

One Audience Too Many: An Interview on Prescriptive and Receptive Audiences in Screenwriting

Irina Nersessova

An audience is traditionally thought of as a group that only participates in a given medium by experiencing and interpreting it but not by having any hand in crafting or changing it. However, screenwriters encounter an interactive audience that is actively engaged in the act of producing a film. This creates an interesting dynamic between screenwriters and their work, which former film student Michael Melkon will elaborate on in this interview with Irina Nersessova.

Screenplay writing creates an entirely new awareness of audience. It's a highly unique genre specifically because a screenplay's audience generally consists of individuals with the power to ask for the text to be revised and then make further changes in the process of producing and directing. It is not until the screenplay becomes a film, which is an entirely different genre, that it gathers an audience in the traditional sense. That is, an audience that receives information, is entertained by it, and perhaps critiques it.

Michael Melkon: There's an old saying in Hollywood: "The best screenplays don't always make for the best films."

Irina Nersessova: You've heard that?

MM: Yeah.

IN: Who said that?

MM: Well, don't quote me on this [laughter], but I heard that [Francois] Truffaut said it in an interview somewhere. Probably in French. But the point is that *someone* said it and that it's *true*. The reason it's true is because, at the

end of the day, we're talking about two different products: a screenplay and a film.

IN: So you view writing the screenplay and producing the film as two separate projects?

MM: They're definitely linked, but yeah, they are separate projects. I mean, there are two different audiences after all. The screenwriter doesn't write for the public. The screenwriter's audience consists of the producers, director, and actors. And then the film itself, a separate project, has the audience of moviegoers.

IN: Can you elaborate a little? I think most people probably consider the entire enterprise of making a film, from writing to distribution, one project.

MM: Sure. Depending on the production, they can be as different as a novel is from a filmed adaptation of it. For example, take on-set improvisations or a "really cool afterthought," which is almost never actually cool, that the director may have come up with. Sometimes these can turn out really well and enhance your story in ways you didn't even know were possible.

However, that's not really even the point. Whether it's for better or for worse, what's scary is that it's even possible. Sure, I've read books where I thought it would be funny or cute or clever if a certain something happened at a specific point in the story, but imagine if I actually had the power to make it so, just by thinking it?

This is the power that producers, directors, and actors have over screenwriters. They're not actually changing the screenplay itself, of course, since the file is safely unchanged and untouched on my hard drive. But the vast majority of people are not going to read my screenplay, are they? No, they're going to go see the movie, which will list me in the credits as the writer. So I get to take credit for all the choices I had nothing to do with. A double edged sword depending on how competent the filmmakers are, but again, that's not the point.

IN: In the past I've heard you say how it's a completely different story for novelists. Did you mean that in terms of the writing process or in relation to the audience?

MM: Both, I guess. You already know this, but I was actually a short story writer before I ever wrote my first script. Since I was a teenager, I would always write little two or three page stories, mostly fantasy stuff. I would never show them to my friends but always to adults. [laughter] For approval, I guess.

I was always trying to get as much detail as possible into my stories. The cool thing about prose is that you can give someone an almost sensory

experience through what they read. They can imagine the sounds, the smells, and the sights you describe. This is one of the things I had to stop myself from doing when I became a film student. The last thing you want to do is direct through your writing.

You have to keep in mind that a screenplay, by its nature, has to be interpreted by someone else, and that someone may get very offended if you keep telling them how to angle their shots or deliver their lines. But that doesn't mean you have to be bland. That's the beauty of screenwriting as well, the idea that you can convey a lot of information with very little detail and very little word count. It took me a while to adjust my thinking. Now it's almost impossible for me to imagine going into all that detail.

However, when you first asked me the question about novels versus screenplays, I was referring to the relationship with the audience. Or, rather, the relationship between the author and the final product that the audience sees. With screenplays, like I said before, you have two different audiences: a prescriptive one and a receptive one.

