bogus, along with the agencies, clearing houses and prize schemes, which generally required money for services deemed by them to be improperly rendered and a waste of the authors' time.⁷⁵ Sargent advises writers to stay away from such correspondence schools, which he viewed as fake and fraudulent:

Do not believe the misleading statements contained in the advertisements of the self-styled schools [...] that one could begin to

⁷¹ Wright, *Photoplay Writing*, 33.

⁷² The ten questions are: '1. Is the plot new or novel? 2. Is it practicable? 3. Will it pass the censorship? 4. Has it struggle? 5. Has it suspense? 6. Is it properly motivated? 7. Are the characters well chosen? 8. Are the settings correct? 9. Is the plot adhered to? 10. Is the climax correct?' See Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 315.

⁷³ Wright, *Motion Picture Story*, 223.

⁷⁴ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 366.

⁷⁵ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 305 and 354-356; Wright, *Photoplay Writing*, 196 and 214-216;

write photoplays within three hours after receipt of instructions. It cannot be done!⁷⁶

Instead, Sargent counsels that:

Until the real success comes the author must cut his own path, and none of these schemes will help. They may hinder progress very materially or completely spoil all chances of success. [...] No matter what the contest, the damage done through delay in progress will far outweigh the possible financial gain. You can make more money keeping out of contests and selling in the market.⁷⁷

Ball saw these schools as mere money-making schemes and counselled that 'no wise writer' should believe their claim that 'no literary training nor skill is necessary.'⁷⁸ Peacocke's condemnation of correspondence schools is equally stinging, and as mentioned earlier, was the reason he was hired by *Photoplay* to write about scenario writing:

I cannot tell you how bitterly I am opposed to the schools, clearing houses and other schemes of like nature. I have been fighting against them for years. [...] I have never heard of anyone having benefited from having enlisted in one of these schools.⁷⁹

As already noted, the views of the key screenwriting teachers about correspondence schools may have not been entirely objective, since these operators could have been considered as competitors. However, the fact that they were prepared to recommend other screenwriting teachers, who definitely were competitors, may legitimise their opinions about some of the more unscrupulous operators, as such altruism suggests they were not only interested in financial gain.

The key screenwriting teachers were positive about joining writing groups which met together to discuss films and provide a forum for commenting on each other's work. These clubs often had visiting speakers and provided networking opportunities. As

⁷⁶ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 305.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 354 and 356.

⁷⁸ Ball, *Art of the Photoplay*, 30-31.

⁷⁹ 'Scenario School Advertising Barred by Photoplay Magazine,' *Photoplay*, April 1915, 116.

has already been established earlier, these teachers were involved in setting up a number of these clubs and were often in attendance. They included the Inquest Club, The Ed-Au Club, the Photoplay Authors' League and the Screen Club.

Talent versus Tenacity

The argument over whether or not it requires a high level of literary skill and story-writing talent to become a screenwriter is an enduring one. It feeds into a wider debate about the difference between 'art' and 'craft,' terminology which has been widely used to articulate this issue as a belief that a 'craft' or 'skill' can be learnt, but the mystified conception of artistic expression cannot. There is a long history to this division or dualism, which, according to Larry Shiner, was institutionalised in the 18th century and has been a strong notion ever since. He argues that, up to that point, there was no conceptual distinction between art, in the sense of masterpiece making, and what would later be termed artisanal craftsmanship. Shiner asserts that the old system of art had been broken apart more than two centuries earlier:

arrogating intellect, imagination, and grace to fine art and disparaging craft and popular culture as the realm of mere technique, utility, entertainment, and profit.⁸⁰

The five original 'fine arts' of music, painting, sculpture, architecture, and poetry shared a common essence and were regarded as 'art,' while furniture-makers, potters, popular musicians and movie-makers were relegated to the category of 'craft.' These notions of the two realms remain very strong in contemporary Western culture. Shiner contends that, since the art/craft dichotomy is a modern 'Western' cultural construct and did not exist previous to this, failing to recognise it will skew any debate. Shiner points out that the art/craft opposition continued and can be traced in twentieth-century philosophers and critics, who 'reiterated their belief in a deep opposition between serious art and popular art.'⁸¹ This tension or opposition between the notion of 'art' and 'craft' can be detected in much of the discourse of the key screenwriting teachers.

One of the issues the key screenwriting teachers constantly address is how likely an

⁸⁰ Larry Shiner, *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History* (London: University of Chicago, 2001), 307.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 286.

individual was to succeed as a scenario writer. Inherent in this issue was the fundamental tension or contradiction, depending on interpretation, between that which might be deemed the realm of 'art' as opposed to that which could be achieved through craftsmanship. On the one hand, all the key screenwriting teachers seem to stress that some kind of innate talent or artistic ability was necessary for success, but on the other hand, they also appear to indicate that most people could succeed with application and tenacity.

One cannot ignore the fact that limiting the appeal to those who had proven writing skills would not have been a very sensible marketing ploy for anyone who wanted to sell a lot of manuals. However, it is also possible that the manual writers themselves may not have been entirely sure whether the new skill of writing for film, which certainly required a different kind of writing ability from play, short story or novel writing, could be acquired through instruction or was in fact more innate. They certainly realised that it did not involve a mastery of exactly the same kind of literary skills required for previous kinds of writing, even though they often recommended play and short story writing manuals as useful study aids. They also understood that additional skills, such as the ability to visualise and to write in action, were more important than writing in fine prose; but could these skills be acquired through application or were they also to some extent innate? Throughout their writings this tension is clearly evident, whatever view they ultimately may have held on this issue.

When the key screenwriting teachers slip into vagueness, it may also be a way of avoiding the apparent contradiction between notions of 'unteachable' art and teachable craft. It could be, although more than likely subconscious, a strategy or means of avoiding really dealing with the issue head-on. On occasions they appear to want to invest to some extent in the higher notions of art, in order to appeal to somewhat lofty elements, but this does not quite fit with an often very pragmatic approach towards the material. Most of the advice they give appears to be of a craft/skill nature, but there is a vague sense that writing ought to be something more grandiose. These elusive notions of art often seem quite functional and blurry: simmering below the surface of comment and remaining as unresolved conflicts. The key screenwriting teachers seem to want to see themselves occupying that kind of artistic realm, at least in part, and not just peddling methodologies to create skilled

technicians.

These tensions surface regularly in Peacocke's manual, which is not an instructional manual in the conventional sense, as it is not structured systematically, but instead, is filled with pithy statements and insights about screenwriting. Peacocke's sporadic, scattergun approach is in keeping with what it claims to be on the cover: 'Hints' on how to write photoplays. For most of the book, Peacocke presents himself as an experienced writer dispensing wise advice, rather than a methodical and systematic teacher of photoplay writing. His book is filled with easy-to-grasp practical statements, such as:

Make your scenes short; do not elaborate; don't try to be technical. Be clear and concise in the description of your scenes and of your characters. Don't aim to be literary.⁸²

Peacocke is emphatic about not being able to teach people how to write photoplays, saying that he does not want his 'readers to get the impression that I am aiming to teach the art of photoplay writing, because I do not believe that any mortal being can do that.'⁸³ He constantly reiterates this theme from the beginning of his book, and this gives the impression that there is some mysterious or artistic conception that cannot be quite put into words or described but is nonetheless present:

Scenario writing (the sort that brings acceptance checks from producers) cannot be taught; hints to help are the extent of the instruction possible.⁸⁴

Peacocke insists, 'I am merely giving to others the experience I have gained, and pointing out pitfalls which beset the unwary writer.'⁸⁵ And yet, at some points he becomes entirely pragmatic and appears to say the complete opposite, implying that most people can learn this skill:

There is no mystery about writing photoplays. Anyone who makes a study of pictures on the screen and who can visualize a story and who

⁸² Peacocke, *Hints on Photoplay Writing*, 31.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 32.

can put that story into words, which constitute short, crisp scenes, which will bring the story to a logical conclusion, can write a photoplay.⁸⁶

Peacocke's statement seems at worst contradictory and at best ambiguous or confused, as the 'anyone' described here was clearly 'someone' who in fact had considerable ability or skills. Peacocke could perhaps be accused of falsely raising his readers' hopes of entering the industry, if he truly believed that screenwriting could not be taught and yet he had published a book to do just that. One may well ask, what was the point of trying to help freelance writers if they could not learn how to do it or benefit from instruction anyway? In reality, his motives were probably more nuanced, a genuine desire to improve the writer's lot being mixed with an opportunity for gaining financial reward as well as enhancing his own status.

This fundamental tension is also evident in the writings of the other key screenwriting teachers, although subtlety of argument sometimes masks its presence. Sargent seems to imply that a great deal of innate talent is required, when he claims that the 'fact that literary style is not required does not also excuse the lack of inventiveness, of creative ability, of originality of thought' when writing a scenario.⁸⁷ At another point, Sargent seems to leave open the possibility that such creative skills might be developed in someone who is not innately talented. He maintains that the 'real author' is either born that way or has laboured very hard to acquire the elusive but key skill of being able to 'sense the story; to look past the action, past the technique, past the plot and past the punch itself and see the soul of the story.'⁸⁸ Here, Sargent appears to be appealing to a rather mysterious quality that he believes makes someone a writer but that it is not necessarily an inborn talent. Perhaps Sargent's vagueness on this issue again functions as a way of avoiding really confronting the contradiction head-on. Wright also discusses creativity and focuses on the learning potential someone might have, but also indicates that talent resides within:

It is a thing that can be cultivated, rather than taught. [...] It does not require years of study of technical terms, but rather, study of human nature. There are a few simple things that can be taught, and that

⁸⁶ Ibid., 39.

⁸⁷ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 306.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 309.

anyone can learn – after that, it's what you have in you, yourself, that counts.'⁸⁹

Every now and then, this tension over whether it required talent or tenacity to succeed as a scenario writer would surface in the debates that occurred around screenwriting in the trade press. In 1916, Phillips was appointed to lecture on screenwriting at the YMCA in New York. Sargent wrote about this in his column and raised objections to some of the publicity that had been released by the press about the course. Apparently, according to Sargent, it claimed that Phillips had said, 'I can teach anyone how to write a good photoplay.' Sargent's response in his column was emphatic: 'He can't teach anyone to write a photoplay [...] He can, because he is competent, guide those who are qualified and earnest.'⁹⁰ Exactly what Sargent meant by the word 'qualified' is unclear. Again, perhaps his vagueness was a way of evading an awkward issue.

Although Sargent berates Phillips for his apparent claims, Phillips himself is probably the clearest of the key screenwriting teachers in expressing what he thought art actually was. In his *Art in Short Story Narration* (1913), Phillips says: 'Art consists in an endeavor to express thru an outward and visible symbol some great inward and invisible truth or spiritual struggle.'⁹¹ Although, ironically, a little further on in the same text he also appears to denigrate and downgrade artistic understanding by saying that, 'artistic appreciation is simply emotional response.'⁹² Art surely cannot be both 'truth' and mere 'emotional response.' However, to achieve whatever Phillips saw as 'true art' would depend, according to him, 'as much upon knowledge and practice as it does upon special gifts and imagination.'⁹³ In this statement, Phillips still exhibits the classic dualism, and like the other screenwriting teachers, emphasises the 'craft' element of screenwriting; but at least he does try to define what he thinks art is. For example, statements such as: 'We may be born with the

⁸⁹ Wright, *Photoplay Writing*, 6.

⁹⁰ Sargent, 'The Photoplaywright,' *MPW*, March 25, 1916, 2001.

⁹¹ Phillips, *Art in Short Story Narration* (1913: repr., Forgotten Books, 2012), 15.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 20.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, xiii.

soul of the artist, but we must also cultivate the hand of the artisan skillfully,⁹⁴ or: 'Every artist must master technique; or he is but an artisan whom technique masters'⁹⁵ emphasise, in Phillips's view, the importance of acquiring skills and becoming a craftsman irrespective of artistic notions.

In addition, the key screenwriting teachers drew a clear distinction between writing for the screen and the 'literary' skill required to write novels and short stories. Sargent makes a further division between 'literary skill' and 'literary expression' and points out that '[f]lorid expression [...] is out of place',⁹⁶ but recognises that:

Literary skill and judgment are [...] required of the author in plotting his story as well as in originating ideas, but literary expression can only be shown in the leaders.⁹⁷

Contrast what Wright says about the literary skills required to write short stories and those of writing for the screen. Of stories, he says: 'It requires toil, patience, education and worldly experience, not to speak of talent.'⁹⁸ However, when he discusses writing for the screen he claims:

[T]he fact that you have not had a great deal of education from books will not necessarily stand in your way. It is far more important that you should know people.'⁹⁹

The absence of spoken dialogue in the silent period and the fact the earliest of films were relatively simple in construction, often requiring no writer at all, perhaps perpetuated the idea that literary skill was not relevant, and gave birth to the notion that only the plot idea or story mattered. However, Phillips counters this to some extent by emphasising that proficiency in English was essential since only through 'clear, forceful English alone can the playwright hope to give searching expression to

⁹⁴ Phillips, *The Art of Writing Photoplays* (Cincinnati: Writer's Digest, 1922), 7.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁹⁶ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 5.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁹⁸ Wright, *Photoplay Writing*, 150.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

an exquisite impression!¹⁰⁰ This did not necessarily imply higher literary skill but enough facility with language to be able to craft a screenplay. Ball is quite optimistic that the freelance writer could learn this dramatic technique and write material in a manner that did not require adjustment:

The well-executed, thoroughly practical and professional type of photoplay scenario, which can be handed to the producing director as it has been purchased, for immediate and unaltered staging, without the additional expense and delay of rewriting, is the one which is worth the most to a motion picture company.¹⁰¹

Something that should not be overlooked is the fact that all the key screenwriting teachers came from a highly literate background. They had all been successful journalists or fiction writers of one kind or another and had acquired the skills to write scenarios through the experience and training they had received. For example, Peacocke was privileged, had been educated at one of the best English public schools and had gone to Sandhurst; he was a highly unusual, gifted, intelligent and well-read individual. Ironically, when discussing the possibility of making the transition from freelance writer to staff writer, he largely describes his own skillset as the main qualifications, namely, success in the literary field as a result of journalistic training, experience and education.¹⁰² Wright also claimed that a journalistic background was of great help, even if it was a more pragmatic form of writing. He observes that:

If you will look over the lists of successful fiction writers, yes, and those who have succeeded in motion picture story writing, you will notice that nine out of ten have been newspaper men or women.¹⁰³

The advice he gave to those who might be tempted to sign up to one of the fake correspondence schools is illuminating – follow a journalistic training instead, by taking ‘an apprenticeship in the “city room.”’¹⁰⁴ Wright’s emphasis of this form of

¹⁰⁰ Phillips, *Photodrama*, 116.

¹⁰¹ Ball, *Art of the Photoplay*, 8.

¹⁰² Peacocke, ‘Hints on Photoplay Writing,’ *Photoplay*, November 1915, 119-122.

¹⁰³ Wright, *Photoplay Writing*, 33.

¹⁰⁴ Wright, *Motion Picture Story*, 18.

pragmatic writing skill also implies 'applied craft' rather than art.

The belief that very little or no literary skill is required to write a screenplay would today be scorned and regarded as a misnomer. The modern screenplay writer has to be terse and to the point and must be able to think and write in a style that conveys visual imagery, and these are literary skills. Modern screenwriters would claim that it is just as difficult to write a visually conceived screenplay with sub-textual dialogue as it is to write a novel, even if the style of language use is markedly different. The ability to construct stories also requires an understanding of structure and character. However, the literary nature of screenwriting was not fully grasped in the early period, although, as will be later examined, it was beginning to be understood by the late teens of the twentieth century, particularly when it came to writing synopses.

The Original Plot

The key screenwriting teachers constantly emphasised the need for originality and the fact that the industry demanded 'original' scenarios, as opposed to those that had been plagiarised or breached copyright. Notions of originality appear to be associated with the realms of art, as already suggested, and in this context were often vaguely framed. However, it is clear from their writings that the key screenwriting teachers' ideas of originality were essentially rooted in very conventional, routine and formulaic tropes, which included advice on structure, genre and melodrama. What they seemed to recommend were fresh versions or un-stolen re-workings of fairly standard routines, while couching them in what would be understood as artistic terminology.

There was a consensus among the key screenwriting teachers that freelance writers did have something fresh to offer the industry, and they were writing at a time when this was most needed. As has already been established in the first part of this study, the film industry was desperately short of 'original' material in the early to mid-teens, which was a key period in the publication of these manuals. Ball recognised the reach of the new medium, saying that 'the photoplaywright has a greater audience with one picture than Shakespeare had in two centuries.'¹⁰⁵ It would require new

¹⁰⁵ Ball, *Art of the Photoplay*, 27.

authors who could exploit this opportunity.

Peacocke went straight to the heart of the matter with his plea for 'Original stories! Original photoplays,'¹⁰⁶ which he claimed 'the directors have fully demonstrated that they are not capable of producing.'¹⁰⁷ He supported his views by pointing to the output of the industry, which he said consisted of many poor quality films and ill-conceived adaptations of old stage plays and novels.¹⁰⁸ Peacocke also expressed dissatisfaction with the current state of the industry, because he claimed it did not give the freelance writer a proper hearing. At some points he almost seemed to suggest it was conspiratorial: 'Their stories have long been wilfully kept back, through the selfish motives of others in salaried positions.'¹⁰⁹ However, it is hardly surprising to find Peacocke on the side of the amateur, as he was playing to this particular gallery, which included his *Photoplay* readership. Peacocke argued that the ability to 'plot' was at the heart of the matter and this was to be distinguished from just writing good prose:

the success of a photoplay depends mainly on the originality of its plot. A novel or short story, on the other hand, can be negligible in plot but sustain interest by pleasing descriptive matter and clever dialogue.¹¹⁰

Peacocke never clearly articulates exactly what he means by an original plot, other than stating that: 'The public is clamoring for logical stories, replete with human interest and full of action and suspense.'¹¹¹ He also said they should be 'virile, human, up-to-date stories, well worked out into scenes, with logical continuity.'¹¹² In practice, originality seemed to amount to just variations on themes or a novel idea.

Ball also believed the problem was industry-related, and claimed that those who called themselves professional writers in the industry had mainly been drawn from the ranks of unsuccessful journalists and second-rate actors and managers from the

¹⁰⁶ Peacocke, *Hints on Photoplay Writing*, 11.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 128.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 129.

¹¹⁰ Peacocke, 'Original Photoplays – versus Adaptations,' *Photoplay*, July 1917, 127.

¹¹¹ Peacock, *Hints on Photoplay Writing*, 97.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 12.

theatrical profession. He argued that they were blinkered, hackneyed, out of touch and unable to adapt their writing style to the screen, whereas the freelance writer was free of past conventions and such limited vision. It may be that Ball was attempting to flatter his readership when he said of the amateur writer that: 'His thoughts are apt to be fresher, and while perhaps lacking the technical skill of the scenario staff writer, he views life from a less professional vantage point.'¹¹³ Ball put forward a simple solution:

the encouragement of the independent writer, who understands technique and applies it, with variation and artistry, to every scenario [... as he] can read more, see more staged plays, and mingle more with the people who are interested, as laymen, in the picture productions.¹¹⁴

Phillips also argued that, although it was not a completely level playing field, there was a real chance the freelance writer could succeed, because he did not come to this new field with the same preconceptions as the professional but was more open-minded:

The trained writer has only a slight advantage over the untrained writer, because he must reject all his well-grounded rules of fiction and dramatic technique. The novice has a better chance in photoplay writing than in any other field of expression, providing he is mentally and temperamentally equipped to take it up.¹¹⁵

Wright claimed that freelance writers were capable of injecting fresh life into the industry by providing original material. However, originality in this context generally meant they could take a newspaper clipping of some amusing or amazing incident and weave it into a story that could happen to real people:

anyone can write for the screen; that is, anyone who has a feeling for the thing that makes a screen story, for the right kind of plot – anyone who has inventive ability, and can devise new situations, and show us old ones from an angle that is new enough to interest us; anyone who can show us everyday people on the screen, in such a way that we like to

¹¹³ See Ball, *Art of the Photoplay*, 33.

¹¹⁴ Ball, *Photoplay Scenarios*, 168 and 171.

¹¹⁵ Phillips, *Photodrama*, xxv.

look at them, and to see what they are going to do next.¹¹⁶

Although he seemed to indicate that the field was wide open to everyone, his qualification that it was for 'anyone who has inventive ability' makes his statement rather elusive and even contradictory. Oddly, the one thing that appeared to count was the ability to come up with an innovative idea or novel approach to any extant material and not the use of literary skill:

You do not have to be able to express yourself well, as you would have to if you were going to write short stories, for instance. It is the idea that counts, rather than the way in which it is told.¹¹⁷

Wright seemed to emphasise the craft element of screenwriting by indicating that even a carpenter is as well-placed as a novelist in the writing of screen stories, as long as he can take inventive ideas and plot them into an engaging story:

The novelist must forget his word paintings and get right down to screen terms and action along with the contributor who may be unskillful in the assembling of adjectives, but who can plot, and who can visualize.¹¹⁸

In one of Wright's articles we are confronted with the blunt and uncompromising statement: 'A book cannot teach originality.'¹¹⁹ Again, the precise definition of originality is rather unclear in this context, since it could be argued that very little sold work was truly original. Wright clarifies this to some extent at a later point in his manual by admitting that: "Freshness and originality" are generalities [and the] best we can do is to try to put something new and fresh into an old plot or an old situation.¹²⁰ Similarly, Sargent alludes to originality by referring to a plot having a 'new twist,' which means 'the viewing of an old plot from a really new angle.'¹²¹ Phillips also admits that originality is 'doing an old thing in a new way' and that we

¹¹⁶ Wright, *Photoplay Writing*, 5-6.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 228.

¹¹⁹ Wright, 'Photoplay Authors Real and Near,' *NYDM*, 1916 Sep-Nov 1917 - 0261.pdf: *Fulton History*: <http://fultonhistory.com/Fulton.html>.

¹²⁰ Wright, *Photoplay Writing*, 147.

¹²¹ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 69.

must 'invent new ways to reveal truth [...] – that is originality.'¹²²

In summary, the key screenwriting teachers presented their adherents with a clear process of study that included exposing themselves to the medium, reading playwriting manuals and works of theory and, most of all, scrutiny of the teaching manual. Their instructions about the type of learning in which they would be engaged were more confused.

At the time, the key screenwriting teachers were wrestling with a fundamental question: were they right to appeal to lofty artistic notions in order to justify a role as sponsors of talent, or should they simply admit that they were dispensers of workman-like skills that produced artisans with craft-based expertise? The tension between these constructs or definitions about the nature of creativity opens up space in between – a space in which the genus of this debate about the nature of screenwriting is located and continues to be located to this day. Interpretations of the different aspects or tasks involved in screenwriting exist on the space continuum between these two positions of 'art' or 'craft' and either lean more towards one, or the other.

Although the key screenwriting teachers occasionally waxed lyrical about the concept of 'art,' their instruction mostly tended towards 'craft'. It was easier to impart a set of skills and pragmatically discuss screenwriting using craft-based terminology. Mobilising these kinds of skills made the debate easier to handle, whereas mystified notions of art were much more difficult to deal with. The idea of 'originality' generally related to working within well-understood and specified dramatic conventions and applying them to plot material, rather than thinking up completely new ways of doing things or inventing novel ways of thinking about film as an art form.

B. The Filmic Process

In line with a pragmatic and craft-based approach, all the key screenwriting teachers attempted to educate their readers with varying levels of detail, via their columns and manuals, about the industrial process of filmmaking, the terminology that the industry used and, in particular, the role of the writer in this process. Acquiring such

¹²² Phillips, *Art of Writing Photoplays*, 22.

knowledge would allow the writer to fit into the specific, practical requirements of the business. Learning about the technical aspects of the business was matter-of-fact; it was information that could be conveyed more easily, in contrast to addressing the challenging issue of developing artistic ability and sensibility. This kind of knowledge was hands-on and of direct relevance, as opposed to the more vague notion of 'how to write' in an artistic way.

Sargent wanted his readers to be fully versed about how films were made; he summarises the whole procedure in a step-by-step manner, including: the initial reception, selection and development of the script in the manuscript department; the type and operation of the studio; the selection of indoor and outdoor locations and their cost implications; the role and activity of the director; and the manufacture and distribution of the film.¹²³ Sargent also provides a glossary of terms to induct his readers into industry jargon, although he discourages the overuse of these terms in a manuscript as he advises it could appear 'amateurish' to an editor: those who truly know do not need to parade their knowledge.¹²⁴ In addition, Sargent's columns in *Moving Picture World* provided up-to-date industry information.

In *The Motion Picture Story* (1914), Wright confined himself to explaining how editorial departments work, as well as providing a 'list of terms', which he called the 'professional vernacular'.¹²⁵ Understanding the editorial process was crucial, as this was the part of the industry with which the aspiring writer would have to engage. His third manual, *Photoplay Writing* (1922), gave details on the production process in a chapter on 'How your Story is handled'.¹²⁶ In addition to his manuals, Wright supplied up-to-date industry information through his articles and columns in *Motion Picture News* (1911-14), *Motion Picture Story Magazine* (1912-14), *New York Dramatic Mirror* (1914-17) and *Picture-Play Magazine* (1917-1921).

Peacocke's writing style was less organised, but he offered industry information sporadically throughout his manual. For example, Peacocke highlighted the importance of various roles in filmmaking: 'A capable camera-man is quite as

¹²³ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 6-17.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 359-366.

¹²⁵ Wright, *Motion Picture Story*, 218-221.

¹²⁶ Wright, *Photoplay Writing*, 165-175.

important to the success of a film production as is the director,' as it was the cameraman who filmed what the writer had already visualised with his 'camera eye.'¹²⁷ Peacocke also provided an extensive glossary of terms at the end of his manual, including those more directly relevant to the writer.¹²⁸ His first series of articles for *Photoplay* (1915-16) were largely a distillation of his manual, but his second series, published in 1917, relayed more information about the process of filmmaking and included articles on the role of the director, the workings of the studio and understanding camera work.¹²⁹

In his first manual, *The Art of the Photoplay* (1913), Ball wrote a whole chapter on 'The Adventures of the Scenario,' which described the process of making a film from scenario right through to manufacture and distribution.¹³⁰ His second manual, *Photoplay Scenarios: How to Write and Sell Them* (1915), limited itself to the vital process and requirements of submitting a scenario to a studio; however, it also contained insights on acting for the camera and how this differed from acting in stage plays. He emphasised the importance of facial expression and actions as agents in storytelling rather than dialogue, and that this was vital knowledge for a writer to acquire.¹³¹

Phillips includes a brief chapter on the filmmaking process in his first instructional manual, *The Photodrama* (1914). It contained information on the studio, the editor's role and the possibilities and limitations of the camera.¹³² He also provided a glossary of terms in common usage by various studios, in an attempt to encourage standardisation.¹³³ His second instructional manual, *The Feature Photoplay* (1921), focused entirely on the process of writing synopses, and the final manual, *The Art of Writing Photoplays* (1922), concentrated on continuity writing. It seems he assumed

¹²⁷ Peacocke, *Hints on Photoplay Writing*, 13.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 138-146.

¹²⁹ See Peacocke, 'The Scenario Writer and the Director,' May 1917, 111-114; 'Studio Conditions as I Know Them,' June 1917, 127-130; and 'Knowledge of the Camera Essential to Successful Photoplay Writing,' October 1917, 108 and 118 in *Photoplay*.

¹³⁰ Ball, *Art of the Photoplay*, 11-32.

¹³¹ Ball, *Photoplay Scenarios*, 1-26.

¹³² Phillips, *Photodrama*, 107-118.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 212-221.

that those who read these subsequent manuals were already attuned to the knowledge contained in his first manual. His articles in *Motion Picture Magazine*, published in 1917-18, were supplementary to the manuals and contained important information about the workings of the industry. Another series of articles in *Motion Picture Magazine*, in 1923-24, attempted to predict possible future technical developments in the industry with some degree of accuracy.¹³⁴

C. The Storytelling Process

The advice about storytelling provided by the key screenwriting teachers has a workmanlike feel to it, with the application of dramatic conventions. However it also involved what might be deemed artistic choices with regard to character and the imaginative process of envisioning and creating the storyline. Much of the guidance is comparable, which indicates its significance, as the teachers all focused on the most important issues. Where they agree, I will deal with these issues collectively, but I will also carefully examine crucial differences of opinion and any notable specific insights that these teachers offer.

The Initial Idea, Theme and Plotting

The key screenwriting teachers generally distinguished between the initial ideas for a story, which could be a thought, an experience, real or imagined, or some literary source often termed as 'original' – and the theme, which was the overall meaning or import of the photoplay. This relates closely to the distinction that Archer outlines: the 'germ of a play' relates to its story, whereas the 'theme' expresses its subject or meaning.¹³⁵

A major preoccupation of the key screenwriting teachers was how to help their readers devise what they considered 'original' ideas for the screen, since the industry was constantly seeking new and fresh material. Oddly, although Peacocke constantly implores his readers to come up with 'original stories,' he gives little or no advice in his manual or columns on how to do this and, as we have already seen,

¹³⁴ Phillips wrote a series of articles for *MPM*, 1923-24 on possible future industry developments, including the use of colour, sound technology and innovative camera techniques.

¹³⁵ Archer, *Play-Making*, 13-22.

what he meant exactly by 'original' is not entirely clear. Whatever this was, when it related to the theme, he suggests that: 'Each story should have an idea in it greater than merely an interesting series of events.'¹³⁶

In contrast, Sargent was by far the most detailed on this subject; he spends two whole chapters in his manual on how to cultivate the power of the imagination to come up with these ideas.¹³⁷ He suggests that: 'Imagination is creative only in that it can develop and embroider known facts. It cannot imagine new ones.'¹³⁸ According to Sargent, the imaginative process works through the active observation, absorption and recollection of facts throughout daily life in the hope that they would lead to what he termed a process of 'transmutation; projecting the base material of unoriginal idea into the gold of unusual thought.'¹³⁹ Again, this notion seems rather nebulous and it is hard to know exactly what Sargent is referring to, other than to say that an unusual thought pattern or inkling could be the inspiration for a story. He advocates a notebook and card index for the recording of these 'novel and strongly suggestive ideas.'¹⁴⁰ Sargent appears to treat theme and plot as virtually synonymous, as he never really distinguishes between them. When it comes to devising a plot, Sargent avers that: 'Plotting is the imaginative and creative part of photoplay writing. Form is merely the expression of the plot in the simplest and most direct manner.'¹⁴¹ In other words, the suggestive idea for the plot is then creatively worked upon. Sargent appears to use Archer's analogy of the skeleton, which is the 'fundamental element in the human organism'¹⁴² to describe the structural function of the plot:

the skeleton upon which the flesh of incident is hung and the spirit which animates that flesh, for plot comprises both the outline of incident and the idea which that incident seeks to tell. One gives form and the other

¹³⁶ Peacocke, *Hints on Photoplay Writing*, 102.

¹³⁷ See Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 18-24.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 21-22.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 24;

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 18

¹⁴² Archer, *Play-Making*, 18.

soul.¹⁴³

In *The Motion Picture Story* (1914), Wright was also rather vague about the source of inspiration, terming it the 'elusive idea' or 'plot germ,' which could be as simple as a 'fleeting' thought suggested by some incident or something a person had read. Basically, it could come from anywhere, but it must be an idea redolent with 'dramatic possibilities.'¹⁴⁴ Wright fleshed this out more in an article for *The Photo Playwright*, where he claimed that '[a]n idea is good in proportion as it concerns some event that determines a man or woman's happiness or unhappiness.' In other words, for it to be dramatic it must involve decisions with huge consequences and life-changing possibilities.¹⁴⁵ In *Photoplay Writing* (1922), Wright was more concrete and said it could come from a theme, a character, an incident or a moral teaching.¹⁴⁶

However, Wright does not go into a great deal of detail about plot construction, other than referring to it as 'the art of story plotting' and pointing the prospective writer to the study of the various masters of this art, such as Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins and Edgar Allan Poe. and their skill in arousing emotion, showing clear motivation and providing suspense in their plots.¹⁴⁷ Wright does not use the word 'theme' but talks of 'The Tremolo Touch' or 'soul of the story,' sometimes referred to as the 'punch', which he regards as 'that element which makes the story significant for life, which gives it a bearing on our existing problems, which brings to us heart-felt human interest.'¹⁴⁸ Achieving this through plotting again requires skill and technical craftsmanship.

Phillips also called the inspiration for a plot the 'plot germ,' and said it might be 'an isolated incident, phrase, deed, relationship, fragment, or moment, vitally connected with and suggestive of man's emotional life.'¹⁴⁹ It is worth remembering that Price

¹⁴³ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 25.

¹⁴⁴ Wright, *Motion Picture Story*, 21-27.

¹⁴⁵ 'The Idea is the Thing,' *Photo Playwright*, September/October 1912, 11-13 and 'The Successful Plot,' October/November 1912, 9.

¹⁴⁶ Wright, *Photoplay Writing*, 23.

¹⁴⁷ Wright, *Motion Picture Story*, 42-47.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 28-29.

¹⁴⁹ Phillips, *The Photodrama*, 120.

used the term 'plot germ' in his playwriting manual¹⁵⁰ and Phillips's language in describing it is very similar. He produced a plot catalogue in an attempt to try to systematise the process of coming up with these ideas, by classifying subjects, characters, emotions and experiences under broad groupings linked to mankind's concerns and circumstances.¹⁵¹ In essence, he said of constructing the 'complete plot' that:

It is a combination of the stability of science and the subtlety of art. It requires the brains of structure, the imagination of artifice and the fancy of adornment.¹⁵²

In other words, a good plot required some blend of the imagination of the artist and the skill of the craftsman and no system could replace the creative element, which, as always, was hard to quantify or describe. Phillips regarded the overall theme as the 'big idea' or 'master idea.' It must embrace the whole story and be of noble worth, but he admitted that such themes were rarely original.¹⁵³

Ball only briefly discussed how to obtain ideas for photoplays, suggesting similar sources to the other key screenwriting teachers, but he did stress the importance of 'theme' in a similar way to Phillips. He says it must be expressed in one sentence and be regarded as 'the backbone which gives the strength, action and effectiveness to the photoplay' and as such must have a moral foundation.¹⁵⁴

These ideas again draw on familiar homilies rather than notions of originality in any strong sense. Coming up with ideas, then plotting them into a story that has an overarching theme is a combination of some kind of ill-defined artistry, but mostly artisanship, which again expresses the fundamental tension that runs through all these manuals.

¹⁵⁰ Price, *Technique of the Drama*, 227.

¹⁵¹ Phillips, *Universal Plot Catalogue*, 71-106.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 22-23.

¹⁵³ Phillips, *Photodrama*, 119-123; and *Feature Photoplay* (Springfield: Home Correspondence School, 1921), 91-95.

¹⁵⁴ Ball, *Art of the Photoplay*, 33-38.

Dramatic Construction

The classical elements of dramatic action, unity of action, probability of action, the unified three-act dramatic structure, and the well-honed rules of the 'well-made' play are all present in the instruction given by the key screenwriting teachers. This guidance is presented alongside advice on what can be utilised from the melodramatic tradition.

Sargent admits that a 'play may be partly a drama and partly a melodrama' and goes on to write a whole chapter on melodrama.¹⁵⁵ However, he warns that 'recourse to melodrama alone will not suffice.'¹⁵⁶ Wright sees no reason why the 'ambitious writer' should not study melodrama and Peacocke regards 'melodramas with a strong "heart interest"' as a legitimate form.¹⁵⁷ Ball even says that: 'Every good serious play [...] is a melodrama pure and simple.'¹⁵⁸ Phillips is less positive, stating that: 'Melodrama is at best Art over-exaggerated' and rejecting sensationalism, implausibility and extremely good heroes and totally evil villains whose only emotion is passion. However, he appears to consent to melodrama's milder elements, provided they are governed by dramatic rules, commenting: 'we can admit it only as far as the threshold of good photodrama.'¹⁵⁹

As indicated, all the key screenwriting teachers advocated a methodological approach to plotting, although writing within these parameters still involved some creative choices. Sargent articulates this in 1913:

The successful writer of the moment is well equipped technically as the novelist or the dramatist. He writes in strict accordance with the rules of construction and he observes with care the hundred and one details that go to make the perfect script.¹⁶⁰

Ball also acknowledged there were clear unalterable rules of construction that must

¹⁵⁵ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 250 and 267-269 on 'melodrama.'

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 295.

