Developing a feature-length screenplay: Didn't You Used To Be Somebody?

Offering a counter-story to the characterisation of older women in mainstream cinema.

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or institution of higher learning.

Signed:

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Abstract

The screenplay, working title *Didn't You Used To Be Somebody?,* is a creative exploration of sexism and ageism within the mainstream entertainment industry, and how this affects the perception of older women (defined as 35 years and older) in wider society.

I developed the screenplay using a creative practice methodology that included dramaturgical analysis, traditional research into theories of feminism, and social construction theory. I also studied conventional screenwriting techniques such as the three-act structure, dramatic beats and character arcs.

In this way, a screenplay was produced to offer a counter-story to the prevailing characterisation of ageing women in mainstream cinema. I also used a dramaturgical approach to trace and understand how cultural influences produced and continue to propagate these characterisations and how this influenced my creative process.

According to Turner & Behrndt (2008), in simple terms, when we engage in the practice of dramaturgy, we are looking at the composition of a work. Although historically it has applied mainly to theatrical plays, increasingly dramaturgical analysis and practice are being used with the production of works such as dance, cross-form artwork, new media, and screenplays as a research method of enquiry.

Using this method, as I developed and wrote the screenplay I undertook reflective analysis and film history research to understand the lines of force that ran through it; that is, the culture my story sits in, the narrative techniques I employed, the commercial imperatives of film production, and the tacit knowledge and experiences I brought to the story.

Patriarchy definition

For the purposes of this exegesis, patriarchy is defined as "a system of social structures, and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women" (Walby,1989, p. 214).

Introduction

In this exegesis, I propose that the dominance of patriarchal culture in mainstream western cinema and the characterisation and absence of older women (aged 35 years and older) in many screen productions influences how older women are perceived in wider society.

Dolan (2013) writes that during Hollywood's pioneering era, women dominated filmmaking "on and off the screen", but the studio system that developed from the 1920s onwards systematically reduced professional roles for women. This resulted in screen characterisations of women became "increasingly predicated on a gendered star system that privileges hetero-masculine desires and is dominated by historically specific discourses of idealized and fetishized feminine beauty that, in turn, severely limit the number and types of roles available to women" (Dolan, 2013, p. 1).

Research shows that this discrimination continues. Industry analysis by Bazzini, McIntosh, Smith, Cook, and Harris (1997) and Lauzen & Dozier (2005) over the past few decades found that women disappeared from the screen at an earlier age than men, suggesting that a woman's value is tied to her appearance and youth.

These ageist stereotypes were prevalent for both genders, says Bazzini et al., but women especially were portrayed as "less attractive, less friendly, having less romantic activity, and as enjoying fewer positive outcomes than younger characters" (p. 541).

It was against this pattern of discrimination that I sought to create a screenplay with older women as the protagonists to offer a counter-story to prevailing negatives characterisations in most mainstream cinema, that is, productions from the Hollywood studio system.

Convention culture and fandom

The inspiration for the story came from my experience working as a publicist for a New Zealand popular culture event, which attracted a mix of artists; some successful, some starting out, but many whose careers had stalled and now used the convention circuit as an

alternate career. I was intrigued as to how this “subculture” had evolved and the cult of celebrity and fandom that drove it.

I observed with interest the behaviour of the artists before their fans, their interaction with fans, how the guests behaved behind the scenes, and how the conventions had developed a subculture with its own rules and language. I wanted to explore this in a fictional work.

This meant that I drew on my tacit knowledge and experiences for story development. The concept of tacit knowledge, or knowing, was first developed by polymath Michael Polanyi and can be defined as “knowledge that cannot be articulated, and personal knowledge involving an active comprehension of things known, an action that requires skill” (Polanyi 1958: vii) as quoted in Gascoigne and Thornton (2014, p. 5). I interpreted this to mean the lived experience and knowledge that I brought to the screenplay’s creation.

Popular culture conventions originated with San Diego Comic-Con in the USA. Today hundreds of similar events are held worldwide, attracting a perpetually moving assortment of actors, artists, cosplayers and gamers (Carvelli, 2017).

My screenplay is set in this culture, where at convention after convention artists retell stories of their glory days, even when shows are barely remembered, and people ask: “Didn’t you used to be somebody?”

The narrative follows Karen McGill, an American actress in her early fifties, who is struggling to find acting roles after achieving early success on a hit TV science fiction series. She now works the convention circuit, leveraging her former fame to make money.

The second protagonist, Maddie Crawford, is a jaded publicist who wants to pursue her creative interests but is a chronic enabler who struggles to put her needs first. When the pair meet at the New Zealand convention, the screenplay explores the growing friendship between the two women and how they inspire each other to progress in their lives and discover new ways of being.

A huge impetus for writing this screenplay was my frustration at the portrayal of older female characters in mainstream cinema, especially women in their forties and fifties. Women in film seem to be either 35 or 70, with the story centred on a male partner who has either died, divorced or deserted them, or the women are suffering an existential crisis about ageing.

According to Dolan (2013): “older female stars are typically positioned to embody idealised ageing femininity within Hollywood’s hetero-normative sexual paradigm, though this is rarely articulated as active sexuality” (p. 2). Most often, Dolan says, older female stars are cast in roles where their sexuality is repressed in some way. Silent-era actress Lillian Gish complained about it in a 1989 interview:

> “You know, when I first went into the movies, Lionel Barrymore played my grandfather. Later he played my father, and finally, he played my husband. If he had lived, I'm sure I would have played his mother. That's the way it is in Hollywood. The men get younger and the women get older” (Cohen, 2012, p. 225).