IN: Can you go into some more detail about the differences between prescriptive and receptive audiences?

MM: Sure. A movie or a TV show pretty much only has a receptive audience; in other words, an audience that just sits there, takes in what is presented to them, and doesn't interact. The screenplay itself, however, usually only has a prescriptive audience, unless you count film students who go back and read award winning screenplays or whatever. For the most part, the only people reading your script are people who are actively trying to give you advice on how to make it better and are very much expecting you to make those changes. When that is your sole audience, writing for it is something that is very different from any other genre. This is different from a novel or even a theatrical play, which is the screenplay's closest cousin.

IN: Theatrical plays and screenplays basically serve the same function though, correct?

MM: Yeah, they are basically the blueprints for some kind of production.

IN: So how do you see them differently?

MM: First of all, there is a certain permanency to film that traditional plays simply do not have. Plays can be performed hundreds of different ways, even with the same cast and director, so there is never one definitive version of it. Unless, of course, you count the original manuscript itself. The original manuscript is often considered an important work in and of itself, at least in the plays that have endured.

Even though a playwright is creating something that is explicitly meant to be performed, just like a screenwriter is, they still get the benefit of having the manuscript itself be what everyone, even generations later, will come back to for inspiration. Whether it is for pleasure or in school, people can read a play without ever planning on seeing a live production of it. Think about it, how many people have read Sophocles, Shakespeare, or Arthur Miller, who have never, ever seen a performance of any of their plays? Probably a lot, right?

IN: Can we talk about novels a little bit more? What is the difference between the relationship a novelist has with the final product as opposed to a screenwriter?

MM: Well, a novelist will sit down to write a story and when they are done, including all the changes imposed by the editor, they will already know exactly what the audience is going to see. Screenwriters don't really have that; instead they have the antechamber of production. Where the job of a novelist usually ends is precisely the point where, for a screenwriter, their story gets taken and turned into something else that *then* will be presented to a public audience. At the end of the day, that is really the main difference between the two mediums, not the structure.

IN: I've heard you refer to screenplays as literature before. Traditionally, it seems uncommon to come across that sort of perspective of them.

MM: Yeah, there are reasons for it though.

IN: Like what?

MM: Well, it's a lot of things. You know, a screenplay is made up of essentially two types of writing. One is the prose descriptions, and then you have the dialogue. I guess it's three forms actually, if you count the location headers. The biggest difference in screenplays is that sparseness is revered above all else. You're not really commended for how many words you have on a page but rather for having more white [blank paper] than black [text].

Dialogue is also a big issue, and this is another place where the prescriptive and receptive audiences intersect. The receptive audience, the movie-goers, is only going to see what the prescriptive audience did with it. So in the case of dialogue, the prescriptive audience consists of the actors. Due to a lack of inflection or verbal tone, actors can interpret the written dialogue in all kinds of different ways. That's really the main problem with the written medium in general, I think. How does an author direct a reader's imagination toward the intended emotions and interpretations? Stylized writing and cleverly placed punctuation combine in an attempt to communicate the nuances of a line to the audience.

This is very much on an individual basis when it comes to novels so that even if one person reads a piece of dialogue in an unintended way, there is a pretty good chance that the next person may get what you were going for. However, with a script you ultimately only have the actor's interpretation. The director will have some say in it, but it really comes down to how those words leave the lips of that guy or girl who you just hope was properly cast.

IN: Which is a process that the screenwriter had nothing to do with?

MM: Exactly! This is the prime reason why dialogue is such a point of anxiety for screenwriters: no matter how careful or witty dialogue may be written, all it takes is just one bad actor's delivery to make the definitive reading of a work something less than it should be. To everyone. For all time. You can do your best to stop it, but sometimes even placing all the commas in the right spot isn't enough.