¹⁵⁷ Wright, *Photoplay Writing*, 127 and Peacocke, *Hints on Photoplay Writing*, 90.

¹⁵⁸ Ball, *Photoplay Scenarios*, 58.

¹⁵⁹ Phillips, *Feature Photoplay*, 53 and *Photodrama*, 154.

¹⁶⁰ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 2nd ed., 9.

be applied, but this understanding could be acquired:

What can be learned can be taught! Many successful dramatists have derided the idea of a practical application of systematized technique to the writing of plays. [...It] can be seen that there are certain definite laws upon which the permanence of their excellence is based.¹⁶¹

Phillips related it back to theatrical tradition and drew a clear parallel:

The presentation of a photoplay, through the medium of actors, on a screen-stage, before an audience, and in a theater, is almost identical with that of the Stage Play. Both are drama, hence both are dependent on the same larger laws for their larger effects.¹⁶²

The key screenwriting teachers set out a process for clear storytelling. They all have an Aristotelian understanding of narrative structure. and the formulaic influence of Freytag, largely followed by Price, can also be detected. This is in place of Archer's rather more loosely rhythmic approach to structure, despite the fact that they regularly recommended Archer's manual to their readers. Sargent and Phillips clearly articulate Aristotelian structure in their plotting, Wright makes brief reference to it and for Peacocke it is implicit. Sargent refers directly to Aristotle when discussing plot:

the centuries-old definition of Aristotle declares that a play must have a beginning, a middle and an end. [...A] beginning, which is the statement of the object of the play and the obstacle to be encountered; a middle, or struggle against this object made interesting through suspense; and an end or termination of the struggle, wherein either victory is gained or defeat sustained.¹⁶³

He elaborates on this by saying that 'a plot can have but a single objective point' which is 'the objective' of 'the protagonist' who 'must carry the interest.' The 'antagonist opposes' this objective through 'obstacle', which the protagonist must 'overcome through struggle.' This will produce 'suspense,' which is resolved at the

¹⁶¹ Ball, *Photoplay Scenarios*, 28-29.

¹⁶² Phillips, *Feature Photoplay*, 19.

¹⁶³ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 26-27.

climax.¹⁶⁴

Phillips does not specifically refer to Aristotle but links photoplay structure to three-act structure in the stage play:

the Act principle will always be the same. There must be a beginning, the middle, and the end; the Introduction, the Crisis, and Dénouement. These requisites are met in the three Acts of the Stage Play.¹⁶⁵

Phillips describes the 'complete plot' as a 'perfect syllogism,' which raises three questions that must be answered by the plot: '1) What is the cause? 2) What is the effect of the cause? 3) What climax does the effect lead to?' He elaborates on this in *The Feature Photoplay* (1921) by breaking his structure into 1) 'Sequence,' where the purposes of the protagonist and antagonist are set out, 2) 'Consequence,' where the protagonist and antagonist are at war and 3) 'Solution,' where the protagonist emerges victor at the climax.¹⁶⁶ Wright simply identifies the structure as 'motive,' 'cause' and 'effect' or 'preliminaries, complications and dénouements,' in *The Motion Picture Story* (1914) and in *Photoplay Writing* (1922), 'the opening of the story, the building and the plot development, the big situations and the climax.' In neither manual is there any elaboration.¹⁶⁷ It is also worth remembering that Phillips subscribed to an understanding of 'situational dramaturgy' that was inherited from a more melodramatic tradition, as identified by Brewster and Jacobs.¹⁶⁸ In contrast, Ball's structure is entirely reminiscent of Freytag and is expressed in five parts: 'introduction,' 'rising action,' 'climax,' 'falling action' and 'dénouement.'¹⁶⁹

The key screenwriting teachers all concur with, as Sargent puts it, the Greek triad of time, place and action.¹⁷⁰ There is universal agreement about the importance of Aristotle's unities of 'one time', 'one place' and 'one action.' It is also implicit in Peacocke's understanding, but again is never discussed. Time is compressed by

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 29-31.

¹⁶⁵ Phillips, *Feature Photoplay*, 20.

¹⁶⁶ Phillips, *Photodrama*, 122 and *Feature Photoplay*, 99.

¹⁶⁷ Wright, *Motion Picture Story*, 37 and 42 and *Photoplay Writing*, 60.

¹⁶⁸ Phillips, *Photodrama*, 163-164.

¹⁶⁹ Ball, *Art of the Photoplay*, 49-50 and *Photoplay Scenarios*, 46-47.

¹⁷⁰ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 26.

extracting all unnecessary scenes, such as time lapses of six months or ten years between the action, in order to ensure there is no break in the sequence of the observer's thought. The number of locations is reduced to the minimum. What takes place in them is appropriate to those locations and the story follows the action of a single character and any extraneous action or characters are removed.¹⁷¹ One good reason for keeping the number of locations to a minimum was economic as well as dramatic. As Ball suggests: 'Unity of place possesses unusual advantages in pictureplay production. The number of sets and outdoor scenes should be held down as much as possible.'¹⁷²

In accordance with Aristotelian principles, the key screenwriting teachers are in agreement that all actions must be 'in accordance with probability or necessity.'¹⁷³ Nothing must happen at random, and all actions, characters and settings must be plausible and logical.¹⁷⁴ Sargent further refines the idea of narrative coherence by stressing that incidence on its own does not comprise plot, but 'plot is that which makes these connected incidents a story by giving those incidents some reason for being shown.'¹⁷⁵ In other words, the progress of the action must be completely apparent and logical with regard to the elements of character and place. This progress of action involves a protagonist who must have an 'underlying reason' or goal and the dramatic aspect of the plot should be 'the recital of the means by which a definite and predetermined object is gained or lost.'¹⁷⁶ Likewise, Phillips is characteristically clear, stating that 'we must have a single action by knitting and welding together [...], everything must agree with our purpose and be essential to its being, or be eliminated' and nothing extraneous must be present.¹⁷⁷

Staiger usefully points out that a key theme in most of the early manuals is

¹⁷¹ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 34-35; Wright, *Photoplay Writing*, 18; Ball, *Art of the Photoplay*, 47-49 and *Photoplay Scenarios*, 47-50 and Phillips, *Photodrama*, 175-184.

¹⁷² Ball, *Photoplay Scenarios*, 49.

¹⁷³ Aristotle, *Poetics*, 16.

¹⁷⁴ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 37-39; Wright, *Motion Picture Story*, 68 and *Photoplay Writing*, 8; Peacocke, *Hints on Photoplay Writing*, 106; Ball, *Art of the Photoplay*, 55 and Phillips, *Photodrama*, 138-145.

¹⁷⁵ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 2nd ed., 66.

¹⁷⁶ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 25-26.

¹⁷⁷ Phillips, *Feature Photoplay*, 112.

'continuity', which 'stood for the smoothly flowing narrative, with its technique constantly in the service of the causal chain.'¹⁷⁸ Continuity is a constant preoccupation of all the key screenwriting teachers. Its increasing importance is indicated by the fact that Ball includes it in his second manual but barely mentions it in his first; Wright only gives it a brief mention in his second manual in 1914, but by his third in 1922 the requirements of smooth storytelling have evolved into a script form known as the 'continuity.'¹⁷⁹ Audiences from a broad social range and background could not be left wondering about time or spatial relationships that did not make complete sense in films. Hence, there was a need for a careful arrangement of scenes, clarity of action and intertitle use to ensure that plot interruptions were avoided and there was a logical chain of causality. Phillips's pithy phrase expresses its importance in the photoplay: 'Perfect continuity [e]nsures perfect illusions.'¹⁸⁰

However, it seems that the non-classical narrative structural elements found in melodrama, as identified by Singer and discussed in part one¹⁸¹, were also tolerated to some extent. Wright and Peacocke do not elaborate on this, but Sargent provides more detail. He is open to the idea that '[e]xact truth may be strained' if 'the visual effect is of greater importance than strict probability'.¹⁸² Sargent admits to the 'dominance of the melodramatic feature'¹⁸³ but wants writers to moderate the more extreme elements when drawing from this form:

It must be *fairly* [my emphasis] logical, plausible and with a plot that can be followed by those incapable of depth of thought and yet sufficiently intelligent to interest those of a higher order of intelligence.¹⁸⁴

Phillips also states that these elements 'should never be employed for pictorial

¹⁷⁸ Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, *Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 194-195.

¹⁷⁹ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 220-224; Wright, *Motion Picture Story*, 45 and *Photoplay Writing*, 49-59; Ball, *Art of the Photoplay*, 46 and *Photoplay Scenarios*, 4; Peacocke, *Hints on Photoplay Writing*, 21 and 28 and Phillips, *Photodrama*, 138-145.

¹⁸⁰ Phillips, *Photodrama*, 144.

¹⁸¹ See 63.

¹⁸² Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 267.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 270.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 269.

effects alone, and they should always be consistent in spirit with the theme.¹⁸⁵ As discussed earlier, his *Plot Catalogue* indicates that Phillips had a 'situational' view of plotting, that could make use of such effects. Ball also endorses the use of 'tableaux vivantes' as a means of unifying the action.¹⁸⁶ The admission of the key screenwriting teachers that they were willing to tolerate the use of spectacular effects and allow some degree of implausibility and improbability is surprising, given how wedded they were to Aristotle's principles. However, this was likely to be driven by market considerations, as Sargent points out that a 'melodrama' is one of the 'best selling' scripts, providing it is 'well-planned' and 'well-written.'¹⁸⁷

On the issue of linearity of storytelling, some differences of viewpoint open up between Sargent and Phillips's later manual, *The Feature Photoplay* (1921). Sargent says in 1916 that:

Theoretically the photoplay should move in chronological order, beginning with the earliest action and continuing in logical sequence to the last action recorded.¹⁸⁸

Sargent's model for the scenario appears to be the short story; in 1912 he quotes from Phillips's book, *The Plot of the Short Story*, in support of his view, 'The short story plot should set out to do one thing and then complete it.'¹⁸⁹ Similarly, in 1913, Sargent again says the photoplay should follow the same principle: 'Not only must each scene be played in chronological order, but each scene should aid in advancing the plot.'¹⁹⁰ Sargent virtually sees these two forms as indistinguishable, stating that: 'Photoplay is merely a plot in action instead of words, and most of Mr. Phillips's statements are as applicable to the photoplay as to the fiction story.'¹⁹¹ This position is understandable in the first two editions of Sargent's manual, as feature length films were not completely dominant at this point. However, this was not the

¹⁸⁵ Phillips, *Feature Photoplay*, 35.

¹⁸⁶ Ball, *Art of the Photoplay*, 24.

¹⁸⁷ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 269.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 203.

¹⁸⁹ Sargent, 'The Photodrama,' *MPW*, September 12, 1912, 1274.

¹⁹⁰ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 2nd ed., 38.

¹⁹¹ Sargent, 'The Photodrama,' *MPW*, September 12, 1912, 1274.

case by 1916, when the third edition of his manual was published, so the fact that Sargent holds to this position seems rather antiquated.

Phillips's book on short story writing was published in 1912 and may have been a model for scenario writing at that time. But in *The Feature Photoplay*, Phillips opens up other storytelling possibilities and suggests two other forms. Firstly, the 'Logical Sequence', which involves 'choosing related events and applying the law of syllogism to them.'¹⁹² This is still cause-and-effect, as one thing logically follows another, but it does not have to be chronological in sequence. Secondly, he proposes the 'Dramatic Sequence', which he terms a combination of chronological and logical sequences, whereby the storytelling may move in and out of chronological sequence at will. This enables portrayals of incidents occurring simultaneously or the depiction of a character's thoughts.¹⁹³ As forms of storytelling, these sound decidedly modern and advanced and less applicable to scenario writing of the period. This more flexible approach to storytelling also refers back to Münsterberg's ideas about creating emotion within the viewer through the manipulation of events, which was considered earlier in this study.

Establishing characters

The key screenwriting teachers draw on the prevailing Western tradition of character-centred narrative and characters with simplistic melodramatic traits are generally discouraged. Azlant claims that Sargent's view of character is 'complex', as characters must be understood in order that their actions can be comprehended. Each character must 'possess a clear, distinct identity and maintain some degree of consistency if their actions are to be credible to the audience.'¹⁹⁴ For Sargent, characters are also defined by what they do and the photoplay is no place for literary character sketches. Through their actions, '[t]he characters, particularly the leading character, must be so finely drawn that the persons seem real and convincing.'¹⁹⁵ Characters must exhibit constancy in their behaviour and actions, although Sargent

¹⁹² Phillips, *The Feature Photoplay*, 123.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 124.

¹⁹⁴ Azlant, 'Theory, History and Practice of Screenwriting,' 222.

¹⁹⁵ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 58.

does allow for the possibility of character development:

It is necessary to select a type of character for each person and hold to that type, unless a change in character is a basis of your play, when you must prepare your audience for the change by showing a gradual deepening in feeling.¹⁹⁶

Nevertheless, there are indications that even Sargent lapsed into melodrama when describing character traits by sometimes depicting characters as simple heroes and villains.¹⁹⁷

Phillips's view of character is as developed as Sargent's. He believes that characterisation is symbolic of inner psychological truth and must be logical and consistent:

When we seek what it is that characters express, we find that they express their characteristics, which in turn are largely symbols of the vices and virtues of humanity.¹⁹⁸

Phillips claims that: 'characters must be delineated in terms of emotion – repressed or active – or described in words of action – commonplace or dramatic.'¹⁹⁹ He advocates intertitles as a quick way to establish a character if necessary.

Wright's comments on character are far less detailed, but he advises that they should be few in number and the writer should 'make them "human beings"' by drawing them from life, which presumably means basing them on real people.²⁰⁰ In both his manuals, Ball suggests drawing upon the 'stock company characters' of melodramatic tradition for establishing basic character traits. However, in the second manual his view of character is more developed and he advises the writer to try to understand the psychological profile of the character by attempting to think as the character would think, in order to ensure 'logical action and realism.'²⁰¹ Peacocke's

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 51.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 86.

¹⁹⁸ Phillips, *Feature Photoplay*, 168.

¹⁹⁹ Phillips, *Photodrama*, 80.

²⁰⁰ Wright, *Motion Picture Story*, 167-175.

²⁰¹ Ball, *Art of the Photoplay*, 46-47 and *Photoplay Scenarios*, 56-59.

advice on character is limited but he is clearly aware that actions define character. For example, he says that if a girl is reading in a park it means she is possibly a 'girl of leisure and probably wealthy.'²⁰²

The key screenwriting teachers see character motivation as the main driving force behind the plot; and they appear to agree with Archer that 'action ought to exist for the sake of character,' rather than the reverse.²⁰³ Sargent claims that, '[e]very action must be motivated to show its connection with the plot, and so must be related to plot.'²⁰⁴ Wright advises: 'never let the interest shift for a moment from the central figure'; and every action must have a reason behind it, 'for no human act can be rightly understood without the motive for that act.'²⁰⁵ Phillips is equally clear and believes that desire is 'the basic motivating force behind all Drama,'²⁰⁶ – a sentiment also held by Ball who claims that, "want" [...] is the steam of the dramatic engine.'²⁰⁷ Peacocke only says that the writer should, '[a]lways create a logical reason for each character to be in each scene depicted.'²⁰⁸ Azlant's assertion that Sargent has a 'complex' view of character implies that his viewpoint is special; however, most of the other key screenwriting teachers' views about character were just as developed.

The Beginning

The key screenwriting teachers agree that the beginning of a photoplay is very important, as it is essential to grab the audience's attention from the start. Wright says:

Your story must begin with action – something must happen right away [...] and then go back afterward and explain who the people were and why they were doing what they did.²⁰⁹

²⁰² Peacocke *Hints on Photoplay Writing*, 25.

²⁰³ Archer, *Play-Making*, 19.

²⁰⁴ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 33.

²⁰⁵ Wright, *Motion Picture Story*, 40 and 43.

²⁰⁶ Phillips, *Feature Photoplay*, 190-191.

²⁰⁷ Ball, *Art of the Photoplay*, 50.

²⁰⁸ Peacocke, *Hints on Photoplay Writing*, 41.

²⁰⁹ Wright, *Photoplay Writing*, 24.

According to Sargent, Wright held a more extreme position on this by proposing a 'striking first scene.' Sargent allows that:

The device will serve at times, but as William Lord Wright has pointed out, the striking first scene is a promise to the spectator that must be kept. If you promise a big play, [...] you must keep your promise by pitching the play in that key.²¹⁰

Phillips agrees:

The problem to be met by those who open up in the midst of a fire, is to explain how things became so hot and to get back to Sequence gracefully.²¹¹

Wright's only other instruction about the composition of his opening scene appears to be simply to: 'Start the story where it should start,' which seems rather vague.²¹² Phillips is clearer, suggesting getting 'into the heart of the theme with as few scenes as possible [... and the] first scene must be suggestive at least of the climax'.²¹³ Ball also urges that the 'opening scene should [...] show [...] the line upon which the theme of the subsequent action is directed.'²¹⁴ Sargent reiterates this, saying: 'the statement of the question is the start of the play [...] and the reply the climax or end.'²¹⁵ This is reminiscent of Archer's 'point of attack', which signifies a first scene that will capture the spectator's interest and will of necessity lead to the 'obligatory scene,' or the scene which must happen at the end.

The Struggle

If characters have a clear motive, they will be pitched into a struggle. For Sargent, 'Struggle must be directed against a specific and not a general object [... and] the objective must be concrete.'²¹⁶ In other words, it must have a definite physical end

²¹⁰ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 217.

²¹¹ Phillips, *Feature Photoplay*, 126-127.

²¹² Wright, *Motion Picture Story*, 83.

²¹³ Phillips, *Photodrama*, 135-136.

²¹⁴ Ball, *Photoplay Scenarios*, 43.

²¹⁵ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 29.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 40.

point so that the struggle can be terminated. Wright points out that precision is important, as '[e]xactly the right amount of motive is necessary for action,' meaning that the author should think out a logical reason for every detail in the photoplay, otherwise the struggle will not be effective.²¹⁷ Ball asserts that:

Struggle is this foundation stone of drama. Some one or some several want something: they try to get it. Some others or something resists the efforts to obtain it. The continuation of those efforts, now succeeding temporarily, now failing, here changing in plan, there surprising the antagonist, is the action of the drama.²¹⁸

Phillips emphasises the internal nature of the struggle, in contrast to the external:

Actions must express and portray an internal struggle with which the audience is in sympathetic understanding. There must be an underlying emotional meaning for every prominent action.²¹⁹

Particular references to the 'struggle' are strongly suggestive of Freytag's playwriting manual, which says: 'What the drama presents is always a struggle, which, with strong perturbations of soul, the hero wages against opposing forces.'²²⁰ Freytag uses the idea of 'struggle' to completely frame the action in all three acts, by stating that 'the beginning of the struggle' takes place in Act One.²²¹ This idea also figures heavily in the playwriting manuals of Archer and Matthews.²²² And like Archer, who says that once 'the tension sets in' at the beginning of the struggle it should not be relaxed until the end, Phillips reiterates that: '[e]ach minor effect, tho begun in the first scene, must heighten and tighten the climax.'²²³

The 'Punch' or 'Tremolo Touch'

All five key screenwriting teachers see the need for 'heart interest' in a story,

²¹⁷ Wright, *Motion Picture Story*, 44.

²¹⁸ Ball, *Photoplay Scenarios*, 32-33.

²¹⁹ Phillips, *Photodrama*, 156.

²²⁰ Freytag, *Technique of the Drama*, 104.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 196.

²²² Archer, *Playmaking*, 23 and Brander Matthews, *The Principles of Playmaking* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1919), 40.

²²³ Archer, *Play-Making*, 148 and Phillips, *Photodrama*, 163.

meaning that quality in the actions of the characters that engenders emotions of pathos, sympathy and warmth in the audience.²²⁴ It reaches its zenith in what these screenwriting teachers refer to as the delivery of the ‘punch’ or the ‘tremolo touch.’ Broadly, this seems to refer to the emotional impact of the story produced at the climax, although their writings vary in level of precision on this point. It is certainly reminiscent of some of the melodramatic elements discussed earlier in this thesis, but is not a term derived from theatrical tradition.

An important element in delivering an effective ‘punch’ was suspense, or delaying the outcome for as long as possible, since this heightened the climactic effect. This meant careful planning to ensure that the climax occurred at exactly the right moment to produce a ‘punch’ with maximum impact, usually followed by a happy ending.²²⁵ Ball sums it up:

The uncertainty of outcome, the surprise of the successive incidents of the play, – these keep the audience in sympathy with the participants holding them spellbound until the final scene or dénouement.²²⁶

In respect to the positioning of the climax and the delivery of the punch, Sargent differs strongly from Ball and seems to take issue with Freytag’s five-act structure. As already mentioned, in Sargent’s opinion the photoplay follows more closely the structure of the one-act play:

This differs from the teaching of the drama where the last act is supposed to be reserved for the falling action following the climax, but photoplay is not drama, and in the photoplay the climax should be so led up to that there is nothing more to follow and detract from the interest.²²⁷

Using language similar to Freytag, Ball describes how the “rising action” follows the introduction, showing the development of the situation. Then the series of powerful incidents culminating in [...] the climax,’ which constitutes the next to last act. It is

²²⁴ See Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 56-60; Wright, *Motion Picture Story*, 125; Peacocke, *Hints on Photoplay Writing*, 6; Ball, *Art of the Photoplay*, 53 and *Photoplay Scenarios*, 39-40; Phillips, *Photodrama*, 69 and *Feature Photoplay*, 106.

²²⁵ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 92-98; Wright, *Motion Picture Story*, 28-34; Peacocke, *Hints on Photoplay Writing*, 30; Ball, *Photoplay Scenarios*, 179; Phillips, *Photodrama*, 173.

²²⁶ Ball, *Art of the Photoplay*, 70.

²²⁷ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 43.

followed by the 'falling action,' which signals the dénouement of the play.²²⁸

Peacocke is characteristically light on specifics, and although he regularly refers to the 'punch', he does not discuss what it actually is. He says that it is important to 'create plenty of suspense and keep the interest up to fever heat until the actual "thrill" occurs [...] and you have landed the "punch."' ²²⁹ Ball discusses the importance of feelings and that the:

necessary emotion [or] heart interest [...] is satisfied by the rounding up of the action into a dénouement which exemplifies dramatic justification. [...T]he goal of the play must be worthwhile: there must be a reason for the ending, and that ending must satisfy the audience.²³⁰

However, although Ball mentions 'the punch' a handful of times in his second manual, he never develops or clearly defines its meaning.

Wright has a different term for the 'punch', calling it the 'tremolo touch' instead, and refers to it as 'the soul of the story' and 'that element which makes the story significant for life,' but otherwise his definition is rather obscure and, as already mentioned, he only vaguely relates it to the theme.²³¹ He takes up the idea under the guise of 'emotionalism' in an article for *The Motion Picture Story Magazine*, where he claims that the 'tremolo touch' is that moment when you play the 'heart strings' of the audience and 'is an inherent emotionalism essential to success in Literature, Music, Art and the Drama.' This description is more reminiscent of an approach found in conventional melodrama.²³² Perhaps Wright's lack of clarity in his own mind on this issue is emphasised by the fact that he gives credence to a 1913 article in *The Writer's Magazine*, in which five writers attempt to define the 'tremolo touch,' or 'punch' and none of them agree on the analysis.²³³ Wright even locates it in the power of the acting as one possibility.²³⁴ In summary, he is content with it as 'a

²²⁸ Ball, *Art of the Photoplay*, 49-50.

²²⁹ Peacocke, *Hints on Photoplay Writing*, 30.

²³⁰ Ball, *Photoplay Scenarios*, 39-40.

²³¹ Wright, *Motion Picture Story*, 28-29.

²³² Wright, 'The Tremolo Touch,' *MPSM*, December 1912, 130.

²³³ Wright, *Motion Picture Story*, 33.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, 31.

mystery' and says: 'It means an infinite variety. It is heart-interest, gripping action, suspense, climax, and unusual idea, all rolled into one.'²³⁵ Such descriptions underline the melodramatic tendencies of the concept.

Phillips is much clearer in his understanding of the 'punch,' saying it is the moment 'when the dramatic struggle that has waged uncertainly from side to side suddenly pitches forward with the victor for good.'²³⁶ It is in these moments that the reason behind the action or, as Phillips puts it, 'the effective expression of the movement that underlies the action [... or] the force behind the Climax' is exposed.²³⁷ According to Phillips, the 'Climax-Punch' should have the power to move people and:

must be sufficient to make the audience literally hold its breath, or emotionally rise to the occasion [... as it] is the motive-idea of the play summed up in a cumulative stroke [... and] the emotional truth of the author's vision come home to dwell in the heart of each one who sees the vision.²³⁸

Phillips clearly links emotional impact with the thematic intentions of the writer, as discussed earlier. He also seems to articulate the potential emotional power of the film experience more clearly than the other screenwriting teachers. In this, his writing sounds distinctly modern. However, the following description displays strong elements of pathos verging on melodrama, similar to Wright, when he claims that in the 'perfect play' it is possible to find 'sufficient emotion released to shatter the soul of the strongest man God has created.'²³⁹

Sargent's views on the punch are similar to those of Phillips. For Sargent, the 'punch' is also the 'idea' behind the incidents of the plot, is strongly related to the theme and heightens the effect of the climax. Sargent describes it thus:

Punch is the idea back of the narrative. It makes narrative interesting through idea. In this it differs from motivation, which makes for interest

²³⁵ Ibid., 34.

²³⁶ Phillips, *Photodrama*, 173-174.

²³⁷ Phillips, *Feature Photoplay*, 142.

²³⁸ Phillips, *Photodrama*, 174.

²³⁹ Phillips, 'The Photodrama,' *MPM*, January 1917, 119-120.

through explaining the reason for action.²⁴⁰

In other words, the punch 'is the effect of action heightened by our knowledge of facts,' thus providing the underlying reason for the plot.²⁴¹ It is what gives the story 'dramatic intensity' and, as with Aristotle, it is through this that the audience experiences 'strong and gripping effects.'²⁴² Sargent illustrates it in the following way:

The sight of one man trying to kill another may be exciting, but not of real interest. If we know the slayer is unwittingly trying to kill his own son, then this idea gives interest to the physical action.²⁴³

According to Sargent, the 'punch' can only be effective if we fully understand the reason or motive behind the action. However, Sargent does not rule out the inclusion of melodramatic elements at this point if 'it is desired to increase or heighten the effect toward the close.'²⁴⁴

Azlant correctly identifies that Sargent's view of the 'punch' is more 'subtle' than that contained in many other screenwriting manuals, because he links it with the theme or 'the "idea" behind the incidents of the plot.'²⁴⁵ As an example, Azlant lists James Slevin's 1912 manual, because it fails to link emotion to theme and says that: 'The dramatic crisis deals in emotions, and the more emotion and greater variety you can get out of a situation, the nearer you are to the dramatic.'²⁴⁶ However, Azlant incorrectly aligns Phillips²⁴⁷ with Slevin's position and also overstates Sargent's views as being unique. As I have already outlined, Phillips also clearly expressed the view that the 'punch' could powerfully relay the theme or intention behind the drama in a similar way to Sargent, even if it were tinged with melodramatic overtones.

In summary, the approach adopted by the key screenwriting teachers to the learning,

²⁴⁰ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 93.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 96.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 230.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, 93.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 268.

²⁴⁵ Azlant, 'Theory, History and Practice of Screenwriting,' 220.

²⁴⁶ Slevin, *On Picture-Play Writing*, 24.

²⁴⁷ Azlant, 'Theory, History and Practice of Screenwriting,' 270.

filmic and storytelling processes lent itself to a more pragmatic 'craft' type line, even though artistic notions were often broached. A clear study pathway was proposed, appropriate information on the film industry was conveyed and a form of storytelling was laid down that was based on familiar mechanisms such as the 'well-made' play and melodramatic devices, overlaid with more sound instruction from the playwriting tradition, which advocated a product that would appeal to the mainstream. Although there was nothing essentially new in this material, the key screenwriting teachers were the first industry insiders to have an opportunity to propagate it widely in a consolidated and easy-to-understand format.

8. How to write for the industry

All five key screenwriting teachers gave very practical advice on the specialised skills that the freelance writer needed to acquire in order to write for the film industry.

These were: developing the skill of writing visually; comprehending how to write in photoplay form; and gaining an understanding of screenwriting techniques.

A. Visual Writing

One important skill that the prospective writer needed to acquire was the ability to think visually, a dimension specific to the medium.

Sargent stresses the importance of ‘the eye of the mind’ or the ability of the author to ‘think in action and to visualize that action.’ In other words, the writer must see the action so clearly in his mind that he can write it as he sees it. Along with the other key screenwriting teachers, Sargent regards this as one skill which is indispensable and which distinguishes the writing of photoplays from all other forms of writing:

Without the picture eye it is not possible to write convincingly of your action since you cannot see your action and do not know what it is, but a little practice will enable you to acquire the picture eye if you have the proper imagination.²⁴⁸

Strangely, Azlant only mentions the issue of visualisation briefly and then makes very little of it, tending rather to focus on Sargent’s treatment of the literary aspects of photoplay writing. This is despite the fact that Sargent stressed this as a crucial skill in writing for film. Azlant does recognise that Sargent ‘considers the province of “imagination” important and that he would expect such a skill to be ‘attached to a craft that requires the mental picturization, transformation, and embroidery of complex events.’²⁴⁹ However, this is the only mention of it apart from a comment relegated to an endnote. Here he acknowledges that ‘[m]any of the screenwriting manuals make much of this capacity for “imagination” or “picturization”, often calling

²⁴⁸ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 137.

²⁴⁹ Azlant, ‘Theory and History of Screenwriting,’ 255.

it the “picture eye.”²⁵⁰ This endnote lists some of the peripheral manual writers of this study, who considered the skill of visualisation important, but it only mentions one of the key screenwriting teachers, Phillips.²⁵¹ However, all the key screenwriting teachers considered this skill of specific relevance to the medium and absolutely vital in the writing of photoplays.

Wright stresses the skill of visualisation just as strongly as Sargent and says, ‘You must be able to visualize your story as you write it – you must be able to see it.’ Like Sargent, he gives the acquiring of this skill absolute pre-eminence: ‘Above all [my emphasis] learn the “Picture eye” and when you can clearly visualize, natural, unforced and logical construction will come to you almost unawares.’²⁵² The ability to ‘visualize a story’ is something that Peacocke also stresses more than once. He urges his readers: ‘Try and look at things with a ‘camera eye’ and even advocates taking up photography as a means of facilitating this skill.’²⁵³ The issue of visualisation is omitted from Ball’s first manual, *The Art of the Photoplay* (1913), but he corrects this just two years later in his second, *Photoplay Scenarios: How to Write and Sell Them* (1915), when he contrasts writing for the screen with writing for the theatre. He claims that the photoplay writer:

eliminates the explanatory speeches of the stage play which must describe things seen and done out of view of the audience, by going through every phase of the action before the camera-eye.²⁵⁴

Phillips regards visualisation as ‘both the key and keynote of all photoplay-writing.’²⁵⁵ He devotes a whole chapter to it in his first instructional manual, *The Photodrama* (1914), and constantly refers to it in his second, *The Feature Photoplay* (1921).²⁵⁶ Phillips also gives visualisation a new twist by suggesting in *The Photodrama* that ‘perfect visualization’ occurs when the ‘dramatic development,’ represented visibly ‘in

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 273.

²⁵¹ Azlant lists Esenwein and Leeds, Thomas, Barker and Bertsch and Freeburg alongside Phillips when discussing visualisation. See Ibid., 273.

²⁵² Wright, *Motion Picture Story*, 83 and 85.

²⁵³ Peacocke, *Hints on Photoplay Writing*, 13 and 39-40.

²⁵⁴ Ball, *Photoplay Scenarios*, 6-7.

²⁵⁵ Phillips, *Photodrama*, 65.

²⁵⁶ Ibid., 65-74.

terms of action,' functions as 'symbols of emotion' for the audience.²⁵⁷ In *The Feature Photoplay* he terms this 'Dramatic Visualization,' which he claims means 'feeling while we see.'²⁵⁸ Interestingly, the views of Phillips line up with Münsterberg's ideas. According to Sargent, Münsterberg actually moots the possibility of 'reproducing in the mind of the spectator the actual emotion and not merely the record of an emotion in another' by rearranging scenes and putting them in a particular order.²⁵⁹ Münsterberg puts it thus:

Every shade of feeling and emotion which fills the spectator's mind can mold the scenes in the photoplay until they appear the embodiment of our feelings.²⁶⁰

Sargent thought this too difficult to achieve at the time: the photoplay could only depict emotion to the viewer and not suggest it.²⁶¹ However, Münsterberg's belief that the thought processes of the human mind could in some way be projected or mirrored by the pictures on the screen certainly opens up new storytelling possibilities and combines with Lowe's understanding that narrative processing of the Aristotelian variety is intuitive and an innate part of human make-up. As this was the kind of visual storytelling that screenwriting teachers like Phillips were advocating, it could be viewed as doubly powerful.

The idea of visualisation was advocated by playwriting manuals, but not to the same degree. For example, Archer says that the playwright must 'at some point in the working-out of his theme, visualize the stage-picture in considerable detail' by paying 'great attention to [...] the topography of their scenes and the shifting "positions" of their characters.'²⁶² However, the key screenwriting teachers frequently voice and emphasise the need for this particular skill. Maras correctly identifies Sargent's concern: 'The plot of action demands a specific style of writing, one that demands a specific kind of visualization.' In other words: 'Literary style and the picture eye come

²⁵⁷ Phillips, *Photodrama*, 67 and 69.

²⁵⁸ Phillips, *Feature Photoplay*, 146.

²⁵⁹ Sargent, 'Münsterberg on the Photoplay,' *MPW*, July 15, 1916, 436-437.

²⁶⁰ Münsterberg, *Photoplay*, 93.

²⁶¹ Sargent, 'Münsterberg on the Photoplay,' *MPW*, July 15, 1916, 436-437.

²⁶² Archer, *Play Making*, 51.

together' for Sargent. This issue is clearly enunciated in the 1913 edition of Sargent's manual, as Maras observes:

His overall view of 'writing photoplays' is that while 'the mastery of phrase and literary style that are demanded of the other forms is not required,' it is 'offset by the need for being able to write in action so clearly that this action is as plain and understandable as the written word.'²⁶³

The ability to 'write in action' was a fundamentally different skill from writing the fiction prose narrative or novel. Ball contrasts the visual skills of the photoplay author with those of the novelist; he claims that, in the novel, a:

character is shown by long dialogues, letters, descriptions of scenes, manners, expressions; the entire portrayal depending primarily upon the story-telling individuality or 'style' of the author.²⁶⁴

Phillips concurs and argues that dramatic conflict must be approached in an entirely different way in film: 'An internal struggle of one being with himself can sustain but a few scenes at most.' Extended inner monologues and introspection had no place in the photoplay. According to Phillips, ideas had to be conveyed through 'psychological action, suggestive attitude and mimetic expression.'²⁶⁵

Sargent points out that '[t]he fiction author is free of the fetters of time'.²⁶⁶ it is easier to move back and forth in fiction with a few words of explanation. However, '[w]hat the fiction writer must do in words, the photoplay writer must do with business and situation.'²⁶⁷ For Wright, screenwriting 'does not depend so much upon word painting, dialogue and tricks of the literary craft' but the visualisation of action.²⁶⁸ Ball sums up the main differences:

Contrasted with the novel, then, the scenario must tell its story within a limited time, its characters must be differentiated by their type, as shown

²⁶³ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 2nd ed., 144; cited by Maras, *Screenwriting*, 148.

²⁶⁴ Ball, *Photoplay Scenarios*, 8.

²⁶⁵ Phillips, *Photodrama*, 77 and 69.

²⁶⁶ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 247.

²⁶⁷ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 2nd ed., 10.

