

The Original Text Versus What We See on Screen

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Abstract: *Every film award gala or festival has a Best Screenplay section (bigger ones, such as the Oscars, the European Film Academy Awards, the BAFTA or the César even have a section for the Best Adapted Screenplay). This brings up the legitimate question: How much of the printed screenplay appears in the film? Usually, a considerable amount, as most of the text is there, but – and I say this based on the more than 30 films I have acted in and nine films I have directed – there is no scene that has not been modified during rehearsals, on set or in the editing phase, except for Romanian films made between 1983 and 1989, for which the screenplays, once vetted and stamped by the Censorship Commission, could no longer be changed. The Commission was established after the Mangalia Theses, the famous educational measures and cultural policies adopted in August 1983. Another exception were post-Revolution films which could afford the luxury of on-site rehearsals.*

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Introduction

The director's vision always is (or should be) based – apart from the informal goal, which has to do with the message, which translates into questions or personal introspection for the spectator – on a formal goal, namely closeness to reality or the similarity of conventionality and the surrounding reality. Naturally, we are excluding science-fiction films, genre or period films, animation or documentaries – this article discusses fiction feature or short films which are based on realism (in the minimal sense of naturalism, insofar as aesthetics and acting go, not style), and their proportion is rather large, although even in period films, the prop design and screenplay attempt to reenact that day and age as truthfully as possible, whether filmed on set or on location. When it comes to putting a story on screen, the starting point is a screenplay that can be original, adapted, improvised, or a dramatisation. All these variants, though, require rehearsals, even the improvised (as the rules of film improvisation are rather different from those in theatre), and the director – depending on the budget – can hold them in a dedicated space or on set.

Film rehearsals have three stages: text rehearsals (“table reads”), combination rehearsals, and on-set rehearsals. With these three stages, the actor enacts massive transformations, moving from the horizontal of the text (essentially inanimate writing, words on paper) to the vertical of the character (essentially a living person who can elicit empathy and attachment).

The final stage has two substages – image and sound editing, both of which substantially change the form of the story as told on screen.

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And yet, much as one can prepare, there is no way of knowing whether things will turn out as expected. Regardless of how “by the book” it is all done, regardless of how much you prepare, there is this great “I don’t know” which puts the magic of film in direct contact with the indirect link between divinity and us humans: inspiration. The beautiful part of this field we activate in, from my point of view, is that – whether we are talking about theories based on hypotheses or time-tested theories on the stages of pre-production, production, and post-production – they apply even to assertions coming from other fields: “Any physical theory is always provisional, in the sense that it is only a hypothesis: you can never prove it ... you can never be sure that the next time the result will not contradict the theory”².

1. Rehearsals

A text actors rehearse for a film can, as mentioned in the introduction, fit into several categories. That of the original screenplay – an original work written by a writer or screenwriter, presenting an original idea, concept or story, with dialogue and a plot, theme and subject which have not been put to paper before. In this case, the director has great freedom of creation – variations, interpretation, plot twists, everything having to do with the story depends, to some degree, on the director’s free will. That is what generates the (sometimes considerable) difference between what is written on the page and what will appear on screen. Often, rehearsals reveal – sometimes with contribution from the actor, sometimes from the producer, sometimes from the director of photography – all sorts of motivations, goals, intentions or nuances that change the initial text and can enhance a scene or make it complementary to the action, usually during rehearsals (and I say “usually” because the first reading with the actors gives a different picture compared to the author’s singular reading which he does on his own, in his mind, at home or at the office). Text rehearsals are the ones that spark questions as actors come up with proposals or the director brings up options that modify – sometimes substantially – the course of the action or the connection between scenes. They can discover, for instance, that a character’s stakes can differ from their goal.