But I really want to get back to the difference between novelists and screenwriters in their relation to the final product, if that is okay. When a script is turned in, with all the required changes, a screenwriter doesn't get to sit back and watch the world eat it up the way a book or magazine author would. These are motion pictures after all, and they have to be filmed. One of my film teachers told me that what makes screenwriters different from other writers is the anguish of seeing our baby taken away. That's pretty much true.

IN: How is a script like a baby to you? How does that analogy work?

MM: It's going to sound kind of weird [laughter], but just bear with me. All writing, if it's done with any kind of passion, can be similar to raising a child. The concept is like a baby being born, full of potential. The early drafts are their first few toddler steps, you know? Constantly falling down and picking themselves up again until they can balance just right. As they get older a personality takes form and certain traits solidify, giving you a foundation to build upon. There really is nothing more beautiful than watching a story come into its own, with its own set of values and outlook on the world. At some point, it's like a real person. Even the back and forth with the studio can be seen like arguing with your wife about where to send the kid to school. Sure, you may disagree with her, but you know she ultimately wants what is best for it to succeed. And studios want nothing if not to see the films that they finance succeed.

IN: I think a novelist can say everything you just said about screenplays, except the thing about the studios.

MM: Yeah, they could. But there is more. With a novel, once you're done writing it and editing it, it just comes out. Scripts leave home, in a sense, and you never know how they're going to come back to you, or, in other words, how the movie is going to turn out.

IN: Screenwriters get empty nest syndrome? [Laughter]

MM: Sort of! I mean, like all children who make it out of adolescence alive, the story has to move out. It has to go to college. And then you are alone. For a while, anyway. Then eventually, one day your baby comes back to you. Sometimes it comes back with all the potential it had inside of it fully realized, guided by the values you spent years carefully instilling in it. Other times, it returns to you burnt out, tatted up, and God knows what else. The fact that the latter is always a possibility, if not a probability, is what defines our particular brand of intellectual misery.

IN: Okay, so one thing I really need to ask, this might be the last thing actually, is if a screenwriter feels this compromised and neglected, then why be a screenwriter? I don't mean just for the money, why do it as a form of art?

MM: There is a paradox at work here that you may have already noticed. On one hand, a screenwriter can complain about people taking their baby away and turning it into something other than what they intended, but on the other hand, isn't that exactly what a script is for? It's weird to think someone would be complaining about people using their product exactly for what it was meant to be. If they had this much of a problem with it, then they should just go write something else. Why keep writing scripts? Well, a big part of it is their economy. Simply put, it's the most concise and precise form of writing out there.

There is something beautiful about the simplicity of a screenplay. There are no long prose passages like in a novel, and there is rarely any flowery dialogue or soliloquizing going on like you would see in a play. It leaves much out, but it sacrifices nothing, allowing the reader to truly place the characters in their own film in their own minds. They are deceptively simple to read, but under the hood no medium has as much complexity to it, *precisely because* of how Spartan the pages are. Like I mentioned earlier, it's not the amount of black ink you see on the page that gives it worth, it's that each line, each letter, is surrounded by a glaring sea of white, making the black all the more powerful.

IN: Yeah, I think I get that now. So the sparseness of it is the draw?

MM: Yeah, there's no fat. That's what made me fall in love with the format. It is literature, and it is humanity. It is distilled, simplified, with all the extra bits cut out and its soul right there, bared to anyone who reads it. But, like all bared souls, I guess, they are vulnerable. They are made specifically to be vulnerable. Vulnerable to that prescriptive audience that, you hope, will do it justice and then present their product, not yours, to the receptive audience that wants to be entertained.

Endnote

1. This interview was not a single sit-down; rather it was a collaboration that took about a month. Michael and I had a series of conversations in person, over the phone, over email, and through a shared online document before I was able to recreate the discussion in interview format.



Irina Nersessova earned her Bachelor's and Master's in Literature from Eastern Michigan University. Her interests include postmodernism, comics, and moving back to her hometown of Los Angeles. She's currently a doctoral student at Illinois State University, which brings her one time zone closer to being back in California.