²⁶⁸ Wright, *Photoplay Writing*, 223.

in movement, costume and motives. Their actions must be practically self-explanatory because long captions, or 'subtitles' of printed matter use up valuable film space to the detriment of the action in the scenes: and the photoplay is primarily action, from start to finish.²⁶⁹

The key screenwriting teachers also wanted their students to understand that there was a clear distinction between the skills required to write plays and those for film. Again, Ball clearly articulates these differences in his 1915 manual. The stage play is dependent on:

action, interpreted by dialogue, [...] the emotional appeal is made to the ear rather than to the eye [...] while the action of the motion picture story must be self-explanatory *or shown through action* (my addition). The ideal photoplay is that one which contains the least number of explanations in the form of subtitles and screen letters.²⁷⁰

As Peacocke stated, films needed to be 'visualized', making them 'absolutely distinct from the art of the spoken drama or from the art of pantomime,' which consisted of showing emotions and feelings through gestures.²⁷¹ This contrasted sharply with 'The really good screen play [...] written by trained screen play writers especially for [...] the motion picture camera,' which was more naturalistic.²⁷² Similarly, Phillips recognised that this new form of writing required more than just a transfer of skills but, 'a new type and a new school of artists.'²⁷³

However, Ball also understood that many of these skills were interchangeable. If people learnt how to write a photoplay, they were also developing the skills that would help them to write for the theatre and literature:

The development of the technique of good photoplay creation leads to a skill in dramatic composition which can be applied to original compositions for theatrical productions and literary work of the broadest

²⁶⁹ Ball, *Photoplay Scenarios*, 9.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

²⁷¹ Peacocke, *Hints on Photoplay Writing*, 97.

²⁷² Peacocke, 'Hints on Photoplay Writing,' *Photoplay*, Sept 1915, 149.

²⁷³ Phillips, *Photodrama*, 151.

nature.²⁷⁴

Although photoplay writing was a literary form, in all its guises, whether it was the synopsis, the scenario or the continuity, it was presented by these teachers as synonymous with a process of visualisation. This process was facilitated by brief, present-tense descriptions of actions that focused on only what the viewer of the finished film would see. The fundamental difference between literary and theatrical storytelling and film writing was that writing for film could only be related visually. This had to be achieved with minimal dialogue in what was a transitional document that would be discarded once it was realised in film. Maras notes that, in the writing of today, 'notions like the picture eye' have merged with more modern 'concepts such as writing for the camera and eventually writing for the screen.'²⁷⁵ This emphasis on the ability to visualise in order to write for the screen is perhaps one of the most important legacies left to us by this early period of theorisation about writing for film, and the key screenwriting teachers were among the first to fully articulate and disseminate these ideas within the industry and to a wider public.

B. Photoplay Form

There is a great deal of debate over the origin of the current form of the screenplay. Azlant sets out the purpose of his research as the pursuance of 'the problem of identifying the screenplay,' which he ultimately links in his conclusion with 'Sargent's views on the nature of the screenplay.'²⁷⁶ Maras picks up on Azlant's use of the identifying words 'some format of the screenplay' when describing different kinds of 'film script,' because the term 'screenplay' was not used for this concept prior to this. Maras suggests this is problematic, as relating the modern screenplay to a document that had been variously called "plot of action," "scenario," "photoplay," "continuity," "treatment," "screen dramatization," "cinema play," to name a few terms,' is inappropriate because it involves projecting a notion back into the past that was not applicable at that time.²⁷⁷ Maras rightly cautions against reading back our 'present

²⁷⁴ Ball, *Art of the Photoplay*, 9.

²⁷⁵ Maras, *Screenwriting*, 148.

²⁷⁶ Azlant, 'Theory, History and Practice of Screenwriting,' 1 and 338.

²⁷⁷ Maras, *Screenwriting*, 81.

day terminology understanding' of the 'screenplay' into 'the complex and shifting terminology of screen writing in the 1910s and 1920s.'²⁷⁸ However, Nannicelli challenges Maras's views, as he does not regard Azlant's account as teleological, as Maras does, and says that Azlant's use of the word 'screenplay' does not necessarily imply that he regarded the 'screenplay' as the predetermined end point of the script. Nannicelli says that Azlant was simply asserting that 'the screenplay has, in fact, evolved historically out of earlier, similar script forms.'²⁷⁹

Price's research on the history of the screenplay is of use in this respect. He indicates that the variance in terminology is indicative of the infant industry's state of flux and of its attempts to define how narrative film should be written. Price identifies that 'writing for film encompasses a large number of different kinds of texts [... and] the history of these writings does not simply see one form replaced by another in a straightforward chronological sequence.'²⁸⁰ Price also notes that Sargent had reproduced a sample format from 1908 in one of his articles in *Moving Picture World* in 1911.²⁸¹ In this article, Sargent claims that the 'photoplay manuscript consists of two essential parts – the scenario and the synopsis. Cast and scene plot are optional.'²⁸² Sargent promotes a particular format here, but also indicates in another article in 1912 that the writer and director Bannister Merwin could well have developed the 'permanent form of the photoplay,' as he saw it at that time. This is because Merwin's scripts had lengthy motivational descriptions and were full of detail, which, according to Sargent, made for 'absolute clearness' and standardised production.²⁸³ Sargent supplies a sample from a Merwin script in the Appendix of his 1916 manual and again confirms that he believes this could become 'the standard form of script.'²⁸⁴ However, Sargent presents it alongside nine other forms of script²⁸⁵ and claims that the writer 'is at liberty to adopt any one of these or combine parts of

²⁷⁸ Ibid., 81.

²⁷⁹ Nannicelli, *Philosophy of the Screenplay*, 56.

²⁸⁰ Price, *History of the Screenplay*, 10-11.

²⁸¹ Ibid., 81.

²⁸² Sargent, 'Technique of the Photoplay,' *MPW*, July 29, 1911, 197-198. Sargent reproduces a short synopsis, cast of characters and the beginning of the scenario of Lubin's, *For His Sister's Sake* (1908).

²⁸³ Sargent, 'The Photoplaywright,' *MPW*, June 8, 1912, 926-927.

²⁸⁴ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 374 and 397.

²⁸⁵ Ibid., 376-398.

two or more into a new form, if he pleases.²⁸⁶ A glance at these inclusions in his manual indicate how different these documents were and gives some idea of how fluid the format was at this time, which reinforces Price's point.

It is beyond the scope of this study to trace this history further or to assess the level of influence that particular screenwriting teachers might have had over specific submission formats or the nomenclature of what ultimately came to be known as the 'screenplay' and its supporting documents. Suffice it to say that some further light may be shed on this area of interest by investigating photoplay form as it was viewed by the key screenwriting teachers selected for this study. What is confirmed is that throughout the 1910s no fully standardised form or terminology had yet emerged for the photoplay and that studio requirements varied. This variation is reflected in the writings of the key screenwriting teachers, although there is agreement on certain basic aspects of the submission format and terminology employed. The fact that all but one of these screenwriting teachers wrote more than one manual, sometimes years apart, is helpful in tracing some of the developments that took place in photoplay form up to the early 1920s, a point by which continuity scripts were usually written in-house by staff writers and scenarios had been largely replaced by a lengthier synopsis.

Examining the views of the key screenwriting teachers will at least confirm and clarify the nature of the documents that were generally referred to as photoplays in the early 1910s and the general terminology that was in use. It will also be possible to comment on how their views about these documents changed in response to the industry's requirements. Such evidence is not definitive, since it only focuses on the views of five individuals, but these individuals have already been identified as being possibly among the most significant contributors to the discourse about screenwriting during this early period, so their opinion carries weight.

The key screenwriting teachers all stress the need for the writer to be able to present their work in a 'form' that was acceptable to the industry. However, Sargent's main concern is that the writer is not overwhelmed by form, as he only sees it as a means to an end. He says: 'Precise adherence to form – a placing of form before plot – is

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 99.

one of the pitfalls that yawn for the unwary [... and] form is merely a means of telling a plot succinctly and understandably.²⁸⁷ This is a view that is echoed by the others. Wright claims that:

many writers pay too much attention to technique, and not enough attention to the story. To develop an idea in the most forceful and most clear manner possible – that is the form of technique most to be desired.²⁸⁸

Here, Wright uses the word ‘technique’ to refer to writing in photoplay form. This word appears to have been used in more than one sense and its use could sometimes be referring to story writing technique. In fact, a little further on in the same chapter of his first manual, Wright seems to use the word ‘technique’ rather ambiguously: for example, he says, ‘a skilled *technique* [my emphasis] is as highly to be desired in writing the motion-picture story as it is in writing the story of fiction.’²⁸⁹ The comparison he makes with fiction writing, which did not have to be presented in a highly specialised form, is confusing and seems to suggest that ‘technique’ refers also to story writing.

Confusion over what was precisely meant by ‘technique’ seems to have been more widespread and led to a public spat between Sargent and Peacocke, although there is no evidence it went beyond this incident. Peacocke began one of his articles in *Photoplay* in 1916, which was also reproduced word for word in his manual, with the words:

What is the ‘Technique’ of a photoplay? I’m sugared if I know! All the wise-acres who are writing on the art of photoplay writing keep continually harping on that word, as if it was a mystical something that we grasp from nowhere, but which must be vitally essential to ensure success.²⁹⁰

It is unlikely to have escaped Peacocke’s notice that Sargent’s book, then on its third edition, was actually entitled *The Technique of the Photoplay*. This may therefore

²⁸⁷ Ibid., 373.

²⁸⁸ Wright, *Motion Picture Story*, 62.

²⁸⁹ Ibid., 63.

²⁹⁰ Peacocke, ‘Hints on Photoplay Writing,’ *Photoplay*, April 1916, 123 and *Hints on Photoplay Writing*, 37.

have been a sideswipe at Sargent, and Sargent picks up on the comments and makes his own rather caustic response in his column for *Moving Picture World*:

We quite agree with the gentleman that he does not know what technique is. But it does not follow that because he does not know what technique is that it is not necessary to those who would build a lasting success.²⁹¹

Although there was confusion over the meaning of the word 'technique', these men did not really disagree. Peacocke follows this comment in his book with the simple statement: 'Of course there are certain forms to be observed in the construction of a scenario' and then goes on to describe all the technical aspects of script preparation and presentation. It seems that Peacocke regarded 'technique' as referring to photoplay format and not the actual story.²⁹² He is just as concerned as the others that story should take precedence over form. The very first lines of his book are, 'If you have a strong, original plot, you already have ninety-nine per cent of a successful scenario.'²⁹³ A careful reading of Sargent confirms that what the other screenwriting teachers sometimes referred to as 'technique,' he described as photoplay format, as the earlier quote confirms: photoplay 'form is merely a means of telling a plot succinctly and understandably.'²⁹⁴ Sargent divides these subject areas in his manual into sections on 'Plotting' ('technique') and 'Photoplay Form' ('form').²⁹⁵ Therefore, Sargent understands 'technique' as referring to the ability or skill to write a photoplay, and 'form' as the way in which it should be presented.

Ball reiterates virtually the same view by saying: 'the story is the life-blood of the play. No matter how clever the technical presentation, [...] without the backbone of a good theme, all effort is wasted.'²⁹⁶ Phillips clearly sees the distinction between photoplay form and storytelling and notes that the former is only utilised to enhance the latter:

²⁹¹ Sargent, 'Technique of the Photoplay, *MPW*, May 13, 1165.

²⁹² Peacocke, *Hints on Photoplay Writing*, 37.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁹⁴ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 373.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, iii.

²⁹⁶ Ball, *Photoplay Scenarios*, 53.

we are not teaching technique, or laying down rules; rather, we are trying to interpret the laws of human conduct, the science of being natural and the art of entertaining effectively.²⁹⁷

The surface debate over exactly what ‘technique’ meant could be slightly misleading and mask a deeper, more resentful undercurrent of feeling about the gradual drift towards ‘literary particularism’ or the professional exclusivity of a writing elite. Maras observes that ‘the study of technique becomes a key marker of the difference between the aspirant or amateur writer, and the successful scenario writer.’²⁹⁸ Such views about specialist expertise would eventually begin to shut the freelance writer out of the film industry. By 1922 Wright confirms that the freelance writer was definitely relegated to providing only the story and not the detailed continuity:

there is no chance for a free lance writer, one not a member of the motion picture studio staff, or not familiar with the rules of a studio, to write and sell a motion picture continuity.²⁹⁹

Continuity or staff writers were appointed for their years of experience in the studio and their demonstrable writing skill. Opportunities for outsiders were diminishing rapidly. This perhaps explains the strength of Peacocke’s reaction, as he sides with the freelance writer; although one must never forget he wrote for *Photoplay*, an organ of the fan press, and his audience was made up of such people. Peacocke ascribes them value by claiming that the urgent need of manufacturing companies is for ‘original photoplays especially written for the screen by competent scenario writers.’ In his opinion, the staff writers are subservient to the freelance writers in this process, as ‘their chief duties should be in reconstructing good original stories that reach the scenario departments from various sources.’³⁰⁰

The debate over what the key screenwriting teachers actually meant by ‘technique’ again relates to the art/craft dichotomy that has been discussed earlier. Their attempts to define ‘technique’ further indicate the level of confusion over what screenwriting was actually considered to be. When Sargent uses ‘technique’ in the

²⁹⁷ Phillips, *Photodrama*, 106.

²⁹⁸ Maras, *Screenwriting*, 162.

²⁹⁹ Wright, *Photoplay Writing*, 49.

³⁰⁰ Peacocke, *Hints on Photoplay Writing*, 11.

title of his manual, he assigns it a more artistic meaning and Peacocke allots it a mystical quality, whereas the others interpret it in a more mechanistic sense. The imprecision of their language is to some extent understandable, since they were at the heart of the dispute and were not privy to the overview that scholars now have of the historical art/craft constructs identified by Shiner. When it comes to photoplay form, however it is described, it is certainly situated more towards craft, as it involves the application of screen technique to story.

What, then, did the five key screenwriting teachers regard as photoplay form or format? Were they in agreement on the main points or were there major differences? There is in fact considerable overall agreement in their manuals and articles on what was required, although there are some important differences surrounding the synopsis in particular, as it developed into a lengthier document. Their advice is generally pragmatic on these issues because the industry was changing so fast.

The whole of Part Three of Sargent's *The Technique of the Photoplay* (1916) is devoted to Photoplay Form; he asserts that it:

consists of a title, a synopsis, a cast of characters, a scene plot and the plot of action [...], which is more properly termed the scenario [... and] is supplied with leaders [or subtitles] and other inserts.³⁰¹

Wright's approach, in the *The Motion Picture Story* (1914), lists the same constituent parts as Sargent.³⁰² Phillips's *The Photodrama* (1914) is similar, apart from the fact that he replaces the scene plot with the 'Author's Remarks'.³⁰³ Ball, in both *The Art of the Photoplay* (1913) and *Photoplay Scenarios: How to Write and Sell Them* (1915), calls the 'scene plot' a 'set list', but adds a document that the others leave out, which he calls a 'Director's Sheet'.³⁰⁴ Peacocke, in *Hints on Photoplay Writing* (1916), lists the same documents as Sargent and Wright, but omits the 'scene plot' altogether and instead includes the suggestion of writing two synopses of the story, one short and the other more detailed, the second of which could form the basis for what he

³⁰¹ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 101.

³⁰² Wright, *Motion Picture Story*, 82.

³⁰³ Phillips, *Photodrama*, 39-44.

³⁰⁴ Ball, *Art of the Photoplay*, 65-72 and *Photoplay Scenarios*, 16-23.

terms a 'working scenario,' written by someone at the studio.³⁰⁵

Sargent claims, with regard to 'Photoplay Form', that 'Nowhere in photoplay writing is there such a variety as in the form in which a play may be written.' He makes no attempt to present what he considers a standard form or a 'unification of style', but instead provides examples of 'ten different styles of form' from various studios by way of demonstration in his Appendix, referred to earlier.³⁰⁶ Similarly, the other key screenwriting teachers do not espouse a particular form but provide samples of their own produced scenarios and those of others, which also indicate a variety of form.

The Title

All five of the key screenwriting teachers stress the importance of the title, but to varying degrees. In an overall sense, the title was important at two levels: to sell the screenplay and to help sell the completed film.

Sargent regards it as the crucial first point of contact with the editor and a major selling point on billboards. He cautions that it should in all cases be 'brief' and 'easily remembered,' 'fluent – easily spoken,' 'applicable to the story' but 'not self-explanatory,' 'rouse curiosity' or 'sentiment,' and the 'trite' and 'controversy' should be avoided at all times. He counsels readers to 'try to gain proficiency in title writing' by keeping a record of anything that occurs to them from newspapers, magazines, advertisements and trade papers, 'as you never can tell where your title will come from, and you are as apt to find it in the bottom of your cocktail glass as on the top of a twenty-story building.'³⁰⁷

Wright gives equal weight to the title's importance, in *The Motion Picture Story* (1914), but more as an advertising and marketing tool for the completed film than as a means of selling the original idea to the editor: 'A good photoplay with a bad title will be purchased very often and another title substituted.' Nevertheless he still advises the writer to 'submit his script in as perfect a form as possible [and if it...] is

³⁰⁵ Peacocke, *Hints on Photoplay Writing*, 37-43.

³⁰⁶ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 99-101 and 373-398. These examples include a synopsis with a cast of characters, a scene plot and various scenario extracts.

³⁰⁷ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 105-109.

submitted under an ordinary name it is not perfect.’ Therefore, the title should be ‘apt, interesting, original and brief’ and not ‘give too much idea of the plot.’ Thus the writer should give time and consideration to ‘originating appropriate and attractive names’ for photoplays.³⁰⁸ By 1922, Wright seems to have adjusted his thinking on the title and in *Photoplay Writing*, he, like Sargent, now sees it as a crucial selling point for getting the work read by an editor. A ‘striking, significant title for your photoplay [...] will make the scenario editor want to read your story.’ Perhaps his views changed because the level of competition in the photoplay market was even higher than before. In general, he claims that most ‘Photoplay titles are derived from the theme of the play [...] except] where the theme is exemplified by the main character,’ meaning the title must precisely represent the product.³⁰⁹

Peacocke focuses on the brevity of the title as a main selling point both to an editor and for the final film, advising: ‘[t]he shorter the title, the better. One word will often be more potent than four or five.’ He encourages every writer to carry a notebook and to jot down anything that comes to mind, as ‘[a] title will often suggest a theme for a story.’³¹⁰ Ball believes that ‘two-thirds of the scenarios have been bought because of a clever and salient title.’ He also injects some thoughts that are omitted by the other teachers, that ‘the best title is one which is so expressive of the theme it almost gives the entire story in a word or two or three,’ but does ‘not tell the dénouement of the story,’ as this is still the ‘bait which attracts the spectator to the theatre.’³¹¹ Like Peacocke, he also considers that the title is often the ‘first step’ to writing and ‘that the most virile results are attained when a concrete idea is in the mind.’³¹² In *The Photodrama* (1914), Phillips gives a hierarchy of three reasons for a good title, the first two of which involve its commercial potential, namely to ‘add a drawing power to the poster’ for the general public at the theatre front, and its potential to attract the ‘attention of the exhibitor’ to include it in his programme. Oddly, he relegates to last its potential ‘appeal to the photoplay editor because of its

³⁰⁸ Wright, *Motion Picture Story*, 161-166.

³⁰⁹ Wright, *Photoplay Writing*, 44-46.

³¹⁰ Peacocke, *Hints on Photoplay Writing*, 42-43.

³¹¹ Ball, *Art of the Photoplay*, 36-37.

³¹² Ball, *Photoplay Scenarios*, 23-24.

promise of high-class literary or dramatic material,' but does not say why.³¹³ Later, Phillips appears to have adjusted his thinking on the title, and in *The Feature Photoplay* (1921) he discusses none of the previous reasons for a good title but instead emphasises its importance for the writer by saying it is best 'conceived before the story is begun' and the author should: 'Spend hours – days if necessary – on [his] title and then live up to every letter in it!' ³¹⁴ For Phillips, the title has now become the wellspring from which the story flows.

Cast of Characters

The cast of characters served two purposes: to make the package easier to read for an editor in hope of a sale, and to aid the practicalities of going on to produce the film. In essence it was none too different from what playwrights called the 'dramatis personae' or list of persons in the drama.

Sargent instructs: 'The Cast of Characters' should be divided into 'leads' or those that carry the story, 'secondary personages' and 'extra parts and bits.' He advises only giving distinguishing features to key characters who are 'essential to the play' and providing characters with appropriate and easy to remember names.³¹⁵ Wright's advice in *The Motion Picture Story* (1914) is very similar, but he also counsels the writer to use 'few' characters, as not only is it more economical, but 'the fewer the principals, the clearer the action.' Peacocke limits his advice to providing a list of the characters and 'a short description of their ages, sex and calling in life.' Similarly, Ball says that only a list of names with a 'three or four-word description' for each is sufficient.³¹⁶

Of most interest is the fundamental change in approach of Phillips in the years between his first and second instructional manual. In *The Photodrama* (1914), the 'cast of characters' is written merely 'for the convenience of the director' and 'should

³¹³ Phillips, *Photodrama*, 40.

³¹⁴ Phillips, *Feature Photoplay*, 155-156.

³¹⁵ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 115-119.

³¹⁶ Wright, *Motion Picture Story*, 169-175; Peacocke, *Hints on Photoplay Writing*, 38 and Ball, *Photoplay Scenarios*, 20.

mention individual characteristics [...] and clearly show relationships at a glance.³¹⁷ However, in *The Feature Photoplay* (1921), Phillips recommends a greatly enhanced 'cast of characters' that is not just a list of well-chosen names, but also a delineation of the 'psychological attributes' of the leading character, or characters and relevant details about supporting characters.³¹⁸ In contrast, Wright, in *Photoplay Writing* (1921), is still content that the 'cast of characters' should just comprise 'a list naming each one, and telling briefly who the person is.'³¹⁹ This indicates that in respect to providing details about characters there was still no standard way of conveying this information, even into the early 1920s. Further to this, Koszarski has pointed out how pre-1914 cinema was strongly influenced by the melodramatic tradition known for its 'instant characterization of heroes and villains.' After *Birth of a Nation* (1915), these melodramatic influences continue, but Koszarski indicates that feature-length films permitted filmmakers to give their characters 'a richness of detail,' although this generally stopped short of psychological realism.³²⁰ It appears that Phillips's writings may more accurately reflect, and show more sensitivity to, the way film was developing at this time than Wright's.

Scene Plot

The 'Scene Plot' served a very practical purpose for the potential director of the script, giving details of locations and the order they appeared in the script plus budget implications.

For Sargent it referred to a carefully drawn up list of settings, marking scenes as 'exterior' or 'interior' with simple, short descriptions. He says that the writer's 'choice of scenes [should] give a maximum of effect with a minimum of expense and trouble,' although 'economy [...at] the expense of the story' should never be countenanced. Sargent urges the document be 'exact,' as it should enable the director to shoot all the scenes in location rather than chronological order.³²¹ Wright's

³¹⁷ Phillips, *Photodrama*, 39-43.

³¹⁸ Phillips, *Feature Photoplay*, 160-170.

³¹⁹ Wright, *Photoplay Writing*, 17.

³²⁰ Koszarski, *Evening's Entertainment*, 181.

³²¹ The scene plot consists of numbered scenes that correspond to the scenario e.g. '41. John's parlor. Typical country stuff. Portrait of Lincoln on wall essential.' See Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 119-128.

only caveat to this is that a 'scene plot' is 'not necessary to complete the sale of your story' but its provision shows 'a willingness to aid the producer [...] and creates a favorable impression with both editor and director.'³²² Ball stresses the importance of correctly numbering the scenes, in what he denotes a 'set list' instead of a 'scene plot,' as they correspond with the numbers shown on a board held up during the filming of each scene on set. He also refers to an additional document: a 'Director's Sheet,' which he claims 'is a simple list showing scene after scene in chronological order' with numbering to act as a checklist for the director.³²³ Interestingly, when asked about this document in a letter, Sargent admits he has to 'confess ignorance.' He thinks it might be just the front page of the script giving the cast, synopsis and scene plot. This lack of common knowledge may indicate that it was not widely used.³²⁴ As already mentioned, Phillips replaces the scene plot with the 'Author's Remarks,' which deal with period, locale, suggestions for 'ideal locations,' properties and 'specific actors whom you have in mind.'³²⁵ Peacocke omits to discuss this document in his manual, apart from mentioning in his glossary under 'Script,' that it was 'the written form of the plot and its related instructions for producing,' and this presumably included the 'Scene Plot.'³²⁶ The variety of approaches again underlines the lack of standardisation at this time.

The Synopsis

All the key screenwriting teachers agree on one point: that the synopsis functions as the main selling point for the scenario.

In the early teens, the synopsis was a short document that served as a means of introducing the scenario. However, Azlant notes:

By the late teens this format will come to be called the 'continuity,' like the modern shooting-script [...] and the 'scenario' will come to mean a

³²² Wright, *Motion Picture Story*, 183-186.

³²³ Ball, *Art of the Photoplay*, 67 and 71 and *Photoplay Scenarios*, 16-23.

³²⁴ Sargent, 'The Photoplaywright,' *MPW*, April 5, 1913, 41-42.

³²⁵ Phillips, *Photodrama*, 43.

³²⁶ Peacocke, *Hints on Photoplay Writing*, 144.

highly detailed synopsis, like the modern treatment.³²⁷

In 1916 Sargent stresses that the synopsis, written in the present tense, is the most important document, even though it should be the last to be written and usually consists of only around 250 words. It primarily 'exists only to interest the editor in reading that scenario' and ultimately achieving a sale.³²⁸ As Sargent claims:

Your title is your brand name, the synopsis the descriptive label and the preparation of the script the packing. [...] It is your business to present your story in a few words so attractively that the editor will decide to read the action. You are not telling the story, but merely telling what the story is about.³²⁹

Sargent also likens effective presentation of the freelance scenario package to the eye-catching qualities of a newspaper story: '[T]he title functions as a headline, the synopsis functions as a seductive first paragraph summary, and the scenario as the story proper.'³³⁰ In keeping with this approach, he advises the writer to put 'the punch in the opening: the editorial attention is far more apt to be held with a striking statement [... and] the rest does not matter so long as it is well written and informative.'³³¹ Azlant points out that Sargent's view on the synopsis was not universally accepted among other manual writers.³³² This was because, according to Azlant, the 'synopsis, with its first sentence punch, violates the very dramatic structure of the scenario, which builds to a crescendo of conflict.'³³³

The other key screenwriting teachers instead view the synopsis as a summation of the story. For Ball, the synopsis is the document that should be written first, in preparation for the eventual writing of the scenario, and should contain 'every

³²⁷ Azlant, 'Theory, History and Practice of Screenwriting,' 259.

³²⁸ Ibid., 256.

³²⁹ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 109-110.

³³⁰ Azlant, 'Theory, History and Practice of Screenwriting,' 257.

³³¹ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 112-113.

³³² Azlant lists a number of manual writers, some peripheral such as Esenwein and Leeds, Carr, Emerson and Loos, but he also mentions two of the key screenwriting teachers, Ball and Peacocke, as among those that viewed the synopsis as performing a genuine design function by serving as an initial outline of the scenario. See Azlant, 'Theory, History and Practice of Screenwriting,' 257 and 273-274.

³³³ Ibid., 257.

important phase of the story, every dramatic “kick,” every essential scene.³³⁴

Peacocke counsels the writer: ‘Tell your story as simply as you know how.’ He asserts that it must be as succinct as possible, even as little as 50 words, but must be the full story. Like Sargent, he also stresses the importance of its sale value as a document: ‘[a] good synopsis won’t sell a poor scenario, but many a good scenario has lost a hearing because of a poor synopsis.’³³⁵ Peacocke, by advising the writing of a second lengthier synopsis, was signalling one of the changes that were occurring in the industry at the time. Some studios were accepting a longer document from which the scenario editor or director would ‘have to evolve the working scenario.’³³⁶

Wright holds to one point that is similar to Sargent, namely, that it is best to write the synopsis after the scenario has been completed, otherwise some important story detail might be left out. He also argues: ‘The synopsis should be an outline of your entire plot and action, couched in as brief a form as is conducive to clarity.’³³⁷ However, Wright was frustrated by the arbitrary word limits imposed by some studios, because they often restricted writers from telling their story properly, as they were unused to the rigours of ‘boiling down’ in the manner of journalists. Wright was pleased to see ‘the form of the synopsis [was] undergoing alteration’ and some directors were beginning to ‘prefer a full synopsis,’ even as early as 1914.³³⁸ As Maras comments, the development of ‘a very complete synopsis including all the important points in the plot and climax,’ as recorded by Wright, was part of a wider trend towards a read-through that provided a visualisation or ‘complete’ picture of the film.³³⁹ The synopsis became the main selling document and a staff writer would write a detailed continuity. This meant that the telling of the story was unencumbered with technical detail and the reading of a script would make for a ‘more artistic

³³⁴ Ball, *Photoplay Scenarios*, 17.

³³⁵ Peacocke, *Hints on Photoplay Writing*, 5-7.

³³⁶ *Ibid.*, 41.

³³⁷ Wright, *Motion Picture Story*, 176.

³³⁸ *Ibid.*, 177.

³³⁹ Wright, *Motion Picture Story*, 61; cited by Maras, *Screenwriting*, 75.

process [...] evoking rhythm and powerful images.³⁴⁰

The change in the role of the synopsis in the industry is clearly seen in the way Phillips treats it in *The Photodrama* (1914), and how this has changed by the time he completes his second instructional manual, *The Feature Photoplay* (1921). This was due to the development of the features market, as previously indicated. In 1914 Phillips regards the synopsis as ‘an abridgement’ of the story. He advocates writing a synopsis ‘without missing a single essential point [...] in] a style of telling [...] that is terse, crisp and suggestive.’ Because of the pressure of time, it is to be written ‘for the convenience of the editor or reader who takes up your manuscript with a view to its acceptability.’³⁴¹ The fact that the industry was in a state of flux over the role of the synopsis is indicated by Phillips’s comments in his column in August 1917. He writes: ‘[T]here exists a disagreement among editors and producers as to what a synopsis is’ and he then attempts to define it and thereby indicates that not only its length has significantly changed but also its level of importance.³⁴² In fact, to illustrate how he believes a synopsis should be written, he publishes a lengthy one of his own, over a seven-month-period.³⁴³

Sargent’s reflections on the state of the industry in 1917 conclude that ‘in the past decade we have worked in a circle back to the starting point of synopsis.’ He recognised that the industry now required a ‘detailed synopsis’ and entrusted the writing of the continuity to the staff writer.³⁴⁴ For Bordwell, 1917 is also a watershed moment, as he claims this is the point at which ‘a system of formal principles that were standard in American filmmaking [now known as] *classical Hollywood cinema*³⁴⁵ was established. This is not a coincidence, as both Sargent and Bordwell

³⁴⁰ Maras writes extensively on the development of the read-through as a means of experiencing a film through a process of mental visualisation. See Maras, *Screenwriting*, 71 and 69-75.

³⁴¹ Phillips, *Photodrama*, 40-42.

³⁴² Phillips, ‘The Photodrama,’ *MPM*, August 1917, 81.

³⁴³ Phillips publishes his synopsis, (*The Romance of*) *The Self-Made Widow* (1917, World Film) from February to August 1918. See Phillips, ‘The Photodrama,’ February 1918, 50-52 and ‘Photodrama in the Making,’ March 1918, 108 and 110; April 1918, 60 and 122; May 1918, 89 and 127; June 1918, 114; July 1918, 95 and 116; August 1918, 104 and 113 in *MPM*. See ‘Self-Made Widow,’ *IMDbPro*: <https://pro-labs.imdb.com/title/tt0008557/>

³⁴⁴ Sargent, ‘Photoplay Writing Then and Now,’ *MPW*, March 10, 1917, 1491-1492.

³⁴⁵ Thompson and Bordwell, *Film History*, 32.

are signifying the movement towards the professionalisation of writing for the screen, not only for the continuity, but for any form of screenwriting.

According to Phillips, the synopsis had become a fully rendered, highly readable story, entirely visualised with capitalised leaders and dialogue. In his 1921 manual, *The Feature Photoplay*, he provides another example of a 41-page synopsis in seven parts entitled *Pierre Le Grand*, which was produced in 1920.³⁴⁶ Phillips reiterates the importance of the synopsis in his 1922 manual, *The Art of Writing Photoplays*. Here he emphasises the importance of the read-through in creating a sense of rhythm because ‘each paragraph represents a complete cycle or sequence of action.’³⁴⁷ Prose also had to suggest the right imagery, because ‘if the author fails to use the precise word in the synopsis, he will fail to create the exact picture in the mind of the producer that his vision calls for.’³⁴⁸ Most importantly, the synopsis was not only to be used as a selling point, but also for production purposes, so it must be written ‘in such a manner that a group of producers – readers, editors, directors, actors – shall envision it perfectly.’³⁴⁹

Wright, in *Photoplay Writing* (1922), largely concurs with Phillips and the change in the basic form of the synopsis, but does not insist on capitalised leaders and dialogue:

The synopsis should tell the editor the plot of the story; [...] the characterization of the people who carry out the plot, [...] an idea of the environment or locale of the story, [...] the big climaxes as the plot develops; and it should always carry a happy ending.³⁵⁰

Simplicity was the order of the day. Wright claimed that studios required from a writer: ‘manuscripts contain[ing] the bare skeleton of his idea, written in simple language, so that editors [...] could see clearly just what was in the mind of the

³⁴⁶ See Phillips, *Feature Photoplay*, 224-265. *Pierre Le Grand* (released as *Heart Strings* by Fox, 1920) starred William Farnum. See *Heart Strings*, *IMDbPro*: <https://pro-labs.imdb.com/title/tt0011268/>

³⁴⁷ Phillips, *Art of Writing Photoplays*, 83.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 86.

³⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 82.

³⁵⁰ Wright, *Photoplay Writing*, 10-11.

author [... and] could visualize immediately the story he had in mind.³⁵¹ Wright also accepted that a feature play synopsis could now be as long as 2,000 words, which is still somewhat shorter than Phillips's recommendations.³⁵² He includes a sample synopsis by way of illustration.³⁵³

According to Phillips, the synopsis is also to be preceded by the 'motif,' which is a 'paraphrase of the story' in one or two lines.³⁵⁴ In his 1922 manual, *Photoplay Writing*, Wright just terms this as 'the first paragraph' and, as in a newspaper article, this 'frequently contains a short and snappy résumé of the entire' story. Wright does not go as far as Sargent in advocating that the 'punch' be told up front, but he does recognise that 'the first paragraph should be so written as to hold the attention of the editor so he will read further.'³⁵⁵ Phillips also advocates an 'outline' of the synopsis, breaking it into its constituent parts. However many parts there are – there can be up to seven according to Phillips – these are always based on 'three component divisions' making up the beginning, middle and end.³⁵⁶ He argues that 'as the main title must contain the essence of the entire play, so must each of the subtitles of the 'outline' contain the essence of its part.'³⁵⁷ Just as in a book or play, division into parts helps focus the attention of the editor and 'greatly adds to the pleasure of reading it.'³⁵⁸

Plot of Action, or Scenario

The 'plot of action,' or 'scenario,' was the main script and was the most important document in the 1910s before it was mostly replaced by the synopsis. There is a commonality among the five key screenwriting teachers on a number of issues with

³⁵¹ Ibid., 224.

³⁵² Ibid., 11.

³⁵³ Wright reproduces the synopsis for *The Dream Girl* written by George Morgan and directed by Cecil B. DeMille (1915). See Wright, *Photoplay Writing*, 15-17. However, *IMDbPro* lists Macpherson as the writer of the story and gives a release date of 1916. Wikipedia also claims it was released in 1915. See *The Dream Girl*, *IMDbPro*: <https://pro-labs.imdb.com/title/tt0006605/> and 'List of Lost Silent Films (1915-19)' in *Wikipedia*, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_lost_silent_films_\(1915-19\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_lost_silent_films_(1915-19))

³⁵⁴ Phillips, *Feature Photoplay*, 156.

³⁵⁵ Wright, *Photoplay Writing*, 10.

³⁵⁶ Phillips, *Feature Photoplay*, 149.

³⁵⁷ Ibid., 153.

³⁵⁸ Ibid., 13.

regard to this document, which had its basis in theatrical tradition. Archer regards the play 'scenario' as a preliminary document – a 'skeleton' or 'scheme of scenes' that functions as the 'groundwork of a dramatic performance.'³⁵⁹ However, for the key screenwriting teachers it was regarded as more than just a schema, because this document would in fact transmit the whole story.

