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BIOGRAPHY

Welby Ings is a Professor in Design at Auckland University of Technology. He is an elected Fellow of the British Royal Society of Arts and a consultant to many international organizations on issues of creativity and learning. He is an award winning filmmaker, author, designer and playwright whose short films have been shortlisted for the Oscars and selected for special screenings at Cannes and Berlin. Although he holds a Ph.D. in narratology, he publishes widely on practice-oriented inquiry and methodology. In 2001 he was awarded the Prime Minister's inaugural, Supreme Award for Tertiary Teaching Excellence and in 2013 the AUT University medal for his contributions to research and education.

Renegotiating the screenplay: Drawing as a method for narrative development in a short film

KEYWORDS

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ABSTRACT

This article considers a non-written form of screenplay. In so doing, it illustrates a trajectory of thinking where drawing methods were employed in the development of a cinematic narrative. These visual approaches replaced creative processing normally associated with writing. In discussing the author's short film Sparrow, the exposition examines three processes. The first method, gestational drawing, was employed as a 'story finding' device. The second, immersive drawing, was used to refine thematic intensity in the work. Finally, directorial drawing was employed as a catalyst for discussion when collaborating with actors and production crew. In discussing these drawing methods, the article proposes the concept of 'screen-play' as a verb and an active space where a developer of cinematic narratives might work beyond the parameters of writing, to ideate, refine and artistically compose image-led, cinematic narratives.



Before reading this article, it may be helpful to watch the 90-second trailer for the short film *Sparrow*. The sequence provides an indication of the visual tone of the narrative.

<https://vimeo.com/ondemand/sparrow2/321278144>

QUESTIONING THE SCREENPLAY

The presumption that screenplay writing underpins film production is relatively ubiquitous. In fact, in 2010 Brian Richards claimed, 'It is impossible to envision a film without a script, as the script is the base for what appears onscreen.' (Richards 2010: 1). Although much literature reinforces the belief that scriptwriting forms a substrate from which a film is developed (Bowden 2018; McBride 2012; McKee 2010; Nash 2012; Nelmes 2007), the assumption warrants consideration.

In 2007, Paul Wells proposed that screenwriting required broadening so it might engage more effectively with alternative paradigms, narrative structures and sound and image potentials. His assertion was understandable when one considers the practice of Jean-Luc Godard who has employed images for inspiration during the story development phases of his work, and Wong Kar Wai who used images, sound, and music in both his preproduction and production processes. Wong has asserted

You can't write all your images on paper, and there are so many things – the sound, the music, the ambience, and also the actors – when you're writing all these details in the script, the script has no tempo, it's not readable [...] It's not a good idea (to write out a complete script beforehand) and I just wrote down the scenes, some essential details, and the dialogue.

(Brunette 2005: 126)

Kathryn Millard has also asked if in a contemporary world, where images and sound have become so fundamental to communicating meaning, perhaps conventional, writing-based methods for film development might be restricting innovation. She argued that under-critiqued approaches to screenplay writing might potentially be inhibiting the 'aliveness' that is important if cinematic storytellers are to effectively connect with audiences. Millard noted despondently that, as her own films progressed through rounds of assessment, 'it

was invariably words on a page that were discussed, dissected and analyzed, rather than images, sounds, gestures, rhythm or the cinematic qualities of the script' (Millard 2010: 13). Yet, she observed, 'the work of many innovative filmmakers has long favoured audio and visual expressivity over plot and narrative drive' (ibid.). Supporting her assertion with Lawrence Lessig's (2008) argument that the most interesting ways to write are increasingly with images and sound, she proposed that the traditional separation of screenwriting and film-making has diminished the potentials of cinema's image-led ancestry; an ancestry that lies among other things in photography, painting, vaudeville, the nickelodeon, travelogues, and illustrated lectures. In 2014 when elaborating on her argument, Millard suggested that one might approach the development of scripts using multimodal processes. In such instances she proposed that a script might take the form of 'a map, sketches, photo-texts, a wiki, a list of scenes that form part of a jigsaw, a graphic novel, a video trailer, a short film – whatever works' (2014: 184).