In an adapted screenplay – considered to be a derivative work providing a fresh perspective or an interpretation derived from the original story, which can undergo or allow temporal or spatial changes while at the same time meeting the requirements or demands of a new generation of the public – thing can be a little more complicated from the point of view of changes brought to it. Only certain aspects can undergo transformations – obviously, depending on the contract or agreement with the rights holder or heir for the respective work. To give an extreme example, someone might adapt *Romeo and Juliet* for the year 2025 and film in a Romanian mountain village, with the necessary derivations: using lei as currency, adapting set design, props and costumes to the geography and period, using local language. In films, if the original work is not in the public domain (the *Moromeșii* novel, for example), the derivative work based on a literary creation is called a dramatisation or an adapted screenplay (both referring on the same thing) and the text itself is one of the areas where interventions can transform a scene, part of the film or even a character (in the example above, *Dumitru lui Nae*, for instance). In theatre, the derivative work is called a dramatisation as well.

² Stephen Hawking. 1998. *A Brief History of Time*. New York: Bantam Press, pp. 17-18.

Returning to the stage of text rehearsals, we move on to combination rehearsals, which feature part of the props, though without costumes, mostly corresponding to the size of the objects appearing in the scene – table, sofa etc.) and, again, the collaboration between the director and the actor turns the text on the page into a form with visual or phonetic meaning. The actors usually ignore the technical part of the film (or its technical dimensions and possibilities), and in a difficult scene taking place in a restricted space, this indifference can make the process more difficult. Again, usually, it is the director who should constantly remind the actors what is happening on set (for example: “You can’t pass along the wall, the camera is there; you can’t make that movement / can’t come back that way, you have the dolly tracks on the floor”).

Combination rehearsal can’t be done without a partner. It is at this stage, that of actual dialogue with another character, that the initial scripted dialogue is once again polished, in the presence of living, breathing people – actors – in contrast with characters on paper. After auditioning, some words or lines may no longer fit with the actors who have been cast. There are several reasons why a line can turn out to be unsuitable when the actor speaks it – the director may realise they want to change the age of a character (from 50 to 30, for instance) or their education (from university graduate to highschool graduate) or, as an extreme example, their gender (turning a male role into a female role, for instance, because they realise it makes the story more powerful). In these conditions, the text will change considerably, though the character’s intention or trajectory remain the same.

The way the actors move related to the text will impart a certain rhythm to a scene (“Even when what is expected makes demands on my sense organs and not on my motility, I may assume that the expectation is expressed in a certain motor expenditure towards making the senses tense”³.) It is the rhythm that determines the dimension of the line – shortening, lengthening or separating it into sections to keep things in balance. In the process of text rehearsals, the important elements of the screenplay are revealed and made comprehensible to the actors, eliciting discussions on matters related to the protagonist - what they want, what prevents them from obtaining what they want, and the same process is carried out for the antagonist. These discussions usually lead to essential changes in the lines, from the point of view of topic, the presence of conjunctions, replacing given names in the dialogue between characters, or any change that transforms the characters for a better understanding and matching of the actor with their respective role.

The on-set rehearsal stage has two substages – dress rehearsal and prop rehearsal – in which the actor fully melds with the given text. Generally, costumes elicit a change in the actor’s attitude – particularly specific costumes (police agent, firefighter, doctor, butcher etc.); in other words, they change their way of walking, their posture, their gestures, and this brings about more changes in the text. The actor transforms and feels the need to use specific words or phrases, beginning with specialised language (used in a particular profession, for example that of police agent, which the screenplay can only provide up to a certain point, beyond which it is up to the actor’s work with themselves) and going all the way to verbal tics, which are technical mechanisms that cannot be included into the script from the beginning, as they depend on the actor’s capabilities. Even though the director may want to have a character who stutters (to give an example), that stutter can’t be written out, as one has no way of knowing whether, from the point of view of rhythm, the actor will find it easier or more adequate to stutter on the vowels, on the consonants, or on the first syllables of words.

³ Sigmund Freud. 1990. *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. Norton & Company, p. 331.