There was consistency in what it was called: Sargent refers to it as the 'plot of action' or 'scenario', and the others refer to it as the 'scenario.'³⁶⁰ However, there was no definitive form in terms of layout, typeface and style of heading, as the samples referred to earlier show and both Sargent and Wright confirm.³⁶¹ They all counsel brevity, a variety of setting to avoid monotony, clarity of storytelling through action written in the present tense, careful weaving of scenes, numbering of scenes, and that it should be told in good, clear English. As with an extended synopsis, the 'plot of action' or 'scenario' demanded a highly visualised form of writing, as has already been suggested in this study.³⁶²

With regard to segmentation, Sargent advises the writer that, when beginning to write, he should break down his action into 'important facts and isolate those into [numbered] scenes,' keeping the 'action as brief as possible' and making use of (silently mouthed but understood) dialogue only when it 'will tell more than action will.' Scene numbers were for the purpose of editorial identification.³⁶³ Azlant points out 'that the basic sense of the segmentation, serial representation of the film's activity that Sargent presents in 1916 survives [...] minus the dialogue.'³⁶⁴ Azlant explains that Sargent's understanding of the 'scene' is linked to theatrical usage, where an ambiguity already existed. It could either refer to a place or setting, or to the time-period over which an activity or a single experience took place. But Azlant observes that Sargent offers a further clarification by defining 'the "scene" [... as] one

³⁵⁹ Archer, *Play-Making*, 44.

³⁶⁰ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 213.

³⁶¹ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 99 and Wright, *Motion Picture Story*, 187.

³⁶² See Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 119-145 and 213-220; Wright, *Motion Picture Story*, 186-191; Peacocke, *Hints on Photoplay Writing*, 20-43; Ball, *Art of the Photoplay*, 68-72 and *Photoplay Scenarios*, 15-26 and Phillips, *Photodrama*, 43-47.

³⁶³ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 128-136.

³⁶⁴ Azlant, 'Theory, History and Practice of Screenwriting,' 260-261.

continuous run of the camera.’ This unit of segmentation has continued to this day, but has been redefined as the ‘shot’ and is now part of a larger unit which is usually termed a scene or sequence.³⁶⁵

All of the action made in one set or location at one time is one scene. If the camera is stopped, then the scene stops, though the action of the scene, as it may be understood in dramatic work, may be continued.³⁶⁶

However, although Azlant comments only on Sargent’s understanding of the scene as one continuous run of the camera, this understanding is reiterated by all the other key screenwriting teachers in this study, except Ball; so there is nothing unusual here, and there is in fact no clue to who originated it.³⁶⁷ Of significance is Phillips’s dissatisfaction with the use of the term for this purpose; he thought it was confusing because the etymology of the word ‘scene’ is connected to location or setting, as Sargent also observed. Phillips preferred ‘scenes’ to be called ‘acts’ since ‘they are distinct units of action and definite and complete acts in the development of the play,’ but would be numbered chronologically as before. Phillips seems to indicate that scene numbers should be attached to each ‘act’ and, when a setting is first used, it would be numbered as scene 1 and any return to it in a subsequent ‘act’ would have the same scene number ascribed to it.³⁶⁸ Phillips’s comments possibly show that ideas about the practice of segmenting were varied at this point and as a result aspiring writers were often offered conflicting advice.

Sargent spends no less than 43 chapters of the third edition of his book dealing with the ‘technique’ of how to write the scenario and the methodological skills to ensure that it was presented in a suitable ‘form.’³⁶⁹ This is far more detailed than the other key screenwriting teachers. He regards the ‘plot of action’ as a crucial initial instigator and interim vehicle of the production process. Azlant clearly demonstrates in his thesis that Sargent’s understanding of what constituted a scenario or screenplay was ‘a complex, challenging commentary on the nature of the early film

³⁶⁵ Ibid., 262 and 266.

³⁶⁶ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 135.

³⁶⁷ See Wright, *Motion Picture Story*, 219, Peacocke, *Hints on Photoplay Writing*, 27 and Phillips, *Photodrama*, 44.

³⁶⁸ Phillips, *Photodrama*, 47.

³⁶⁹ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 18-249.

scenario [which] clearly invites application.³⁷⁰ As recorded earlier, Azlant goes on to test Sargent's views by successfully applying them in a critical analysis of the exemplary screenplay, *Selfish Yates* (1918) by Sullivan.³⁷¹ In Azlant's opinion, this use of Sargent's approach in 'the analysis of this particular screenplay indicated the high level to which the craft of screenwriting had evolved by 1918.'³⁷² However, it is important also to credit the other key screenwriting teachers with extensive input on the scenario. Phillips spends virtually all of the first three parts of his first manual dealing with the 'principles,' 'plot' and 'dramatic construction of the photoplay.' Wright and Ball are equally detailed on plotting the story and writing the scene plot and scenario in their manuals and Peacocke analyses and annotates a sample script to indicate how it should be written. They all record in detail how to write in photoplay form.³⁷³

Continuity Script

It is not within the remit of this study to attempt to discern whether or not there was a simple evolution from what was termed the scenario into what came to be known as the 'continuity script,' or whether in fact these were entirely separate documents. What we can say is that the trade press recorded in 1911 that 'most directors prefer the well-developed scenario,' and as the 'continuity script' was not mentioned at this point they may have been synonymous documents.³⁷⁴ In the period up to 1920, a fundamental shift in the role of the freelance writer and consequently that of the staff writer was taking place, with resultant effects on how people trained for and entered the industry. It appears that submissions increasingly involved providing an extended synopsis rather than a 'scenario' and staff writers were given the job of writing the 'continuity script' from these documents.

In his 1916 manual, Sargent dubs the studio writers who rewrote submitted stories

³⁷⁰ Azlant, 'Theory, History and Practice of Screenwriting,' 267.

³⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 276-334.

³⁷² *Ibid.*, 338-339.

³⁷³ See Phillips, *Photodrama*, 27-184; Wright, *Motion Picture Story*, 21-65, 80-85, 114-124, 161-214; Ball, *Art of the Photoplay*, 33-79, 116-124 and *Photoplay Scenarios*, 1-93, 162-182; and Peacocke, *Hints on Photoplay Writing*, 5-43, 84-97, 115-134.

³⁷⁴ 'Technique and the Tale,' *MPW*, November 18, 1911, 541.

as mere 'reconstructors.'³⁷⁵ Although he discusses the issue of 'continuity' in great detail, he never associates the word 'continuity' with the particular role of a staff writer. As already stated, Peacocke indicated in 1916 that a synopsis might form the basis for a 'working scenario' and it could be evolved by a staff writer.³⁷⁶ Peacocke instructs the freelance writer, whom he believed to be an engine of creativity and originality, to focus on the idea, or the story or plot, rather than trying necessarily to write a detailed continuity. Like Sargent, Peacocke seems to relegate the studio writers to a secondary role as:

constructionists, not hack photoplay writers [...] their chief duties should be in reconstructing good original stories that reach the scenario departments from various sources.³⁷⁷

Nevertheless, even in 1917 Peacocke indicated that, although the synopsis did not have to be necessarily accompanied by a 'continuity,' he still strongly advised that, if possible, it should be provided. Peacocke was surprisingly optimistic about the chances of the freelance writer's work being accepted in its entirety by a studio and the work of the professional writer bypassed, because he believed that the real creativity lay with the scenarist and not the staff writer.³⁷⁸

No matter how upbeat Peacocke was about the future of freelance writing, Phillips correctly signals in his articles that there had been a change in the market by 1917; he indicates that studios were requesting a synopsis rather than a scenario.³⁷⁹ Although it is beyond the reach of the present study to carry out a detailed analysis of script nomenclature, it was clear that by this time not only the language describing the documentation had changed, but the policy of the studios was rapidly changing too. By 1921, in *The Feature Photoplay*, Phillips actively discourages the freelance writer from providing a scenario in favour of an extended synopsis, a view that is also confirmed by Wright in his 1922 manual, *Photoplay Writing*. Wright ascribes a specialised role to the 'continuity man' who has had a 'thorough studio education,'

³⁷⁵ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 8.

³⁷⁶ Peacocke, *Hints on Photoplay Writing*, 41.

³⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

³⁷⁸ Peacocke, 'How to Sell a Photoplay Scenario,' *Photoplay*, August 1917, 127-130 and 142.

³⁷⁹ Phillips, 'The Photodrama,' *MPM*, August 1917, 81-83.

has spent 'years of study' and has gained 'much experience in the motion picture industry.'³⁸⁰ Even though the fate of the freelance writer was sealed, Phillips still believed that the really creative work was located in crafting the story. In *The Art of Writing Photoplays* (1922), Phillips says the creation of synopses 'is the real art' whereas continuity writers are 'interpreting' the vision of the photoplaywright, although by this time it is clear that much of the writing of photoplays was in-house.³⁸¹

The key screenwriting teachers appear to try to cast the freelance writer as the artist or originator of ideas and the staff writer as the artisan or craftsman. This again feeds into the wider debate over notions of art and craft referred to earlier in this thesis. The argument over synopsis/continuity was another attempt by the key screenwriting teachers to articulate elements of the debate, by positioning themselves as encouraging artistic development while on the other hand actually providing advice on very specific workmanlike skills.

C. Screen Technique

An important part of writing the 'plot of action', 'scenario' or film script involved deciding how to use of a range of techniques to enhance the storytelling process. These could be divided into two main kinds: those that involved putting some kind of written material on the screen, and those in which the action on screen could be complemented by moving to action occurring in a parallel scene or showing some kind of close-in view of the current scene. The latter would come to be known as parallel editing and close-ups, and would become well-established elements of classical style by the mid-teens. The advice of the key screenwriting teachers was practical and pragmatic, and leant more towards the craft-based aspect of screenwriting in this respect.

Sub-titles and Inserts

The inclusion of written material posed considerable problems for the writer. Striking a balance between expositional material that was necessary for audiences to make

³⁸⁰ Wright, *Photoplay Writing*, 49-59.

³⁸¹ Phillips, *Art of Writing Photoplays*, 107-109.

sense of the story and overloading the viewer with too much to read involved skilful choices. The key screenwriting teachers were more probably influential in the discourse that established these [title and insert] protocols.

The terminology used for these devices was not consistent, but Sargent offers the most detail. He refers to sub-titles or captions that convey exposition or signify a shift in time as 'leaders.' He categorises them into three types. Firstly, a 'straight leader' occurs between scenes and conveys some statement about an incident that occurs between the scenes.³⁸² Secondly, a 'fact leader' is character-based and is an unspoken expository statement that clarifies the character's action to avoid any misunderstandings, or obviates the need for an extensive action sequence to convey the story. For example, 'John tells Nellie of his intended trip to the city' would save extensively on footage.³⁸³ Thirdly, 'leaders' connected with time are broken up into two further kinds. A basic 'time leader' serves to mark the passage of time, such as 'the next day,' whereas a 'break leader' is 'used [when it is...] not necessary to tell that time has elapsed' but it 'replaces some extended but not essential action,' such as a journey or lengthy illness.³⁸⁴ Wright claims they can all be called 'sub-heads,' 'sub-titles' or 'leaders,' but makes no further delineation other than to say they signify time lapses or clarify action. Peacocke refers to them simply as subtitles, Ball calls them 'captions,' 'subtitles' or 'leaders' and Phillips uses only 'captions' and says they are miscalled 'leader, subtitle.'³⁸⁵

Similarly, there was little consistency in the terminology used for dialogue. Sargent refers to written dialogue as 'cut-ins' or 'dialogue leaders' but admits that 'spoken insert' would be a better description but it is not in common usage. Wright uses 'cut-in subtitle,' Phillips prefers the use of 'spoken line' and Peacocke and Ball do not comment on this.³⁸⁶ On the matter of filming written material to be used in the scene, they are all in agreement and call this 'the insert,' apart from Ball, who again does

³⁸² Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 163.

³⁸³ *Ibid.*, 166.

³⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 169-170.

³⁸⁵ See Wright, *Motion Picture Story*, 192-199; Peacocke, *Hints on Photoplay*, 28 and Ball, *Art of the Photoplay*, 24 and *Photoplay Scenarios*, 9 and Phillips, *Photodrama*, 48-53.

³⁸⁶ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 163-164; Wright, *Motion Picture Story*, 196 and Phillips, *Photodrama*, 62-64.

not comment. Inserts included letters, telegrams or any other form of printed material that could convey information within the scene.³⁸⁷

Although there was a great deal of confusion over terminology, there was none about usage. If the information could be expressed effectively through action, these devices were not recommended for use. However, Sargent regards 'leaders' and 'inserts' as a necessary addition to action if this conveyed insufficient information, and his views are representative. He regards the 'cut-in' or 'spoken insert' as the least distracting type of 'leader,' and recommends it to the writer, but cautions even then that 'Dialogue is used in the action only if dialogue will tell more than action will.'³⁸⁸ Sargent regards the 'insert' as 'less of an interruption' to action, even though 'it does not picture action.'³⁸⁹ The words of Peacocke typify the basic approach: 'they are to be sparingly used and avoided when possible.'³⁹⁰

Liepa has carried out extensive research into the use of intertitles during this period and his work can be drawn upon to indicate that manual writers probably played an important role in the development of their effective use. He argues that:

The language used to identify intertitles, both dialogue and expository, and describe their function, reveals something of how these authors conceptualized the function of these devices, influencing the popular perception of the role these devices should play.³⁹¹

Liepa draws from a wide pool of manual writers to illustrate his contention, including those whom I have indicated as on the periphery, but he also draws extensively on the views and comments of the five key screenwriting teachers, which to some extent further legitimises his work, and theirs. Liepa points out that these writers 'continually returned to intertitle writing as a crucial element of the screenplay; many manuals devoted a chapter to the writing of "leaders."³⁹² Of the five key

³⁸⁷ See Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 153-163; Wright, *Motion Picture Story*, 200-205; Ball, *Art of the Photoplay*, 69-70; Peacocke, *Hints on Photoplay Writing*, 29 and Phillips, *Photodrama*, 54-61.

³⁸⁸ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 132.

³⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 153.

³⁹⁰ Peacocke, *Hints on Photoplay Writing*, 28.

³⁹¹ Liepa, 'Figures of Silent Speech', 241.

³⁹² *Ibid.*, 234.

screenwriting teachers considered in this study, three, Sargent, Wright and Phillips, devote more than one chapter to the acquisition of this skill. Liepa makes a convincing case for the centrality of the manual writers in this development. Although it is not possible to be entirely certain of their overall impact, as it is not easily measurable, the evidence does point in this direction.

During this period a lively debate about the role of intertitles was taking place between two groups at completely opposing poles:

on one extreme were the 'purists' who resented the presence of orthography among their beloved pictures, and on the other were the 'integrationists' who realized a necessity of intertitles, for storytelling and otherwise, and argued for the creative integration of text into cinematic storytelling.³⁹³

The chief proponent of the 'purists' was the film theorist Münsterberg, who saw the photoplay as a new form of art and rejected all 'leaders' on the grounds of visual purity.³⁹⁴ Freeburg was less extreme and saw a value in the use of expository titles, although his use of them would be as a stimulus to auditory imagination, providing a running commentary on the play in the vein of a Greek chorus.³⁹⁵ According to Liepa, 'those who promoted the creative integration of intertitles won the debate' by the early 1910s.³⁹⁶ Among those who adopted 'integrationist' views, we find all five of the key screenwriting teachers who are the subject of this study, although they did exhibit shades of opinion on the matter. Both Sargent and Wright give cogent advice on the effective use of intertitles, but they still appear to cling on to the notion that ultimately they are best avoided altogether. Sargent claims that '[t]he play without a leader is the ideal play, because here there is no interruption to the action.' When a leader is used: 'You must stop thinking about the picture and read the words.'³⁹⁷ In addition, Wright suggests that they 'frequently confuse the interest, and sometimes

³⁹³ Ibid., 254.

³⁹⁴ Münsterberg does not regard the photoplay as an imitation of theatre, but as a completely new art form 'composed of pictures.' He likens it to other forms of art such as painting that require no words except a title. See Münsterberg, *Photoplay*, 102-112.

³⁹⁵ Freeburg, *Art of Photoplay Making*, 174.

³⁹⁶ Liepa, 'Figures of Silent Speech,' 256.

³⁹⁷ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 164.

even exasperate the spectator', who did not go to the 'theater to read' but 'to be entertained.'³⁹⁸ Liepa quotes Phillips on the triumph of the 'integrationists:' 'Optical delusion is a negligible quantity in the face of dramatic illusion, which sweeps everything mechanical before it.'³⁹⁹ Phillips is certainly the most positive of the key screenwriting teachers on the use of intertitles and inserts, seeing them as 'an integral part of the play; units in the development of the story.'⁴⁰⁰

The key screenwriting teachers were concerned to offer pertinent and important practical advice to writers on the effective use of intertitles. Liepa takes up this theme and claims that: 'Preserving narrative continuity and producing a more unified or integrated story was one of the primary motivations behind the development of intertitles.'⁴⁰¹ They were important for a range of reasons, not least because they helped to shape the action and were an important element of scenario construction. Sargent points out the shock effect produced by the leader, as it interrupts the action: 'Each time a leader flashes you must adjust your mind to the fact and readjust it to the story.'⁴⁰² Azlant admits that the perceptual change this requires is problematic but it also serves, in Sargent's words, to 'make definite the end of one development of action and the commencement of a second.'⁴⁰³ In one sense it was similar to the curtain drop in the theatre. Liepa observes that Sargent even saw a legitimate use for intertitles in delivering the 'punch' instead of the use of pictorial action. Quoting from Sargent's column, he says that:

'the real punch is not the visual action, but the idea behind the action.'
For intertitles to have this forceful effect, 'the words must be used at the moment of greatest tension and the entire action must be planned to support the stated fact.'⁴⁰⁴

³⁹⁸ Wright, *Motion Picture Story*, 193.

³⁹⁹ Phillips, *Photodrama*, 58; cited by Liepa, 'Figures of Silent Speech,' 256-257.

⁴⁰⁰ Phillips, *Photodrama*, 49.

⁴⁰¹ Liepa, 'Figures of Silent Speech,' 242.

⁴⁰² Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 164.

⁴⁰³ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 163; cited by Azlant, 'Theory, History and Practice of Screenwriting,' 227.

⁴⁰⁴ Sargent, 'Leader and Action,' in *The Photoplaywright, MPW*, June 5, 1915, 1598; cited by Liepa, 'Figures of Silent Speech,' 241.

As Azlant suggests, Sargent's understanding of the 'leader' was that it 'automatically imparts a definite rhythm, which can be used in marking extensive segments of the plot's development.'⁴⁰⁵ Phillips is willing to go even further and claims that the use of textual inserts 'is a great factor for economy, and when properly used in this respect may contribute to heightened effects thru suggestive condensation.'⁴⁰⁶

Another practical problem that surfaced with 'leaders' was determining the correct number to be used within a scenario and how many feet of film to use on each one. This was a matter that all five key screenwriting teachers addressed, as in a 1,000 feet film using up valuable film footage on too many 'leaders' could be very detrimental. Ball observed that if the commonly held measure that each titled word took up one foot of film was applied, just two hundred words would 'deprive' a one-reel film of one-fifth of its entire length.⁴⁰⁷ Sargent suggested an insert should be left on the screen for as long as it takes 'a person not used to rapid reading to decipher it.'⁴⁰⁸ According to Liepa, Sargent's preferred measure of length for each title was to allow three feet for the first line and two feet for each succeeding line of the same leader. This would mean that a two-line leader would use up five feet of film and a three-line leader would consume seven feet. Sargent advised that no more than one-tenth of a one-reel film should be taken up with leaders.⁴⁰⁹ Another means of controlling the amount of space that titles took up was limiting sentence length, a view favoured by Wright, who suggested that each title should be no longer than 10-15 words.⁴¹⁰

Given that audiences in America were of an amorphous nature, as a result of large-scale immigration, and many were of lower class with poor English skills, titling was a problem. All the key screenwriting teachers addressed the issue of language in dialogue titles. According to Liepa:

A common thread connecting the advice offered in screenplay manuals

⁴⁰⁵ Azlant, 'Theory, History and Practice of Screenwriting,' 227.

⁴⁰⁶ Phillips, *Photodrama*, 55.

⁴⁰⁷ Ball, *Art of the Photoplay*, 24-25.

⁴⁰⁸ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 160.

⁴⁰⁹ See Sargent, 'Technique of the Photoplay,' *MPW*, August 12, 1911, 363-364; quoted by Liepa, 'Figures of Silent Speech,' 238-239.

⁴¹⁰ Wright, *Photoplay Writing*, 186.

emphasized that the language of dialogue titles must reflect the everyday conditions and environment of the writer. In both choice of subject and development of character – a quality that could draw heavily from character language – the desire for the vernacular was strongly emphasized.⁴¹¹

Choice of accessible language extended not only to titling but also to the telling of the story and subject material. Amateur writers were distanced from the rich and famous in the cosmopolitan ranks of society, and were courted for this very reason. According to Ball, the amateur writer should avoid ‘oratorical and poetic profuseness of language’ and tell the story in ‘concise English, with description of action.’ He should focus on writing ‘modern American plays with simple casts, powerful action and themes of every-day life.’⁴¹² This is a sentiment echoed by Peacocke, who encourages the writer to: ‘Stick to American subjects. [...] Lay your scenes in the cities and localities with which you are familiar’ and ‘[d]o not attempt to be “literary.” Stick to simple language;- the simpler, the better.’⁴¹³ This emphasis on the plainness of a language for titling, as opposed to writing good literary prose, again exposes the tensions in the debate over whether the key screenwriting teachers were engaged in teaching a craft or an art form.

Sargent argues that dialogue titles should be ‘everyday speech or they will sound absurd. People of today do not speak in blank verse.’⁴¹⁴ Wright is concerned that the language used should reflect the make-up of audiences, which he realised were ‘mixed’ and as ‘both the educated and the uneducated through the movie theatres [...] the task of the writer is to strike a happy medium.’⁴¹⁵ Phillips characteristically focused on the internal emotional effects of a line of dialogue: ‘The words pierce the spectator with personal sympathy, or antagonism, and fairly thunder thru the silence,’⁴¹⁶ and this is to be achieved by imitating the mental process of the viewer and presumably this also means their form of language.

⁴¹¹ Liepa, ‘Figures of Silent Speech,’ 272.

⁴¹² Ball, *Art of the Photoplay*, 31 and 28.

⁴¹³ Peacocke, *Hints on Photoplay Writing*, 94 and 20.

⁴¹⁴ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 171.

⁴¹⁵ Wright, *Photoplay Writing*, 185.

⁴¹⁶ Phillips, *Photodrama*, 63-64.

As the film theatre became mass entertainment across class and ethnic barriers, poor grammar and spelling, vulgarity, and the use of slang proliferated within intertitles. There were strong pressures to improve language in films, for the purposes of moral uplift. As Liepa points out: 'The proper writing of intertitles was a major concern for those invested in maintaining a mode of address acceptable to the middle class guardians of culture.'⁴¹⁷ It was easier to bring about change in the expositional title, as this did not have to reflect speech idioms. Loos had achieved this through complex, witty and clever prose and did much to improve the practice of titling. Although Sargent was not focused on moral uplift, he certainly approved of the effective use of the leader and he deals with this extensively in his 1916 manual. He saw the leader as: 'the sole part of the script in which the literary ability of the author may really be shown [... hence it] should be fluent and pleasing, though not grandiloquent.'⁴¹⁸

Despite Sargent's efforts, and those of the other key screenwriting teachers, as industry requirements changed the author of the piece would seldom exercise the skill of intertitling. Ball comments in his 1913 manual that the titles provided by scenario writers were rarely acceptable to the director and he would 'prune and slice his titles to fit his own needs.'⁴¹⁹ By the 1920s titles were not required at all from writers, as Wright confirms in *Photoplay Writing* (1922), where he confines the writing of titles to a specialist 'movie title writer' who has 'expressive and fine writing skills.'⁴²⁰

Busts and Close-ups

'Busts' and 'close-ups' were close-in views of action or of a character's face. They were among the most important features that distinguished film from theatre. The magnification of the facial expressions and actions of characters intensified the emotional involvement of audiences, because the close-up view fostered a feeling of intimacy with the screen persona. The key screenwriting teachers saw these devices as integral for effective storytelling.

⁴¹⁷ Liepa, 'Figures of Silent Speech,' 264.

⁴¹⁸ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 171.

⁴¹⁹ Ball, *Art of the Photoplay*, 24.

⁴²⁰ Wright, *Photoplay Writing*, 185.

Sargent clearly understands the importance of these devices and concurs with Münsterberg's belief that the close-up view was 'the most striking feature of the new art' because it would centre the viewers' attention on a particular object. This is accentuated by the fact there are no words and as a result movement is heightened in importance. However, Sargent argues that Münsterberg attributes an 'over-importance to its use.'⁴²¹

The precise meaning of 'bust' as distinguished from 'close-up' is a matter of contention. Azlant claims that 'Sargent's [...] discussions of 'busts' and 'close-ups' are not always clear or consistent' and that 'Sargent's terms of segmentation seem to be reaching for some real difference.'⁴²² However, a careful reading shows that Sargent's thinking is clear and consistent throughout. Azlant quotes Sargent in support of his view, arguing that Sargent also recognises the problem:

the bust may be written as a close-up or close-up used to designate a bust, but the clearest technique makes a distinction that really is a difference.⁴²³

At this point Sargent is referring to the practice of some studios that confuse these terms, but he himself makes a very clear distinction between the 'bust' and the 'close-up.' He describes the 'bust' as 'a detailed exposure of some action, not so large as to take in any considerable portion of the figure. This is what makes the distinction.' In other words, it is the magnification of a significant action by a character such as a murderer whose 'hand steals into the picture and drops a pistol into the pocket' of another unsuspecting character.⁴²⁴ Sargent later defines 'close-ups' as:

scenes made with the players close to the camera [... because] the story is or should be told in facial expression. This may be seen to advantage only when the image of the player is large and distinct.⁴²⁵

Azlant interprets Sargent's comments about 'busts' and 'close-ups' inaccurately by

⁴²¹ Sargent, 'Münsterberg on the Photoplay,' *MPW*, July 15, 1916, 436-437.

⁴²² Azlant, 'Theory, History and Practice of Screenwriting,' 263-264.

⁴²³ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 173.

⁴²⁴ *Ibid.*, 148-149.

⁴²⁵ *Ibid.*, 173-174.

saying:

'Busts' are *generally* small segments of the main action, which replicate the larger activity or master shot. 'Close-ups' are *generally* close facial expressions of the players (my emphasis in italics).⁴²⁶

Azlant asserts that Sargent's terms are broad and ill-defined by the subtle use of the word 'generally' in his comment, inferring there is lack of clarity in Sargent's thinking on this matter, which is not the case. Sargent's use of the phrase 'generally' is referring to the misconceptions of others and not his own understanding of the differences. He is, in fact, clearer and more detailed than the other key screenwriting teachers who discuss this issue and gives a very precise function for the 'bust' as close on action carried out by a character, distinguishable from the 'close-up,' which focuses on the facial or bodily activities of a character. Wright, Ball and Phillips conflate these terms entirely. For Wright, "the bust" is an enlarged or close up view of any object upon which emphasis is to be made' and in his glossary he lists them as one and the same, and Ball only appears to refer to close-ups. Phillips prefers the words 'close-view' in place of 'close-up' but still equates it with the 'bust.'⁴²⁷ Peacocke's specific suggestion of a "close-up" of an infant's tiny foot, with the weeny toes wiggling,' clearly shows that he saw what Sargent would call a 'bust', as a close-up.⁴²⁸ Although Sargent's rendering of these distinctions is the most defined, all the key screenwriting teachers espoused the value of 'close-ups' or 'busts' for the purposes of clarifying action, creating a feeling of intimacy and relaying the thoughts and emotions of the characters as a form of, in Ball's words, 'psychological action' and recognised they were unique to the medium.⁴²⁹

Cut-Backs and Visions

All the key screenwriting teachers saw the value of the cut-back, or 'flash-back' as it is sometimes referred to, or its shorter version the 'flash', as a useful tool for writers.

⁴²⁶ Azlant, 'Theory, History and Practice of Screenwriting,' 264.

⁴²⁷ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 148-152 and 173-182; Wright, *Motion Picture Story*, 213-214 and 220; Peacocke, *Hints on Photoplay Writing*, 25; Ball, *Art of the Photoplay*, 18-19 and *Photoplay Scenarios*, 51 and Phillips, *Photodrama*, 60-61.

⁴²⁸ Peacocke, *Hints on Photoplay Writing*, 18.

⁴²⁹ Wright, *Motion Picture Story*, 214; Peacocke, *Hints on Photoplay Writing*, 25; Ball, *Photoplay Scenarios*, 51 and Phillips, *Photodrama*, 59-61.

Again, it was a distinguishing feature of film writing as opposed to theatre because of the sheer speed with which changes of scene could be effected. Phillips renames it the 'return', as he claims 'cut-back' is misleading because it 'suggest[s] going back.'⁴³⁰ Sargent's views are representative of how they saw its usage:

a device used to bridge awkward gaps in the action, to heighten the effect of a situation through contrasting action or to raise suspense through delaying the crisis or climax.⁴³¹

In other words, cutting to another scene, or parallel line of action or plot, can mask less interesting action that does little to advance the story. Alternatively, it can provide other information that develops the main action, before returning to the former line of action via another 'cut-back.' In a particularly tense scene, they all agree that cutting back and forth creates more suspense, as the action is significantly slowed at the approach of a climactic moment. There is also an assumption that audiences will not lose a sense of continuity with the use of simultaneity.⁴³²

Sargent considered 'visions,' such as picturing the thoughts of a character in the present, or recalling a past incident, or dreaming of the future, to be problematic. He is wary of them because, in his opinion, they could interrupt narrative momentum.⁴³³ Sargent believed in the 'continuous flow of narrative' – for him jumping back to the past could disturb this. According to Azlant, continuity for Sargent meant 'designing the narrative film in the progressive, continuous dynamic present.'⁴³⁴ But Sargent was pragmatic, and if it were a choice between a leader and a vision he would choose the latter as the 'less intrusive of the two.' Similarly, Wright warns against trick effects, but accepts that a vision can reveal the motives of a character that have 'some bearing on the action' in a scene. Ball says they should not be 'overworked' and Peacocke saw a use for them. Phillips perceptively says of the vision that a 'play

⁴³⁰ Phillips, *Photodrama*, 140.

⁴³¹ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 182.

⁴³² Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 182-194; Wright, *Motion Picture Story*, 206-209; Peacocke, *Hints on Photoplay Writing*, 28-30; Ball, *Art of the Photoplay*, 20 and *Photoplay Scenarios*, 7 and Phillips, *Photodrama*, 140-141.

⁴³³ Azlant, 'Theory, History and Practice of Screenwriting,' 236.

⁴³⁴ *Ibid.*, 238-239.

should progress even when it appears to go back' and that 'every scene should contribute action' and advance the play in the mind of the audience.'⁴³⁵ As discussed earlier, Phillips's views on chronological order were more adventurous and opened up the possibility of using flashbacks, visions and non-linear editing if the maintenance of suspense required it.

Other trick effects achieved through lighting, colouration of the film, under-cranking the camera to speed up action, or sending it in reverse, are denoted as 'shop stuff,' and the amateur or novice is discouraged from loading his script with such technical terms or suggestions. This also applies to 'dissolves' (fading down and up) and 'stop camera' work (where something is made to disappear or appear). The consensus was that effects were best used sparingly and left to the director and, according to Sargent, if the writer should think them necessary he should simply 'tell what happens. The director will understand.'⁴³⁶ Sargent presciently discusses the prospect of 'talking pictures' by setting out dialogue in a form that is none too different from modern screenwriting practice. However, he admits, 'It is not possible to foretell the precise form that talking pictures will next assume.' This was understandable since the technical difficulties of synchronising picture to sound had not yet been resolved.⁴³⁷

With regard to screen technique overall, it is important to recast Azlant's views on Sargent, which overrate his contribution in this area. Azlant represents Sargent as espousing a view that the photoplay writer could exercise a greater freedom in the 'selection of activity, compression of time and fluid sense of location' in 'designing the narrative film in the progressive, continuous, dynamic present' and that this is expressed in his detailed treatment of screen technique.⁴³⁸ However, Sargent's approach was not unique, as the other key screenwriting teachers held similar views and provided significant instruction, albeit expressed in a less detailed manner.

⁴³⁵ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 202-208; Wright, *Motion Picture Story*, 210-213; Ball, *Photoplay Scenarios*, 85; Peacocke, *Hints on Photoplay Writing*, 146 and Phillips, *Photodrama*, 142.

⁴³⁶ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 194-212; Wright, *Motion Picture Story*, 212-214; Ball, *Photoplay Scenarios*, 85; Phillips, *Photodrama*, xvi.

⁴³⁷ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 302-304.

⁴³⁸ Azlant, 'Theory, History and Practice of Screenwriting,' 234 and 239.

Acquiring expertise in order to write in a visual style, in correct photoplay form and using the appropriate screen techniques, was again very much at the craft-skill end of the spectrum. The key screenwriting teachers were in a position to reinforce and codify this instruction in order to ensure adherence to industry standards.

9. How to sell to the industry

The issue of how to sell to the industry takes up a great deal of space in the manuals of the five key screenwriting teachers. It comprises two aspects: first, writing the manuscript and second, marketing it. Much of this has been implicit in the material this study has already covered. The advice is pragmatic and useful, relating to what is likely to sell based on the prevailing trends of the market at any given moment.

A. Writing the Manuscript

The key screenwriting teachers realised that a prospective writer was faced with a series of important decisions at the beginning of the writing process, which should be addressed in order to ensure they had a saleable script at the end of it.

What Photoplay to Write?

Addressing the most important issue with regard to achieving a sale involved reiterating and emphasising the arguments about the importance of so-called original material, for which there was a relentless demand. In 1914 Sargent predicts this as the best opportunity for the freelance writer:

it is only reasonable to suppose that, in the time to come, when the best of the book rights have been exhausted, the author who writes photoplays for photoplay production will command a better price than the man who writes books that may be adapted.⁴³⁹

Similarly, Peacocke claims in his 1916 manual: 'It is becoming an open market for the competent scenario writer, and is becoming more so every day.'⁴⁴⁰ In response to this opportunity, Peacocke clearly articulates the need for original material:

Originality is the Worcestershire of the screen. Don't waste your time trying to sell stale stuff. Stale stuff is as easy to get as orange culls in California. Better make out any day a crude but plotty original story than

⁴³⁹ Sargent, 'The Literary Side of Pictures,' *MPW*, July 11, 1914, 202.

⁴⁴⁰ Peacocke, *Hints on Photoplay Writing*, 12.

the most polished stale stuff!⁴⁴¹

As has already been made clear, much of this so-called original material involved routine and familiar tropes. Nevertheless, Peacocke re-states his optimistic prediction for the role of the freelance writer in his contribution to an article for *Motography* in 1917:

The coming year will see the stage play and fiction story adaptations in the discard, and original stories, specially written for the screen will be the only things in demand. [...] Nearly all the big moneymakers have been productions made from stories specially written for the screen.⁴⁴²

In his manual, Peacocke publishes letters from various scenario chiefs such as Woods, which support his views that 'the original story' is in short supply.⁴⁴³

What the studio directors – the ultimate buyers of manuscripts – want is not the details, but THE STORY, and always a brief clean-cut synopsis with it. A plot will be bought if it is good; the mere technique of the idea is not saleable. The studios have their own experts to take care of the technique.⁴⁴⁴

Sargent also quotes from Woods about the demand for original material, although Sargent is keen to stress that 'demand increases for scripts with ideas of a higher degree of literary merit.' By this he does not mean literary expression, but skill 'in plotting [the] story as well as in originating ideas [... as] literary expression can be shown only in the leaders.'⁴⁴⁵

Likewise, Wright agrees that once the writer has 'the original idea as a basis, all that is needed is skill in plot construction to develop the photoplay.'⁴⁴⁶ Wright also goes on to stress the importance of the story:

It is the idea and not the technique that counts heavily in the end. [...]

⁴⁴¹ Ibid., 127.

⁴⁴² Peacocke, 'The Story's The Thing,' *Motography*, March 31, 1917, 687.

⁴⁴³ Peacocke includes letters about studio requirements from Woods of the Fine Arts Studio, Harry R. Durant of the Famous Players and Jasper Ewing Brady of Vitagraph, which were published in *Photoplay* (1916).

⁴⁴⁴ Peacocke, *Hints on Photoplay Writing*, 2.

⁴⁴⁵ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 5.

⁴⁴⁶ Wright, *Motion Picture Story*, 26.

