

Scripting without words: visual language in the pre-production process

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Panel 17 – ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES

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Abstract

A key phase during the planning of a conventional narrative screen production occurs when crew members such as director, production designer and DOP develop a visual lexicon that will be used to communicate the story of the film through imagery. These crew members, along with other colleagues, work together to define a collective intention which will drive the decision-making process through the planning of principle photography. Methods used to develop ideas for a film's visual style are found to have some similarities across productions but are often also as idiosyncratic as each group of individuals formed for each different project. Artefacts created such as mood boards, reference images and concept illustrations are used to develop, gain consensus and share ideas with all parties involved in the production, both above and below the line, and are therefore worthy of detailed analysis. These artefacts provide evidence can be used to understand a part of the scripting process that is fundamental, but often forgotten in the same way that script drafts are discarded in preference for the final audio-visual product. Much of the pre-production process is hidden because it's meant to be. The audience longs to feel immersed in an audio-visual story that is convincing and without artifice. Producers fiercely defend their right to control the story that is told about the making of the film. The creative process is also a highly vulnerable state in which creatives themselves may feel safer if kept secret.

As a result of these and other factors, the production process is notoriously difficult to infiltrate. This research is an attempt to gain access in order to examine in some tangible detail how layers of meaning are added to the storytelling during the phase of pre-production in conventional narrative screen production.

Keywords – creative process, screen production, pre-production, visual style, Australian screen production

Juliet John (La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia) graduated from the Australian Film, Television and Radio School in 1996 under scholarship, prior to working in Australian film and television production for over twenty years, mainly as an art director. She is currently undertaking a PhD under scholarship at La Trobe University in Screen Studies and is lecturing at the University of Melbourne and Deakin Universities in Production Design for Screen and in Film Production.

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