I wanted to create a story not driven by the narrative of ageing but by the problems that arise throughout the different stages of our lives—that life is a continuum with a series of chapters. The screenplay examines this issue through Karen’s experience. Her character arc explores life after fame, how we cling to our glory days as we get older, not believing that we can move onto different chapters of our lives and that more glory days lie ahead, albeit in different ways.

The other protagonist, Maddie Crawford, is a character that many women will relate to as she struggles to be a mother to adult children who don’t seem to want to grow up. Maddie’s challenge is not the empty-nest syndrome, but rather how to stop hovering over her babies and kick them out of the nest.

Mostly, I wanted to tell a story that ageing is not something to be feared, that the problems we face in our twenties and thirties tend to be the same problems we have in our forties and fifties, we just learn how to manage them better. I believe there is a need to tell these stories

for women over 35 who are significant consumers of films globally. In 2016, three of the five highest ranked films largely had female audiences ("*Theatrical Market Statistics 2016*," 2017).

The Narrative

Logline

While on a road-trip between conventions, a former TV star and a jaded publicist clash heads until a storm strands them in a county town where they discover friendship and a new purpose in life as they help each other to overcome their fears.

Synopsis

Actress Karen McGill is in her fifties, facing failure and a huge tax bill. After early success in a hit science-fiction series, her life is now an endless series of pop-culture conventions. The story opens with her appearance at yet another convention where she is subjected to overt sexism and ageism. Also appearing is Jake Featherston, a former colleague who garners better treatment and attention than her, much to her resentment.

Karen believes her only hope for a better life is a role in a major franchise, but as she leaves for New Zealand to attend yet another convention, the axe falls; a role she desperately wanted goes to a younger actress and the IRS is about to foreclose on her home that represents everything she once was.

Once in New Zealand, Karen discovers Jake is also attending the convention, much to her dismay. She encounters jaded publicist Maddie Crawford, their publicist for the event. Maddie is tired of babysitting actors but can't seem to break free from her inertia to follow her creative dreams. Instead, she chronically rescues her adult daughter to avoid tackling her fears and frustration.

After a positive reaction from a breakfast TV show appearance, however, Karen is determined to fight for the role she lost, especially when she discovers that the director of the franchise is in New Zealand. She decides to do everything she can to win the role.

Meanwhile, Maddie restarts a romance with the emotionally unavailable graphic novelist Darian O’Hara, who has returned to the convention. After they briefly reunite, Darian once

again freezes her out and she goes home distraught. Her daughter Emma is going through yet another emotional crisis, which Maddie feels compelled to rescue her from.

Unfortunately, due to a mishap, Maddie must drive Karen, Darian, Jake and the other artists including the younger and attractive actor Pedru Bhandari, on a road tour between Wellington and Auckland.

Forces combine when a weather-bomb traps them in a small country town where Karen and Maddie put aside their acrimony and bond over a mutual love of Regency Romances. Dan, an army major also stranded in the town, catches Karen's eye, while Maddie and Darian reconnect. Maddie is unaware, however, that Pedru, is attracted to her.

When the storm prevents Karen from reaching her meeting with the director in Wellington, she has a meltdown before confessing all to the group. They work together to get her to the meeting on time.

They arrive in Wellington in the nick of time, but during the meeting, Jake joins them, and Karen is shoved aside and ignored. She snaps and is no longer prepared to accept being treated as invisible, even if it costs her the role she wants so badly. She storms out, but her energy and interaction with Jake impresses the director who decided to write a role for her and Jake into the movie.

Although this will solve her financial problems, Karen decides it's time let go of the past and move into a new chapter of her life.

Unfortunately, an earlier text from Karen complaining about Maddie is accidentally sent to her boss. When he confronts her about it, Maddie quits her job, dismayed that Karen, who she thought was her friend, has seemingly backstabbed her. As she leaves, she stumbles upon Darian leaving for Los Angeles and realises that he is as heartless as ever. Maddie has an epiphany that she is her own worst enemy and resolves to change her enabling ways, especially when she discovers her daughter has solved her problems without Maddie's help.

Karen discovers the misunderstanding and the group hunt for Maddie. When they find her, Karen and Maddie resolve their differences and agree to work together to complete Maddie's romance novel.

Several months later, their book is finished, and Karen has sold her home to go travelling with Major Dan and Maddie has started a serious relationship with Pedru. The story ends at the wedding of Karen and Major Dan with the group reunited at the motel where they were stranded.

Ageism in Hollywood

Prior to developing the script, I researched the origins of ageism in Hollywood to better understand how it become so entrenched. One of my discoveries was how ageism in Hollywood and the cult of youth developed and fuelled each other from the 1920s onward.

The careers of the first Hollywood movie stars began in the early 1900s with women such as Gloria Swanson, Lillian Gish, Pola Negri, Mary Pickford and Greta Garbo. By the 1920s, they were considered superstars, but with the arrival of talkies in the early 1930s many silent stars couldn't make the transition. Some did, such as Gloria Swanson, but for many, once they reached "Hollywood Old" (about age 35) they were no longer considered to have star power (Chivers, 2011).