We are of the opinion that many writers pay too much attention to technique, and not enough attention to the story.⁴⁴⁷

Wright does not stress the opportunities for the freelance writer as much as Peacocke does, but the emphasis is still present even in 1922: 'The demand is now and will be in the future for original stories for the motion picture screen.'⁴⁴⁸ The other manual writers focus on the opportunities for original scenarios in a similar way. Ball recognised there was a 'dearth of good stories' and Phillips claimed that they could only be supplied by competent 'photoplay technicians' and not necessarily those who had populated the ranks of fiction or dramatic literature.⁴⁴⁹

By 1917 it was clear that the market had substantially changed. As already suggested, the staff writer was now responsible for the continuity and the contribution of the scenarist had been reduced to an extended synopsis. Peacocke acknowledges this, but remains optimistic. In one of his articles for *Photoplay*, he envisions the possibility of writer-director cooperation. He makes a clear distinction between the freelance writer and the staff or continuity writer, who should work closely with the director. However, he still sees a role for both kinds of writer and emphasises 'teamwork'. He views the contribution of the freelance writers as still essential:

The plots of their stories are original and well worked out in logical continuity, their photoplays will find a ready market. [...] Changes may have to be made to suit the particular requirements of the company which purchases a story from a freelance writer, but the scenario editor can easily have this done [...] because nowadays [...] good, original stories are hard to find.⁴⁵⁰

In reality, the offerings of freelance writers often needed to be completely rewritten by continuity writers and this sometimes involved 'discarding a half or a third' of their work, as suggested by the successful writer and editor, Jeannie Macpherson, in

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid., 62.

⁴⁴⁸ Wright, *Photoplay Writing*, 189.

⁴⁴⁹ Ball, *Art of the Photoplay*, 15 and Phillips, *Photodrama*, xx.

⁴⁵⁰ Peacocke, 'The Scenario Writer and the Director,' *Photoplay*, May, 1917, 111-114.

1922.⁴⁵¹ This was if the submission ever made it past the first hurdle, and most did not. As Jasper Ewing Brady, scenario editor at Vitagraph, pointed out in 1916, on some days they could 'receive as high as three and four hundred scripts, and many times not one is found acceptable.'⁴⁵²

By 1922 Wright was still claiming, in *Photoplay Writing*, 'there is an alarming scarcity of material of worth for motion pictures.'⁴⁵³ However, on the whole, Wright is more sanguine and his manual aims to skill the freelance writer for the market that still exists. Although more muted, he still does on occasion give vent to the belief that:

The market demands material [...] and] more careful consideration is being given to the outside contributory, not so much for the literary excellence of their stories as for the ideas or plots contained therein.⁴⁵⁴

However, in the search for originality the writer should beware of being inspired 'by newspaper stories, as [...] whenever anything sensational occurs in the public prints, the scenario editor is deluged with plots similar in character and based on the same foundation.'⁴⁵⁵

Although there was a shifting market with regard to much of the material required by film companies, particularly as the demand for features opened up, there was a constant: the general advice was not to attempt to write a 'continuity.' In 1922 Wright advises that 'for some years continuity has been written only by those on the inside, who were trained to write it – and the outsider can't do it.'⁴⁵⁶ Freelance writers were only to provide a scenario or synopsis from which a continuity script would be prepared. In this they could be successful, if the work was of a high standard. As Wright points out: 'it makes no difference to them who submits a story, so long as the story meets requirements.'⁴⁵⁷

The advice that the key screenwriting teachers gave about subject material was fairly

⁴⁵¹ Jeanie Macpherson, 'Functions of the Continuity Writer,' *Opportunities in the Motion Picture Industry*, 26.

⁴⁵² Peacocke, *Hints on Photoplay Writing*, 112.

⁴⁵³ Wright, *Photoplay Writing*, 188.

⁴⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 147.

⁴⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁴⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 190.

consistent and conventional, but continually updated through their columns. They encouraged freelance writers to focus on contemporary subjects set in America, as the cost of staging was always a consideration. Locations were to be generalised, to give the director choice, and seasonal aspects should be taken into account. For example, a story set in summer should not be submitted in winter, as it could not be filmed at that time. Drama, comedy and melodrama were generally considered appropriate and happy endings were advocated.⁴⁵⁸ There was a general consensus as to what to avoid: farcical comedy or slapstick, as this was a peculiar specialism with a great deal of 'business'; adaptations; historical costume dramas; Biblical topics, which studios were flooded with; reworkings of plots the writers have seen; or plots based on the latest newspaper articles, as these were freely available. Ball seems more open to a variety of script genres in his 1913 manual and expands his list to include a:

demand for well-conceived, carefully written and strongly original photoplay scripts dealing with comic, tragic, historical, educational and moral themes.⁴⁵⁹

However, just two years later in 1915 he is more conservative, encouraging the freelance writer to focus on 'logical themes from the life and people about him.'⁴⁶⁰

All five key screenwriting teachers deal with issues regarding film length. The scenarist had to work within the various categories of film length that were in industry use: split (half) reel, multiple (two to three) reel, or feature (three to five) reel length scenarios. The consensus appears to be that it was best to master the writing of one-reel scenarios before moving on to longer forms, although this form did require great skill in compression and simplification. However, film length did depend on the scale of the plot idea. According to Wright, the writer should:

let everything be determined by the demands of your story. The location, the number and kind of people, and the things they do will all be decided

⁴⁵⁸ Ball, *Art of the Photoplay*, 28; Peacocke, *Hints on Photoplay Writing*, 91; Wright, *Photoplay Writing*, 32.

⁴⁵⁹ Ball, *Art of the Photoplay*, 8.

⁴⁶⁰ Ball, *Photoplay Scenarios*, 62.

by the telling of your tale.⁴⁶¹

They all agree that as few characters as possible should be used, for economy in the resulting film. Sargent is cautious about advising how many scenes there should be to a reel of film, as there are too many variables to take into account: some directors will work a scene quicker than others and 'leaders', 'letters' and 'inserts' also have to be included.⁴⁶² Peacocke admits that scene length can vary from director to director, but does offer some guidelines on the number of scenes in a 'scenario'; he says that, from experience, 'dramatic or melodramatic' stories are usually around 40 scenes and comedy between 50 to 75 scenes.⁴⁶³

It is possible to track the development of one-reelers through to features by studying the manuals of the key screenwriting teachers. The earlier manuals of Sargent, Wright, Peacocke, Ball and Phillips, published from 1912-1916, show that the market for one and two-reelers was extensive. It is clear that by the time Wright and Phillips had written their final manuals in 1922, features were by far the largest market. Wright cautions: 'A five-reel feature may call for only a small cast, but it must have a big theme and plenty of quick action.'⁴⁶⁴ He encouraged the freelance writer to focus instead on the two-reeler, and said that there were more opportunities in this market as, by the early twenties, lengthy five-and seven-reel features were more likely to be written by staff writers. Phillips gives little market information in his later manuals but advocates the writing of lengthy and extended synopses, although he does not appear to rule out the features market.

Censorship, Copyright and Stardom

Ben Hecht wrote of the advice Herman Mankiewicz gave him in 1925 when he arrived in Hollywood: 'in a novel a hero can lay ten girls and marry a virgin for a finish. In a movie this is not allowed.'⁴⁶⁵ All the key screenwriting teachers gave extensive advice on censorship, which was essential if the finished film was not to

⁴⁶¹ Wright, *Photoplay Writing*, 18.

⁴⁶² Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 145-148.

⁴⁶³ Peacocke, *Hints on Photoplay Writing*, 28.

⁴⁶⁴ Wright, *Photoplay Writing*, 82.

⁴⁶⁵ Mankiewicz's quote; cited in Black, *Hollywood Censored*, 4.

fall foul of the censor. In response to local efforts to control the content of movies, the National Board of Censorship of Motion Pictures had been formed in 1909 for the purpose of reviewing films and providing a seal of approval for those that would not give offence.⁴⁶⁶ There was to be no suggestiveness, sex stories, vampire stories, underworld plots or vice – nothing of a sordid nature.⁴⁶⁷ According to Wright, ‘clean stories of adventure, full of romance and devoid of crime are what are wanted.’⁴⁶⁸ It was crucial for would-be writers to understand this kind of pressing restriction. For Sargent, the best thing was for the writer to ‘avoid the necessity for being censored’ in the first place, as ‘the outside writer stands small chance if there is any question or doubt.’⁴⁶⁹ The chief aim was to achieve a ‘pass’ from the editor and for this issue never to be raised.

Not all the key screenwriting teachers necessarily agreed with censorship. In particular, Wright used his influence to actively campaign against it, as already indicated in this study, and he contributed to a wider discussion about this issue. He frequently expressed his distaste for censorship and connected it with vested interests:

So why censors would be wished on the motion picture industry is a question that has never been satisfactorily answered, except by saying that censorship provides additional political positions for political workers.⁴⁷⁰

Nevertheless, Wright was pragmatic and advised writers to keep a copy of the pamphlet covering the rules and standards from the National Board of Film Censorship to hand. He quotes Ball, who worked with the Board, and agreed that even with censorship it is still possible to write engaging scenarios:

To declare that risqué situations, gruesome details, exposition of the methods of criminals are necessary for dramatic punch shows a

⁴⁶⁶ Azlant, ‘Screenwriting for the Early Silent Film,’ *Film History* 9, (1997): 241.

⁴⁶⁷ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 2nd ed., 342-345; Wright, *Motion Picture Story*, 58-60; Wright, *Photoplay Writing*, 158; Ball, *Photoplay Scenarios*, 66-79; Peacocke, *Hints on Photoplay Writing*, 93 and Phillips, *Photodrama*, 87-96

⁴⁶⁸ Wright, *Photoplay Writing*, 109.

⁴⁶⁹ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 344 and 315.

⁴⁷⁰ Wright, *Photoplay Writing*, 154.

complete misunderstanding of the possibilities of the 'struggle', the fundamentals of every real play, whether on the screen or on the stage.⁴⁷¹

Ball points out that writers needed a 'thorough understanding of and even sympathy with the fundamentals from which the Board's critique is carried on.'⁴⁷² Peacocke thought that: 'The censors should be allowed to decide upon the script before it leaves the scenario department, or is touched by the director.' After all, it was pointless showing films in their completed state to censors when it was too late to make changes. Without such scrutiny beforehand, it was possible to face financial ruin.⁴⁷³ On this they all agree: submitting scenarios that do not qualify would be a waste of time and effort.

All the key screenwriting teachers strongly condemned copyright breaches. Plagiarising was no longer an option as a result of the 1911 Kalem copyright debacle over *Ben Hur*, and as Daniel Eagan confirms, the judgment on this lawsuit was a critical moment in the establishment of copyright law.⁴⁷⁴ Sargent sums up the situation for the scenario writer: 'You may derive inspiration but not material from the work of another.'⁴⁷⁵ Peacocke advises the writer: 'Never, under any circumstances, take your plot from anything that has been printed' and Ball even tells the writer not to 'model [...] scenarios after the themes of the others.'⁴⁷⁶

This issue was made more complicated by the fact that authors of other materials, such as magazine articles, plays and novels, were protected by copyright. However, at this time the scenario could not be copyrighted unless printed in book form, so scenario writers themselves could be plagiarised. This led to the suggestion from some that writing the story for a magazine format first would mean that the original

⁴⁷¹ Ball, 'The Scenario Writer, the Director and the Censor,' *MPN*, December 26, 1914, 36; quoted by Wright, 'Photoplay Authors, Real and Near,' *NYDM*, 1914 May-June 1915 – 1465.pdf: *Fulton History*: <http://fultonhistory.com/Fulton.html>.

⁴⁷² Ball, *Photoplay Scenarios*, 69.

⁴⁷³ Smith, 'The Evolution of the Motion Picture,' *NYDM*, 1913 Mar-Apr 1914. 0771.pdf: *Fulton History*: <http://fultonhistory.com/Fulton.html>

⁴⁷⁴ Daniel Eagan, *America's Film Legacy: The Authoritative Guide to the Landmark Movies in the National Film Registry* (New York: Continuum International, 2010), 24.

⁴⁷⁵ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 345.

⁴⁷⁶ Peacocke, *Hints on Photoplay Writing*, 6 and Ball, *Photoplay Scenarios*, 178.

work was at least afforded some protection if the rights were reserved. This prevented hack writers from working a successful scenario back into magazine format and benefiting from it financially. Peacocke, Wright and Phillips advised this route as a precursor to writing for the screen, since it would not only improve one's writing but also, due to the shortage of original plots, the industry saw the short story market as a possible source of material.⁴⁷⁷

Both Wright and Peacocke argued that a plot was unlikely to be purloined by a reader or staff writer, as they considered these people to be 'honorable' and to take a dim view of plagiarism. However, Peacocke is more cautious of those closer to home, advising: 'The original plot. Have you one? If you have, guard it as carefully as the pupil of your eye. Be careful to whom you submit it. Do not whisper it, even to your best friend.'⁴⁷⁸

Writers were also to be aware of the stars associated with particular studios and the characters they were likely to play, although it was important not to be too specific in order to ensure the scenario would appeal to a number of studios and not to narrow the market.⁴⁷⁹

B. Marketing the Script

Preparing the Submission

As all the key screenwriting teachers had served on the editorial staff of film companies, their roles in that capacity gave weight to their recommendations. Wright claimed that he had:

read and analyzed thousands of manuscripts submitted for motion pictures, and [...] the principal objection to most of the stories comes from the author's misconception of the requirements for the screen.⁴⁸⁰

⁴⁷⁷ Peacocke, *Hints on Photoplay Writing*, 125 and 132; Wright, *Photoplay Writing*, 145-147 and Phillips, *Photodrama*, 117.

⁴⁷⁸ Peacocke, *Hints on Photoplay Writing*, 13-14 and Wright, *Motion Picture Story*, 114-117.

⁴⁷⁹ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 54; Ball, *Photoplay Scenarios*, 59-60, Wright, *Photoplay Writing*, 37-38; Peacocke, *Hints on Photoplay Writing*, 101-102.

⁴⁸⁰ Wright, *Photoplay Writing*, 224.

As discussed in detail earlier in this study, the submission consisted of the following elements: a 'cast of characters,' a 'scene plot,' a 'synopsis,' a 'plot of action' or 'scenario' and, importantly, a covering letter. By the end of the decade, the 'plot of action' or 'scenario' was often replaced by an extended synopsis. These teachers were most concerned that the first contact with the editor was impactful. Sargent stresses the importance of 'first impressions', as an editor 'cannot help being influenced, if only unconsciously, by the feel of the paper, the neat appearance of the writing, the arrangement of the page, the general air of knowingness' in an 'attractively prepared' manuscript.⁴⁸¹ The other key screenwriting teachers offer similar advice about creating the right impression with the editor by submitting well-thought-out documents.⁴⁸² Wright admits, as an experienced editor, that:

faced with a pile of scenarios that heap themselves up on an editor's desk [...] it's the neat, clean, business-like looking manuscripts towards which he has the most kindly feeling.⁴⁸³

Peacocke indicates that, if it is well presented, the scenario should 'speak for itself.'⁴⁸⁴ Again, the key screenwriting teachers advocate a pragmatic and workmanlike approach to this issue.

Sargent gives the most detailed advice on the basic parameters of how to set out a manuscript, the paper to be used, the copies to be made, appropriate bindings, the importance of a quality typewriter along with the skill to use it, and keeping a plot book and manuscript record. Carbon copies should always be kept of the original script and it should never be mailed to more than one editor at a time to avoid competing offers.⁴⁸⁵ The other teachers also devote space to this important topic, as they are all concerned with presentation.⁴⁸⁶ Ball's pithy article, 'Ten Things I Would Tell a Beginner,' summarises this technical advice on how to make a manuscript

⁴⁸¹ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 104.

⁴⁸² See Peacocke, *Hints on Photoplay Writing*, 84-88; Ball, *Art of the Photoplay*, 11-14 and *Photoplay Scenarios*, 15-16 and Phillips, *Photodrama*, 39-40.

⁴⁸³ Wright, *Photoplay Writing*, 160.

⁴⁸⁴ Peacocke, *Hints on Photoplay Writing*, 86.

⁴⁸⁵ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 99-104 and 319-342.

⁴⁸⁶ See Wright, *Motion Picture Story*, 215-218 and *Photoplay Writing*, 160-164; Peacocke, *Hints on Photoplay Writing*, 84-88; Ball, *Art of the Photoplay*, 64-69 and *Photoplay Scenarios*, 80-83; Phillips, *Photodrama*, 115-118 and 192-193.

presentable to a scenario editor.⁴⁸⁷

Genre Classification

All the advice the key screenwriting teachers gave was time-limited, transient and closely linked to the contemporary state of the industry. The columns written by the screenwriting teachers give an on-going account of an industry in a state of change, whereas their manuals give a snapshot of the industry at their moment of publication and the popularity of certain genres at that particular time. Sargent devotes a great deal of space to the 'Classification of Photoplays', but suggests that 'the various forms of drama blend into one another.'⁴⁸⁸ He classifies them into various genres, as they were understood at the time, in order to ensure the writer is able to categorise his work correctly on the title page and knows what is popular and with which particular film company. He lists them as: drama (general); historical and costume; problem (presenting a life dilemma); purpose (drawing attention to a social injustice); propaganda; melodrama; comedy drama; comedy farce; and slapstick. Sargent, Wright and the other key screenwriting teachers concern themselves with the contemporary understanding of these divisions and supply plenty of scenario samples to illustrate them.⁴⁸⁹

Market Awareness

The key screenwriting teachers encourage their freelance adherents to study the market closely so that they are aware of the kind of material the various companies are producing. Sargent and Wright, in particular, give meticulous and up-to-date advice on a weekly basis through their columns, and this was a vital facet of their value to aspiring writers.⁴⁹⁰ It was usually direct insider information; for example, Sargent writes in *Moving Picture World* in 1914: 'The American Company announces that it is particularly interested in scripts adapted for comedies or light dramas for the

⁴⁸⁷ Ball, 'Ten Things I would Tell a Beginner,' *Photoplaywright*, July 1912, 5.

⁴⁸⁸ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 250.

⁴⁸⁹ See Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 250-304; Wright, *Motion Picture Story*, 66-79 and 125-160 and *Photoplay Writing*, 60-150; Ball, *Photoplay Scenarios*, 94-161; Peacocke, *Hints on Photoplay Writing*, 89-97; Phillips, *Photodrama*, 185-191 and *Feature Photoplay*, 43-54 and 60-73.

⁴⁹⁰ Sargent focuses on 'What Kalem Wants' and Wright details 'The Needs of Éclair' by publishing direct requests on freelance submissions from editors. See Sargent, 'The Photoplaywright,' *MPW*, April 5, 1913, 41-42 and Wright, 'For Those Who Worry O'er Plots and Plays,' *MPN*, November 8, 1913, 21-23.

use of the Beauty Company.⁴⁹¹ Wright also encourages writers to read the trade journals such as the *Exhibitors Herald of Chicago*, *Moving Picture World*, *Motion Picture News*, *Exhibitors Trade Review* and the *Exhibitors Herald of New York City*.⁴⁹² Peacocke provides the addresses of various companies in his manual, although this would soon have been out-dated, but his columns regularly contained the latest on what the industry wanted.⁴⁹³ For example, he writes:

Mr. Russell E. Smith, scenario editor of the Famous Players Film Company [...] will be pleased to consider detailed synopses of good strong stories that would make four or five reel photoplays.⁴⁹⁴

Ball encourages freelance writers to study the trade press so as to be aware of the requirements of various companies and of the market.⁴⁹⁵ Phillips regularly gives industry information in his column for *Motion Picture Magazine*, providing a 'List of Photoplay Markets' with company details and their requirements.⁴⁹⁶ Writers could stay abreast of the market value of scripts through the fan and trade press and the various columns of the screenwriting teachers. Sargent's advice was to either 'offer a script at usual rates or to state a price.' Ball reminds the writer that price is always related to the 'value of the work and the fame of the writer.'⁴⁹⁷ Membership of various clubs and associations, which have already been discussed, was also a source of useful information and contact with industry insiders. Wright particularly stresses this matter in his chapter, 'The Value of Organizations,' where he argues for 'cooperation' with other writers through discussion and exchange of ideas as a means of inspiration and career development.⁴⁹⁸

The key screenwriting teachers gave expert practical advice to would-be writers on

⁴⁹¹ Sargent, 'The Photoplaywright,' *MPW*, April 4, 1914, 55.

⁴⁹² Wright, *Photoplay Writing*, 197.

⁴⁹³ Peacocke, *Hints on Photoplay Writing*, 135-137.

⁴⁹⁴ Peacocke, 'Hints on Photoplay Writing,' *Photoplay*, September 1915, 150.

⁴⁹⁵ Ball refers his readers to *Motography*, *MPW* and the *NYDM* among other publications. See Ball, *Art of the Photoplay*, 28-30.

⁴⁹⁶ Phillips, 'The Photodrama,' *MPM*, November 1917, 91-92.

⁴⁹⁷ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 336-337, Wright, *Motion Picture Story*, 20; Ball, *Art of the Photoplay*, 56, Peacocke, *Hints on Photoplay Writing*, 109.

⁴⁹⁸ Wright, *Photoplay Writing*, 217-220.

what was marketable at any given time and how to sell effectively to that market. In so doing, they demonstrate their considerable knowledge and awareness as 'industry insiders' and also give us a detailed understanding of the practices of the period.

10. The Contribution of the Key Screenwriting Teachers

The main contention of this study is that the key screenwriting teachers played a crucial role in assisting in the translation, adaptation and development of stage and literary conventions for the screen. In other words, they acted as a conduit for the conveyance of theatrical understanding into screen practice. The five key screenwriting teachers identified: the skills that the prospective writer would need to acquire and how they could put this learning process into train; what the writer needed to know about their role in the process of making films; and how they could draw upon the rich storytelling conventions in literary and theatrical traditions in order to write for film. They dealt with what the writer specifically needed to do in order to write for the film industry; namely to tell their story in action and visually in photoplay form by presenting the correct documentation and by employing techniques such as intertitles, busts, close-ups and cut-backs that were peculiar to the medium of cinema. They coached the writer about the process of selling their work to the industry, by: knowing what kind of material to write; submitting the right documents in an acceptable format; being aware of how to negotiate the issues of censorship, copyright and writing for stars; and understanding where to market their work and what strategies were more likely to lead to a sale.

The key screenwriting teachers were not the only voices in this discourse, nor were they inventors of it, but I argue that they were important contributors and helped to articulate the debate and to codify screen and writing practice. To some extent, this has been recognised, but not in any systematic or sustained manner. For example, Nannicelli states that

scenario writing manuals [...] like the trade press, simultaneously reflected, shaped and normalized standards of screenwriting practice based on the narrative principles of the legitimate theatre.⁴⁹⁹

Here Nannicelli does ascribe them some limited role, but gives little supporting evidence or detail as to why he takes this view. However, I contend that the evidence I have put forward in this study suggests that the key screenwriting teachers were leading and active participants rather than passive and reactive agents in this

⁴⁹⁹ Nannicelli, *Philosophy of the Screenplay*, 95.

process. This is a possibility that has been barely considered or acknowledged up until now.

These screenwriting teachers wrote for different interest groups. Sargent and Wright initially wrote for the trade press and industry insiders, although the general public increasingly accessed their columns once the market for freelance material had developed. This is evidenced by the proliferation of columns in different publications and some recorded effects. Wright claims in his column for *Moving Picture News*: ‘The number of readers have grown rapidly over the last year. This department is read by script writers in almost every known country.’⁵⁰⁰ When Wright was engaged to write a column for the *New York Dramatic Mirror* in 1914, Grau notes that ‘the *Mirror*’s already large circulation immeasurably increased.’⁵⁰¹ Grau also attributes much of the ‘amazing success’ of *Moving Picture World* to Sargent’s weekly articles.⁵⁰²

Sargent and Wright were logical, organised and comprehensive in their coverage of writing technique and provision of industry information and they tended to be more formal in style. Phillips wrote for the fan and trade press and was equally prolific, both as a manual writer and columnist, but his style is a little less formal. His writings are very detailed and long-winded in places, but always remain accessible. In particular, he emphasises that technique should only be employed for one purpose – emotionally engaging the audience, for reasons discussed earlier in this thesis. Ball’s popularity was based on his profile as a short story columnist and successful scenarist. His manuals are also very accessible and easily understood, readily drawing upon an understanding of theatre as a source of technique. Peacocke wrote exclusively for the fan press and his style is terse and practical. He offers a more down-to-earth, plain-speaking approach. His writings are informal and conversational in style, if a little repetitive in places.

This study has set out to demonstrate that all five of the key screenwriting teachers were well-known, highly regarded and in a position to wield influence with a great number and wide spectrum of people both on the inside and outside of the film

⁵⁰⁰ Wright, ‘For Those Who Worry O’er Plots and Plays,’ *MPN*, September 27, 1913, 22.

⁵⁰¹ Grau, *Theatre of Science*, 311.

⁵⁰² *Ibid.*, 308.

industry. As experienced professional writers and editors, it is probable that they contributed to a complex and developing industrial discourse and, in collaboration with many other film professionals, helped to establish patterns of working, requirements for submissions to film companies and the dissemination of expertise to the growing number of industry professionals and the freelancers hoping to join them.

All the key screenwriting teachers responded to market conditions through what they wrote in their columns and in the publication of either revised editions of their manuals, or new manuals altogether. The development of Sargent's thinking over the span of three editions of his manual and almost a decade of column writing is indicative of this. The third edition of his manual, in particular, is exhaustive in its treatment of every conceivable aspect of screenwriting. In fact, the comprehensive coverage of this manual gives an excellent insight into how developed the craft of screenwriting had become by 1916. Wright wrote three manuals, with considerable gaps of time in between, and his columns are likely to have made a sustained contribution to the discourse over a ten-year period. His two surviving manuals can be used to contrast market conditions in 1914 and 1922. His extensive knowledge, gained from his practical experience as a writer, editor and producer throughout this period, meant that he was in a position to give cogent and coherent advice.

Phillips likewise demonstrates the breadth of his understanding of the craft, and the varying approaches in his four manuals signal the seismic shift that occurred in the industry's requirements between 1914 and 1922. His columns in 1917-18 and 1923-24 also indicate his continual engagement with the industry. Ball wrote his two manuals only two years apart; he decided to do this because he wanted his comment to be, in his words, 'up-to-the-minute in its presentation of the new conditions, and the author believes that his own knowledge has been considerably broadened by his producing and scenario creations.'⁵⁰³ Ball's second manual is more organised, much longer and more thorough than his first. Peacocke shows an in-depth knowledge of the market conditions in his 1915-16 manual and his columns of the same period. His continual engagement is indicated through the second set of articles he wrote in 1917 dealing with pertinent industry issues. Collectively, the five

⁵⁰³ Ball, *Photoplay Scenarios*, xv.

key screenwriting teachers appear to have made a sustained, detailed contribution of material of direct relevance to the prevailing conditions in the film industry throughout this early period. The study of a group of screenwriting teachers, rather than focusing on one individual, adds an important wider perspective on what it meant to write for the broader system of the industry,

The key screenwriting teachers offered a complete how-to guide – from script inception right through to sale. It is impossible to determine whether they were the originators of specific aspects of the scripting process, but in all probability they contributed to its development through confirming and clarifying technique. As already suggested, perhaps one of the reasons why these screenwriting teachers have not received the recognition they deserved was the status of the writer in the industry. Phillips points out: ‘All authority in too many instances has been given to the director.’⁵⁰⁴ In addition, in the beginning photoplay writers received no credit. If writers were not highly regarded, this would also affect the status of those who gave instruction and possibly explain why they have also been largely marginalised and in some cases virtually forgotten.

These key screenwriting teachers owed much of their understanding of dramatic construction to theatre and other literary forms. All of them were journalists, but four also had strong theatrical connections. Sargent wrote for theatrical journals as a vaudeville critic, both Peacocke and Phillips were playwrights, and Ball’s versatility meant that he could turn his hand to almost any kind of writing. The key screenwriting teachers were thus in a unique position, in the early teens of the twentieth century, to be able to influence and impart knowledge about the new skill of writing for film. As Tibbetts observes, ‘the movies had no tradition, no academy, no system of instruction and training, no centralized industrial plant or business headquarters and no critical record.’⁵⁰⁵ However, what the new industry did have was the narrative tradition of the well-made play with its melodramatic overtones and pictorial realism, which would be a rich source material to mine, adapt and reformulate.

⁵⁰⁴ Phillips, *Photodrama*, xxiii.

⁵⁰⁵ Tibbetts, *American Theatrical Film*, 4.

The likely role that the key screenwriting teachers played in this process is not generally recognised across the scholarly community. This is perhaps typified by Nannicelli's negative assertion about the claims made by manual writers about the importance of their work:

that the manuals' promulgation of an understanding of photoplaywriting as a new kind of dramatic literary art was nothing more than a ploy to sell more manuals [...as] the ideas they expressed were echoed in the legitimate theatrical press.⁵⁰⁶

The key screenwriting teachers did want to market their product, but to argue that they did nothing more than repeat information that was already available in a different guise – namely theatrical – is, I believe, incorrect. Nannicelli's comment is not supported by evidence and does not appear to acknowledge the significant differences between theatrical and cinematic storytelling, as highlighted in this study. These differences were even more marked in the silent era, when storytellers did not have the option of dialogue other than by the use of subtitles.

The key screenwriting teachers functioned as more than just intermediaries between the world of the playwright and the new film medium. As this study has indicated, these teachers were not simply involved in reiterating dramatic principles: I contend that they helped to adapt, reformulate and construct a highly visualised form of storytelling called cinema. I concur with Blackton, one of the founders of Vitagraph, who wrote in the foreword to Phillips's manual that a new approach was needed, because: 'Photoplay writing is a new profession, for the simple reason that the photodrama is a new form of dramatic expression.'⁵⁰⁷ Sargent recognised that the roots of his work were based in playwriting and classical dramatic principles, but he also knew it was distinct from them:

Photoplay [...] is not an adaptation of another branch of literary work, but is possessed of a technique all of its own. There are [...] the broad basic rules of literary construction and dramatic development, applicable to all

⁵⁰⁶ Nannicelli, *Philosophy of the Screenplay*, 102.

⁵⁰⁷ Phillips, *Photodrama*, xxi. Blackton was one of the founders of Vitagraph in 1897. By 1912-13 it grossed an income of between \$5-\$6 million a year; his recognition of Phillips's writing approach is indicative of the need for writing expertise in the industry. See Hampton, *History of the American Film Industry from its beginnings to 1931*, 22-24 and 96.

forms of literature [... but] the art of writing photoplays has become possessed of a technique that is applicable only to the writing of picture plays and to no other form.⁵⁰⁸

Presenting a story visually through the eye of the camera was the main difference between film and theatre. Because the camera could be moved for point of view and location, and the material, once filmed, could be edited, the use of space was more fluid and time could be compressed. According to Hamilton, the medium of film gave the scenario writer a new 'freedom in handling the categories of place and time.'⁵⁰⁹ This not only presented new opportunities but also fresh challenges for the writer. Susan Sontag says that if there is a distinction between theatre and cinema, it is that:

Theatre is confined to a logical or continuous use of space. Cinema (through editing, that is through the change of shot – which is the basic unit of film construction) has access to an alogical or discontinuous use of space.⁵¹⁰

No longer were the positions of the spectator and the performer fixed at a set distance and the action and storytelling possibilities restricted by the limitations of the stage space, as in the theatre. Gone were many of the restrictions in showing how time passed. As Hamilton observes:

[A character] can walk, run, ride, sail, or fly for any distance, and yet be accompanied through his entire transit by the actual eye of the observer [... and the writer has] the ability to alter in a fraction of a second, the point of view from which the story shall be looked upon.⁵¹¹

It was also possible for the writer to use, subject to cost, whatever number and type of settings he felt appropriate to tell his particular story and 'arrange his tale in fifty scenes instead of four' if that was to his advantage.⁵¹² Ball compares this with the theatre:

⁵⁰⁸ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 2nd ed., 7.

⁵⁰⁹ Hamilton, 'The Art of the Moving Picture,' *Nickelodeon*, January 14, 1911, 51.

⁵¹⁰ Susan Sontag, 'Film and Theatre' in Mast, Cohen, Braudy, eds., *Film Theory and Criticism*, 367.

⁵¹¹ Hamilton, 'The Art of the Moving Picture,' *Nickelodeon*, January 14, 1911, 51.

⁵¹² *Ibid.*, 51.

The stage play is presented upon a broad platform, from which the audience may be observed from all parts of the house [whereas] motion picture production presents to the [...] director an unlimited scenic wealth [which] eliminates the explanatory speeches of the stage play [...] by going through every phase of the action before the camera-eye.⁵¹³

The ability in film to arrange screen images in any way that would assist in the storytelling process, and its advantage over the restrictions faced in the theatre, is emphasised by Sontag:

The theatre's capacities for manipulating space and time are, simply, much cruder and more labored than film's. Theatre cannot equal the cinema's facilities for the strictly-controlled repetition of images [...] and for the juxtaposition and overlapping of images.⁵¹⁴

In terms of devices, this was particularly evident in the use of the various forms of the 'close-up' and the 'cut-back,' which gave the storyteller a new power to control the perspective of the viewer and to avoid monotony by breaking up scenes. No longer were spectators free to choose what they focused on within specified theatrical sightlines, because the camera directed their eye. Ball was keen to stress the power of the close-up in this respect, because 'facial expression and the subtlety of gesture [...] were] so necessary to take the place of dialogue.'⁵¹⁵ Peacocke's advice is to, 'Make your characters human. Bring them close to the camera, so that we can see their facial expressions and know what they are thinking about.'⁵¹⁶ Phillips observes that the 'cut-back' or 'return' meant it was possible to 'cut' to another scene 'that has a contributive effect on the thematic scene.'⁵¹⁷ Every 'close-up' and 'cut-back' had to be effectively used in a seamless continuous narrative that cumulatively developed and drove the plot towards its eventual climax.

Telling a story visually posed particular problems with continuity that were different from theatre. Ball says that in a stage play:

⁵¹³ Ball, *Photoplay Scenarios*, 4, 6-7.

⁵¹⁴ Sontag, 'Film and Theatre' in Mast, Cohen, and Braudy, eds., *Film Theory and Criticism*, 368.

⁵¹⁵ Ball, *Art of the Photoplay*, 19.

⁵¹⁶ Peacocke, *Hints on Photoplay Writing*, 45.

⁵¹⁷ Phillips, *Photodrama*, 141.

The development of the action can be carried along clearly with [...] verbal assistance [...] in the words of the characters. But with motion pictures, the prime essential is continuity. There must be smoothness, logical progression, synchronism, and each step of the action must be clear.⁵¹⁸

Azlant sums up the importance of continuity with regard to Sargent's work as 'the fruition of all the techniques of screenwriting properly exercised' and only if this continuity were maintained would a filmgoer's 'constant participation in the "happening" of the story' be ensured.⁵¹⁹ However, all five key screenwriting teachers espoused the importance of continuity in a similar way.

Managing the experience of the viewer or guaranteeing 'continuity' required careful use of point of view. Azlant claims that Sargent expresses in his manual what was implicitly understood in most early motion pictures about point of view as, 'ubiquitously omniscient, all-knowing and capable of viewing the action from any possible vantage.'⁵²⁰ Point of view had become an incredibly powerful tool in the hands of the writer, one that permitted a diegetic form of storytelling from the interior perspective of the character in a way hitherto unknown. However, the experience of the filmgoer needed to be carefully handled through skilful storytelling in an unbroken and seamless way, because verisimilitude or the illusion of real life could be easily lost, as Azlant observes:

this omniscience is not [...] automatic. It is deeply dependent on the sustenance of [...] the uninterrupted, continuous flow of narrative [...] and fragmentation, works against the audience's active participation in the plot, instead promoting a distanced deciphering of the film's form.⁵²¹

This method of storytelling was unique to the motion picture and required an adroit and accomplished use of novel narrative devices previously unavailable to the playwright. Instruction in this new form of storytelling was both necessary and essential if it were to thrive and develop, and the key screenwriting teachers were

⁵¹⁸ Ball, *Photoplay Scenarios*, 4.

⁵¹⁹ Azlant, 'Theory, History and Practice of Screenwriting,' 253.

⁵²⁰ *Ibid.*, 237.

⁵²¹ *Ibid.*, 237-239.

instrumental in supplying this, through their manuals and columns.