Millard's suggestion may be positioned alongside the thinking of a number of other writers who have critiqued conventional approaches to screenwriting. Ken Dancyger and Jeff Rush have emphasised the need to approach story structures in ways that 'cannot be directly expressed through writing alone' (2007: 281). Their suggestion may be compared to Ian W. Macdonald's concept of the 'screen idea', where one creates a screenwork from a single concept "whether or not it is possible to describe it in written form or by other means" (2013: 4–5). Such approaches have also been alluded to by Alex Munt, in his consideration of Kriv Stender's development of film, that he suggests constitutes 'a hybrid process that uses images and text, and is distributed across phases of film production' (2008: para. 16). In practice-led doctoral theses, artistic challenges to screenwriting have more recently been discussed by Siri Senje (2017), whose creative processes extend beyond prose formats and Robert Pouwhare, whose approach to indigenous filmmaking employs *He mahere whakawhanaunga* ('talking' diagrams and charts), which he uses 'to unravel complex networks of *pūrākau* (story content) and to compose narrative trajectories and intersections between them' (2020: 41).

Because I conceive cinema as image-led narratives, the approaches that I generally employ in shaping a story are pictorial. While sometimes I have to deliver a screenplay when I

negotiate with funding agencies, this document is only a translation of thinking that has been constructed and refined through visual processing. So, although I agree with Hermansson that screenwriting as a process, can facilitate ‘negotiation, priorities, adaptation and creativity, as various problems arise along the way, especially regarding characters and themes’ (2020: 84), for me these issues are more effectively navigated through visualization and internal dialogue.

‘SCREEN-PLAY’ AS A COMPOSITIONAL SPACE

When we encounter the word screenplay it is generally as a noun that describes a ‘film, television or video game script, written for narrative or documentary film purposes’ (Industrial scripts 2020). However, I suggest that screen-play might also be a verb. It might constitute a methodological, heuristic approach where one ‘plays’ with possibility. As such we might conceive a screen-play as a compositional space. Returning to the Proto-West Germanic etymology of the word ‘play’ (*plegōjanan*) meaning to ‘occupy oneself about’ or in Old Saxon *plegan* ... ‘to take charge of’ (Online etymology dictionary 2020), we might use such an environment to sense our way forward. In developing a film narrative we might step aside from studio format drafts with their 12-point Courier font, prescribed scene headings, action, dialog, character names, shots and parenthetical matter ... and dwell in a realm beyond words. Here, we can reach beyond *scriptum* (script) and engage with the related Greek idea of *skariphasthai* (to scratch an outline or sketch). In such a realm, drawing can become a tool for ideation and refinement where one composes inside image-led thinking (Vinacke 1952). Thus, in screen-playing, we might occupy ourselves with diverse approaches to processing knowledge where we think through nuances and connections in pictorial ways that resonate with the pictorial manner in which cinema itself communicates (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Drawings made in the now abandoned, Kingseat Psychiatric Hospital. ©. Welby Ings (2015). Sketches like these were made as I explored locations that seemed to resonate with the emerging film’s ethos.

Hundreds of such drawings contribute to the way that I initially think through the storyline and emotional tone of a film. In such renderings I can talk to myself about abstract ideas like the frailty of forgetting, the presence of absence and the hauntings of things that have now faded to become ghosts of themselves.

So, I do not use drawing to create discrete artworks or didactic storyboards. Although I appreciate these pursuits in others, drawing is a way that I sense my way through feelings, story fragments and potential environments that don't as yet, have coherent narrative form. As Rosenberg suggests, I think 'with, and through drawing to make discoveries, to find new possibilities' (2008: 109). As such, drawing may be likened to a *denkraum* (thinking space) where I sketch in the pursuit of an idea. Although these drawings are extensions of mental or physical imagery through which meanings and new insights are accessed, they also function as repositories of narrative, moments of tangibility or allusion through which, iteratively, I make sense of an emerging whole. Such images help to make evident what might be communicated and what might more effectively be elided, (left for an audience to imagine).

Screen-play as a space embraces Keats' realm of 'negative capability' where one 'is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact or reason' (Keats 1958, I: 193). However, it also extends to the state encountered in heuristic inquiry that Douglass and Moustakas describe as indwelling. Here, 'vague and formless wanderings are characteristic in the beginning, but a growing sense of meaning and direction emerges as the perceptions and understandings of the researcher grow and the parameters of the problem are recognized' (1985: 47).

Before unpacking how drawing operates in such a realm it is useful to consider the events that inspired the film *Sparrow*.