A lack of older women and the prevalence of certain character types was studied by Bazzini et al. in 1997. The researchers examined 100 top-grossing motion pictures spanning from the 1940s through to the 1980s, rating 829 characteristics such as attractiveness, character goodness, intelligence, friendliness, socioeconomic status, romantic activity, and movie outcome.

Drawing on earlier studies, they sought to confirm if the perpetuation of existing female stereotypes had continued in two ways: by under-representing older women in film, and consistently depicting more negative images of older women than older men. They found that women of all ages were underrepresented, but particularly women over 35, who

accounted for only 20% of characters, compared to males over 35 who made up 80% of characters.

Ageist stereotypes were prevalent, with older people of both genders portrayed as "less friendly, having less romantic activity, and as enjoying fewer positive outcomes than younger characters." This was even more so for older women, who were "perceived as less friendly, less intelligent, less good, possessing less wealth and being less attractive" (Bazzini et al., p.541).

The researchers were surprised to find this pattern prevailed across prior decades. They posited that this indicated that although society had become more aware of discrimination, "the industry had not attempted to adjust its depictions of people to be more sensitive to the perpetuation of negative age stereotypes" (p. 542).

A 2005 study found little had changed. Focusing on the top 100 domestic grossing films of 2002, Lauzen and Dozier found that although the proportions of male to female characters had improved slightly (73% vs. 27%), the majority of men were in their thirties and forties, while female characters were at least ten years younger in their twenties and thirties, and people over sixty were still massively underrepresented.

In 2004, actress Geena Davis was so concerned about the imbalance of male to female characters in children's television that she sponsored research into gender in children's entertainment at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Southern California. In 2007, she formed the Geena Davis Institute to promote representation in media and advocate for equal representation of women ("*About Us, Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media,"* n.d.).

This has significantly bolstered the data available on gender representation in media and film covering industry and film content and characters. Smith et al. (2017) examined films from 2007 to 2016 and found little had improved, with female characters now at 31.4% with only 12% of films having balanced casts.

The study found the gender bias was driven by a disproportionate number of men in the 21- to 39-year age group, with 33.4% females to 66.6% males. For women over 40, the number of female characters had improved marginally from 22.1% in 2007 to 25.6% in 2016. Of the 100 top grossing films in 2016, only 34 had a female lead and of these, only 8 were aged over 45, compared to 29 movies with men aged over 45 as leads (Smith et al., 2017).

This trend has propagated globally, says Dolan (2013) as other national film industries adopted Hollywood's narrative conventions in order to compete on the global film market. Consequently, the pattern of refusing to cast older female stars in significant roles and casting them as "marginal characters; or as abject pathological figures" has become a globalised cinematic practice. . . and the cinematic invisibility of older, post-menopausal women is symptomatic of a broader, highly pervasive and endemic cultural marginality" (Dolan, p. 2).

Gullette (2011) argues that the concept of ageing is a construct and that ageing at any stage of life can be made better or worse depending on the social context. She attributes ageism in our society to an ideology of "decline", which is "the entire system that worsens the experience of ageing past youth" (Gullette, p. 5).

> "[An] innocent absorption of cultural signals, youthful age anxiety, middle-ageism, ageism—infiltrating our society from top to bottom, is increasingly a threat to psychological wellbeing, to healthy brain functioning, public health, midlife job growth, full employment and a growing economy, intergenerational harmony, the pursuit of happiness, the ability to write a progress narrative, and the fullest possible experience of life itself" (p. 24).

Her argument is supported by Cohen (2012) who broadens this to the "cult of youth" that emerged in the 1920s, just as the Hollywood film industry was gaining global significance.

> "With its ingenious techniques for selling to a mass public, the burgeoning marketplace was able to exploit the fascination with the body. The market was

> modern and being modern meant being young. A cult of youth seized the popular imagination after World War I and has kept a grip on it ever since” (Cohen, 2012, p. 79).

This cult of youth has been especially discriminatory against the representation of women in contemporary cinema and film, says Cohen, with attitudes “veering between fear and ridicule.”

> The repressed or joyless middle-aged women was a stock character in cinema or, if sexually driven, unbalanced. This has transmogrified in recent years into the portrayal of middle-aged women with pumped up breast implants as sexual predators —“cougars”—hunting for younger men” (Cohen, p. 221).

Few scripts tackle the reality of sex and middle-aged life for women, says Cohen. Even if they are cast in these roles, middle-aged women can’t look middle-aged.

> “Like the caricatures of middle-aged women as depressed and stodgy, Stepford perfection can reverberate through the culture in a troubling way. . . Absence, the most common fate for middle-aged women in Hollywood, is similarly powerful. When people over 40 are erased from cinematic tales of love, intrigue, excitement, or heroism, the tacit message is that such adventures are for another generation” (p. 224).

Ageism in Practise

A mechanism for understanding how ageism operates in mainstream cinema is to examine the type of roles actresses played in their twenties compared to those they play in middle-age. Nesbitt (2016) looks at the difference thirty years made for actress Sigourney Weaver from her starring role in *Aliens* in 1979 to her role as Grace Augustine in *Avatar* (2009), both directed by James Cameron.