Sargent understood that the photoplay plot mediated the relationship between the fiction film and its actual sources; he says that a 'photoplay reproduces life and should be animated by life.'⁵²² Phillips agrees that 'we find something in this newest of the Arts that none other of the Fine Arts has; that is, the animated deed – the verisimilitude of life itself!'⁵²³ Such rhetorical statements echo Aristotle's treatment of the imitation of art in the *Poetics*:

When constructing plots and working them out complete with their linguistic expression, one should so far as possible visualize what is happening. By envisaging things very vividly in this way, as if one were actually present at the events themselves, one can find out what is appropriate, and inconsistencies are least likely to be overlooked.⁵²⁴

Barnaby Dallas perceptively suggests that 'Aristotle could not have possibly meant his words for the cinema, yet his statement could have been made by a photoplay theorist.'⁵²⁵ The imaginings of the scenarist could be fully realised in visual terms in a way that no theatrical production could match. These possibilities were also appreciated by theorists like Freeburg, who says that:

what distinguishes the photoplay from all other narrative and dramatic arts is the possibility of representing an action in its natural setting. For the first time in the history of the arts which mimic human happenings it has become possible for the spectator to go to the very spot where the action takes place.⁵²⁶

Leaving aside the fact that Freeburg's statements indulge in a certain amount of hyperbole and exaggeration, his treatise *The Art of Photoplay Making* was advertised in the trade and fan press. However, what differentiated the key screenwriting teachers from the theorists, who were not without influence, was not

⁵²² Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 25.

⁵²³ Phillips, *Feature Photoplay*, xii.

⁵²⁴ Aristotle, *Poetics*, 27.

⁵²⁵ Colonel Barnaby Dallas, 'Play, Photoplay, and Screenplay Structure: Dramatic Principles from Theater to Cinema' (MA Diss., Jan Hose State University, 2000), 39. ProQuest (UMI 1399789).

⁵²⁶ Freeburg, *Art of Photoplay Making*, 137.

necessarily their inventiveness but their potential reach and sphere of influence and the timing of their work. They were able to articulate this new understanding to a huge number of people both inside and outside the industry due to their prominence in the trade and fan press, their role as editors, directors and writers, and the extensive and sustained comment they made through columns and manuals. All this was achieved before the theorists had even published their ideas.

Further to this, the requirement of visual storytelling, without the dialogue that the theatre so liberally afforded, meant that the writer had to learn to use expository and dialogue subtitles skilfully. The key screenwriting teachers, in all probability, played an important role in helping to clarify and codify this practice; and were responsible for imparting valuable instruction in the concise, effective use of intertitles as unique literary devices that both aided segmentation and enhanced the storytelling possibilities. As Liepa's research has identified:

Screenwriting manuals both adopted and developed a specific lexicon for discussing filmmaking devices and practice. The language used to identify intertitles, both dialogue and expository, and describe their function, reveals something of how these authors conceptualized the function of these devices, influencing the popular perception of the role these devices should play.⁵²⁷

Liepa does not pinpoint the key screenwriting teachers as the most influential in this process, although he draws heavily upon them in his research. For reasons already identified in this thesis, we can surmise from the evidence that they probably were among the most influential, although this cannot be conclusively proved.

Maras argues that such early handbooks played a significant part in the development of writing for the screen, their contents largely reflecting increasingly established practices of the industry. Sargent's handbook, in particular, is presented as a guide for successful writing and the selling of photoplay scenarios and is grounded in the point of view of the scenario editor. He sets out the 'rules for the guidance of the author...with the full knowledge of the needs of the studio gained through service as

⁵²⁷ Liepa, 'Figures of Silent Speech,' 241.

an editor of scenarios.⁵²⁸ Sargent regularly refers to industry practices and figures, giving the impression he belonged to an extended 'Nyyssonen.'⁵²⁹ Of course the possibility that he exaggerated his influence for the purpose of self-propagation cannot be excluded. But even if this is true to some extent, it must be balanced against the wealth of evidence that he was in fact highly regarded by 'industry insiders', as the testimony I have presented appears to indicate. Azlant comments on what he believes Sargent's achievements to be:

The sum of Sargent's descriptions of the many techniques by which the scenarist works his materials into a finished scenario is extremely full, and he recognizes the almost incomprehensible complexity of combining all these considerations [...and] the working of a staggering number of variables and contingencies [...] into once craft, one exercise of creativity.⁵³⁰

In some respects, I believe it is possible to go further than Azlant and Maras in recognising Sargent as perhaps an even more highly significant and influential voice in the development of early screenwriting practice than previously acknowledged. In addition, the other four key screenwriting teachers identified in this study more than likely played an extremely important role in this process as well, and this needs to be recognised too.

By way of summary: storytelling in the new medium of the screen presented considerable challenges for the writer of the early twentieth century, and the skills required to do it were acquired within a span of just 20 years. In the early days of cinema, writing for film was not even a recognised activity; but by 1920 the craft was well established. Contrast this with literary and theatrical storytelling, which had developed over a period of more than two thousand years. It is impossible to prove definitively what actual, specific impact the key screenwriting teachers had, but this study contends that the evidence suggests they may well have significantly facilitated and aided the speedy development of the skill of writing for the screen and its professionalisation.

⁵²⁸ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay* (New York, MPW, 1912), 3; cited in Maras, *Screenwriting*, 160.

⁵²⁹ Maras, *Screenwriting*, 160.

⁵³⁰ Azlant, 'Theory, History and Practice of Screenwriting,' 254-255.

The tension over whether the key screenwriting teachers considered that they were providing artistic or artisanal instruction, or a blend of both, permeates their writings. As already mentioned, Shiner regards this as a false dichotomy and for him the answer to this perception of art divided is to unite 'freedom, imagination, and creativity [...] with facility, service and function.'⁵³¹ The discourse of the key screenwriting teachers is of special interest, because it locates and reflects the genesis of this debate in early film writing.

This thesis contends that the role of the screenwriting teacher was inextricably linked to the development of the screenwriting process in early cinema. I argue that not only did that process affect the kind of advice that was offered by screenwriting teachers, but further that their input also fed into, spurred, and shaped the development of that process. The advice that they gave was specific, detailed and closely attuned to the specific circumstances and developments in the industry. They were part of the melting-pot process in which writing for the screen was negotiated over this decade – from the ill-defined practice before 1910 until film companies had developed a self-sufficient means of producing their own story material and the submissions of amateur writers were no longer welcomed by the industry.

⁵³¹ Shiner, *Invention of Art*, 307.

11. The End of an Era

Decline in Freelance Submissions

The public promotion of scenario fever gradually abated, for a number of reasons. First, out of the many thousands of scripts that were received, there is evidence that most were of poor quality. By 1911, *Moving Picture World* reported that the operations of the average scenario department were highly organised and that the typical scenario editor was passing judgment on 60 scenarios a day, the vast majority of which were rejected: 'the scenarios that are accepted, according to the authority of the various editors, does not exceed one per cent.'⁵³² The article continues with:

scenario editors [had] to consider the reams of manuscripts that began to pour into their offices from unsuccessful playwrights and short story writers, who, in many instances, sent not scenarios, but complete plays, novels and short stories, most of them no more adapted to moving picture production than five wheels would be on a wagon.⁵³³

It is not possible to determine how many complete scripts by amateurs were ever turned into saleable films. Information from studios suggested that they only accepted a very low percentage of these submissions. For example, *Moving Picture World* noted when discussing Vitagraph that, during a four-month period, 'only about two per cent were accepted and only four of these were practical working scenarios.'⁵³⁴ According to Harrison, writing original material was easier said than done:

Original stories of high merit [...] are few and far between [...] and] the best paying productions have been wrought by those who have something new to say.⁵³⁵

In 1916 Sargent appeared to be slightly more optimistic. He believed: 'Probably eighty per cent of the scripts do not pass the first reader. The remainder are sent

⁵³² R.V.S., 'Scenario Construction,' *MPW*, February 11, 1911, 294.

⁵³³ *Ibid.*, 294.

⁵³⁴ 'Scenario Writing for Moving Pictures,' *MPW*, March 5, 1910, 335.

⁵³⁵ Harrison, 'Five Reels,' *MPW*, February 7, 1914, 652.

along to the editor.⁵³⁶ This meant that 20 per cent were at least considered. It is probable that amateur submissions provided the industry with inspiration, albeit indirectly.

William De Mille, head of the story department of the Jesse Lasky Feature Play Company, was gloomier. He estimated that within one year he received as many as ten thousand submissions from unknown writers. They 'bought two, made one of them into a picture – and it flopped.' The company gave up reading outside material as it was too time-consuming and gave them a poor return on their investment.⁵³⁷

Peacocke also admits to a problem, quoting Woods of the Fine Arts Studio on 'What Producers Want', which had been published in *Photoplay* in July 1916. Woods painted a disappointing picture about the quality of material he was receiving:

If we buy so little, it is because out of the mass of material that is being constantly offered we find so little that is adaptable to our peculiar wants. Everything we receive is carefully read, in the hope of finding somewhere a diamond in the rough; occasionally we find one, but not often.⁵³⁸

Peacocke also quotes Durant of Famous Players, whose views were even bleaker than those of Woods: 'Out of the mass of material, which is submitted to us we purchase only half of one percent!'⁵³⁹ The most detailed record of a story department of this period is in the *Biograph logbook* from 1910-1915. In 1910 Biograph bought 162 stories, of which 114 were made. By 1915 it bought 238 stories, of which 158 were made.⁵⁴⁰ This shows that even out of the small percentage of bought materials much was never filmed. By 1920 Patterson directly attributes the decline to the poor quality of scenarios received, since:

everyone was attempting it [... and] scenario writing was becoming the most popular form of 'indoor sport' [...but people] had absolutely no idea of the technique, of the form, of the camera, or of the procedure in the

⁵³⁶ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 7.

⁵³⁷ William de Mille, *Hollywood Saga* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1939), 126; cited by Stempel, *Framework*, 13.

⁵³⁸ Peacocke, *Hints on Photoplay Writing*, 100.

⁵³⁹ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁵⁴⁰ *Biograph Story Department Logbook* (New York, MOMA, 1910-15); cited by Stempel, *Framework*, 11.

business of making a photoplay.⁵⁴¹

Second, in addition to the bother of hundreds of unsolicited scripts arriving at each studio daily, producers began to suffer accusations of plagiarism. Such scares were fanned by the celebrated case of the spurious lawsuit brought by Mrs Mattie Thomas Thornton, an Atlanta housewife, against Cecil B. DeMille, claiming she had written the original screen story for *The Ten Commandments*.⁵⁴² Although such practice was not widespread, the editorial problems and legal jeopardy that accompanied amateur screenwriting drove the studios away from the public towards professional exclusivity. By the mid-teens, studios were no longer seeking freelance work and were wary of accepting work from unknown sources because of these issues.

Professionalisation of Writing for the Screen

The demand for freelance submissions gradually lessened. In 1913-1914, 'feature fever' had taken hold and it was 'the beginning of a limited number of major production companies that would end up with greater control of distribution and exhibition.'⁵⁴³ The First World War had largely eliminated European competition and meant that America was in a completely dominant position. This presented an enormous business opportunity for Hollywood to fill the vacuum and become a major exporter of films. The general public was gradually cut out of writing and it was far more difficult to get a story past the gatekeepers. The process of writing for the film industry had also become immensely more complex and the professional screenwriter was in the ascendancy. By the end of the decade, writing for film had largely been institutionalised and was done in-house by professionals.

Wright signals this shift even in 1912, when he records how few freelance writers actually make it: 'Ten thousand writers in the Moving Picture scenario field, and one in a hundred fairly successful.'⁵⁴⁴ Peacocke laments in his own column about the

⁵⁴¹ Patterson, *Cinema Craftsmanship*, 126.

⁵⁴² Mrs Thompson claimed she submitted the script to the Players-Lasky Film Company but it had it never been returned. It was later discovered that she had copied her version of the scenario from a pre-release account of the plot printed in the *Los Angeles Times*. See Charles Higham, *Cecil B. DeMille* (New York: Da Capo, 1973), 137-138.

⁵⁴³ Bowser, *Transformation of Cinema*, 224.

⁵⁴⁴ Wright, 'The Spark of Genius,' *MPSM*, September 1912, 136.

shifting practices of the studios, which had begun to employ their own staff writers to rework freelance scenario submissions. Sargent appears to share this concern and refers to Peacocke in his own column:

I think that you, William Lord Wright and myself have taken up the cudgels on behalf of the free lance writer more than others and endeavored to get manufacturers to see that the author and not the director or staff writer is the logical person to make the continuity.⁵⁴⁵

Sargent records, in his assessment of ten years of the industry in 1917, that photoplay writers had ended up where they began. The continuity writers had taken over the main task of writing the scenario and ideas were sometimes supplied by outsiders. He says: 'There are inside writers and tipsters.' In effect he was saying the current phase was over for the freelance writer:

In the past decade we have worked in a full circle back to the starting point of synopsis. [...] Today the detailed synopsis or scenario is sent instead of a letter of fifty or one hundred words, but the idea is the same.⁵⁴⁶

However, the bleakness of the situation for the amateur writer is more directly referred to in *Motography* in 1917, as a definite separation of classes of writers became more defined:

There are only two classes of motion picture scenario writers – a few whose work is in real demand, who collaborate with the producers and get good prices; and a great many whose work is of little or no value and most of whom will never succeed.⁵⁴⁷

Only three years later, in 1920, Patterson openly refers to the pathway that any prospective writer must take if they were to succeed in the profession. The only opening for an amateur was the submission of a synopsis, but the real professionals were the staff writers who had a proven track record:

Continuity writing [...] has become a profession in itself, and the writer

⁵⁴⁵ Sargent, 'Necessity of Encouraging the Author,' *MPW*, July 22, 1916, 623.

⁵⁴⁶ Sargent, 'Photoplay Writing Then and Now,' *MPW*, March 10, 1917, 1491-92.

⁵⁴⁷ 'Better Treatment for the Story Writer,' *Motography*, September 29, 1917, 651.

[...] needs long and careful training before he can handle a script successfully. [...] Writers must submit their ideas in synopsis form, and if they were purchased the company would farm out the continuity to scenarioists whose skill had been tried and proved.⁵⁴⁸

This is a reversal of Peacocke's ideas that staff writers were simply 'constructionists' who were employed to rewrite the original ideas of freelance writers into workable scripts. The freelance writer had, in fact, been relegated to the sidelines. This shift is registered in 1922 when Wright, who begins his chapter on: 'What scenario editors want from you' with the directive: 'You must write your story in synopsis form.'⁵⁴⁹ As already stated, this position is confirmed in Phillips's last two manuals, which are written with the synopsis particularly in mind.

Within three years, the film industry had completely turned away from the general public as a major source of story material and toward the professional screenwriter, as Brownlow points out:

By the mid-twenties, the work of the amateur photoplay writer was no longer destined for the screen but for the wastepaper basket. The motion-picture business was now the exclusive domain of the professionals. The days of experiment were over.⁵⁵⁰

Maras argues that the trade press advice reflected what he calls 'particularism,' or the drift towards an exclusive professional writing elite that fashioned screenwriting technique as a specialised field of knowledge. The possibility of amateur writers continuing to flood the market with their material affected the prospects of the more professional writers, who were attempting to improve their status. Initially, this put the industry management in a very powerful position and would help to keep writers subjugated in a lower position. However, in the end, it was only the writers who could easily participate in this arena, which demanded specialised knowledge determined by the gatekeepers and authorities in the field, who could survive.⁵⁵¹

⁵⁴⁸ Patterson, *Cinema Craftsmanship*, 126.

⁵⁴⁹ Wright, *Photoplay Writing*, 9.

⁵⁵⁰ Brownlow, *Parade's Gone By*, 278.

⁵⁵¹ Maras, *Screenwriting*, 24-25

Maras believes that this knowledge of the proper technique begins to serve as ‘a key marker of the difference between the aspirant or amateur writer and the successful scenario writer.’⁵⁵² Ironically, Sargent himself marks the demise of the freelance writer in 1918, with the declaration that ‘photoplay writing is no longer the toy of the multitude. It is a profession.’ Sargent goes on to say categorically: ‘There is no opening for the untrained man at present.’⁵⁵³ His original intention, and that of the other key screenwriting teachers, may have been to broaden the base of writers and to help skill these people. Ultimately, they had helped to narrow the field of writers to those few amateurs who managed to succeed and the talent culled from the journalistic and literary establishment, thereby encouraging further specialisation, which would strengthen the position of the insiders. Even though the earlier ‘eminent authors’ programme had failed, Sargent admits in 1917 that there had been a ‘gradual absorption of real writers by the studios.’⁵⁵⁴ A process of professionalisation of screenwriting had taken place.

Demise of the Early Screenwriting Teacher

Film companies were no longer openly seeking for submissions from freelance writers, as writing had largely gone in-house. Some advertisements placed by writing schools, such as the Palmer Photoplay Corporation, for the sale of their published manuals, continued to appear sporadically in the trade and fan press throughout the early 1920s, but their presence gradually tailed off.⁵⁵⁵ The publication of new manuals gradually ceased and screenwriting columns dried up. Of the key screenwriting teachers, Peacocke ceased writing a regular column in 1917, Phillips in 1918, Sargent in 1919 and Wright in 1921. Wright, in 1921 and Phillips, in 1922 published their final manuals. The role of the screenwriting teacher was over for this phase of screenwriting history.

⁵⁵² Ibid., 162.

⁵⁵³ Sargent, ‘The Photoplaywright,’ *MPW*, May 25, 1918, 1136.

⁵⁵⁴ Sargent, ‘Photoplay Writing Then and Now,’ *MPW*, March 10, 1917, 1491-1492.

⁵⁵⁵ See advertisements for Wright’s, ‘Photoplay Writing,’ *MPN*, March 10, 1923, 1205 and ‘The Palmer Photoplay Institute,’ *Photoplay*, March 1925, 127.

PART THREE – LEGACY

It is not possible to measure precisely what might have flowed down from early screenwriting teachers to their modern-day counterparts, because so much film history has happened in between. This study has attempted to locate early screenwriting teachers within their historical context and to demonstrate their importance and contribution to the industry during that period. However, by making associations, tracing connections and drawing out some possible similarities between then and now, this brief analysis will speculate on some possible contributions that early screenwriting teachers may have left as a legacy to modern screenwriting gurus and the current screenwriting community. This will be done by assessing early screenwriting teachers' equivalence with modern screenwriting gurus, their involvement in the evolution of the screenplay, and their impact on the education of screenwriters.

1. Equivalence with Modern Screenwriting Gurus

As indicated at the outset of this study, the work of screenwriting teachers can be situated within three broad phases of screenwriting history, based on how the Hollywood industry was structured in each particular period. At the end of each of these periods a major shift in organisation occurred, which directly affected the level and type of activity in which screenwriting teachers were engaged. The first of these periods has formed the main basis of this study (1895-1920s), although screenwriting teachers were only fully active from around 1911 onwards. Subsequent to this were the studio era (1920s-1950/60s) and the era of the package unit system and resultant independent production (1950/60s-present day).

During the studio era (1920s-1950/60s), the studios controlled everything, from the conception of an idea through to its execution. Story departments largely took over the script development role of the early screenwriting teachers and instruction went in-house. This meant that it was a particularly lean period for widely shared instruction about screenwriting. However, in Liepa's opinion, the involvement of the wider public had been beneficial:

The participatory reputation of film writing would help the industry retain

a connection to its popular base even as production became closed to the general public, and moreover granted early film writing considerable cultural influence beyond its impact on studio production.¹

The industry's dalliance with the amateur freelance writer meant that shared knowledge about technique and process entered the public domain and the consciousness of the general populace. A wide-ranging and open discourse about screenwriting had taken place in the fan and trade press columns and through the many manuals that had been published over a 12-year period. No such open discourse had ever taken place on the subject of playwriting. According to Liepa, this would mean that:

[although] industry concerns would certainly dominate the later developments of film writing, they would always be tempered and in many ways underwritten by popular influence.²

Despite the general exclusion of outsiders from the industry, some notable works on screenwriting were still written during the studio era. Six manuals stand out among the few that were published: Tamar Lane's *The New Technique of Cinema Writing* (1936), Frances Marion's *How to Write and Sell Film Stories* (1937), Eugene Vale's *The New Technique of Screen Writing* (1944), John Howard Lawson's *Theory and Technique of Playwriting and Screenwriting* (1949), Clara Beranger's *Writing for the Screen* (1950) and Lewis Herman's *Practical Manual of Screen Playwriting* (1952).

These manuals were integral to, and representative of, the development of screenwriting practice during this period.³ They were more than likely written for the insider, although some seem to maintain the possibility that the freelance writer could still succeed. In 1936 Lane still addresses both the freelance and the professional writer, although the bar is set high. He stresses the level of

¹ Liepa, 'Entertaining the Public Option' in ed., Jill Neldes, *Analyzing the Screenplay*, 8.

² *Ibid.*, 20.

³ All six manual writers have extensive writing credits. Lane wrote *The Isle of Destiny* (1920) and *A Self Made Failure* (1924); Marion has 188 writing credits and won Oscars for *The House* (1930) and *The Champ* (1931); Vale's credits include *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (1944) and *A Global Affair* (1964) and he was Oscar nominated for his documentary, *The Dark Wave* (1956); Lawson was Oscar nominated for *The Blockade* (1938), but his career was hampered by accusations from the House Un-American Activities Committee on his Communist sympathies; Beranger was prolific, with 96 credits, and is known for *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1920) and Herman is known for the film noir *Strange Impersonation* (1946). See *IMDbPro*: <https://pro-labs.imdb.com>

professionalism required from both 'those in the elementary stages of screen writing [and] experienced authors and playwrights' who must 'give much time and thought to a thorough study of the new studio demands.'⁴ Marion claims in 1937 that the studios were 'welcoming stories by talented free-lance writers.'⁵ Beranger also says that because of 'the dearth of good stories [...] the author with visual and dramatic imagination has a good chance of selling an original screen story' through an agent.⁶ However, she also admits that opportunities to be engaged as a staff writer are few and far between.⁷ It is hard to know whether these appeals had more to do with a ploy to sell more manuals or came from a genuine conviction that a complete amateur could break through. Both Vale and Beranger also taught screenwriting on university courses, so these particular students of their work may have stood more chance.⁸ The precise detail of how this particular discourse and the dissemination of the content of their manuals interacted with the studio system and outsiders is a question that is beyond the reach of this study.

What can be affirmed is that what had been learnt in the early period was largely internalised and refined by the industry over a 40-year period; and what Bordwell and Thompson have identified as the 'Classical Hollywood Cinema' was established.⁹ A cursory examination of the content and organisation of these manuals confirms that they are broadly reflective of this continued refinement and codification. Lane is principally concerned with the conversion from silent films to sound and is less detailed in his description of story construction.¹⁰ Marion's aim is to dispense all necessary information in order to help orientate the prospective writer 'toward giving the motion-picture studios what they want,' so the manual is detailed and comprehensive.¹¹ Herman clearly delineates the three-act structure as the

⁴ Tamar Lane, *The New Technique of Screen Writing* (New York: Whittlesey House, 1936), vi.

⁵ Frances Marion, *How to Write and Sell Film Stories* (New York: Covici Friede, 1937), 13.

⁶ Clara Beranger, *Writing for the Screen* (Iowa: Brown, 1950), 162.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 167.

⁸ Both Beranger and Vale lectured on screenwriting at USC (University of Southern California). See 'Clara Beranger,' *Women Film Pioneers Project*, <https://wfpp.cdrs.columbia.edu/pioneer/ccp-clara-beranger/> and 'Eugene Vale,' *IMDbPro*: https://pro-labs.imdb.com/name/nm0883884/?ref_=sch_int

⁹ Thompson and Bordwell, *Film History*, 32.

¹⁰ Lane, *New Technique of Screen Writing*, 3-35.

¹¹ Marion, *How to Write and Sell Film Stories*, vii.

model for screenwriting and Vale, Lawson and Beranger all unmistakably link the skills required for screenwriting to playwriting tradition.¹² Oddly, none of these screenwriting teachers acknowledges their indebtedness to any teachers of the silent era for laying the groundwork.

In the era of the package unit system (1950/60s to the present), circumstances contrived to create conditions in some ways similar to those of the early period. Studios changed from being highly stratified entities controlling every aspect of production into operations providing contracted-out services for package-led productions. A single producer organised a film project by securing the finance, hiring the studio and outsourcing employment, including that of writers.¹³ Writers were no longer on contract or being trained in-house by studio story departments and freelance writers once again had a toehold in the industry.

This shift in organisation triggered an increase in the level of activity of screenwriting teachers, which resembled that of the early period. Again, the general public was drawn in and a similar level of interest resulted – a level of interest that remains in place today. Although this phase of screenwriting history is not the primary focus of this study, it may be possible to draw out some parallels and comparisons, which may further elucidate the overall role and contribution of early screenwriting teachers to the Hollywood film industry, and throw some light on the current activity of those who have come to be known as ‘screenwriting gurus’. As Allen and Gomery suggest:

The historian’s study of the past seeks to explain why a particular set of historical circumstances came about and with what consequences. The historian’s interest in the past stems directly or indirectly from the belief that an understanding of the past is useful in understanding the present.¹⁴

By the late 1970s, a spate of manuals had been published, the most significant of these being Syd Field’s *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting* (1979) with

¹² Herman, *Practical Manual of Screen Playwriting for Theatre and Television Films*, (1952: repr., Meridian, 1974) 21-22, Vale, *Technique of Screenplay Writing*, 95-99, John Howard Lawson, *Theory and Technique of Playwriting and Screenwriting* (New York: Putnam’s, 1949), 364 and Beranger, *Writing for the Screen*, 52-55.

¹³ Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, *Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 330 and 367.

¹⁴ Allen and Gomery, *Film History*, 6.

its focus on three-act structure. This may not have been a new concept, since Constance Nash and Virginia Oakey diagrammatically represent their 'script divisions' in this way in *The Screenwriter's Handbook* (1974).¹⁵ However, Field brought it to the fore with his structural 'paradigm'. Thompson points out that this popularised:

a much more specific formulation of a 'three-act structure' [...that] has become enormously influential among screenwriters, studio heads, and employees alike – so much so that the book is sometimes referred to as the 'Bible' of screenwriters.¹⁶

The term 'screenwriting guru' seems to have become common parlance in the screenwriting community for describing the screenwriting teachers who have been active since the 1970s. Today it continues to denote the increasing myriad of so-called experts who now pepper the writers' conference circuit explaining their particular 'take' on how to write the successful screenplay. The steady publication of new manuals became a flood by the 1990s and the level of activity has still not abated. Field was soon joined by others, such as Robert McKee and Christopher Vogler, who also wrote their manuals from first-hand experience as studio story analysts.¹⁷ This gave them the advantage of knowing exactly what was required, in a similar way to the studio editors of the early period. The ranks have been swelled by many others, such as Lewis Hunter, Richard Walter, John Truby, Michael Hauge, Linda Seger and Linda Aronson, to name but a few.

The demand for 'original' stories, characteristic of the early period when 'scenario fever' produced dozens of how-to books, contests and privately run screenwriting schools, was repeating itself. As Decherney observes: 'The legacy of this culture, in which everyone has a screenplay, is still with us.'¹⁸ Stempel calls this the 'Return of the Son of Scenario Fever,' as it smacks of the early period, with its proliferation of manuals and private correspondence courses and the rapid rise to almost celebrity status of a number of screenwriting gurus:

¹⁵ Constance Nash and Virginia Oakey, *The Screenwriter's Handbook* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1974), 2-3.

¹⁶ Thompson, *Storytelling in the New Hollywood*, 22.

¹⁷ 'Guru' as a term is regularly applied to screenwriting teachers in the modern period by academics such as Bordwell. He calls Field, McKee and Vogler, 'script gurus'. See Bordwell, *The Way Hollywood Tells it*, 28.

¹⁸ Decherney, *Hollywood and the Culture Elite*, 43-44.

not only were there screenwriting courses in colleges and privately run schools, there were also series of weekend seminars taught by such well-known screenwriting teachers as Robert McKee and Richard Walter.¹⁹

The demand for the kind of services that screenwriting gurus offered may have also been fuelled by the wider cultural currency, notion or fantasy of the desire for celebrity status. The sheer pervasiveness of film and media in modern Western society and the draw of being famous for creating it cannot be overestimated. As Cooper Lawrence argues, the widespread fascination with celebrity is more than likely associated with 'our need to form bonds and social connections' in an increasingly busy and socially fragmented society.²⁰

On the surface, the early period does appear to bear some likeness to what is happening today. Film had become the main entertainment medium by the late teens of the twentieth century; working in the film industry appeared glamorous and many people wanted to enter it. However, the wider social reasons that might explain this fascination with stardom might be different from those of today. As pointed out earlier, Morey puts this fascination down to a desire for self-expression. She suggests this may have been stimulated by a sense of disenfranchisement on the part of those individuals who felt excluded from the dominant culture of American society.²¹ Success in the film industry would provide an individual with the social capital to improve their status in this society.

The manuals of recent screenwriting gurus are written to gain the widest possible public appeal in order to sell more copies, regardless of how many readers could really write saleable scripts. Nevertheless, there is always the draw that a successful screenwriting career does pay extremely well. With this prospect, the slick presentation skills and easy-to-follow steps of the screenwriting guru explaining how to write a potential 'Hollywood blockbuster' play into that rather nebulous and evasive notion of the 'American dream'; this again is not too dissimilar to the early

¹⁹ Stempel, *Framework*, 256.

²⁰ Cooper Lawrence, *The Cult of Celebrity: What Our Fascination with Stars Reveals About Us* (Connecticut: Globe Pequot, 2009), 236-237.

²¹ See 19-20 and 122.

period, with its prospect of sudden success and wealth as America emerged as an entrepreneurial and industrial power.

The modern screenwriting guru is a controversial figure and is often viewed from a negative perspective. The very epithet 'guru' has quasi-religious connotations. Various dictionaries define a 'guru' as anything from a 'revered mentor' or 'influential teacher' to a guide in 'intellectual,' 'spiritual' or 'philosophical' matters.²² The idea of the 'guru' has enjoyed a certain cultural resonance since the 1960s when Westerners, such as the Beatles, dallied with religious mysticism. For the convinced religious adherent of some philosophies or creeds it implied devotion to, or the following of, a particular body of instruction, and in some cases the elevation of the 'guru' to virtually cult status.

The term has since been applied to other areas of knowledge and used to refer to experts in disciplines including popular psychology, business practice, the 'life skills' movement, and screenwriting. Such populist speakers and writers distil apparently complex notions into easy-to-follow steps for the general public to consume. These kinds of gurus resist the idea that there are enclaves of knowledge to which only the truly initiated and trained expert have right of entry. As Tony Keily points out:

[the] flavour comes from a whole generation of American self-help and pop psychology bestsellers. The ones that tell you, you can. You can. Stop smoking, lose weight, stop losing money on stocks, speed read, use more than 10% of your brain, be confident, swing that club like a pro, get fit, get fucked. Oh, and why not? Screenwrite.²³

According to Kathryn Millard, screenwriting gurus and their books fit the notion of the self-styled guru and parallel many of the features of their counterparts in other fields:

words like 'success,' 'tips' and 'techniques' all feature strongly in screenwriting books, and the language of both religion and pop psychology abounds in both screenwriting texts and seminars [...]. In a seminar that I attended in Sydney in the early 1990's, Christopher Vogler, author of *The Writer's Journey*, even advised participants to

²² For Dictionary Definitions see *Oxford Dictionary* online, *Cambridge Dictionary* online, *Collins Dictionary* online, *Dictionary.com* and *The Free Dictionary.com*.

²³ Tony Keily, 'Gurus Methods Teachers,' *Film Ireland* August/September, 2001.

‘take the template and go out into the world. See the changes it will make in your life.’ It is not that big a leap then, to view many of the (mostly North American) screenwriting books as having most value as contributions to the literature of the self-help movement.²⁴

Millard draws on the work of psychologist Steven Starker to support her contention that most screenwriting manuals strongly relate stipulated actions to particular outcomes:

The prescribed behaviours usually are linked with the presumed utility of the work by way of a simple promise: ‘do this and you will get that.’ Failure to achieve the desired results usually suggests that the prescribed behaviours have not been followed faithfully.²⁵

Leaving aside the dubious claims that have developed alongside the self-help movement, the self-improvement culture of the early period does actually bear some resemblance to its modern day manifestation and resonates with it. Liepa neatly draws out this connection:

The legacy of amateur film writing, in fact, continues to loom large today with the profusion of screenplay manuals, romantic success stories of screenwriters who ‘made it,’ and screenwriting courses offered in colleges around the country, still promising to divine market demands and convey them to eager novices.²⁶

As already noted, Morey has also demonstrated that a similar desire for self-improvement was a major theme in the handbook culture of the early period.²⁷ Fan press literature carried many advertisements about how to achieve success through personal development, public speaking and career progression in virtually every area, including the creative industries.²⁸ Screenwriting advertisements were similar in

²⁴ Kathryn Millard, ‘Writing for the Screen: Beyond the Gospel of Story,’ *Journal of Media Arts Culture*, June 2006, accessed October 13, 2013, http://scan.net.au/scan/journal/display.php?journal_id=77

²⁵ See Steven Starker, *Oracle at the Supermarket: the American Preoccupation with Self Help Books* (London: Transaction, 1989) 9-10; cited in Millard, ‘Writing for the Screen,’ *Journal of Media Arts Culture*, June 2006.

²⁶ Liepa, ‘Entertaining the Public Option,’ ed., Jill Nelmes in *Analyzing the Screenplay*, 20.

²⁷ Morey, *Hollywood Outsiders*, 4-22.

²⁸ See advertisements, ‘The Intense Life, The Better Life – Swoboda System of Conscious Evolution,’ 6-7, ‘Modern Eloquence’ by Geo. L. Shuman, 10, ‘Become a Lawyer: We train you by Mail’ – La Salle Extension University, 159 in April, 1915, *Photoplay* and ‘Practical Art: You can make good at it’ – Rosing School of

their appeal, containing strong claims and promising successful outcomes.²⁹

The legitimate early screenwriting teachers (those recognised and accredited by the industry) had salutary remarks at the ready to prepare their prospective followers for the possibility of failure. For those who thought only of making money, Wright cautions, 'You will have to look on scenario writing as a diversion, an interesting pastime, something you can afford to entertain yourself with.'³⁰ Wright goes even further by claiming the writing process could:

mold you and make you as no other agency will. Knowledge will come, and power will grow for you, and with knowledge and power will come a sense of responsibility for others.³¹

This is very similar to comments made by Hauge in 1991, who claims that 'as long as you find the process of writing screenplays personally fulfilling, then you should keep at it.'³² In an echo of Vogler's words (cited earlier), Hauge also asserted at a seminar in 2011, that writing screenplays might even prove to be a life-changing experience, irrespective of any monetary gain.³³

Modern screenwriting gurus have faced much disapproval and their work is often dismissed by industry figures, including working screenwriters, as irrelevant. A number of successful screenwriters have been highly critical of screenwriting gurus and rarely admit to owing any of their understanding or craft to them. The rather jaundiced view of the highly successful Lee Hall, writer of *Billy Elliot* (2000) and *Gabriel and Me* (2001), is typical of many:

I spent about six months [...] reading all those 'How to Write a

Lettering and Design, 5, 'Travelling Men Earn Larger Salaries Than Any Other Class Of Men,' National Saleman's Training Assn, 165, 'Improve your Face by Making Faces' by Professor Anthony Barker, 168 in *MPM*, August 1915.

²⁹ See advertisements '\$500 in Cash for Motion Picture Plots – How to Write Photoplays' by Elbert Moore in *Photoplay*, February 1915, 186 and 'The Art of Selling a Photoplay' – Photoplay Clearing House, in *MPM*, September 1915, 151.

³⁰ Wright, *Photoplay Writing*, 7.

³¹ Wright, *Motion Picture Story*, 226.

³² Michael Hauge, *Writing Screenplays that Sell* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), xx.

³³ *Screenwriters' Summit* in Toronto, 2011. I attended the presentation given by Hauge and these were his parting words. See Toronto Screenwriters' Summit 2011 held on March 28, 2011, Hollywood University Blog, <http://hollywoodu.net/2011/03/28/screenwriters-summit-2011-toronto/>

Screenplay' books [...]. They're both useful and complete rubbish. All they actually say is a screenplay should have a beginning, a middle and an end – in that order. The rest is filler, really.³⁴

Scot Myers, whose credits include *K-9* (1989), *Alaska* (1996) and *K-9: P.I.* (2002), criticises screenwriting gurus for emphasising structure over other storytelling elements, which he claims has led to formulaic stories, thinly drawn characters, and narratives without emotional resonance. For him, becoming a screenwriter means:

striving to learn the craft day in and day out [...] it takes time, it takes work, it takes immersing oneself in the world of cinema, it takes reading hundreds of scripts, watching thousands of movies.³⁵

Leaving aside the fact that his list of activities sounds very similar to those advocated by the early key screenwriting teachers as a means of learning the craft, Myers remains negative about modern screenwriting gurus. He quotes Frank Darabont, writer of *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) and *The Green Mile* (1999), who he claims crystallises his thoughts on this:

Everybody wants to hear, 'I can teach you a three-act structure. I can give you a formula, and you'll be selling screenplays within six months.' Bullshit. And what's really funny is, these guys in the business of being screenwriting gurus, they don't ever write screenplays. I have never seen one of these guys' names on a screen credit.³⁶

Such comments indicate that these screenwriters have at least accessed or referred to these books during their careers, even though they are very critical of them. We can speculate that inexperienced writers may initially seek out as much help as they can get; however, once they have achieved success, it is not inconceivable that they may be less willing to give any credit or acknowledgement to anything or anyone that may have aided them in that success. After all, it may make them appear less creative and kill the commonly-held myth that such things cannot be taught. Perhaps

³⁴ Alistair Owen, ed., *Story and Character – Interviews with British Screenwriters* (London: Bloomsbury, 2003), 40-41.