Similarly, depending on the production team and the location scout, a scene which was initially written for a certain space can change if the space changes – if, for example, in the screenplay a scene happens in front of an icecream stall (and the text leads in and out of the scene in a certain way), but the location scout has found a much more visually spectacular burger stall and the producer greenlights the budget for it, the text will change (again, for the lead in or out of the scene, which do not affect the characters’ trajectory or direction from an emotional or psychological point of view). For example, instead of saying “*Hello, do you have vanilla flavour?*” they will say “*Hello, do you have mutton too, or just beef?*” This kind of change, which in no way impacts the character’s trajectory, the screenplay structure or the goals and stakes, can happen not only upon request from the director, but also when the producer decides on them – having signed, for instance, a representation agreement or a financial partnership with the burger stall owner. Or, instead of having a beer, the actor may drink cola. Or coffee – depending on the highest bidder.

In interacting with the props and set, the actor and the director make the last rehearsal-phase touchups on the text. If, for example, the actor is supposed to smoke or drink coffee and carry out various actions with objects on set, that will once again change the rhythm of a scene and, in places, its text. When camera movements and the actor’s movements come together and are joined by interaction with the objects and the text, preparations are nearing the end. What changes during filming (and can only change then) is the exact rhythm of the scene, because that depends on the state the actor is in. The atmosphere of a scene can only be determined while filming, where time constraints, the crew’s eyes following the actor, the frustration of failed takes add up until, finally, the right pace for the scene is achieved, and it is only there that the very last text touchups are made. There, in that state, on set, wearing the costumes, with all the camera movements, with an acting partner, under pressure, only there does the director see the rhythm and remove or add pieces or snippets of text, reactions that weren’t initially scripted (anything that was not mentioned in the screenplay but is only discovered at this last stage), any yawn, hiccup, gesture, vocal reaction, verbal expression of surprise, elongated vowel, hissed consonant, word skipped or only half pronounced – that gives the final form of that scene as filmed, which will be written down in detail by the set secretary, who will deliver the notes to the editor, to have an exact inventory of all the changes (writing it down is absolutely necessary, and collaboration with the script supervisor is vital for the editing phase, as the director can’t possibly remember all the changes, particularly since some will carry over to the final edit, while others will not).

2. Editing and camera

Moving on from the text of the initial screenplay, editing is the technical post-production phase that can change the narration, eliminating narrative threads or create new ones through a different succession of cuts. At this stage, the actor can have no further intervention in the direct process and can only do additional voice recording in a sound studio for some lines that have not been properly recorded during filming. Only the director and editor will establish the relation between characters and audience, imparting the necessary rhythm to the story told on screen, balancing the main plot against the secondary plot, generating empathy or attachment in the public by presenting the protagonist in their relation with their goal, stakes or other characters.

Editing can remove a line or whole scenes, or it can switch the order of scenes compared to the initial screenplay, going for a different type of narration – from a continuous chronology to ellipsis or flashbacks. This post-production process can also change the meaning of a scene or even

of the words the actors actually speak – there are times when the director realises a scene filmed with a certain text no longer serves the film as a whole, or cannot exist with the text as it has been written initially. Editing provides the possibility (in some cases) for the scene itself to gain a different form – because it needs to speak of something else than what the screenplay contained at first – which will make it necessary for it to be edited so that actors are only shown from the back or without their mouths visible, so that new text may be written and recorded for ADR, later to be superimposed on the re-edited scene.

Through the way it relates to the initial screenplay, the editing process provides the chance to see the written story on screen – and, more often than not, it looks very different there. Reading is an individual process, and imagination is something that creates thoughts, images and sounds based on personal experiences, on the emotional past of the person doing the reading. Film is a collective experience: all spectators in a theatre see the same film, the same pictures, though they do translate them through their own individual filters. Still, the pictures are the same, in the same succession, for everyone in the cinema at that time.