> “At the time of *Aliens*’ release, Ellen Ripley represented the potential of second-wave feminism, a revolutionary character unfettered by female stereotypes and embodying

> the need to reject them. Weaver's iconic performance as Ripley earned Weaver a place on the cover of Time. Weaver-as-Ellen Ripley represented the radical potential of feminism to upstage masculine postures of identity" (Nesbitt, 2016, p. 21).

However, by the time she was cast as Augustine, she was relegated to a supporting role with a character that "is positioned as fully accommodating and embracing patriarchal agency," says Nesbitt.

> "The powerful feminist icon Ellen Ripley/Grace Augustine is transmuted from a material force into an abstract, naturalized notion of feminine power that can be co-opted for male use" (p. 25).

Tropes

One normalizing system in storytelling is the use of archetypes and "tropes". According to Gibbs (1993) tropes:

> "represent figurative schemes of thought by which people make sense of themselves and the world. The ubiquity of tropes throughout everyday speech testifies to the idea that much of our thinking is based on figurative processes that include not only metaphor but a vast array of tropes" (Gibbs, p. 253).

A mechanism for researching culturally relevant tropes was the website *www.TVTropes.org*, a pop culture wiki that details tropes common in film and television and updates them as new ones arise. It defines a trope as "a conceptual figure of speech, a storytelling shorthand for a concept that the audience will recognize and understand instantly" *(Tropes are tools*," n.d.).

According to the writers, tropes employed in scriptwriting are conventions that may include a plot trick, a setup, narrative structure, or character type. Well-known examples include car chase scenes, Deus ex Machina plot, characters with a Dark and Troubled Past (Batman), and flashbacks.

Tropes, however, are also used negatively. In the section called "Acceptable Tropes", the website identifies tropes that consist of groups that are considered acceptable to target.

A prevalent trope that specifically targets older women is the “faded or washed-up star.” It can be argued that this was first established with the movie *Sunset Boulevard (Wilder, 1949)*. TVTropes calls this the “White-Dwarf Starlet” trope.

> “She was one of the most famous performers of her time. But now, her time in the spotlight is over. She's over the hill. A joke. A "Where Are They Now?" trivia question. A White Dwarf Starlet: like stars—the kind in outer space—that have ceased to burn and are now glowing only with residual heat from their active years.
>
> But she still yearns for the adoration she received during her time as the It-Girl and believes her big comeback will happen any day now. She tends to live in a run-down mansion full of memorabilia of her lost golden years, wears moth-eaten Outdated Outfits from her great hits, and still expects everyone to recognize her. She refuses to believe she's too old to play Ophelia and still insists she's not old enough for Gertrude” (“*White-Dwarf Starlet*,” n. d.).

Tropes are, in effect, a shared meaning between the filmmaker and the audience as they rely on tacit knowledge that, once formed, becomes a shorthand for that situation or characteristic. According to Gravagne (2012), “these shared meanings allow people within a particular culture to make sense of the world in roughly the same way and, therefore, to engage in ‘logics’ [of] public debate which create limiting social realities about the way the world works” (Makus 1990, p. 495) as quoted by Gravagne (p. 5).

In this way, the trope of the fading star reinforces the “social reality” that once a female actress reaches a certain age, she is not considered experienced or an expert, but “washed-up”.

I used this trope in my screenplay but after undertaking reflective analysis after the first draft, I questioned its veracity and sought to understand its origin and why it has persisted. This led me to Billy Wilder’s movie *Sunset Boulevard* (1949), which I will discuss later at length.

Methodology

The development and writing of this screenplay employed creative-practice research combined with dramaturgical analysis throughout four distinct stages:

- Development
- Writing
- Reflective analysis
- Rewriting

According to Batty and Kerrigan (2018) creative-practice research positions the creative work at the centre of the research project, which is "either the result of research and therefore performs the research findings (practice-based research, research-led practice), or is used as a site for systematically gathering reflections on the process of doing/making, in order to contribute knowledge to the practice" (Batty and Kerrigan, p. 7).

In this instance, the screenplay is intended as a mechanism to gather reflections on cultural and social influences and to understand and then create a counter-story to established tropes and characterisations of older women.

Batty and Kerrigan say this involves engaging in a "cognitive two-step" when the "filmmaker-researcher experiences the immersed, messy routines of creativity oscillating with the distanced analytics of reflective critique and theorisation." In other words, doing "research through creative process" (p. vi).

My aim was to develop the theme for my screenplay, write it, then reflect on it to understand the external influences that helped shape it, followed by a second draft.

> "An experience is best understood experimentally, therefore, through trial and error, through involved tampering and subsequent reflection, through a developing awareness of the actions and repercussions that are available and definitive inside and alongside the experience" (p. x).

This method aligns with the dramaturgical analysis I also undertook. According to Turner & Behrndt (2008), in simple terms, when we are engaged in the practice of dramaturgy, we are looking at the composition of a work. They admit that dramaturgy can be a difficult concept to grasp, and they define it as “an engagement with the actual practical process of structuring the work, combined with the reflective analysis that accompanies such a process.” (Turner & Behrndt, p. 3).

In this way, a screenplay is considered as part of a “wider network of meaning” that can take in the contextual “socio-political, human, institutional, organizational, structural and financial features. (pp.35-36).

