

Can we write Cinema?

Scripts are still a crucial tool to develop the filmmaker's vision and finance the production of a film. When we work within a classical scriptwriting process, on a script that is narrative, that tells a story by organizing its events in the shape of a plot, we are likely to focus on action and dialogue of the characters. The writing of the script will be governed by the idea of advancing the plot towards the desired outcome. From this understanding comes the rule-of-thumb used in the industry to determine the approximate length of a film by the page-count. One page roughly resembles one minute of film.

For films that do not feature a strong plot and rely more on images than dialogue, finding a method to adequately convey in writing what the film will be like can prove a trying task.

In his little book “Notes on the Cinematographer”, Robert Bresson writes about two kinds of films:

Films that use the tools of the theatre (actors, staging) and use the camera to reproduce, and films that apply the tools of the cinematographer and use the camera to create.

To Bresson, cinema is that which is not filmed theatre, which is not written to have a maximum dramatic effect, which departs from dramatic writing and dramatic tools to explore and develop the medium’s own language – in images, movements and sound.

In my work as a script advisor, I frequently come across filmmakers who are not primarily interested in creating a story that can be summarized via plot or character change.

These projects have one thing in common: when we try to pitch them, the way pitching stories is understood, it usually doesn’t work, it doesn’t communicate well. There is not enough happening that can be told as a story, or rather, pronouncing what is happening will not necessarily give you any idea of what the film is going to be like, how it is going to look and feel.

In order to convey the ideas behind these films, the unique qualities of each one of them, we need to look for other ways of communication. Not only in the presentation of the work, but also in the development and this includes the scriptwriting process.

If not all films can be put into the classical form of writing, we have to ask ourselves: How to write cinema? But this already implies that we can. So we might better ask: can we write cinema? All forms of cinema?

To my experience there is still a wide consensus among people working in development that equipped with the toolbox of dramatic writing, and professional objectivity, a script advisor can work on every script and help make it work.

At the same time, scripts that are not meant to create a dramatically built story, and do not rely on causality to plausibly move things towards their inevitable end, will most likely suffer, if approached and worked on with the tools of dramatic writing.

So how do we write what is to be seen and how do we convey successfully, through this writing, both content and intent?

The Mexican film director Carlos Reygadas did not even make an attempt to indicate a story in the summary for his film project *Post Tenebras Lux* when he presented it at CineMart 2011. Instead he wrote: “it is a feature film with a loose plot link in its discourse, but really clear in its poetics. It is not united by the plot, but by the harmony in the expression of the feelings.” And later, in his director’s notes: “The film’s objective is not to make sense from a particular story, but to make sense by association of emotions and ideas between the film and the spectator.”

It seems to me that Reygadas, along with many others - just to name Lisandro Alonso, Apichatpong Weerasethakul and Tsai Ming-Liang- strive for a shift in experience, comparable to the way German philosopher Walter Benjamin is said to talk about experience, distinguishing between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*:

The English translation for both German terms will give you “experience”, but *Erfahrung* is that which is connected to making and storing experiences, that which we can draw from to shape future behaviour. It can be communicated and we do so. If I have burned my hand by putting it into a fire, I can tell others about it and warn them not to put their hand into a fire, because it will give them burns and pain.

Erlebnis, on the other hand, cannot be communicated, it is more wary of words, it is the experience while it is being made. It is about being in the moment, as an undivided and non-expressible present existence in time. The *Erlebnis* I have when I put my hand into the fire is subjective and time-bound, it can’t be narrated later through words as easily and precisely as my *Erfahrung* of that act.

It seems to me that an emphasis on *Erlebnis* comes close to the interest and fascination of many filmmakers from around the world who want to share with their audience not a

preconceived causal unspooling of story, of experience as knowledge-passed-on, but are searching for ways to touch the emotion of their audience and connect it to their own moment of experience.

Those were the thoughts that led to my research, which began at the Master Film at the Dutch Film Academy in 2013, with a question “On the relation between scriptwriting and visual representation in film narratives”.

I want to reflect here on the thoughts, observations and experiences that led me to formulate my research proposal – and share some insights I gathered during my still ongoing research. Although I shall be speaking predominantly of the European Film Industry, the rationale we find at work in the subsidy-based form of film development and production -which relies heavily on the contributions of regional, national and international film funds- can be traced further than Europe.

My aim was to research and develop ways how to deal with alternative film narratives, especially in the question of creating a reading experience, which can adequately mirror the intended viewing experience.