ORIGIN AND STORY

In 2015 I discovered a family story. It concerned a distant relative who had died saving the lives of his comrades in the dugouts of Egypt during the Second World War. This man was a hero. His photograph hung above the mantelpiece in the family's living room and every year

his nephews and nieces wore his medals in the local commemorative parade that wound its way solemnly down the main street of the small town where he had lived.

However, this story was destroyed one night when my cousin, while rummaging through an old set of drawers in his father's workshop, came across a metal tin. Inside it contained a bundle of letters. These were written in the 1950s from a psychiatric hospital less than 20 kilometres from where the family lived. They were communications to the soldier's son, from the man who had supposedly died on the battlefield. In them an aging man was trying to explain something that had happened. He was also asking his son to come and visit. Most of the letters had never been opened.

The soldier had not died saving lives during the Egyptian campaign. The truth was more extraordinary. Apparently, when his gay lover was shot, in defiance of orders from his commanding officer, the man had stripped off his uniform (a formal act of desertion) and he carried the body of his 'copper' out into enemy gunfire. Although he was shot, he did not die. Instead, disgraced, he was sent back to New Zealand after having been diagnosed with Combat Stress Reaction (CSR). Relegated to the back rooms of the hospital where the soldiers with psychological injuries were housed, he died alone almost two decades later. Nobody came to see him.

Although generations later, when his relatives granted me permission to create a film that incorporated his story, they asked that their identities might be protected. They still live in the small town he grew up in. With a carefully crafted myth, their parents had shielded generations from public embarrassment by creating a legend that fed seamlessly into the nation's metanarrative of heroic sacrifice and glory. Their action was understandable. After last century's World Wars, injured soldiers returning to New Zealand often encountered a social climate where public reverence was paid to men with physical wounds but there was deep suspicion and intolerance surrounding psychological injury (Boston 1993).

Given the vulnerability of the family, I agreed not to produce the work as an expository documentary but instead I sought to craft a delicate, composite narrative that interwove the soldier's story with an autobiographical account of my childhood obsession with flying (and

the resulting confrontations with bullies at school). By adopting this approach, I was able to obscure the man's identity by rendering details anonymous and conflating his story with an autobiographical narrative that occurred a generation later.

The thread that joined the two stories was a sparrow. In the soldier's world this was a small, caged bird that he wrote about in his letters. Apparently his comrades kept it as a mascot. In his grandson's world it was a creature that the boy found trapped in a room in the abandoned asylum where his grandfather had eventually died.

DRAWING IN CONTEXT

In explaining my attraction to thinking through drawing, it is perhaps helpful to understand that until the age of 15 I could neither read nor write. I understood the world through pictures and I drew incessantly. Although I listened to stories on the radio, I also waited anxiously for Saturday nights when my parents would take our family to Darby's 'picture theatre', which was a small shed with 30 upholstered seats, situated in a paddock on the outskirts of the local hydro village. Here, cinema spoke to me in complex ways, irrespective of my level of conventional literacy. Although being unable to write impacted adversely on my early, formal education, I learned to draw as a way of thinking through intricate ideas. Drawing became a method of making what I imagined, concrete.

At the risk of suggesting that drawing as a mode of narrative development can be easily categorized, an analysis of the development of the film *Sparrow* makes evident three distinct but interconnected methods. Each serves a different purpose. Broadly we might think of them as gestational, immersive and directorial drawing.

GESTATIONAL DRAWING

Gestational drawing is a process used in the early stages of a narrative design process. These are either fleeting sketches or longer term considerations where I think through elements of the story, feeling my way around potential content and environments. Such drawings have few character details because at this point, the narrative's population is still not well defined (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Gestational drawings employed to think about potential story content and environments. ©. Welby Ings (2015-2016).

Gestational drawing alights on potential environments or plot points and through them I pull the earliest considerations of content into being. Because this form of drawing is an exploratory method, many of the ideas that I sketch out fall away as the narrative begins to solidify.

Often gestational drawings are roughed out on odd bits of paper or in notebooks while I am inside a location I am considering for a film. The sketches are generally covered in annotations; these are notes that I write to myself about what I 'hear' or sense inside a world that is somewhere between presence and fiction. The notes are normally flickers of conversation or poetic fragments that describe the interior atmosphere of an event, character or environment.