Textual analysis

Prior to writing the first draft, I researched movies that had similar themes, genres and storylines. These included movies set in the convention culture: *Galaxy Quest* (Dreamworks Pictures, 1999) and *Paul* (Universal Pictures, 2011). The entertainment industry: *America’s Sweethearts* (2001, Columbia Pictures) and *The Player* (1992, Fine Line Features); buddy movies: *Thelma and Louise* (1991, MGM), and *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969, 20th Century Fox); movies about women and ageing: *The First Wives Club* (1996, Paramount Pictures); and rom-coms *When Harry Met Sally (*1989, Columbia Pictures*)*, *Sleepless in Seattle (*1993, Tristar Picture*s),* *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind (*2004, Focus Features*)*.

Galaxy Quest and *Paul* are examples of movies set in conventions, which then divert into fantasy plots involving aliens. I focused more on *Galaxy Quest* as it follows a similar theme to my screenplay in exploring the frustration the stars of a science fiction show (modelled on Star Trek) have with each other, being typecast, and their lives on the convention circuit. In the opening scene, the character Gwen De Marco (played by Sigourney Weaver) laments her typecasting:

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ALEXANDER
No. I can't go out there! I won't say that ridiculous catch
phrase one more time. I won't. I can't!
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GWEN
At least you had a PART. You had a character people loved!
My TV Guide interview was six paragraphs about this body
suit. About my legs. How did I perfect my trademark
sidesaddle pose? Nobody ever bothered to ask what I DO on
the ship...
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Howard and Robert (1999, p. 1).

Gaalxy Quest was one of the first movies to touch on the frustration that science fiction actresses felt at being typecast and undervalued in the science fiction genre.

It seems contradictory that science fiction as a genre of storytelling dedicated to challenging the boundaries of nature and culture should have reinforced gender roles, but this was the case up to the 1960s, says Attebery, (2002).

> Until the 1960s, gender was one of the elements most often transcribed unthinkingly into SF's hypothetical worlds. Even if an author was interested in revising the gender code, the conservatism of a primarily male audience—and the editors, publishers, and distributors who were trying to outguess that audience—kept gender exploration to a minimum (Attebery, p. 5).

It can be argued, however, that the sexualisation of women in science fiction continued well into the nineties. Marina Siritis who played Counselor Troi in the television series *Star Trek: The Next Generation* is a likely model for the Gwen De Marco character. In the pilot, Troi wears a very short skirt and in subsequent seasons her uniforms were low-cut, emphasising her cleavage. She has frequently spoken at conventions about her frustrations:

> "There are certain rules in Hollywood... if you're doing an action-adventure show, you gotta have chicks on the show for the boys to look at when they're not blowing up other spaceships. Second rule: if the chick has a cleavage, she cannot have a brain.
> "So, [after wearing a uniform in the first episode] I got a cleavage, and all my gray matter departed. Which was sad, because originally (I know this is gonna shock you), Troi was supposed to be the brains of the Enterprise. So when the cleavage came,

all that left, and I became decorative, like a potted palm on the bridge." (Mitchell, 2014).

In the later seasons of the show, she was finally allowed to wear a Starfleet uniform.

> "Suddenly, I was smart again. My cleavage had gone. My gray matter came flooding back. (Mitchell, 2014).

This portrayal of women, however, continues to be problematic in other genres. I perceived my story to be a "buddy movie" which McKee (2019) says are a sub-genre of the love story and share many of the same conventions:

> "You will have the friend's meeting, the friendship developing closely, you will have arguments and difficulties between friends but then they will come back and renew their friendship. They will both want and the two will try to struggle toward the same thing, they both have the same desire and carry that out mutually somehow, united in the cause." (McKee, 2019).

McKee cites *Thelma and Louise* and *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* as famous examples of the buddy genre and that these conventions can be observed in both these movies.

Few buddy movies feature women, so *Thelma and Louise* was a logical choice for study. According to screenwriter Syd Field, it is "a story of self-enlightenment about two women learning to take responsibility for their actions" (Field, 1994, p. iv).

When released in 1991, the film was the subject of major discussion and debates, says Field: "Everyone had an opinion on it and no-one agreed on anything." (p. 3). "It was labelled an "unabashedly feminist script" with an "explicit fascist theme" and it seemed to represent some focal point in the "battle of the sexes", he says (p. 05).

> "Somehow Thelma and Louise hit a common chord and jangled people's emotions. What was it that sparked so much emotion?" (p.06).

Field sought out the screenwriter Callie Khouri to better understand the background to the development of the screenplay, which she said was driven by her frustration with the portrayal of women in film.

> “I didn’t want to write about two stupid women, or two evil women who go on a crime spree. I wanted to write about two normal women. The definition of women as presented in films and plays is so narrow, so limiting. I noticed that when I was acting: How many times did I play a prostitute?” (Field, p. 9).

As the writing progressed, Khouri says she also wanted to explore the anger women feel when they are sexually harassed.

> “That’s another one of the things I’ve never seen dealt with in a film, the anger women feel about the way they’re talked to. In that particular situation, it’s almost a natural response.” (p. 9)

Conversely, the 1969 western buddy story of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (Hill, 1969) features a similar theme – two people on the run from the law, trying to escape the consequences of their actions - yet it did not generate the same emotional response as *Thelma and Louise.* Hollinger (1998) suggests it was a challenge to gender norms that drove this response:

> “The film grants its female protagonists central roles in driving not only the film's car but also its plot. They are granted agency in the narrative, challenging the traditional cinematic association of activity with masculinity. They remain in charge of their own fate throughout the film, frustrating all attempts at male control up to the very end, when they choose suicide over submission to male authority. While remaining resolutely heterosexual, they refuse to be defined entirely by their relationships with men; instead, they form at the film's conclusion a symbolic marriage of sisterhood. (Hollinger, p. 119).