One of the questions that came up immediately was the role of duration. Many of the films that do not primarily focus on story attempt to create a visual experience for the spectator, in which the length of the individual shot takes on a narrative dimension. Instead of determining the length of a shot by its informational value, duration encourages us to look further, to experience the scene, to become conscious of our own reflections and then maybe even of the duration as a deliberate means to transcend the experience.

How then does the writing need to look like in order to give us the right feeling for the temporal engagement the audience is expected to have?

How do standard scriptwriting tools approach this question or rather, do they deal with it at all?

Is there a way to create a “model-reader” for a script through the way the script itself engages with language (both syntactically and spatially)? Can we create writing tools that “educate” the reader as to how a script needs or wants to be read in order to convey its intentions correctly?

And is there a satisfying way to achieve an adequate method for a writing and reading experience of scripts that have no classical narration?

A crucial part of this research necessarily has to deal with developing the idea of the audience – not as the ticket-buying judges of good or bad films, but as the addressees of the filmmaker’s act of communication. The question of the audience combines all my concerns, as we address readers/viewers in every stage along the way of planning, developing, financing and selling a film.

At the latest at this point I have to be aware that my research also has a clearly political aspect, as it addresses two groups of people: scriptwriters and filmmakers on one side, but also very much the decision makers like producers, commissioning editors, funding bodies, etc.

What you read is what you get?

The common assumption when reading a script, and writers can corroborate this assumption via the feedback they mostly receive, is: *what you read is what you get*. First and foremost this means: what you read in the script is what you expect to get in the finished film. The script will allow you to assess the film-to-be so well that you can base crucial decisions on the reading.

But it might also refer to the fact that you can only read what you know how to read, because otherwise you might not “get it”. Like sometimes you look at something but you don’t see it for what it is because it is unfamiliar to you.

Reading and seeing are acts of choice that have to do with recognition.

In a script we need to convey visual (and audio) information through writing.

And this particular writing is not an end in itself. Still, many of the decision makers who read scripts do not think of cinema, of moving images while reading. Rather they react to story, to the stimuli of causality. They react as readers more than as viewers. They read for plot, if there is one...

We know that scripts that have sufficient amounts of dialogue are often read by merely scanning most of the scene descriptions between the dialogues for relevant information about non-verbal actions and ignore merely descriptive parts.

In an interview with *Filmmaker* magazine, Reygadas talks about his idea of writing for cinema: “Unfortunately, most cinema is illustrated literature. It’s basically writing literature and then adapting it to images so you can tell literature in a photographic and audio way. But it’s still literature. It’s not just because you don’t have to read it that it’s changed. I really think cinema is not at all literature, it’s something else. So, since I did not come from film school, the only place I had been taught was watching films.

So I would write:

‘First: there’s a tree. Ten seconds of silence, and then this sound comes, and then that comes afterwards. And then there’s a cut. And second: there’s a mountain, and blah blah.’ It’s like I am describing a film that I am watching, it’s being projected and I am describing to you what I am watching, as if you were blind. Somehow that’s the idea. You weren’t at the cinema and I would write down for you everything I saw. That’s the way I do it, and probably that’s the way it should be done, so we would make cinema instead of illustrated literature. ... It’s not so important to know what happens in the end, because it’s not about telling a story but rather about looking into a moment of life.”

We should remind ourselves that Reygadas by now has garnered a reputation as a filmmaker that will allow him to operate more freely in the planning/writing and financing process. But for many filmmakers, convincing a producer, financier or sales agent to come on board of their project still relies very much on the script.

So what are the tools available to a writer/director to adequately convey what a film shall look like through scriptwriting?

As I already noted, in films that develop a more or less classical narration, we are used to focus on the most active element on screen. It’s the same in the writing. Anything that involves movement draws attention to itself. Dialogue is experienced as movement between characters, while action is observable physical movement. So one could say that as long as your characters talk, or as long as you narrate actions and make things move, you should be fine. But there are different kinds of movement and this needs to be investigated in more detail.

The difference is between description versus narration and this brings in the role of the audience again. While it goes for both reading and viewing, it is particularly in the absence of

the image, in the reading, where we must acknowledge that everything the film author writes in a screenplay will be read by the audience (whether consciously or unconsciously) as the result of a *choice* by the author, whereby the audience can assume that every selected element is meant to be meaningful within the context of the work presented.

