J. Donaldson’s popular children’s book *Room on the Broom* (2001) is a charming poem, illustrated by Axel Scheffler, about a witch who keeps losing things and offering space for a ride on her broom to the animals who find them. Towards the end, they are threatened by a dragon. In 2012, it was adapted as a short animated film, with the plot structure staying very close to the book, with one exception: the dragon was introduced briefly twice, earlier in the plot, before he actually arrived and threatened them. The film thus introduces tension and a dramatic build to a climax. In the book, the dragon appears unexpectedly (surprise); in the film we know what the witch doesn’t, that she is heading for trouble (suspense). The book follows the children’s storybook tradition where the heroine simply meets one character or event after another, in picaresque style; the film conforms to the current orthodoxy of screenwriting, which suggests that simple screen storytelling requires a build of tension, a climax somewhere near the end, and a coda. This example shows, neatly, that those who produce screen narrative have certain assumptions about what that narrative should look like, irrespective of content.

Orthodoxy: The screenwriting manuals

‘Looking at screenwriting through a discourse frame’, says Steven Maras, ‘involves exploring how the practice of screenwriting is constructed or constituted through statements that circulate through institutions, handbooks, trade magazines, academic studies, promotional materials and other writings’ (2009, 13). This is not exhaustive; scripts and other scripting documents, film and TV texts themselves, verbal discourse and other sources join this ‘archive’ (as Maras refers to it). For the practitioner, learning what is said about screenwriting, what one could infer about screenwriting from what is said about other things, and what is ‘said’ about the practice outside
written or verbal language, for example, all contribute to his or her ‘received understanding’, or the doxa of screenwriting. For the scholar, as Maras goes on to say, analysis of this ‘archive’ allows us to question those received understandings of what screenwriting should be or could be (2009, 15).

John T. Caldwell lauds the benefits of studying industrial forms of theorization (2009, 170), and screenwriting manuals are ‘especially rich sources for statements that shape the discourse’ (Maras 2009, 13). They can be seen as ‘meta-prescriptive texts’ or ‘low intensity theory’ lying between practice and high theory (Ballester Añón 2001, 493), as a normalizing discourse. Almost all such literature reflects the mainstream, as Ballester Añón points out (2001, 492–93). Pierre Bourdieu points out that textbooks and manuals emanate from the doxa (1996, 194), and they do represent the attempt to rationalize and codify practices in a freelance industry. Thus, they represent beliefs about that doxa.


Around the outer edges of such work also lies more reflective analysis, on dramaturgy and other narrative theories, whose purpose is to ‘explain’ how screen narrative construction works. The difference between manuals and reflective analysis is that the former is concerned with framing future practice; the latter is interested in identifying common patterns and norms which explain how a range of practices and texts have worked. There is overlap, however; serious reflective work may be focused specifically on how the orthodoxy is expected to work (e.g. Parker 2000; Cattrysse 2010; Batty 2010), and a level of theorization is not uncommon within manuals such as McKee (1999) and Parker (1998; 2006).

Manuals direct writers towards the ‘right’ way to do things. Their attraction lies in the authority they can claim for their ‘insider’ information, and the clarity with which they express it. Writers are expected to absorb the wisdom on offer, rather than question its basis. Conor’s analysis refers to Foucauldian ideas of ‘self-steering mechanisms’, and to Rose’s description of manuals as ‘psy-technologies’ which work to reinforce an ‘ideal subjectivity’ (2010b, 120). Manuals ‘are zones of intelligibility for screenwriting labour in the new cultural economy’ (Conor 2010b, 120), offering not just knowledge/power to the helpless screenwriter, but a framework, a convention around which the writer is expected to operate. This seems like a closed circle, in mainstream screenwriting at least; so, where does the creativity come in? Conor acknowledges that while this analysis can explain the ‘containing’ nature of the manuals’ discourse, it does not extend far into the creative spaces that are left. ‘Such an analysis quickly seems reduced to polarities – constraint is implicitly counter-posed to production