Female friendship movies differ from male buddy movies, which sit in the action/adventure genre, and can be considered a sub-genre of women's films, says Hollinger.

> "Female friendship films offer not only sympathetic heroines, but ones who have been created by female producers, directors, screenwriters, and stars to serve as role models, validating the self-worth of the female spectator who identifies with them. The heroines of female friendship films also provide images of alternative lifestyles for women based on meaningful social relationships with other women. In so doing, they avoid advocating the submissive behavior that so often characterizes filmic portrayals of women's relationships with men. (Hollinger, p. 4).

This perspective informed the premise of my screenplay: supportive female friendships can help us to make change in our lives.

Screenwriting techniques

I also studied the screenplays of the mentioned screenplays to research characterisation, story beats and character arcs to gain an understanding of how successful comedies were created. I wanted to create a commercially viable screenplay while retaining an original story with well-developed characters. I studied a variety of screenwriting guides to understand narrative structure, including *The Screenwriters Bible* (6th Edition) (Trottier, 2014), *The Screenwriter's Workbook* (Syd Field, 2014) and *The Story Grid* (Coyne, 2015).

An early challenge I encountered in the development phase was establishing the main protagonist and through whose eyes the story would be viewed. This was a major roadblock and story development stalled until I solved it.

Studying *Thelma and Louise*, and *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* helped me resolve this uncertainty. Both movies have two protagonists, but in each case, one is more dominant—Louise and Butch Cassidy. From this, I decided to retain two main protagonists but with one whose viewpoint was slightly stronger.

Screenplay read-though

After the completion of the first draft, I had a read-through session with a group of professional actors. This dramaturgical technique is used to reflect on the screenplay and identify key problems with its dialogue, pace, and narrative (Turner & Behrndt, 2008).

The read-through helped me identify issues with characterisations and viewpoints. One issue that the session highlighted for me was how I handled the treatment of age differences in romantic relationships and how this was viewed by different age-groups, particularly the relationship between and older woman and a younger man. The feedback from younger actors was that it seemed that the character of Maddie was exploiting the younger Pedru . This led me to change and reframe certain scenes.

Actors also bring real-world experience to a read-though and the feedback and differing viewpoints were invaluable in helping me to overcome some of my attitudes that may be considered old-fashioned. This led me to revise the relationship between Maddie and Pedru into a long-term serious relationship rather than a short-term "fling".

Discussion

In the documentary "*The Kingdom of Dreams and Madness"*, Japanese animator and director Hayao Miyazaki makes the observation:

> "You know, people who design airplanes and machines, no matter how much they believe what they do is good, the winds of time eventually turn them into tools of industrial civilisation. It's never unscathed, it's cursed dreams. Animators, too" (Sunada, 2013).

He goes on to discuss how this concept applies to movies. I took from this observation that screenplay is not a standalone creative work, in the same way as a novel or photograph is, and the writing process requires an understanding of and, at times, adherence to the cultural norms which will lead to its successful production as a film.

In the case of my screenplay, the intended production culture is the mainstream Hollywood system. At the times the requirements could seem overly onerous, for example, the "Hollywood style" screenplay which is predominantly a three-act narrative structure.

These come with seemingly stringent requirements dictated, not for creative reasons, but to interest production company script readers so they read the entire screenplay.

> "You've heard the horror stories of agents and executives reading only the first few pages of a script then chucking it on the dung heap. One way to avoid that is for something to happen in the first 10 pages" (Trottier, 2014).

According to Trottier, most major Hollywood studios and production companies today stipulate that movies in production cannot be any longer than two hours, eight minutes. That means approximately 128 pages and must adhere to the three-act structure of set up the story, create complications, resolve then conclude.

Act One is considered the setup and is generally 20 to 30 pages long, Act Two is about 50 pages long and is concerned with conflicts and obstacles confronted and overcome, while Act Three is about 20 to 30 pages long and leads to the resolution.

The inciting incident which affects the main protagonist's life must appear early in Act One. A major turning point at the end pushes the audience into Act Two, which progressively becomes more complicated. Another turning point at the end of Act Two pushes into Act Three and leads the story towards the crisis that forces the main protagonists to take the actions to resolve the story.

In the opening, Karen's life as normal is working the convention circuit and her inciting incident is discovering she hasn't got the role she was counting on to pay her tax bill and return her life to its former glory.

She falls into despair. but buoyed by the positive response to her television appearance, she becomes determined to fight for her role.

At the end of Act Two she discovers she has a second chance to get the role, only for a storm to trap her in a small town so she is unable to meet with the director. This pushes us into Act Three.

In Act Three, Karen meets with the director only for him to fawn over a Jake. Karen overcomes her need for fame and gains her self-respect by walking away from the role. The resolution comes when Karen wins the role because of her own agency and restores her friendship when she realises the Maddie believes she had betrayed her.

By letting go of the past, Karen discovers life offers more potential and opportunities that she wants to explore and has found an important new friendship.