If we can't escape the assumption of intentionality, why then is it that so many readers of scripts distinguish between important and unimportant information, between description and narration?

Description will more likely be understood as being from the standpoint of an observer while narration suggests the standpoint of a participant, so we feel a different sense of involvement, depending on the writing. How do they differ, though?

Narration is implicitly considered as coming out of the relation of characters to objects and events, a dynamic sort of interaction, where the characters act and feel. Action does not stop so that description can take over, rather settings are involved in the action from the start.

Let's look at a simple example: "Lucy enters the sunny room" versus "The room is sunny. Lucy opens the door and enters". "The room is sunny" calls attention to the room being sunny, while in the first example the information about the room being sunny seems incidental, the focus being more on Lucy entering.

This distinction is especially important in what we call establishing shots in cinema. Writing of a sunny room without any people in it is usually perceived as establishing a location. If we assume to be in a narrative film, we will feel that story time has not yet begun and we wait for something to happen. When instead we enter the shot in the middle of an action, the sunniness of the room is a detail we might or might not perceive, in addition to our focus on the action taking place in that room.

Yet perception can change through duration.

If we see the sunny room for a whole minute, we gradually understand that we are to look for something else than just establishing shot information (which would take us less than a minute to register). So we may start to look for detail that could tell us why the filmmaker wants us to look at the room for so long and we will also start to register the duration as meaningful.

The problem in scriptwriting occurs when we try to write a one-minute-long shot of a sunny room and give an indication why this should be observed for so long and how.

If nothing moves, we can only feel the time dimension through the length of *viewing*. But we won't spend a minute *reading* the sentence "The room is sunny." So what works in the viewing won't work in the reading. Description cannot transmit the actual duration by simply stating the fact of a sunny room. And it doesn't help much to write "we'll be looking at this image for one minute", because that is merely information about duration, not the experience of it.

One option would be to increase the description sufficiently, so that it would take you one minute of reading time to take in all the detail described. But the question would remain, whether all that detail will be relevant and intentional (in relation to the events unfolding, or some other purpose) and whether it will create the desired emphasis. What's more, an image presents all its information simultaneously (like a painting) and it is the spectator's gaze that prioritizes or ignores some details.

This focus changes immediately when we write a long description in a script. If the assumption is that we are in a narrative film, all the detail mentioned will be read as carrying potential meaning for the action to come or else be superfluous. Even if we are not in a narrative film, we will still look for clues as to how to interpret what we read. As we can not possibly exhaust the potential detail of any given room in a one-minute written description, every reader of a script will assume that those details the writer cared to mention do carry more significance than all the unmentioned other objects which can be perceived once we exchange the written description with a concrete image.

Even a movement, which would draw our attention from the room to a moving detail, is not necessarily sufficient to shift from description to narration. Imagine an open window in that sunny room, the curtain swaying in the wind. Whether this will be seen as a narrative event or a descriptive one depends on the context of the shot and on the understanding of the audience what kind of film it is they are watching.

If we get no sense that plot time is advanced by an action, no sense that the moving curtain is tied to the event chain but instead is simply there (and would presumably continue to be there even if no plot were unfolding), then we are inclined to infer that its function is simply descriptive, not narrative.

Does this mean that scripts that are not focusing on classical narration are always descriptive? Or can we conceive of a way of writing that could replace the impression of a “merely descriptive” writing with its non-descriptive intentions?

Several questions seem to insist here: does description have a negative connotation per se in scriptwriting? If we move away from classical narration, do we also completely move away from story, from events being plotted?

And what can be put in its stead? Writing descriptions of a succession of images together with some cues how to read and at the same time imagine them, so that their non-descriptive qualities come to the fore?

Now look at this description: “Lucy is dressed in a mauve blouse and grey slacks, held up by a black leather belt. She wears a pearl necklace with a matching bracelet and low-cut black leather boots.”

Scriptwriters often offer such descriptions without a specific purpose for the action, simply to give us a more detailed visual image of a person. Would this description be read with a different focus in a non-classical script? Can it?

A writer might show Lucy getting dressed, which gives an opportunity to mention all the items in a kind of mini-narrative “Lucy dressing”, that hides the *description* of Lucy’s clothes. Instead of being given as a descriptive list, a mini-narrative of Lucy dressing would most likely show Lucy successively putting on different items of clothing.