The relation between the director and the public, formed through the rendition of the story on screen (a story which, if read individually, would be seen differently in the mind's eye of each member of the audience), is established through editing, becoming a personal story based on the director's imagination, their way of interpreting the screenplay.

Apart from acting, interpreting the screenplay has this personal touch brought by the director's perspective, which sometimes (in terms of the image) can undergo changes compared to the initial screenplay, precisely because of that perspective. Generally, the screenplay includes no direction about camera movements – these are to be discussed by the director and the DoP. But there are many cases, particularly in Romanian filmmaking, where the director is also the screenwriter (Cristian Mungiu, Cristi Puiu, Corneliu Porumboiu, Mircea Daneliuc, myself as well), which results in numerous changes to the screenplay. Being a living organism, the auteur film is treated with great care, from rehearsals all the way to colour correction, and picture is one of the main conduits through which the director brings the story to the spectator.

Often, a wide shot as described in the screenplay can very easily turn into a medium shot when filming. Or a scene which, in the screenplay, includes two parents arguing will be transposed on screen through a closeup of a child listening in the next room. This is a textbook example of what the director and the editor, together, choose to show to the spectator through editing. Of course, to do that, first they need the filmed material – the child filmed as he/she listen – so that in the editing phase they can decide how and what they choose to show to spectators, depending on the rhythm of the film and the individual scene, on the message of the story and of the scene, on the tempo, the tension or the suspense. – “The cinema image, then, is basically observation of life's facts within time, organised according to the pattern of life itself, and observing its time laws”⁴.

Editing can amplify emotional impact, shape the message transmitted to the spectator, move away from the initial screenplay – albeit simply by changing the text in one scene or the order of pictures – and this process, in the case of auteur films, is absolutely necessary.

When shooting on film sets (mostly in the US) things are not that complicated, as the liberties taken from the screenplay during editing are rather minor. Such films have a shotlist, drawn up from the beginning and vetted by the producer, from which the director cannot move away much – changes are only made to the screenplay in cases of force majeure (while Ridley

⁴ Andrey Tarkovsky. 1987. *Sculpting in Time*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, p. 68.

Scott's *The Gladiator* was being filmed, Oliver Reed died, and the rest of the screenplay had to be rewritten; A. G. Inarritu's *The Revenant* had to have adjustments made to the screenplay due to a lack of snow). US copyright legislation differs from the one in Europe; in the US, the producer is the one to decide on most aspects, while the screenwriter's work is highly protected from changes that might be brought by the director to a scene or even the screenplay as a whole. In my view, these obstacles give US filmmaking a strong leaning towards the commercial or the following of recipes, compared to European filmmaking. Personally, I believe that change is the living element of a film, that there are aspects in which filming and editing can bring improvements to the screenplay, that the narration on the page gains different facets on screen, which can only be seen during editing.

That is why editing is a vital stage in transforming the story, particularly through instruments specific to editing. European filmmaking has a popular saying: "films are made during editing".

3. Sound

A film's soundtrack is another element we do not see in the screenplay, but which essentially changes what we see on screen. First of all, we have the music (which can be diegetic or non-diegetic), sound effects (doors, creaking planks, scraping chairs etc.), ambient voices or sounds, all these things absent from the screenplay but which, on screen, add detail to the story seen by the public.

There are very few exceptions, again encountered when the director doubles as screenwriter, in which a certain song is mentioned in the screenplay phase already (in Martin's Scorsese's *Goodfellas*, Cream's *Sunshine of Your Love* was on the director's mind and he made a note of it in the screenplay while working on it with Nicholas Pileggi). In general, though, the music is composed or selected after filming. In the case of Scorsese, we are speaking of non-diegetic music – in other words, music that is not emitted by a source in the scene, whether visible or not (such as a radio, a record player etc.), but works by the same author, or even the same film, can also include diegetic music (broadcast, for example, by a radio placed as a prop in a visible place). This kind of soundtrack cannot be mentioned in the initial screenplay, as it is selected during the editing phase – precisely because, with sounds, there is no way to be sure from the beginning if you need a song with lyrics, or one without lyrics but with a strong emotional impact or deeply emotional instruments (cello, organ), or simply spoken words, for which you use a show broadcast on the radio or on TV.