The inciting incident for Maddie, the second protagonist, occurs later in Act One after a disastrous romantic encounter with Darian and her disenchantment with her job. Her second turning point occurs when they are stranded in the town and she is forced to rescue the group. Her crisis occurs in Act Three when she is abandoned again by Darian and believes she has been betrayed by Karen. Her character arc is resolved when she takes responsibility for her relationship choices and works to achieve her goals.

The creative process is also tempered by the necessity of conforming to the commercial imperative, which can be limiting because it can feel like a story can't be created organically but shoehorned into a structure. To this extent, although the screenplay follows a three-act structure, by wanting to trace the friendship development between Maddie and Karen, it evolved into a two-act structure with a short third act conclusion.

However, this is a work under development and I want to create more dramatic conflict while maintaining the overarching feeling that two protagonists are working together to resolve their problems.

Sexism, Ageism and Hollywood

When it comes to women and their stories, says Simone De Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949) “they still dream through men’s dreams” (p. 166).

The volume of evidence that Hollywood is a sexist and ageist culture dominated by men at every stratum is overwhelming, so how does this affect the creation of a screenplay and influence stories that strive to counteract the prejudice?

My intention was to create a counter-story to the portrayal of older women as needing male agency to resolve their problems. However, I was dismayed at the end of the first draft to discover how much I had been unconsciously influenced by this culture.

The main protagonist Karen was conforming to the trope of the “fading star” or the “White Dwarf Starlet”. After reviewing the first draft, I discovered I had given her limited agency in that her although problem was solved by gaining the role she wanted, it was through the agency of the male characters.

I decided I need to understand this trope better and trace its origin. The movie *Sunset Boulevard,* written by Billy Wilder and Charles Brackett and starring Gloria Swanson, seemed to be where it had begun so I viewed and analysed the text and origins of the movie prior to rewriting the second draft.

Sunset Boulevard

The White Dwarf Starlet” trope largely describes the plot of *Sunset Boulevard.* Down on his luck screenwriter Joe Gillies accidentally stumbles into the rundown mansion of former silent movie star Norma Desmond. She lives with her Austrian butler, Max von Mayerling while writing a long meandering screenplay. She persuades Joe to help her finish it. He moves in and assumes the role of a gigolo. Refusing to accept her fame is gone, her delusion is abetted by Max who secretly sends her fan letters and shields her from reality. When her former studio asks to meet with her, she is convinced her return to glory is happening, unaware they only want to borrow her unique vintage car.

Meanwhile, behind the scenes, Joe is writing an original screenplay with the attractive and young script reader Betty. Desperate to keep Joe when she discovers what he is doing, Norma attempts suicide, causing Joe to rush back to her side. When he finally decides to leave, he tells Norma the truth. Unable to cope with reality, Norma shoots him, then descends into madness, believing she is back on a film set "ready for her close-up" (Staggs, 2009).

Billy Wilder and Charles Brackett had been writing partners for more than ten years by the time they came to write *Sunset Boulevard* in 1948. They had created some of the biggest hits for Paramount in the 1930s and 40s, and when *Sunset Boulevard* was conceived, they were producing and directing their movies.

Brackett kept a diary and his observations give valuable insights into the genesis of *Sunset Boulevard* and Wilder's attitudes towards women (Moore, 2014).

> "May 24: Billy and I worked all morning, but Billy indulged in a digression— his feelings about women: his boredom with them, his scorn for them, his intense dislike. He is a real misogynist (like most intense amorists) and I may say I share his boredom with most of the women he picks out, as dreary and affected a lot of empty-headed females as one could imagine" (p. 312).

A few months later, Brackett references Sunset Boulevard for the first time.

> August 3 : . . . Billy and I spent the morning in discussion of the Hollywood story. It's all centered around a swimming pool owned by an old silent days' star and nothing about it is set as yet" (p.349).

Because of their success, the studio gave them free rein on their projects, says Staggs.

When asked in 1999 what his original inspiration for the movie was, Wilder responded:

> "I wanted to make things a little harder for myself, I wanted to do that thing which never quite works—a picture about Hollywood... We were about to sign or not sign Pola Negri for the movie. Then we came upon the idea of Gloria... She had already been abandoned; she was a death knell—she had lost a lot of money on the Paramount lot. But I insisted on her" (Crowe, 1999).

However, far from being abandoned, Swanson had had a successful career up to that point, says Staggs. She had successfully transitioned to talkies, but in 1938 tired of Hollywood, moved to New York where she lived for the rest of her life. Swanson had her own television show, was an artist, a fashion designer and even an inventor. However, *Sunset Boulevard* identified her with Norma Desmond, often to her detriment, for the rest of her life, says Staggs.

Sunset Boulevard was intended as a horror story, with Desmond the monster, as indicated by Brackett's diary notes:

> "September 24 : Billy, though saying he detests a Camille scene as corny, is definitely set on a Camille scene for our hero and the pattern now will be: fly caught in spider web, escapes because he falls in love with another fly. To promote the second fly's happiness goes back into the spider web briefly and is killed by the spider . . . [ellipses in original] How grisly it sounds, stated like that, but I think the pattern is sound" (p. 352).

From a modern perspective, though, it seemed more a story of how the Hollywood patriarchal system discards and demonises women when they are no longer considered worthy of the male gaze.