Yet again, the question arises, why do we spend time with this? Just to mention what Lucy wears without making it look like a description? Is it to have an opportunity to observe Lucy’s way of dressing? To assess her clothing-style and from that infer some qualities of her character, her social status? To judge how adequate the clothes are to her age and demeanor? Very likely a mini-narrative would be read assuming there’s some additional meaning we should find out about, either while reading or through a later event relating to it.

No matter what the purpose, we can safely surmise that in any case the mini-narrative will be easier to read, because it offers movement and action instead of mere description.

Accepting that there can be different “degrees” of description, depending on the context, we search for additional possibilities to indicate our intentions in the script, to imply a specific pace and duration, as this ideally will lead a reader to re-adjust their scope. If mentioning a

concrete length of a shot is not an option, we have to find a visual equivalent of this duration in the writing and spacing within the script.

Governing space

The spacing of scripts, along with many other features, is quite clearly defined by the industry at large. A typical formatting rule, here quoted from www.screenwriting.info, as one of many examples: „the Courier 12 font is used for timing purposes. One script page in Courier 12 roughly averages 1 minute of onscreen film time. Experienced readers can detect a *long* script by merely weighing the stack of paper in their hand.“ The average amount of lines per page is often given with approx. 55, also counting blank lines. Usually stage directions (sometimes also called action or narration) are 1.5 spaced and run most of the width of the page, while dialogue is single-spaced and about half as wide as stage directions.

Clearly this doesn't leave much space for alternative writing styles, nor does the industry format give any options how to use the space on a page differently. It is interesting to notice that although action is prioritized, no writer is expected to convey that action in real time detail. Stage directions are to be short, precise and to the point (which only works if nothing unusual is happening that would need a more detailed form of description or even narration).

Let's assume we want to write a scene without dialogue and very little overt action. How can this be done to avoid the feeling of stasis that a certain kind of description we know from literature sometimes brings with it?

Even when very little overt action can be observed, we can insert a feeling of pacing, of time passing, through spacing and formatting. The script might then read more like a list of intended shots, with each shot being separated by a blank line from the next. This way, each element described is being looked at, while the blank lines in between pace the reading. In our mind, we also give time to moving from one line, through the blank, to the next line of writing. What's more, we imagine the shots as a montage and start making connections between the separate images.

Wherever possible, movements should be taken advantage of to create a feeling of time passing while we read, and parentheses with static descriptions should be avoided because they function as stop signs in the flow of reading. While we read a purely static description, nothing moves in our imagination. Static description is also very hard to take in and

remember, as it lacks any hint of a connection to other elements and is therefore difficult to memorize for later retrieval (although that might have been the intention of the writer).

The spacing and formatting of a non-dialogue scene broken down into a sequence of single shots by using blank lines can get us very close to a visual experience of the flow of images, bringing to mind the cinematic language and grammar rather than reducing the visual plane through the focus on dramatic storytelling.

If we want to show a fixed frame for a longer time that clearly exceeds a purely informational purpose, it can be helpful to add elements which are time related, most obviously non-verbal actions of one or more characters, but in absence of characters it can also be sounds, shifting light, passing objects, repetition (mentioning a recurring element), etc.

In general, breaking down a continuous action like “Lucy gets dressed” or “Lucy makes coffee” into a series of smaller actions can give us a very specific impression of Lucy’s emotional state, or the intentions of the filmmaker, through both the duration and the individual attention we give to each aspect of that continuous action.

What should definitely be avoided is writing out the interpretation of what is being shown or the expression of narrative intentions. This is exactly what makes readers (especially readers trained on conventional scripts) doubt the writer’s ability to make the film the way it is written and can put him/her under suspicion of pretentiousness.

While this is only a small fraction of the aspects of writing duration and rendering an adequate visual experience through writing, it seems that there are ways to write “different scripts” in a different style.

That still leaves the question of adequate reading? My answer here is: do not force all filmmakers to write their films according to a system which might not be able to serve all of them, rather open up the horizon for the decision makers. I feel we should train the decision makers to understand and respect cinema in its diversity, also as a unique artistic expression and not only as filmed theatre, rather than expect every filmmaker to speak the same language, a language that might essentially not be theirs. Many scripts nowadays are written the way they are written not because this format suits the needs of the filmmaker best, but because they must conform with a quite narrow norm.

What I propose here is that if we still want to be able to productively collaborate with other, more visually oriented forms of cinema, and if there is still a demand for a detailed written approximation of the film-to-be, we need other forms of writing (and reading), in the broadest sense.

What those may look like, we have just begun to explore.

The future is unwritten...

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