³⁵ Christopher Boone, 'How I Really Feel About Screenwriting Gurus: Courtesy of Frank Darabont and Scott Myers,' *No Film School*, July 23, 2012, <http://nofilmschool.com/2012/07/screenwriting-gurus-frank-darabont-scott-myers>

³⁶ *Ibid.*

this will mean they may lose respect and admiration for their own work.

Dan O'Bannon, whose credits include *Alien* (1979) and *Total Recall* (1990), expresses a similarly negative view about screenwriting gurus, in discussions about his screenwriting career with the late William Froug. He claims: 'What there is out there is usually how to do the format. Most of what is written about how to write a screenplay is written by people who don't know how.'³⁷ Ironically, Froug was regarded as a screenwriting guru himself and had given many seminars and written extensively on how to write screenplays.³⁸ However, Froug tended to play this down and highlight his standing as an industry insider and Emmy-nominated screenwriter instead.³⁹ His seminars and writings indicate that he did not wish to be categorised with other screenwriting gurus, was dismissive of them and regarded them with suspicion. This was either because he genuinely believed that most of them had never had any significant success as screenwriters or he thought it might damage his own status as a screenwriter.⁴⁰

This brings me to a very important point. Although it is probably true to say that some modern screenwriting gurus have never written a successful screenplay, or worked effectively as professionals in the film industry, this is certainly not the whole story. Modern screenwriting gurus have, in fact, never had any common pedigree. A number have come from the ranks of story editors and analysts, creative producers and, most importantly, writers, some of whom do have impressive screenwriting credits.⁴¹ This bears some resemblance to the early period, in which the key screenwriting teachers generally had an impressive industry track record, but there

³⁷ William Froug, *The New Screenwriter looks at the New Screenwriter* (Los Angeles: Silman-James, 1992), 59. Froug could be dubbed as a 'guru' as his book sold well and his screenwriting seminars were well attended.

³⁸ See Froug, *Screenwriting Tricks of the Trade* (Los Angeles: Silman-James, 1993). The hyperbolic claims on the book jacket confirm his status in the community screenwriting gurus. Hunter (himself a 'script guru' gushes praise in claiming Froug is 'THE premiere screenwriting teacher in the history of motion pictures.'

³⁹ Froug is best known for his TV series *The Twilight Zone* (1959-64) and *Bewitched* (1964-72), which was Emmy nominated in 1967. See 'William Froug,' *IMDbPro*: https://pro-labs.imdb.com/name/nm0296618/?ref_=sch_int

⁴⁰ Froug, 'Screenwriting Tricks of the Trade – The Workshop,' *Writers Audio Shop* (Allen: Timberwolf Press, 1993).

⁴¹ Many of the current screenwriting gurus such as Hunter, Vogler, McKee and Field have impressive screenwriting, producing or acting credits. However, Truby, who was a story analyst and wrote *The Anatomy of Story* has only one writer/director screen credit, *All American Boy* (2003), as does Hauge for *Hoops & Yoyo's Haunted Halloween* (2012). See *IMDbPro*: <https://pro-labs.imdb.com>

was also a more mixed level of experience and industry recognition for those on the periphery.

Many successful writers admit that, at some point, they have signed up to a screenwriting seminar or read a 'how to' book. The gurus cite many endorsements from named writers, who each claim they have been helped by a particular guru's 'take' on screenwriting.⁴² For many, it seems to have become a 'rite of passage' to attend the three-day 'Story' seminar led by McKee, whose profile as a screenwriting guru is illustrated by his presence as a character in the Oscar-winning film *Adaptation* (2002) written by Charlie Kaufman. Many of the same prospective writers will be found at a whole barrage of conferences led by leading gurus as they tour the main European and American cities.⁴³ Their manuals have also sold extremely well too, with Field's *Screenplay* topping the list with over half a million copies sold over four editions.⁴⁴

Some contemporary successful screenwriters do acknowledge the contributions of screenwriting gurus. Jim Sheridan is one such writer, whose credits include *My Left Foot* (1989), *In the Name of the Father* (1993) and *The Boxer* (1997):

Film is a time medium and the job of the writer is to create emotions which the audience responds to in a time structure. People like Syd Field [...] have examined this structure, showing how Hollywood movies tend to follow the traditional three acts [...]. It works with audiences because they are used to the pattern and they feel safe with it [...]. A writer must

⁴² McKee is endorsed by two-time Oscar winner, William Goldman and Ed Saxon, Oscar winning producer of *Silence of the Lambs* (1991). See Robert McKee website, <http://mckeestory.com>. Truby is endorsed by Jeff Arch who was Oscar nominated for *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993) and the five times Emmy-nominated Richard Kramer. See John Truby website, 'Endorsements,' *The Anatomy of Story Master Class*, <http://trubywriting.com/node/10>. Hauge is endorsed by Shane Black, whose credits include *Lethal Weapon* (1987, 1989 and 1992) and Terry Rossio whose credits include *Shrek* (2001 and 2004) and *Pirates of the Caribbean* (2003, 2006, 2007 and 2001). See Michael Hauge, *Story Mastery*, <http://www.storymastery.com>. Vogler is endorsed by Darren Aronofsky, Oscar nominated for *Black Swan* (2010) and Bruce Joel Rubin who won the Oscar for *Ghost* (1990). See Christopher Vogler, *The Essence of Storytelling*, <http://www.christophervogler.com>.

⁴³ The Screenwriters Summit features leading screenwriting gurus such as Truby, Vogler, Hauge and Seger in joint conferences in many cities across the world, see Final Draft Newsletter for 2014 conference, http://newsletter.finaldraft.com/newsletter-20140123_WritersSummit.html. I have attended conferences led by Field, Truby and McKee and met many of the same writers trawling the conference circuit.

⁴⁴ McKee, *Story* is in its 19th US and 14th UK printing; Vogler, *The Writer's Journey* has sold 200,000 copies over two US editions and Seger, *Making a Good Script Great* had sold 250,000 copies by 2006. See Conor, *Screenwriting: Creative Labor and Professional Practice*, 132.

manipulate the story within the conventional structure while trying to make it seem unconventional and unexpected to the audience.⁴⁵

One thing is clear: the presence of screenwriting gurus as an adjunct to Hollywood and the views they hold provoke different reactions. Screenwriting gurus have been variously associated with encouraging formulaic output from Hollywood and offering simplistic writing solutions. Having inspired such ire, it may well be asked whether a significant number of them are simply opportunists, out to make money from desperate ‘wannabees’ unlikely to ever write a successful screenplay, or whether they are in large part professional teachers who are making a significant contribution to the screenwriting fraternity? Despite the controversy around their work, they remain well-known and their popular appeal has not waned.

In contrast, and unjustifiably, the early key screenwriting teachers *have* become a footnote in screenwriting history, although this study will hopefully rectify this. Their virtual omission from the historical record is certainly not deserved, as these screenwriting teachers came from the writing fraternity and were highly regarded in their day. Admittedly, this was not true of the many correspondence schools and clearing houses run by charlatans, but these were vilified by the industry, including what we might term the ‘genuine’ teachers. The successful screenwriter, Jeannie Macpherson, writes positively about the contribution of screenwriting teachers in 1922:

The fundamentals of screen technique, though not the creative ‘spark,’ can be learned from books and competent teachers – and the best way in the world to learn to apply these principles is by learning to write salable screen stories.⁴⁶

However, by the time this was written the fate of the early screenwriting teacher had already been sealed. Peacocke stated in his regular column for *Photoplay* that ‘it is difficult to predict what the future of the moving picture industry is going to bring forth.’⁴⁷ He recognised he was a man of his time and, as the film industry was constantly changing, it was difficult to know what would happen next. Nevertheless,

⁴⁵ Declan McGrath and Felim MacDermott, *Screencraft – Screenwriting* (Switzerland: RotoVision, 2003), 54.

⁴⁶ MacPherson, ‘Functions of the Continuity Writer’ in *Opportunities in the Motion Picture Industry*, 33.

⁴⁷ Peacocke, ‘The Scenario Writer and the Director,’ *Photoplay*, May 1917, 112.

he remained optimistic about the future, even though he did not realise it would permanently sideline him and others of his ilk:

There will shortly be a wild scramble for original photoplays [read screenplays] written especially for the screen by writers who are thoroughly capable and who have a virile imagination.⁴⁸

His forecasts about the prospects for the freelance writer at that time did not come true once the studio system was established. There would be less need for instruction and with that would come not only the disappearance of the key screenwriting teachers from the scene, but also their virtual obliteration from the historical record. Ironically, the rise of independent production, decades later, has made Peacocke's predictions sound strangely modern, as today's freelance writers also buy into a probably mythic bonanza of writing opportunities.

The issue of whether screenwriting gurus are teaching an art or a craft also continues to permeate the debate today, because the dichotomised intellectual constructs of 'art' and 'craft' that Shiner identified are still in play. Interestingly, Truby responds to Darabont's criticisms (cited earlier) about screenwriting gurus in an interview:

I'm not teaching them the art of writing, nobody can teach them that [...] what I'm trying to do is teach all these craft elements, these techniques which are very useful. [referring to Darabont...] What they don't admit or tell you is that they have quite a background of craft technique that they know [possibly due to] natural storytelling ability and through the practice of writing they have developed these techniques.⁴⁹

The art/craft issue is in fact the crux or axiom of the continual debate that surrounds the worthwhileness of these individuals' work, and Truby attempts to negotiate this in his answer. It is a strong example of the continuity between the early screenwriting teachers and today's screenwriting gurus in trying to articulate how far something like screenwriting can be taught, rather than it being seen as a lofty gift. As Conor points out, these continued tensions play into a 'wider battle for legitimacy that

⁴⁸ Peacocke, 'Hints on Photoplay Writing,' *Photoplay*, January 1916, 124.

⁴⁹ Truby, 'Thoughts on Screenwriting Gurus' on *Youtube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k267ReHztF4>

dominates the subsequent discourse about screenwriting as a new but marginal literary form.’ As screenwriters sit between the worlds of literature/theatre and filmmaking it has led to ‘wider debates on familiar polarizing terrain: art versus commerce, craft versus creativity, artist versus hack.’⁵⁰ Screenwriting teachers of the past and their modern counterparts, the screenwriting gurus, will continue to be embroiled in these controversies.

The modern freelance writer seeks practical instruction in a similar way to the amateur writers of the early period. While there are significant contextual differences, many of the maxims and concerns of those early screenwriting teachers still resonate in the platitudes and advice of the modern screenwriting gurus. This guidance presents an interesting connection between the activity and role of the screenwriting gurus of today and the screenwriting teachers of the past. Early screenwriting teachers coached prospective writers on how to train for, write for, and sell to the industry, and these three concerns still form the basis of instruction of the modern screenwriting gurus of today.

Training for the Industry

Modern screenwriting gurus encourage prospective screenwriters to read and study successful screenplays, which are widely available in book form and on the Internet. They also stipulate that writers should watch as many films as possible, so they can analyse their content and structure. These gurus regularly lead seminars and speak at conferences and festivals for the uninitiated.⁵¹ In addition, there is now a great deal of information available on the Internet.⁵² Web-based instruction has also become very popular.⁵³ Hauge’s advice has a very similar ring to that of early

⁵⁰ Conor, *Screenwriting*, 19.

⁵¹ For example, the prevailing focus and substance of most of the seminars at ‘The London Screenwriters Festival’ 2010, 2011, 2013 and 2014 (at which I was a delegate), was how to successfully write, promote and sell your screenplay. This has grown to be the largest screenwriting festival in the world. *London Screenwriters’ Festival*, see www.londonscreenwritersfestival.com

⁵² For example, Kathie Fong Yoneda offers step-by-step information on essentials such as creating log lines, compelling pitches, and effective marketing techniques through her seminars and her best-selling book, *The Script-Selling Game* (Los Angeles: Michael Wiese, 2002), <http://www.kathiefongyoneda.com>. Two successful Hollywood screenwriters, Robin U. Russin and William Missouri Downs, write from experience on how to write and market scripts in *Screenplay: Writing the Picture* (Los Angeles: Silman-James, 2003), Preface.

⁵³ Advertisement for a ‘webinar’ with Corey Mandell, who teaches at UCLA, called ‘The Insider View: How the

screenwriting teachers, as he encourages his followers to 'establish a writing regimen,' 'immerse [themselves] in the movies' and 'join a writer's group.'⁵⁴

The key early screenwriting teachers also encouraged their followers to spend time at the cinema and to analyse films. They recommended that their own manuals and columns in the fan and trade press should be the main source of screenwriting guidance. Lecture-style public instruction was generally only given in the college context, in which Phillips was certainly involved.⁵⁵ The key screenwriting teachers, Sargent in particular, described the process of film production in great detail from the acquisition of a scenario right through to the final exhibition of the product, because public knowledge about how films were made was more limited in the early period.⁵⁶

Writing for the Industry

The best-known of the recent screenwriting gurus is probably the late Syd Field, who is widely known for his 'script paradigm.' By comparison, Sargent was certainly the most prominent of the screenwriting teachers of the early period and is frequently referred to in past and present academic discourse. A straight comparison of their descriptions of the nature of the screenplay may seem crude, but it is rather revealing. Field's depiction is as follows:

A screenplay is a story told with pictures, in dialogue and description, and placed within the context of dramatic structure.⁵⁷

Peculiarly, this language sounds reminiscent of Sargent's comment about the same:

A story is the narration of events in words. Done into dialogue and actions, it becomes a drama. [...] The photoplay then, becomes a story told in actions and therefore it is written in action instead of dialogue or

Pros Rewrite with Corey Mandell,' Sept 25, 2012. 'Screenwriter Corey Mandell reveals the secrets the pros use to rewrite their scripts'. He begins by saying, 'Professional writers know how to rewrite while most amateurs do not. Too many writers rewrite their scripts over and over without really improving it.' Advertised through *Final Draft*, www.finaldraft.com and <http://coreymandell.net>

⁵⁴ Hauge, *Writing Screenplays that Sell*, 269-272.

⁵⁵ Sargent, 'The Photoplaywright,' *MPW*, March 25, 1916, 2001.

⁵⁶ Azlant, 'Theory, History and Practice of Screenwriting,' 218-219.

⁵⁷ Syd Field, *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting* (New York: Bantam Dell, 1979), 19-20.

polished phrase.⁵⁸

While the structural similarity of this prose may be entirely coincidental, or due to the fact they are discussing the same core aspect of the medium, it is not beyond the realm of possibility that Field actually read Sargent's book. Sadly, it is too late to find out whether or not he did.

As well as being criticised by academics and some industry professionals for the formulaic content of their teaching, modern screenwriting gurus are noted for drawing heavily upon, in Thompson's words, 'the basic techniques of classical storytelling – or at least what Hollywood practitioners think those techniques are.'⁵⁹ Leaving aside, for the present, the issue of whether these 'techniques' are exactly followed by modern gurus, both Bordwell and Thompson agree that these principles, which they view as core components of 'classical Hollywood cinema,' were set down by the late teens of last century.⁶⁰ However, as noted by this study, what seems to have been overlooked by scholars is the likely part that the key early screenwriting teachers played in refining, solidifying and confirming these principles during this period. Once this is considered, it puts comments by academics, such as Nannicelli, about how contemporary practice follows these principles, in a new light, by indicating that among the significant parties actually involved in achieving this were these particular teachers:

contemporary Hollywood screenwriting practice largely adheres to the fundamental narrative principles regarding causality, clarity, coherence and unity, as well as more specific standards with respect to plot structure, conflict and character development.⁶¹

Similarly, if we examine Bordwell's points about the fine-tuning process that occurred to produce these industry norms, it should be admitted that this was at least in part achieved by the contribution of these key screenwriting teachers and not only by 'Hollywood filmmakers:'

⁵⁸ Sargent, 'Technique of the Photoplay,' *MPW*, July 22, 1911, 108.

⁵⁹ Thompson, *Storytelling in the New Hollywood*, 11.

⁶⁰ Bordwell and Thompson, *Film History*, 32.

⁶¹ Nannicelli, *Philosophy of the Screenplay*, 106.

As feature films became standardized, *Hollywood filmmakers* [my emphasis] established firmer guidelines for creating intelligible plots. These guidelines have changed little since then. Hollywood plots consist of clear chains of causes and effects, and most of these involve character psychology (as opposed to social or natural forces).⁶²

The key screenwriting teachers gave detailed advice on plotting and character development, as confirmed in this study, and placed great stress on the importance of continuity. Cook notes that:

Modern continuity editing, on which the classical Hollywood system was based (and which still predominates today), began when they realized that action could be made to seem continuous from shot to shot.⁶³

As already pointed out, the manuals of the key screenwriting teachers describe in great detail this shot-to-shot process through the use of ‘busts,’ ‘close-ups,’ ‘cut-backs’ and ‘leaders’ in order to achieve a continuous unbroken narrative that cumulatively builds towards a satisfying climax and resolution. This series of events usually focuses on a single character with a specific and defined goal and all other characters are meant to be completely understandable and distinct. In her manual, Patterson says that only characters with ‘pre-eminent cinematic qualities should be chosen,’⁶⁴ which, for silent cinema, meant that they were not defined by dialogue but by their visual attributes. Sargent states that as writers mentally visualise the story they ‘do not have to write all the action [they] see, but only the action that helps to tell the story.’⁶⁵ In this schema, an ‘inciting incident’ must start the action and everything will revolve around a single conflict that is integrally linked to this incident. It is crucial that the writer can express the ‘plot of action’ in plain and understandable language. Ball simplifies the plot of the single reel by saying that it can be summed up as ‘one line of action’ that the central character must follow,⁶⁶ but this has become true of the feature too.

⁶² Bordwell and Thompson, *Film History*, 59.

⁶³ Cook, *History of Narrative Film*, 22.

⁶⁴ Patterson, *Cinema Craftsmanship*, 2nd ed., (New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1921), 68.

⁶⁵ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay* 2nd ed., 81.

⁶⁶ Ball, *Art of the Photoplay*, 36.

The modern screenwriting guru Hauge argues that every story can be reduced to a single sentence: 'It is a story about [character] who wants to [action or goal].'⁶⁷ Bordwell and Thompson's summing up of the modern screenwriting gurus' 'take' on plot and character is almost identical to that of the key early screenwriting teachers:

Each major character is given a set of comprehensible, consistent traits. The Hollywood protagonist is typically goal-oriented, trying to achieve success in work, sports, or some other activity. The hero's goal conflicts with the desires of other characters, creating a struggle that is resolved only at the end – which is typically a happy one. Hollywood films usually intensify interest by presenting two interdependent plot lines. Almost inevitably one these involves romance, which gets woven in with the protagonist's quest to achieve a goal. The plot also arouses suspense through deadlines, escalating conflicts, and last minute rescues.⁶⁸

Compare these statements by Phillips, which have a contemporary ring to them:

The hero sets out to reach his goal, but pressure from the sidelines hampers his progress at every step. The pressure increases as he nears the apex, near where it is so great that something must break in order that he may reach his goal. As the moment of the inevitable Big Collision approaches, our suspense increases. We call the Collision, the Climax.⁶⁹

If what Phillips calls melodramatic is added, romance is introduced into the mix:

[And] what a handsome, virtuous Hero he is and what blood-curdling perils he has gone through single-handed to woo and win the woman he loves.⁷⁰

Bordwell readily affirms the connection between early screenwriting teachers and modern screenwriting gurus, when he acknowledges that the content of modern screenwriting manuals is a 'consolidation of studio-era principles [which] nicely

⁶⁷ Hauge, *Writing Screenplays that Sell*, 25.

⁶⁸ Bordwell and Thompson, *Film History*, 59.

⁶⁹ Phillips, *Feature Photoplay*, 115.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 70.

exemplif[y] how modern American moviemaking pays its tribute to tradition.⁷¹ What he does not go on to say is that this tradition was probably in large part established, disseminated and refined by the key screenwriting teachers of the early period. This study contends that this should now be emphatically acknowledged and plainly stated. It may be a subtle adjustment to make to the discourse, but omitting to say it skews the argument and does not attribute to the key early screenwriting teachers the place in screenwriting history that is justified by the evidence presented in this thesis.

Nannicelli makes another important connection, which is not generally acknowledged by the screenwriting gurus of today, that 'classical Hollywood screenwriting practice has its roots in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century playwriting practice.'⁷² Dallas, who says that the current manual writers have distanced themselves from former dramatic theorists, such as Freytag and Archer, also picks up on this. Although this is true, Dallas says it for the wrong reason. He believes that modern gurus ignore these theorists because the early screenwriting teachers had spurned them too. He comments:

The fact that the photoplay theorists moved away from academic sources and even suggested that academic training was not required to write the photoplay could be why scholars like Archer and Freytag disappeared from the discussion and debate of dramatic principles.⁷³

Dallas makes an important point about the modern screenwriting gurus possibly disassociating themselves from the academic fraternity and dramatic theorists of the past. However, as this thesis has shown, the early manual writers regularly referred to Archer and other play theorists; and screenwriting teachers, such as Sargent and Wright, had strong links with academic film theorists of the time, such as Freeburg and Münsterberg, and recommended their works as part of the library of the scenario writer. On the other hand, what Dallas says about the fixation that the modern screenwriting gurus have with Aristotle as their main inspiration is pertinent:

They all cite Aristotle's *Poetics* as their source for the dramatic principles

⁷¹ Bordwell, *The Way Hollywood Tells It*, 27.

⁷² Nannicelli, *Philosophy of the Screenplay*, 106.

⁷³ Dallas, 'Play, Photoplay, and Screenplay Structure', 75.

essential to script development, but fail to credit any other theorists for establishing any rules for dramatic writing over the last 2500 years. These theorists suggest they have merely taken Aristotle's fundamental principles and adapted and expanded them for the cinema.⁷⁴

The key early screenwriting teachers understood the connections between scenario writing and playwriting and were involved in adapting stage technique and the conventions of the playwright to film writing. Perhaps an acknowledgement by modern screenwriting gurus that they also draw on this broader theatrical tradition, rather than just continually citing Aristotle as their source, would engender more respect. This was certainly understood by the likes of Lane, Vale and Herman of the studio era, all of whom acknowledge their debt to the stage play as a form. Lawson writes the first part of his manual on playwriting, which forms the foundation for his understanding of screenwriting. Vale also refers to Aristotle's ideas as the mainstay of dramatic construction, and Beranger quotes Aristotle on 'Unity of Action.'⁷⁵ However, Beranger also cites Freytag in support of her views about conflict driving the action to the point of 'crisis' and how this is 'diagrammed as a pyramid;' and she quotes Archer as an authority on more than one occasion.⁷⁶ The dependency of today's screenwriting practice on a playwriting tradition that extends far beyond the bounds of Aristotle seems to be entirely lost on more recent screenwriting gurus, even though studio-era screenwriting teachers clearly acknowledged it.

Dallas correctly points out that modern 'instruction manuals are a valuable resource for tracing dramatic principles.'⁷⁷ However, care must be taken not to assume that the utilisation of principles proves a source or connection. A short survey of the views of modern screenwriting gurus on principles such as 'unity of action,' 'probability of action' and three-act structure may indicate how indebted they also may be to this playwriting tradition, especially as expressed in Freytag's codification. This may also help link them with the key early screenwriting teachers, who helped

⁷⁴ Ibid., 1.

⁷⁵ Lane, *New Technique of Screen Writing*, 22, Vale, *Technique of Screenplay Writing*, 95-99, Herman, *Practical Manual of Screen Playwriting for Theatre and Television Films*, 7-8; Lawson, *Theory and Technique of Playwriting and Screenwriting*, 1-302 and Beranger, *Writing for the Screen*, 69 and 100.

⁷⁶ Beranger, *Writing for the Screen*, 105, 108 and 113-114.

⁷⁷ Dallas 'Play, Photoplay, and Screenplay Structure,' 72.

to re-order these dramatic principles for the film medium for the first time.

With regard to 'unity of action,' Freytag says that:

the action must move forward with uniform consistency. This internal consistency is produced by representing an event which follows another, as an effect of which that other is the evident cause [...]. Through the motives [of the characters], the elements of the action are bound into an artistic, connected whole.⁷⁸

Field echoes this advice when he says:

You've got to be on track every step of the way; every scene, every fragment, must be taking you somewhere, moving you forward in terms of story development.⁷⁹

On 'probability of action', Freytag also requires that in the drama, 'all the accessory inventions, are conceived as probable and credible motives of the represented events.'⁸⁰ Hauge states in a similar way: 'In order to maintain maximum emotional involvement by your reader, your story must be logical and believable with its own set of rules.'⁸¹

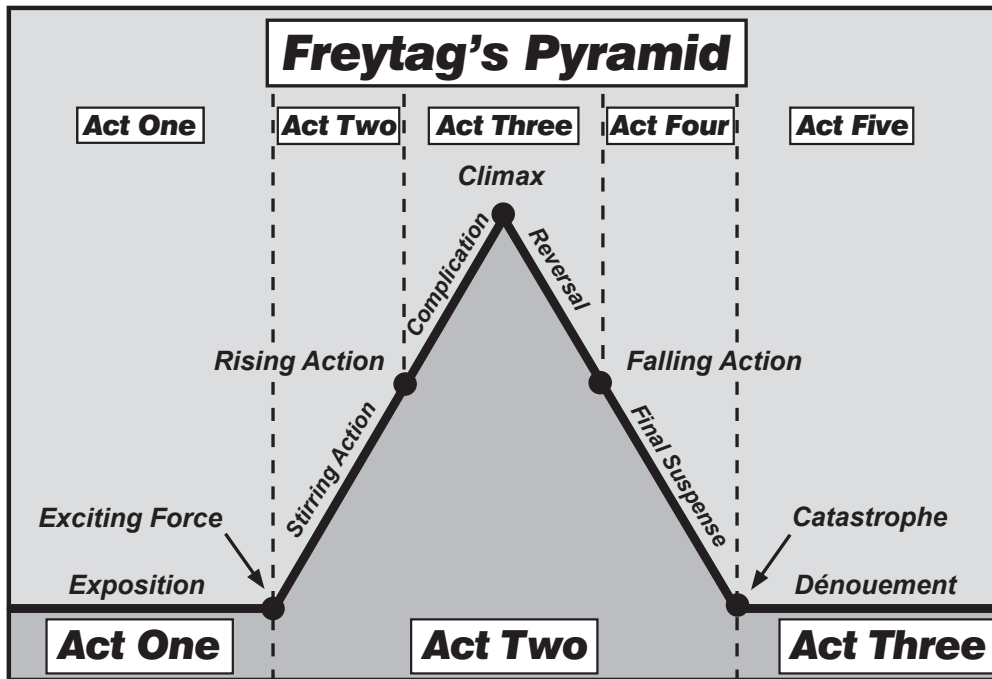
The similarity of Field's Paradigm and Hauge's diagram with Freytag's pyramidal structure on three-act structure is striking:

⁷⁸ Freytag, *Technique of the Drama*, 29.

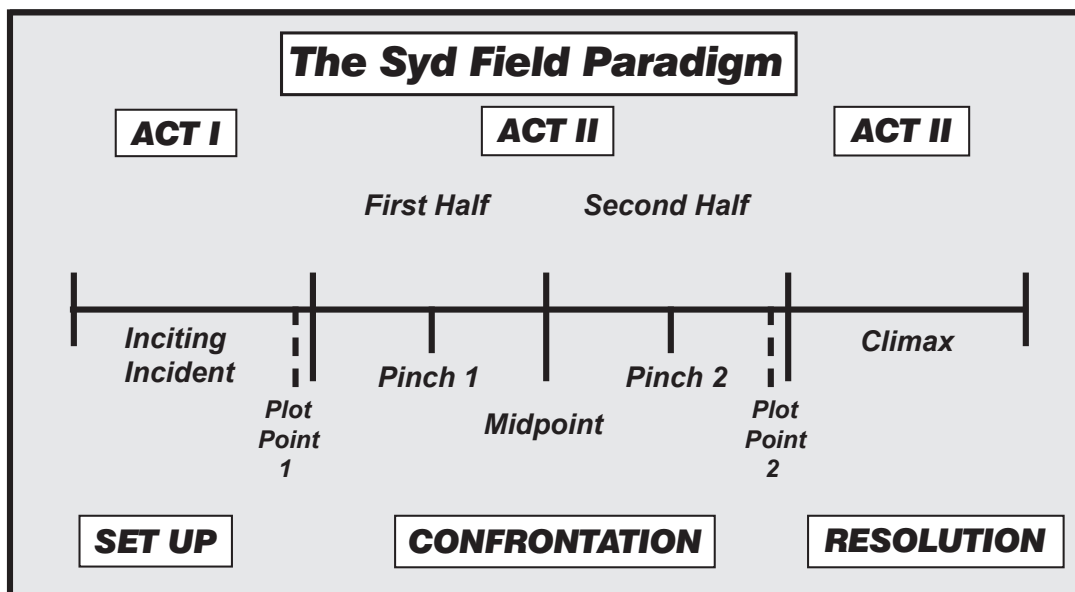
⁷⁹ Field, *The Screenwriter's Workbook* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1984), 12.

⁸⁰ Freytag, *Technique of the Drama*, 49-50.

⁸¹ Hauge, *Writing Screenplays that Sell*, 99.



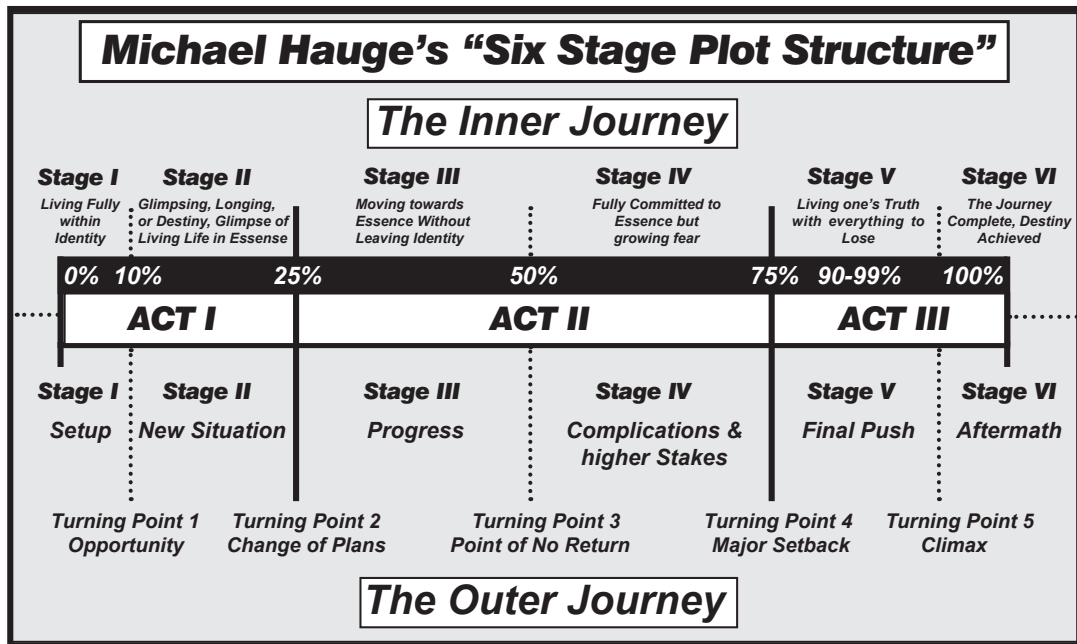
Field's paradigm matches Freytag's three crises, the 'Exciting Force' (inciting incident or plot point 1), the 'Tragic Moment' (midpoint or plot point 2) and the 'Force of Final Suspense' (plot point 3).⁸²



Hauge's diagram names the three crises as turning points and calls them the 'Change of Plans,' the 'Point of No Return' and the 'Major Setback.' Hauge adds two more turning points, 'Opportunity' in first act and 'Climax' in the final act, but the

⁸² Chris Huntley, 'How and Why Dramatica is Different from Six Other Story Paradigms (revised July 2007),' See Dramatica, accessed April 6, 2014, <http://dramatica.com/articles/how-and-why-dramatica-is-different-from-six-other-story-paradigms>

overall structure is fundamentally the same.⁸³



Field's and Hauge's descriptions, and those of other prominent screenwriting gurus of the three acts, are also in line with Freytag. In Freytag's introduction, the characters and situations are defined. Hunter also says the 'beginning, is the situation. The idea.'⁸⁴ Hauge claims that the 'the goal of Act 1 is to establish the setting, characters, situation and outer motivation for the hero.'⁸⁵ Freytag refers to this motivation as the 'exciting force'⁸⁶ and Field connects this to the end of Act One or Plot Point 1. According to Field, 'a plot point [is] – an incident, episode, or event that "hooks" into the action and spins it around into another direction.'⁸⁷

Just as in Freytag's pyramid, Hauge says, 'the goal of Act 2 is to build the hurdles, obstacles, conflicts, suspense, pace, humor, character development, and character revelations.'⁸⁸ Hunter simply calls it 'the complications.'⁸⁹ Both Field and Hauge break the second act into two parts at the midpoint, as does Freytag. Field says,

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Hunter, *Screenwriting 434* (New York: Perigree, 1993), 20.

⁸⁵ Hauge, *Writing Screenplays that Sell*, 86.

⁸⁶ Freytag, *Technique of the Drama*, 121.

⁸⁷ Field, *Screenwriter's Workbook*, 31.

⁸⁸ Hauge, *Writing Screenplays that Sell*, 86.

⁸⁹ Hunter, *Screenwriting 434*, 20.

'The midpoint is a link in the chain of dramatic action, it connects the first half of Act II with the second half.'⁹⁰ Field claims that he found the midpoint on his own by reading thousands of screenplays. This is possible but, as Dallas points out, he seems to have merely 'rediscovered what Freytag identified more than a hundred years before Field's book was published.'⁹¹

Freytag refers to Act III as the 'Catastrophe,' and Field's questions about the climax convey a similar idea: 'What happens to your main character? Does he live or die? Succeed or fail?'⁹² Hauge succinctly puts it thus: 'the goal of Act 3 is to resolve everything, particularly the outer motivation and the conflict for the hero'⁹³ and Hunter calls it the 'conclusion' or 'catharsis' or 'wrap up.'⁹⁴

One possible reason for the fact that there is no mention of the richness of the playwriting tradition and earlier theorists, such as Freytag, by current screenwriting gurus is that twentieth-century theatre built up a degree of hostility towards Freytag's codified structures and the Aristotelian model. Traces of this are expressed in Archer's comments, where he advocates a more organic approach to structure:

the modern tendency to take lightly Aristotle's demand that the drama should have a 'beginning, a middle, and an end' arises from the nature of things, and implies, not [...] a decline in craftsmanship, but a new intimacy of relation to life, and a new sincerity of artistic conscience.⁹⁵

Archer saw Freytag as applying rigid rules and rejected his 'five-act dogma [where] each act was supposed to have its special and pre-ordained function' for a more experimental and exploratory approach.⁹⁶ As theatre abandoned more codified approaches, at the same time screenwriting teachers began to see screenwriting as a separate art form with its own dramatic rules. In 1937 Marion writes: 'Though any form of dramatics may be an art rather than a science, at present the film story

⁹⁰ Field, *Screenwriter's Workbook*, 139.

⁹¹ Dallas, 'Play, Photoplay, and Screenplay Structure,' 62.

⁹² Field, *Screenwriter's Workbook*, 177.

⁹³ Hauge, *Writing Screenplays that Sell*, 86.

⁹⁴ Hunter, *Screenwriting 434*, 20.