This position is held by Dolan (2013) who writes that "Hollywood's ostensible reflections on its own gendered and ageist practices represented in films such as *Sunset Boulevard* (1950, Billy Wilder) and *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane*? (1962, Robert Aldrich) do little more than establish older female stars as abject objects of a pathological gaze.

The concept of pathological gaze was postulated by Foucault, says Dolan, in which a doctor looks for signs of "disease and abnormality" on a patient's body through their prior knowledge of healthy bodies.

> "Extrapolating from this, films such as *Sunset Boulevard* and *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* can be recognized as mobilizing a similar split gaze; a gaze that

> pathologizes the body of the older female star through its knowledge of youthful feminine norms that enables the signs of aging to be recognizable and readable; and for these signs to be constituted as symptoms of abnormality. Clearly, in its rendering of specific older female star bodies as pathological, this split gaze also constitutes an ideological tautology that serves to legitimate the generalized cinematic invisibility of older female stars" (Dolan, p. 1).

The scene where Joe Gillies arrives at Norma Desmond's house reminded me of the arrival of Pip at Miss Havisham's house in *Great Expectations*, and Joe Gillies as the narrator directly references this:

> "A neglected house has an unhappy look, this one had it in spades. It was like that old woman in Great Expectations, that Miss Havisham in her rotting dress and her torn veil, taking out on the world because she had been given the go-by" (Brackett, Wilder, 1950).

I was intrigued by the direct referencing of *Great Expectations* and the character of Miss Havisham. According to Raphael (1989):

> "The characterization of Miss Havisham [in Great Expectations] provides a model of the power of repressive forces, especially in their dual roles as agents of society at large acting on the individual and as internalized matter directing one to govern the conduct of self and others according to unstated principles" (p. 401).

The character of Norma Desmond echoes Miss Havisham as they are both characters who have become frozen in thinking about time and change—one lamenting being jilted by her bridegroom, and the other, Desmond, jilted by her film "family".

> "Readers have generally considered Miss Havisham's isolation as self-inflicted but probing into the causes of her tortured manner of living reveals the workings of a complex system which has made her reclusiveness inevitable. While her financial independence has allowed her to escape confinement to an asylum, a fate we would

> imagine for a woman who behaved as she but did not have property or money, she lives as disconnected from the outside world as if she were institutionalized" Raphael (p. 403).

Raphael raises a salient point that the tragedy of Miss Havisham—and equally Norma Desmond—is not that they have been jilted or isolated, but that they failed to understand the system that works against them. In Miss Havisham's case, Victoria-era patriarchal culture, in Norma Desmond's, the Hollywood patriarchal culture.

> "The same system which esteems individual enterprise limits the ability of those not powerful or lucky enough to find a secure niche within a competitive system that renders all things, including human relationships, subordinate to their profit and exchange value" (Raphael, p. 403).

In Hollywood, this economic devaluation marries with the pathological gaze. Norma Desmond, who can be considered as a proxy for the Hollywood star system, is considered "washed-up" as by ageing she no longer is considered to have economic worth in a culture that values youth and despises ageing. In effect, she is shut out of her work.

Walby (1989) identifies this as a patriarchal structure operating at the economic level:

> "The key feature of patriarchal relations in paid work is that of closure of access by men against women. This involves the exclusion of women from paid work or the segregation of women within it. This leads to the devaluation of women's work and low wages for women, which itself becomes a social fact with determinate effects, not only on women's paid work, but in other areas including the domestic sphere and other aspects of gender relations" (Walby, p. 223).

Thus, the trope of the "washed up" or "faded" star is a mechanism to justify and disguise the discrimination and ageism against women in the entertainment industry.

This was a significant revelation for me as a writer and led to me re-evaluating and rewriting my story to give my characters not only more agency, but to emphasize that they were

operating within an unjust system that had locked them out through no fault of their own. I realised that I had fallen into the same trap - of not understanding the system I was writing about.

To paraphrase Simone de Beauvoir, in 2019 women still dream through the dreams of men, and in the case of Hollywood, stories are mostly written by men. According to Hunt et al. (2018) only 13.8% of movies in 2016 were written by women, and 35.2% of credited writers overall for broadcast scripted shows in 2015-16.

By not fully understanding the underlying patriarchal structure embedded in Hollywood and screenwriting tropes, I was unable to write an effective counter-story that offered alternate view of older women characters, and unwittingly recycled the same characterisations. It was only through the process of writing and reflection – to requote Batty & Kerrigan "through trial and error, through involved tampering and subsequent reflection, through a developing awareness of the actions and repercussions that are available and definitive inside and alongside the experience" that I was able to understand the system.

In my view, the screenwriting tropes and practices developed in mainstream cinema over the past few decades unconsciously reinforce ageism against women as part of a wider systemic prejudice against ageing in women. This only became apparent once I researched their origins and mechanisms.

This lack of awareness was a major structural fault with my first draft. Understanding how the tropes operate and the system behind them will inform the development of the characters, in particular, what tropes are operating with the other characters and what counter-stories could I develop for them to complement the main protagonists.

I feel my research project achieved its stated purpose of creating a screenplay that offered a counter-story to the prevailing characterisation of ageing women in mainstream cinema. The process of creative practice research combined with dramaturgical analysis enabled me to understand not only how patriarchal culture operates within the world of the screenplay, but

also within the Hollywood system, and it’s influence on me as a person and a screenwriter. These findings will inform future drafts so that my story better reflects the dreams of women.

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