Gestational drawing begins with the faintest of impressions; a potential moment in the story or a thought about how something might feel. As hundreds of such drawings are accumulated

I pin them on to a wall, connecting them with narrative threads until I can 'tell' myself the outline of the story. In other words I 'speak' the plot to myself through images and the spaces between them. During this process most drawings are discarded until I am left with a resonant storyline with visually identifiable narrative arcs and coherent metaphors.

IMMERSIVE DRAWING

The second drawing method is deeper. It is used to consider and shape the emotional resonance of events or themes in the work. This kind of drawing may be compared to an emotional pool into which I submerge myself.

In immersive drawing, the self and an idea 'are inextricably bound together in a physical, material space/ time relationship' (Mäkelä, Nimkulrat & Heikkinen 2014: 4). Here, I think as a director inside pictorial conventions of the screen. Thus, in these drawings we can discern features like focus and anticipation of movement or prolonged stillness (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Immersive drawings relating to events or emotions underpinning behaviour in the narrative © Welby Ings (2015-2016).

While these drawings are associated with core themes in the film's story, they are not visualizations of what might eventually be seen on the screen. Instead, they are renderings of emotions that cannot be expressed in words (but are transferable to film). Such drawings can afford up to two hours of immersion where I 'dwell on what lies close' (Heidegger 1966: 47).

When using this form of drawing, I allow my emotional sensitivities to escalate to a very high level so I can feel my way through ideas like the texture of loss, the weight of grief, the force of being bullied, the tenderness of connection, or the ache of trauma. Such drawing is

important because it informs later decisions relating to sound design, colour temperature and editing style. Because immersive drawing is so deep, it enables me to feel the intensity of the film's emotional high points, so I can then adjust the tone and pace of narrative episodes leading up to and falling away from its climaxes.

While immersive drawing as a form of screen-playing supports the development of a narrative, because it is visual, it can also influence other dimensions of the production like costume or property design. At times drawing can also leak stylistically. This can happen in a number of ways. In *Sparrow*, the eventual grade (colouring) of the film was influenced by the desaturated palettes I had been using in my sketches. In addition, many sequences showed traces of the surface texture evident in drawings when they are roughed out on cardboard or damaged paper (Figure 4).



Figure 4: Left: Immersive drawing in response to research I conducted into the symptoms of Combat Stress Reaction. Right: A filmed translation of this thinking in the film *Sparrow* showing a reduced colour palette and subtle surface texture. ©. Welby Ings (2016).

In addition to aesthetic treatments, drawing also shaped the way that iconography was created. Towards the end of the film when the boy breaks into the hospital where his grandfather died, he encounters the symptoms of shell shock. These are residues that appear as enigmatic personifications in the empty rooms and corridors of the building. While I was conducting background research into symptoms of Combat Stress Reaction, I discovered material (filmed at the Seale Hayne Military Hospital in 1918) documenting men whose trauma during war had caused them to lose the ability to speak. I responded to what I was watching by drawing the numbness of suffering. In one instance I sellotaped over the mouth of a drawn soldier. Then I tore the tape off multiple times and restuck it back into

place. This was not a rational decision; it was an emotional response to what I had been watching. In *Sparrow*, the idea of torn tape eventually transferred pictorially from the drawing experiment to the filmed metaphor for traumatic speech loss. However, although this influence was relatively literal, the association between sellotape and damage also influenced other parts of the film. A significant example was the treatment of the grandfather's myth. Using archive and specially shot footage we designed a software application that enabled an audience to see the story as damaged film that had strangely been torn, distressed and clumsily re-sellotaped together (Figure 5). Because such a phenomenon is an impossibility (multiple film frames cannot be consistently sellotaped), the treatment suggested that what we were watching might be something 'constructed' and less than the truth.



Figure 5: A selection of frame grabs from the film's sequence depicting the grandfather's myth. ©. Welby Ings (2016).

DIRECTORIAL DRAWING

The third drawing method is substantially more 'external' because it is a device used to enhance artistic collaboration. Because it is the role of a director to capture the artistic vision of a film, I work with crew and actors, to elicit the highest quality contributions in performance, lighting, sound, photography and production design. If a film is to be co-created using rich, well attuned suggestions, people working on the project need to be able to access a clearly articulated appreciation of both the work's ethos and emphases.