⁹⁵ Archer, *Play-Making*, 246-247.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 145.

comes nearer to being written to formula than does any other type of writing.⁹⁷ At this point, Marion seems to cling to a more formulaic approach reminiscent of earlier theatrical forms, as do other studio-era teachers, who mention Aristotle and Freytag in their writings. More recent screenwriting gurus also appear to adhere to a more formulaic theatrical approach to screenplay structure, but have dropped any mention of the historical connection.

One minor exception is perhaps the continual reference to Lajos Egri (1888-1967), a playwright and teacher who wrote *The Art of Dramatic Writing* (1948). Hunter regards this text as the 'second Holy Treatise.'⁹⁸ Egri's detailed treatment of character, which he does not regard as secondary to plot, as did Aristotle, is also reminiscent of Archer's objection to Aristotle's elevation of plot over character.⁹⁹ However, the deeper reasons for the severing of the theatrical connection can only be noted, as a full investigation of this subject is beyond the scope of this study.

Whatever the reasons, this approach makes it appear that recent screenwriting gurus do not stand in a clear and unbroken dramatic and theatrical tradition, which they clearly do, although it is not a twentieth-century tradition. In fact, most plays of the modern era appear to break into two parts as designated by the interval and it is not always easy to detect three acts. The Hollywood film industry appears to have appropriated a nineteenth-century model and continued with it while modern theatre branched off into more experimental forms. Recent screenwriting gurus do not acknowledge this connection, but only appear to have rediscovered Aristotle in the spirit of some kind of modern classical renaissance.

There is another important connection with the playwriting tradition of the past. Those who wrote playwriting manuals were very aware of the importance of emotionally engaging the audience, as Archer confirms: 'the dramatic quality of an incident is proportionate to the variety and intensity of the emotions involved in it.'¹⁰⁰ Price also draws attention to the fact that actions must lead to emotional conflict:

⁹⁷ Marion, *How to Write and Sell Film Stories*, 22-23.

⁹⁸ Hunter, *Screenwriting* 434, 7.

⁹⁹ Lajos Egri, *The Art of Dramatic Writing* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1946), 32-124.

¹⁰⁰ Archer, *Play-Making*, 76.

The heart of the dramatic is emotion and that action which springs from or leads to a clash of personal interests that by incertitude of incident proceeds to a final result.¹⁰¹

Across a century of writing for film, screenwriting teachers have recognised that the cinematic experience has the power to absorb and involve the viewer in a unique visual form of storytelling. In a darkened space, the viewer can feel involved, as they are drawn into the story through identification with the main character in a seamless flow of action in conflict with the opponent. Hence, for the modern screenwriting guru, it is crucial that the viewer experiences emotions. Hauge sums this up as the main purpose of a screenplay:

All filmmakers, therefore have a single goal: to elicit emotion in an audience [... and] when the movie creates that emotion in an audience it is successful; when it doesn't, it fails.¹⁰²

He also emphasises the centrality of emotion in the script in a website article, where he links it to conflict: 'I don't think I have ever said that emotion IS conflict. But I repeatedly preach that emotion *grows out of* conflict.'¹⁰³ As stories are normally based around one central conflict, this again confirms the importance of the emotional journey for the audience.

This focus on the emotional power of cinema was well understood by the key early screenwriting teachers. Phillips articulates this cogently:

the reader, the listener, the participant in a work of art, must concentrate all the attention of his body, mind and soul upon the *emotional message* [my emphasis] it contains, regardless of the artificial mediums employed in giving it material existence.¹⁰⁴

This statement clearly indicates that Phillips has recognised that, for a photoplay to succeed, it must essentially do the same thing it is claimed all 'art' sets out to do. It must move us. He puts this in the strongest possible terms when it is applied to film

¹⁰¹ Price, *Technique of the Drama*, 5.

¹⁰² Hauge, *Writing Screenplays that Sell*, 3.

¹⁰³ Hauge, *StoryMastery*, <http://www.storymastery.com>

¹⁰⁴ Phillips, *Photodrama*, 28.

as a silent medium, but there are also hints of the melodramatic:

Perfect visualization, then, demands an exquisite command of language capable of nicely interpreting the finest shades of pathos, the deepest wells of passion, the most delicate waves of emotion, and a thousand grades of feeling.¹⁰⁵

This also raises the question as to whether some of the remnants of melodrama found in the sentiments of early screenwriting teachers also have some echo or resonance in their modern counterparts.

Selling to the Industry

The screenplay manuals form part of the help offered to writers trying to make their scripts appeal to story analysts or readers. The screenwriting gurus of today have just as much to say about the marketing of the screenplay as the key screenwriting teachers of the early period. However, they provide this through their websites and specialised manuals rather than through columns.¹⁰⁶ Examples include Field's *Selling a Screenplay* (1989) and Hauge's *Selling Your Story in 60 Seconds* (2006). Detailed information on the specific requirements of various studios is advertised in trade journals, such as *Variety*. The ideal for a modern screenwriter is to sell their screenplay as part of a package of a one-off production, with a director and star usually attached.¹⁰⁷

For the inexperienced outsider, just finding an agent, or having the opportunity to pitch an original or adapted screenplay to an independent producer, is difficult enough. The limited few who are successful could even find they are involved in direct negotiations with a producer or studio.¹⁰⁸ The professionalism of the script and its presentation takes on crucial importance, as it will only impress the 'gatekeepers' or development staff if it arrives in a specifically developed form. A number of

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 69.

¹⁰⁶ Hauge runs 'Coaching for Marketers,' in Hauge, *Story Mastery*, <http://www.storymastery.com/coaching/coaching-marketing/>

¹⁰⁷ Bordwell, *The Way Hollywood Tells It*, 27.

¹⁰⁸ Stempel points out that agents became even more crucial to the business than before. Negotiation now became a part of the process of getting a film made and screenwriters often found themselves spending more time at meetings than writing. See Stempel, *Framework*, 184.

screenwriting gurus, such as Seger, Hauge, Aronson and Vogler, use their own industry experience and long association with the studios as script consultants and story analysts, as a basis for their work with individual screenwriters in the development process.¹⁰⁹ Gurus trade on this insider knowledge of how the industry works, and give detailed advice on all aspects of the industry. This advice ranges from how to create log lines and write compelling pitches to how to negotiate and network, self-agent (if necessary) and set up effective meetings with the gatekeepers.¹¹⁰ Hauge encourages writers to describe their film by using 'commercially attractive categories' or 'genres,'¹¹¹ although what Altman observes of many critics could also be applied to screenwriting gurus; that they rarely feel the need to 'reflect openly on the assumptions' that genres 'reside in a pre-existing pattern.'¹¹² They tend to reinforce a more traditional understanding of genre, rather than seeing that the term has different meanings for different groups and that the understanding of various categories has shifted over time.

The screenwriting gurus encourage their students to aim to sell at a price and stick to it, in the hope they might enter a bidding war. When the market was buoyant, those who managed to sell 'spec scripts' could sell them from anything from the hundreds of thousands to over a million dollars.¹¹³ However, since the 2008 recession there has been a heightening of the tendency to rely on franchise films with guaranteed sales, rather than take risks on untested original ideas. There has also been a proliferation of screenwriting competitions in the last decade, the organisers of which

¹⁰⁹ All these screenwriting gurus have sophisticated script development services: See *Linda Seger Script Consultant*, <http://www.lindaseger.com/script-consultant/>, Linda Aronson Script Consultant, <http://www.lindaaronson.com/consultant-teacher.html> and Christopher Vogler, *Storytech Literary Consulting*, <http://www.thewritersjourney.com>.

¹¹⁰ Ashley Scott Meyers, 'How to Sell Your Screenplay (in a Nutshell),' in *sellingyourscreenplay.com*, <http://www.sellingyourscreenplay.com/how-to-sell-your-screenplay/how-to-sell-your-screenplay-in-a-nutshell/> and Michael Hauge on pitching - Screen Australia Industry Lecture on *Youtube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KZrvGU10hA0>

¹¹¹ Hauge, *Writing Screenplays that Sell*, 227.

¹¹² Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: BFI, 1999), 12 and 216.

¹¹³ In 1984 *Lethal Weapon* went for \$250,000, and by 2004 *Déjà Vu* had sold for \$5 million. The spec market has declined since 2008. In 1995, 173 specs were sold but by 2010 the number was only 55. See Margaret Heidenry, 'When the Spec Script Was King,' *Vanity Fair*, March 2013, <http://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2013/03/will-spec-script-screenwriters-rise-again>

promise the winners recognition and marketing assistance.¹¹⁴ Screenwriting gurus collaborate with and support a number of these competitions.¹¹⁵

As already noted, the key early screenwriting teachers provided detailed information on how to market scenarios through their manuals. Their columns and articles regularly updated writers on the latest developments and what studios were looking for. Unlike recent screenwriting gurus, the key screenwriting teachers of the early period tended to discourage taking part in competitions and told their readers to stay away from film exchanges or schools that promised to market their work. Direct contact with the studios was the best route available at the time, as agents and managers were not operating in great number. As already noted, there was constant discussion about the market price of scenarios in their fan and trade press columns. As many screenwriting teachers were also editors in film companies, they were actually the 'gatekeepers' too, and what they had written in their manuals expressed the current standards of entry.

This raises another interesting historical connection, namely the informal regulatory function of those offering screenwriting instruction. Maras focuses on this issue and says that the manuals helped to establish a kind of hierarchy among writers. These screenwriting teachers were in a position to speak with authority about the industry, to define what was considered legitimate, and to modify these definitions, in order to control access to production.¹¹⁶ As Maras indicates, the provision of a script means that screenwriting is the space where 'industry, practitioners and lay-people' interact and 'where stories and industrial processes intersect.'¹¹⁷ Teaching people how to write scripts thus acts as a filtering process. Maras continues:

The fact that the majority of script books speak to novices is particularly

¹¹⁴ See www.moviebytes.com. This website lists all reputable screenwriting competitions in the US and gives them a rating. At any one time, over 70 competitions are listed.

¹¹⁵ Hauge provided script pitch consultation advice to the winner of the Grand Prize Award in 2014. See 'The CWA Blog', *Creative World Awards*, <http://www.creativeworldawards.com>. McKee endorses the Scriptapalooza screenwriting competition. See Mark Andrushko, 'Scriptapalooza interviews Screenwriting Guru Robert McKee' in *Screenwriting Contests and Markets Online*, April 29, 2004, *Moviebytes* website, <http://www.moviebytes.com/contestDetail.cfm?tab=tab3&ContestNumber=123&StoryID=1876>. Field became an adjudicator for Final Draft screenwriting contest. See 'Syd Field Joins Big Break! Judges Panel' in *Film Industry News*, June 30, 2004, http://www.filmmakers.com/news/contests/article_159.shtml

¹¹⁶ Maras, *Screenwriting*, 25.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 25

important here; the bulk of ‘how-to books’ are, after all, primers to screenwriting that define writing for the screen, and access to it in a particular way.¹¹⁸

This tendency towards ‘particularism’ is as true now as it was a century ago, as aspirant screenwriters attempt to negotiate entry into the industry. As Conor comments:

the how-to genre concretizes and regulates the profession through a particular set of hegemonic codes and conventions – structure, characters, conflict, entrepreneurialism and precariousness.¹¹⁹

In 1922, Macpherson refers to the high level of skill demanded for continuity writing and the role of the staff writer, and readily talks of ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders,’ indicating the level of professionalisation that had taken place by this point:

So don’t waste your time and vital energy envying and criticizing the staff writer. Get busy! REMEMBER THAT HE WAS ONCE AN OUTSIDER JUST AS YOU ARE NOW – and that he became an insider by the very method I am explaining to you!¹²⁰

Eugene W. Presbrey, also writing in 1922, sets a very high ideal for any freelance writer. He must be experienced, acquainted and appreciative of all the arts, ‘[c]ultured by education and travel, [... and be a] product of many environments;’ and then he finally admits ‘the freelance writer is usually a staff writer out of a job.’¹²¹ A specific emphasis on technique, due to the increased complexity of the scripts and the terminology of filmmaking, gave impetus to the formalisation of writing for the screen and the virtual exclusion of outsiders. The bar was set high and has remained so ever since.

Film censorship is not dealt with in more recent manuals, as it seems that the

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 25.

¹¹⁹ Conor, *Screenwriting*, 12.

¹²⁰ MacPherson, ‘Functions of the Continuity Writer’ in *Opportunities in the Motion Picture Industry*, 33.

¹²¹ Eugene W. Presbrey, ‘The Free Lance Writer’ in *Opportunities in the Motion Picture Industry*, 45-46. Presbrey was secretary to the Screen Writers’ Guild, the Authors’ League of America and The Writers’ Club. He also lectured at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts, New York and was an author, painter, actor and playwright.

general parameters of acceptability are understood. For modern screenwriting gurus, the focus has shifted to another question, namely, the target audience; and for this an understanding of film ratings is required, which is a similarly important issue.¹²² For early screenwriting teachers, the matter of censorship was continually addressed and their advice on avoiding the censor's knife was cogent and detailed. As already recorded, Wright was a strong campaigner against unnecessary censorship, and the contributions of the key screenwriting teachers in this area were only the first shots to be fired in a long and arduous struggle that led to where the industry is today.

Recent screenwriting gurus do not regard copyright as an issue, since the same protection is now given to screenplays as is given to all other artistic works; although most writers in the USA still use the script registration service offered by The Writers' Guild of America to prove ownership.¹²³ The matter of copyright was not settled at the time when the key screenwriting teachers were operating, and they played an important part in achieving the protection that writers are now afforded. The Photoplay Author's League, of which Sargent and Wright were prominent members, was formed in part to achieve copyright protection for authors. It incorporated, in 1914, in an attempt to do the same as The Authors' League of America Inc., which offered protection to its members' work in print.¹²⁴ In 1917 Sargent endorsed The Authors' League and recommended scenario writers to register their scripts with them, even though it afforded no protection in law for the present.¹²⁵ However, The Photoplay Authors' League failed to achieve its aim and ceased to exist in 1919. The Authors' League of America joined with the Screen Writers' Guild in 1921, and this would eventually become what we know today as The Writers' Guild of America.¹²⁶ Wright finally recorded in 1921 that a bill had been approved by the State legislature in California to give copyright protection for screenwriters, but there was still no

¹²² The Motion Picture Association of America categorizes film using five ratings: G – General, PG – Parental Guidance, PG-13 – Parents Strongly Cautioned, R – Restricted; NC17 – No one 17 and under admitted, MPAA: <http://www.mpa.org/film-ratings/>

¹²³ See 'WGA West Registry,' See <https://www.wgawregistry.org/webrss/>

¹²⁴ 'Film Flashes,' *Variety*, March 20, 1914, 23.

¹²⁵ Sargent, 'The Photoplaywright,' *MPW*, July 7, 1917, 94.

¹²⁶ Louis B. Perry and Richard S. Perry, *A History of the Los Angeles Labor Movement, 1911-1941* (London: University of California, 1963), 354.

national legislation.¹²⁷ As already noted, Wright had been campaigning to achieve copyright protection for photoplay authors, by working with Congress, since 1914.¹²⁸ The Photoplay Authors' League and the key screenwriting teachers who were involved in it were true forerunners of the Writers' Guild of America, which exists for the protection of screenwriters in the USA today.

¹²⁷ Wright, 'Hints for Scenario Writers,' *Picture-Play Magazine*, July 1921, 10.

¹²⁸ 'Scenario Copyright Law in View,' *MPN*, April 4, 1914, 22.

2. Evolution of the Screenplay

In today's industry, a 'step outline' (or a 'scene-by-scene', 'beat sheet' or 'extended treatment'), describing what happens in each scene and normally worked out prior to writing the script, may be requested before an agent, manager or studio reader reads the full screenplay.¹²⁹ If accepted, a development deal will be struck and the long process of developing the script will commence. Ultimately, a 'shooting script' will be achieved and filming will start. The script format that is currently in use first emerged in the studio period, and must still be followed exactly.¹³⁰

Scholars have searched for the earliest form of script and Raynauld confirms that it has been a futile exercise that has led nowhere.¹³¹ Kenneth Gay's statement sums up the consensus of scholars:

The history of the screenplay is notoriously difficult to trace, due both to a problem of language (the word 'screenplay' itself does not come into common usage until the 1940s) and to the fact that its earliest antecedents are private industrial documents, many of which have been lost to time.¹³²

This study indeed corroborates that during the early period there was no set format for the scenario, and screenwriting teachers were addressing an industry in a state of flux. As already noted, Sargent himself recommends a variety of formats in the Appendix of his own manual.¹³³ What the key screenwriting teachers generally confirm is that submissions consisted of a series of documents, such as a synopsis, scene plot, cast of characters and scenario ('plot of action' or later 'the continuity'), although variations were possible. Kevin Boon suggests:

¹²⁹ Danny Stack, 'Screenwriting Bullet 14: Step Outline,' March 8, 2013, *Scriptwriting in the UK*, <http://dannystack.blogspot.co.uk/2012/09/screenwriting-bullet-14-step-outline.html>

¹³⁰ Lewis Ward, 'Structure and Breaking In: An Interview with Syd Field,' *Script Magazine*, April 10, 2013, <http://www.scriptmag.com/features/structure-and-breaking-in-an-interview-with-syd-field>, Hauge, 'Composing Effective Query Letters,' <http://www.storymastery.com/selling-your-story/composing-effective-query-letters> <https://www.storymastery.com/coaching/109-consultation-submission-checklist>

¹³¹ Isabelle Raynauld, 'Written Scenarios of Early French Cinema: Screenwriting Practices in the First Twenty Years,' *Film History* 9, 3, (1997): 257-268.

¹³² Andrew Kenneth Gay, 'History of Scripting and the Screenplay' in *Screenplayology: An Online Centre for Screenplay Studies*, <http://www.screenplayology.com/content-sections/screenplay-style-use/1-1/>

¹³³ Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd ed., 99-100 and 373-398.

All four are still in use today in slightly different forms. The synopsis is comparable to a contemporary film treatment, the cast of characters, and the scene plot are similar to documents used to facilitate production; and the continuity is much like the contemporary screenplay.¹³⁴

This could be viewed as an over-simplification, however, since Gay links the continuity to the modern shooting script and traces the emergence of the master scene format as a separate form. This indicates how complex the process of standardisation actually was, and its exact timing is imprecise:

Something curious happens in the period between the collapse of the studio system and the 1970s. The continuity script becomes the *shooting script*, in which shot-by-shot scene writing is reserved for the director after a script has been greenlit for production, while the master scene format emerges as the new standard for writers' drafts.¹³⁵

However this is viewed, all the components identified by the key early screenwriting teachers remain present, whatever form they have currently assumed.

What had also become clear by end of the teens was that the script had become an important tool in controlling production costs, which meant that it had to be of high quality in whatever format it appeared. Decherney confidently asserts that:

'Instruction manuals and professional script technicians standardized a script style – the continuity script – complete with descriptions of camera placement, mise-en-scène, and performance.'¹³⁶ Azlant, who evidences his views by the close study of Sargent's discourse, confirms:

the centrality of the scenario in communicating a design intention to all the personnel creating a fiction film and, at the very same, its tentative provisional nature within the normal procedures of this collaborative and compounded medium.¹³⁷

¹³⁴ Kevin Alexander Boon, *Script Culture and the American Screenplay* (Detroit: Wayne State University, 2008), 7.

¹³⁵ Gay, 'History of Scripting and the Screenplay' in *Screenplayology*, <http://www.screenplayology.com/content-sections/screenplay-style-use/1-1/>

¹³⁶ Decherney, *Hollywood and the Culture Elite*, 43.

¹³⁷ Azlant, 'Theory, History and Practice of Screenwriting,' 215.

By indicating that the 'screenplay functions as a document of design in the creation of the fictional narrative film,' Azlant was suggesting that the script was effectively a 'blueprint' for the film.¹³⁸ In response to Azlant's views, Maras cautions us not to read back our modern understanding of the screenplay into previous complex and multifarious documents. Nevertheless, Maras concludes that Sargent's:

emphasis on writing in photoplay form underpins some now common aspects of writing for the screen. [...It] foregrounds the importance of photoplay form and writing in form through plotting.¹³⁹

As confirmed by this study, this assertion by Maras should also probably be broadened to include the other key screenwriting teachers.

Another crucial connection that recurs is the importance of 'the read', meaning the manner in which the film is envisaged by a script reader. The modern screenwriter must convey, through language, a visual experience for the reader of the screenplay. This means economy of language and making description active and visual. As Hauge puts it, any reader must see the movie 'projecting' in their head as they read.¹⁴⁰ As already noted, all the key screenwriting teachers strongly advocated developing the ability to visualise the story as they told it. Peacocke advises: 'Do not attempt to be "literary"', adding that the reader 'cares nothing about literary style' and looks at things with a 'camera eye.'¹⁴¹ The theorist Freeburg emphasises this skill: 'The scenario writer must not only imagine his pictures but he must learn to imagine them in terms of the screen.'¹⁴² These views were also widely held by other screenwriting teachers on the periphery. Esenwein and Leeds told authors that they needed to:

Cultivate the picturing eye [...] so that by being able to visualize each scene as you plan it in your mind you cannot fail to produce in your scenario a series of scenes whose action is logically connected and

¹³⁸ Ibid.,5

¹³⁹ Maras, *Screenwriting*, 148-149.

¹⁴⁰ Hauge, *Writing Screenplays that Sell*, 113.

¹⁴¹ Peacocke, *Hints on Photoplay Writing*, 20 and 40.

¹⁴² Freeburg, *Art of Photoplay Writing*, 29.

essentially natural and unforced.¹⁴³

Screenwriting discourse had always been concerned with ‘the read’. This is something Maras picks up on, when he highlights Sargent’s – and by association we can say the other key screenwriting teachers’ – emphasis on “‘the read” of the script, [that] function[s] as the movie before the mind’s eye,’ which is something we recognise in the modern context.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴³ Esenwein and Leeds, *Writing the Photoplay* (1913, repr., Dodo Press, 2007), 97.

¹⁴⁴ Maras, *Screenwriting*, 149.

3. Education of the Screenwriter

The means by which screenwriters acquire their skills is another area that connects the modern screenwriting guru with the key screenwriting teachers of the past. Towards the end of the studio period, newly created university and film school courses in Film Studies and Screenwriting were receiving thousands of applications and were now regarded as academically respectable.¹⁴⁵ Stempel points out that:

Screenwriters in American film have traditionally come from a great variety of backgrounds, but it was not until the sixties that screenwriters came straight out of film schools. [...]. Los Angeles was, and is, crawling with screenwriting courses at colleges and universities as well as privately run screenwriting schools.¹⁴⁶

There is evidence of substantial cross-fertilisation between the work of recent screenwriting gurus and those who teach screenwriting in an academic context. Since the 1990s there has been a large-scale expansion of university screenwriting courses, and writing a full-length screenplay usually forms the final project of an MA course, and also of some undergraduate degrees.¹⁴⁷ Some professors involved in leading these courses openly endorse material from the screenwriting gurus in addition to their own literature. Hunter's work is a case in point. As a respected academic, he is Professor Emeritus in Screenwriting at UCLA, but is also regarded as a screenwriting guru, due to the large number of screenwriting short courses he runs.¹⁴⁸ He actively supports the work of other screenwriting gurus. His advice to prospective screenwriters in his book *Screenwriting 434* (2004) is to:

Forgo writing exercises when you're learning to write screenplays. Read the books by Bill Froug, Richard Walter, Bill Goldman, Syd Field, Linda Seger, Whitcomb, Hauge, Dorethea Brande, and Sol Saks for

¹⁴⁵ See Donald H. Johnston, ed., *Encyclopedia of International Media and Communications*, vol. 4 (San Diego: Academic Press, 2003), 498 and Fereydoun Hoveyda, *The Hidden Meaning of Mass Communications: Cinema, Books, and Television in the Age of Computers* (Westport: Praeger, 2000), 55.

¹⁴⁶ Stempel, *Framework*, 197.

¹⁴⁷ A number of leading American universities offer specialised Master of Fine Arts programmes in Screenwriting, including the American Film Institute, UCLA, USC, and NYU. Some schools also offer non-degree programmes, such as the year-long UCLA Professional Program in Screenwriting, which can also be taken online. See websites of these universities.

¹⁴⁸ For Hunter's academic, writing and producing background and the screenwriting courses he runs, see Lew Hunter's *Screenwriting 434* Colony, <http://lewhunter.com/index.html>

instruction.¹⁴⁹

It is to be noted that, among this list of gurus, the late Field was also a member of the USC faculty and taught on its Master's of Professional Writing programme, Froug was a Professor at UCLA and had reorganised its whole screenwriting programme, which Walter is now Chairman of, and Seger has taught on the UCLA and USC extension programmes.¹⁵⁰

The sheer proliferation of such courses may well be a factor in the popularisation of writing for the screen and a further incentive for public instruction. This explosion in the number of screenwriting courses is not restricted to the USA: there has been a huge growth of such courses in Great Britain too.¹⁵¹ One of the most successful courses is the Screenwriting MA at the London College of Communication, founded by Philip Parker, a respected academic, producer and leading UK screenwriting teacher. A number of his graduates have gone on to win major film awards such as the Palme d'Or and have been Oscar nominated. In the Appendix of his book, *The Art & Science of Screenwriting*, Parker also recommends as further reading many of the same screenwriting gurus as Hunter.¹⁵²

The early period also spawned academic courses that had links to screenwriting teachers of the day. Freeburg taught the first of these courses and had strong connections with key screenwriting teachers, such as Sargent. Patterson succeeded Freeburg and developed them further. The content of Patterson's two manuals are representative of instruction, as it had developed to that point. Polan comments that 'the photoplay composition courses that began at Columbia University in the mid-

¹⁴⁹ Hunter, *Screenwriting* 434, 53.

¹⁵⁰ Biographical information: for Field see 'About Syd Field,' <http://sydfield.com/about/>; for Seger see 'About Linda Seger Script Consultant' <http://www.lindaseger.com/script-consultant-screenplay-coach/>; for Froug see Alex Stedman, 'Writer-Producer William Froug dies at 91,' *Variety*, September 5, 2013, <http://variety.com/2013/tv/news/writer-producer-william-froug-dies-at-91-1200600523/> and for Walter see 'About Richard Walter,' <http://richardwalter.com/about-richard/>

¹⁵¹ Janet Murray of the *Guardian* confirms the huge growth in writing courses in the UK over the last decade. See Murray, 'Can You Teach Creative Writing?' *The Guardian*, May 10, 2011, <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2011/may/10/creative-writing-courses>. UCAS currently lists 47 universities that provide courses with 'screenwriting' in the UK for 2016. Most of these courses are either completely devoted to screenwriting or contain a screenwriting option; see Undergraduate Courses at University and College (UCAS), <http://wwwucas.com>

¹⁵² Phillip Parker, *The Art & Science of Screenwriting* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2006), 214-215.

1910s represent [...] the first academic offerings on film in the United States.’¹⁵³ Commenting on Polan’s work, Jan-Christopher Horak claims that Polan wants to portray “the moment of self-invention,” when the field’s identity was yet unformed.’ Given that Columbia’s 1915 course was the start of a trend and was followed by courses at the University of Southern California in 1929 and the New York University in 1933, Polan can indeed lay claim to documenting the birth of Film Studies.¹⁵⁴ It is evident that there is also a strong connection between what was taught by the first key screenwriting teachers and the first academic writing programmes, so perhaps their genesis is more complex. The institutions that delivered these first courses have continued this unbroken connection by providing screenwriting programmes ever since, and ‘Columbia, USC and NYU represent top-tiered academic film programmes today.’¹⁵⁵

¹⁵³ Polan, *Scenes of Instruction*, 37.

¹⁵⁴ Jan-Christopher Horak, ‘Review of Dana Polan, *Scenes of Instruction: The Beginnings of the U.S. Study of Film*’ in *Screening the Past*, <http://tlweb.latrobe.edu.au/humanities/screeningthepast/22/scenes-instruction.html>

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

4. Summary

Modern screenwriting gurus stand on the shoulders of the early screenwriting teachers, as they reiterate principles set down in the early period. However, their indebtedness to these early teachers is rarely, if ever, acknowledged. Although early screenwriting manuals did not always speak with a consistent or unified voice, I argue that their discourse was the grist that provided the industry with the opportunity to impose shape and definition on the storytelling process, before the studio system was fully operative. The central position held by the key screenwriting teachers meant that the processes and standards they insisted upon more than likely played a significant role in the professionalisation of writing for the screen, of which all the present-day screenwriting gurus and screenwriters are beneficiaries.

CONCLUSION

This study has attempted to assess the contribution that early screenwriting teachers made to the film industry. First, it was necessary to contextualise their work by tracing their origins; second, the contribution of key screenwriting teachers was examined in detail, and third, comment was made on their possible legacy by briefly examining their links with today's screenwriting gurus.

The study involved surveying the academic literature, which confirmed that this area of film history had been neglected and had only been considered as part of other lines of enquiry, rather than being the subject of close and detailed examination in its own right.

Investigating the origins of screenwriting teachers involved embracing the literary and theatrical sources from which early screenwriting teachers drew, together with consideration of the economic conditions that led to the script becoming a controlling factor in production and paying attention to the circumstances that sparked 'scenario fever', which prompted the emergence of screenwriting teachers.

An assessment of the contribution of the early screenwriting teachers entailed the following. First, conducting a review of when and how the first screenwriting teachers appeared and establishing a set of criteria to distinguish between those screenwriting teachers who were peripheral and those who were more significant to the industry. These criteria were then applied to eliminate the more peripheral screenwriting teachers from the main study and to identify five key screenwriting teachers whose contribution merited detailed interrogation. The next stage attempted a thorough and comprehensive investigation of how the work of Sargent, Wright, Peacocke, Ball and Phillips contributed to the screenwriting discourse in three major ways: showing prospective writers how to train for, write for, and sell to the industry. This included an assessment of the probable overall contribution of these screenwriting teachers by considering how they helped to adapt playwriting technique and theatrical understanding into a powerful form of visual storytelling, and assisted in creating a coherent film language that was eventually encapsulated in the scenario and continuity script.

The potential legacy of these key screenwriting teachers was then briefly examined by considering their equivalence with modern screenwriting gurus whose work may indicate how freelance writers train for, write for and sell to the industry today. This was followed by consideration of what they might have contributed to the evolution of the modern day screenplay and how they may have influenced the recent education of the screenwriter.

By tracing the history of the emergence of key screenwriting teachers in American cinema, I have attempted to demonstrate how central they were to the development of both the writing process and the industry. Much of the primary data upon which this study has been based had not previously been consulted or accessed. Close examination of the trade and fan press literature, in particular, has indicated the importance ascribed to the key screenwriting teachers by the industry. I do not wish to discount in any way the excellent work that has been achieved by many revisionist historians in researching the development of early cinema using a more context-based approach, rather than relying upon a teleological and deterministic conception of cinema change. On the contrary, I hope my analysis of the part that I believe early key screenwriting teachers have played will contribute to this body of knowledge, enrich it, and draw much needed attention to a part of the discourse that has hitherto been virtually ignored.

The evidence seems to suggest that the key screenwriting teachers were highly involved in, and interacted with, the industry during this early period. As motion pictures adopted the fictional narrative mode and films grew to feature length, a host of identifiable screenwriting teachers, from various backgrounds, (were likely to have) attended and aided this evolution. This is a supposition that has never been postulated before: that these key early screenwriting teachers were more than probably integral to and central to this development in the industry and not simply an adjunct to it; that as scenario editors, writers and directors, columnists, manual writers and influential persons in the business of film, they made a significant and lasting contribution to the discourse on screenwriting. As a result, I contend that they should no longer be regarded as marginal to the industry, but as important agents of change, and contributors to the development of an increasingly narratively-integrated cinema. As the film industry adjusted to the complexity and changes spurred by

phenomenal growth, censorship, the studio and star systems, copyright law, and large-scale production, the key screenwriting teachers played a role in these accommodations, as evidenced by their own testimony through the various columns they wrote, the testimony of others who wrote about them and confirmed their involvement, and the body of work contained in their surviving manuals.

I have suggested that these screenwriting teachers helped to tailor and modify theatrical techniques to the medium of film writing. Although this knowledge was not materially new, its translation to the medium of film was. They embraced Aristotle's *Poetics* and Freytag's recalibration of these ideas, as well as much of the advice contained in the playwriting manuals current to the period, and absorbed into their teaching some prevailing melodramatic influences. They were also aware and apprised themselves of film theorists, such as Münsterberg and Freeburg, who were making significant comment. Their columns and manuals represent a codification and summation of screenwriting, as it was understood up to this point. In this respect, I propose that their contribution to the discourse on screenwriting was potentially considerable. Sargent was the most significant key screenwriting teacher, because he produced a highly detailed and exhaustive manual and his columns contained an on-going commentary on screenwriting discourse. However, Phillips and Wright were both prolific and they, too, provided an impressive and weighty body of instruction, for which they have hardly been given any recognition or credit. Both Ball and Peacocke also made significant contributions, which deserve note. Together, these key screenwriting teachers produced the most significant body of instruction on writing for film between the years 1911-1922 and, as the evidence seems to suggest, there is a likelihood that they were influential in shaping the discourse and playing an important role in the professionalisation of writing for the screen during this period.

My examination of the contribution of the screenwriting teachers of the early period is incomplete and much more remains to be done. This study has in fact opened up a number of other interesting lines of enquiry, which require much further investigation and research. For the purposes of this study, a distinction was made between the peripheral and key screenwriting teachers; however, a number of these teachers deserve closer attention. For example, the contribution of significant women

screenwriting teachers, especially Loos and Patterson, merits more scrutiny, although it was not as important as that of the key teachers identified in this study. There were also a number of other screenwriting teachers, such as Esenwein and Leeds, Dimick and Nelson, who wrote noteworthy manuals, which could form the basis of further investigation. This study has also opened up discussion about the relationship between the content of early playwriting manuals and other literary sources, and the instruction offered by early screenwriting teachers. This is an area that could be more thoroughly investigated.

The activity and role of screenwriting teachers during the studio period also emerges as a topic that requires examination. Did the manual writers of that period only service the internal needs of the industry? If not, who were these manuals really for? Were they written for hopeful amateurs who still regarded their use as a means of training for, and entering the industry? A fuller and more cogent survey of this period beckons.

An attempt has also been made in this study to examine the correlation between the instruction offered by early screenwriting teachers and by contemporary screenwriting gurus. This examination has been conducted to a lesser extent, as this was not the main aim of this study. Further investigation into this area may also provide a better framework for evaluating the current screenwriting gurus' relationship with, and contribution to, the last 40 or so years of package-led production, and to the twenty-first century Hollywood film industry as it currently operates.

There are a number of areas that cannot be tested by this thesis. This study has not been an evaluative study about the importance or worth of one particular screenwriting teacher's views or approach over another. It has not been possible to assess how many freelance writers were successful as a result of employing the principles and techniques advocated by the key screenwriting teachers. Neither is it possible to properly assess the role of screenwriting gurus in the era of independent production, as we are too close to it historically and it still continues.

By way of summary, I restate what has been proposed by this study. I do this with reference to the late Edward Azlant, whose own unpublished dissertation on the

early history of screenwriting itself deserves more recognition. Azlant claims that through:

the appearance of various forms of public instruction in screenwriting, including textbooks and manuals, and the strong qualifications of many of the authors of such materials, we possess much authoritative description of the craft of screenwriting for the early silent film.¹

Azlant's final assertion that we 'possess much authoritative description of the craft of screenwriting' in the materials that have been handed down to us has needed rigorous examination, but from the evidence, it seems that this is likely to be the case. It is a body of instruction that has required systematic analysis and interrogation, and this study, hopefully, has gone some way towards addressing this. What has emerged is a fairly concrete historical sense of the filmic instruction relayed to screenwriters by key early screenwriting teachers. Their views appear to have produced a rich discussion of the various techniques of screenwriting in the early period and seem to be indicative of the high level to which the craft had evolved by 1922. If this is the case, it means that the key early screenwriting teachers helped take the materials of story, character, setting, and leaders and apply them through the dynamics of probability, logic, chronology, dramaturgy, convention, and aesthetics to create the motion picture plot. This seems to be evidenced in the scenario of yesterday and it also appears likely that it still reverberates through the screenplay of today.

¹ Azlant, 'Theory, History and Practice of Screenwriting,' 337.

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Trade Press

MPW – Motion Picture World

MPN – Moving Picture News and Motion Picture News

NYDM – New York Dramatic Mirror

Photoplay Author

Variety

Fan Press

Photoplay

MPSM – Motion Picture Story Magazine

MPM – Motion Picture Magazine

Picture-Play Magazine

Screenland