Sound effects don't often appear in the screenplay either and cannot be included in the initial text but, much like music, they enrich the soundscape the spectator is immersed in. A precise description of ambient sounds can be made, but it is most often absent from the screenplay, which includes rather literary depictions (such as "*On the village street, the wind blows up swirls of dust as it rustles lightly in the black locust trees on either side of it*").

What we see very often, however, is interventions on the text spoken by the actors, where sound editing is essential. I doubt there are many film scenes where an actor's text was not spoken in several takes – we are talking, again, about directly recorded sound, not post-sync. It is very hard for an actor to exactly follow the phonetic particularities of a scene (I am referring here to auteur films, which tend to have rather long scenes and shots), which is where sound editing comes in, to make every detail of the line eventually sound just the way the director intended it to.

Another aspect which cannot be mentioned in the screenplay, when it comes to ambient sounds, is the different type of soundscape the director aims to generate for certain scenes happening in the same space – for example, the same village street will feature different noises by night or by day, in winter or in summer. For films whose action is chronologically continuous, the same street will have different sounds at different times during the day. Such things cannot be written in the script, as there is no way of knowing if the scenes will be edited successively, if one of them will have to be foreboding, or serve merely as a bridge – which changes the soundscape. (for instance, a night scene will sound different with an owl in the background or with coyotes howling, or if in the distance there is the sound of a party with live music).

There is very much to be said about the soundtrack as represented by non-diegetic music (the one in the director's mind) and, again, there is no way to write this into the screenplay. Non-diegetic music is very hard to compose in a way that does not make it superfluous – the first form of film music, which supports a scene in accordance with the state it would inspire if it had no music (for example piano or violin for a sad scene, saxophone for a merry scene, percussion for an intense scene). In general, such non-diegetic music is used for commercial films, cannot be written in the screenplay phase, and is meant to underscore the feeling the spectator is supposed to have, as the director wants, in a way, for everyone who watches the film to feel the same thing and, instead of being allowed to resort to their own affective memory, be served the feeling on a platter: here you are supposed to feel sad / here you are supposed to feel happy.

4. Conclusions

In my view, there is a considerable distance between the screenplay and what we see on the screen. Considering all the stages and filters through which the film must go before reaching the spectator, we can speak of it as a living thing, something that changes constantly, increasing its intrinsic value as a whole – because we cannot judge a product in the stages in which it is still taking shape, we can only be aware of the value contributed by each separate department. I believe that is where the beauty of film resides: it reaches the public as a whole, not in pieces, and its backstage kitchen (from changing to text to adjusting it when spoken, to sound editing, to adjustments made for separate spaces, to editing and music) is not something for which you can follow a recipe, but rather an emotional process. The paradox resides in the fact that, though there is so much lying involved in making a film (a predetermined text, rehearsals, props, costumes, characters, filming, picture editing, sound editing), the main goal is to tell the truth. Admittedly, it is a truth that relies on perspective, an individual truth valid strictly for its emitter, but the process in the director's soul, the road to the truth made up of lies – that is where a fierce battle takes place: “the victory of ideas rejected and hated by the established order has changed countless forms of life, by the very nature of this process, a mere concept really – that of the will to truth”⁵.

Many decisions are made during these stages, many of them belonging to the director, and yet in the end the film becomes a sum total of decisions made jointly, as a binome, within each department – director and producer, director and actor, director and DoP, director and set designer, director and editor, director and sound editor, director and colouring editor.

⁵ Petru Creția. 2011. *Luminile și umbrele sufletului*. București: Humanitas, p. 52.

6. References

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