Traditionally in film production, accompanying a script, there are a number of image-based methods that are sometimes used by directors; these include storyboards and animatics. I don't use them. Instead, directional drawing is a technique that I find useful for eliciting richer levels of collaboration because it is not as prescriptive. Essentially, directorial drawings operate as discussion catalysts that help the creative team to surface and evaluate ideas. Using such drawings, we might discuss a symbolic treatment or the visual and aural

approach to a particular plot point. Normally my directorial drawings communicate a fundamental concept like, 'the dead soldier is like Christ sacrificed in a Renaissance pietà' (Figure 6), or 'the cigarette before death is filmed like the touch of life from God to Adam' (Figure 7). These ideas are clumsy in words, but when suggested in drawings to largely visual thinkers (like cinematographers, production designers, make-up artists, gaffers and costumers), they can become an articulate form of 'shorthand' that enables thinking to quickly focus on the essence of an idea.



Figure 6: Directorial sketches for the 'sacrifice' scene in *Sparrow* © Welby Ings (2016). The construction of the actors' pose in the film was inspired by the Mehmetçik Memorial of the wounded ANZAC soldier in the Gallipoli peninsula and Michelangelo's Pietà (1498–1499).



Figure 7: Directorial sketch of Michelangelo's hands suggesting the fragility of life during war © Welby Ings (2016).

Directorial drawings are normally completed before a shoot because film schedules afford little 'down' time to remove yourself to sketch. Accordingly, ideas are generally roughed out a day or two in advance when I visit locations so I can absorb the essence of the environment. These sojourns are normally reflective and pragmatic because I am thinking through what needs to occur (narratively, technically and emotionally) in specific scenes.

In practical terms, during the shoot, I carry these drawings around with me in an old manila folder. They serve no purpose beyond resolving a particular scene so, at the end of a day's filming, normally being in a poor state of repair, they are thrown away.

... IN CONCLUDING

The poet Ben Okri once said, 'It is in the creation of a story, the lifting of a story into the realms of art, it is in this that the higher realms of creativity reside' (Okri 1997: 119).

To lift a story into the realms of cinematic art, we often have to navigate unfamiliar territories. Margot Nash notes that 'The pressure to follow a market-driven development process has led many aspiring screenwriters to embrace script rules and structural templates without question, rather than embrace a discovery-driven uncertain process, in search of originality, story and meaning' (2014: 99). However, when pursuing narrative originality through visual methods one can encounter distinctive challenges. Often commissioning bodies will automatically assume the primacy of prose-based methods. As a consequence, they can tie development funding to script editors whose appreciation and provocations are limited to thinking inside the realm of words. In such instances drawing can end up being treated as an affected anomaly or something cosmetic, and advice is relentlessly drawn back to written processes. This issue can also occur when a producer's conceptual framework for film development is similarly constrained. I have spent many years seeking out producers who focus on thinking methods (rather than conventions). This search has proven imperative because my natural inclination when encountering an unresolved issue is to pick up a pencil, some ink and a sheet of paper. If a producer doesn't comprehend the vitality of this process, I end up hiding it and discussions are reduced to what has been translated away from the primary realm of creation. However, when a

producer and writer/director are able to form an insightful, empathetic relationship, where questioning can shortcut to the heart of the creative process, solutions can be rapid and profound because they don't need to pass through unnecessary processes of translation. This process occurred with *Sparrow*.

The film adopted a delicate voice. The images were haunting and beautiful and the narrative contained very little audible dialogue. Across two years on the film festival circuit *Sparrow* accumulated over 70 international selections and 17 awards. It screened in festivals in Cannes, Berlin and across the US, Asia and Europe. Yet in its narrative development, there was no keyboard shaping and reshaping description and action. I just used some pencils, paper, notes ... and a jar of washed out coffee granules. These mediums resourced an environment where I was able to reach inwards to the essence of characters and ideas to create a story that is both narratively coherent and emotionally resonant. Then by using drawing directorally, I was able to articulate approaches when working with other creatives on set.

By renegotiating the idea of a screenplay, the story *Sparrow* was realized inside visual realms. While this approach does not diminish the relevance and agency of writing, it is a reminder of Kathryn Millard's suggestion that we might usefully broaden our notion of the screenplay so it enriches the complex dimensionality of story creation for film. In concord with this proposition, the article has offered insight into the concept of 'screen-playing' that is predicated on drawing a relationship between the nature of pictorial storytelling and the potentials of pictorial thinking.

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