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CONFERENCE REPORT

HESTER JOYCE

La Trobe University

ARMANDO FUMAGALLI

Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan

ROSANNE WELCH

Stephens College

IAN W. MACDONALD

University of Leeds

‘Screenwriting: Fact and Fiction, Truth and the Real’, 10th SRN Conference, University of Otago, New Zealand, 28-31 August 2017

Hester Joyce writes:

The cover image of this edition of the Journal of Screenwriting is of an artwork by Daniel Mead (2013) located at the top of Baldwin Street, Dunedin, in New Zealand/Aotearoa.¹ On the first evening of the 2017 SRN Conference, in an example of spontaneous Kiwi hospitality that typified this conference and its hosts, a group of us were taken on a Tiki tour of Dunedin, by an

errant taxi driver, to Baldwin Street, the steepest residential street in the world, according (allegedly) to Guinness World Records.ⁱⁱ

The photo's POV is with your back to the street's steep (de-)cline and captures its reverse view, looking further up the hill. The bench, and the panel behind it, is painted to match the street as if it continues upwards – presumably getting steeper all the time. As it runs away upwards in a mirror image of what lies behind us down the hill, we see rows of 19th Century wooden cottages that typify the old colonial New Zealand/Aotearoa.

The Conference themes, Fact and Fiction, Truth and the Real are caught here. A little-known aspect of New Zealand/Aotearoa's settlement is that much of the colony was designed from 19th century England in 2-D; several towns and harbours in New Zealand were laid out with no reference to the often extreme local topography (Wellington being a notoriously dangerous example). Clearly this was a highly speculative activity, much like screenwriting and the development of screen ideas. Baldwin Street is the tangible result of one of these flights of fancy, and the consequence is a lung-busting, calf-wrenching gradient of less than 1 in 3 (19 degrees, or 35%).

Mead uses the existing park bench at the top of the hill to increase the sense of vertigo incited by looking down, by looking up. The wooden slats in the bench reference the cottages' weather boards, and its shape presents the road falling away up hill. What are we to make of this – when seated looking down the street, while immersed in its mirror image?

Baldwin Street hosts several events – the expected 'gut buster' run up the hill – for those who want to find out what they are really made of. Then there's the annual rolling of 30,000 Jaffas down the hill (hard-shelled, orange-flavoured, chocolate-filled sweets from Australia,ⁱⁱⁱ not the oranges from Jaffa, or the 'Jaffa cakes' popular in the UK). This returns us to the film screen

by way of the Antipodean tradition of rolling Jaffas down the raked wooden floors of heyday cinemas.

Like Baldwin Street and its planning, and its interaction with Mead's artwork, the delegates to the SRN conference focused on the same contested territory at the boundaries between fact/fiction, truth/the real. Screen writing research is by definition at the boundary of the established and the emerging, both in theoretical and practice-led applications. My colleagues below single out some examples of the range of interesting papers we experienced, but my single overall impression is one of the very appropriateness of Dunedin, and the University of Otago, as a place in which to discuss the place we occupy in screenwriting research. Davinia Thornley's sensitive organisational skills brought a mix of academic and industry keynotes together with the inclusion of powhiri (a traditional welcome from Tangata Whenua – local Maori), which really demonstrated the uniqueness of New Zealand/Aotearoa, its cultural inclusion and generosity, and its integration of the traditional as foundations for aspirational action.

Armando Fumagalli writes:

The 10th Screenwriting Research Network International Conference took place under the caring and welcoming organizational work of Davinia Thornley, her colleagues and the team at the University of Otago, in the lovely town of Dunedin, at the southern end of New Zealand's South Island – not far from Antarctica, as they pointed out.

The celebrations of welcome and farewell at the beginning and end were wonderful occasions for appreciating the traditions of the Maori people, their culture and their beautiful songs and dances.

On the academic side, the Conference enjoyed, and benefited from, the effective collaboration of the New Zealand Writers Guild. A good number of NZ screenwriters and producers (and a respectable number of Australian ones) were among the participants to the conference, bringing a special closeness to the Cinema and TV production industries. Alongside these from Down Under there was good representation from Europe (especially the UK and Italy), from Asia and both North and South America.

Most of the keynote speakers were professionals from New Zealand, which often produced a vivid dialogue and Q & A. On the academic side, the very useful keynote from Ian W. Macdonald, one of the founders of the SRN, explained the background, history and way of working of the Network to the audience. He also illuminated some very interesting key points relating to the development and the future of the Network itself. We have much work to do!

The papers and panels covered a range of different topics, mostly related to the general theme of the conference: Screenwriting: Fact and Fiction, Truth and the Real. For example, of particular interest was the paper by Rosanne Welch, about the transformation of a real person into a stereotyped character in the US TV series *Gidget* (ABC 1965-66). Luisa Cotta Ramosino, creative producer of an important international TV series, *Medici - Masters of Florence* (produced in 2016 by Italian broadcaster RAI, with Netflix, and distributed in many countries around the world), tackled the challenges in adapting a historical figure like Cosimo de' Medici, one of the key players of the Florentine Renaissance, into a character that could have appeal to a modern and International audience – which it did, judging by the TV ratings.

One area that focused attention was on production for children. Andrew Gunn, in 'Writing Real Children' introduced the demands of writing kids' programmes for audiences ranging from pre-school to teen, in genres from documentary to drama, and using levels of

humour from ‘aiming-for-witty’ to unashamedly scatological. In particular, Gunn focused on the characteristics of this specific target – young kids – and the historical and cultural gap existing between the adult writer and producer of children’s content, and the child him/herself. The target also requires concrete contents and not abstract ones: using examples drawn from very well-known shows like Sesame Street, Gunn illustrated his own experience as a producer of children’s programmes in New Zealand. Another paper about stories for children was the one by Eleonora Fornasari, of Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in Milan. Her case study has been the BBC TV adaptation of *The Stories of Tracy Beaker*, which is extremely popular in the UK. Fornasari studied the choices of the adaptation, a TV series in live action, that had to take some very specific paths to be considered suitable for a contemporary TV audience.

Among many other interesting papers came one from Shinsuke Ohchi (Hiroshima University, Japan), ‘Alejandro González Iñárritu’s *The Revenant* and William Faulkner’s “*The Bear*’. It was an insightful philological contribution to the poetics of two auteurs such as Tarantino and Iñárritu. But it was interesting also on a broader level, because, through the analysis of the similarities and differences between the two directors, Ohchi tackled the issue of ‘puzzle films’ (or, as some scholars prefer to call them, ‘multi-strand narratives’) from a truly concrete screenwriting angle (e.g. the relationship with the theme of the story). Stressing the influence of William Faulkner on Iñárritu’s technique of interweaving multiple storylines, and observing that Tarantino did the same but with lighter thematic implications, was an original approach – and a useful one, since it avoided the fruitless generalization of too many essays where the two directors and the issue of time fragmentation is considered through the framework of postmodernism.

Something that is worth mentioning is that in a good number of cases, especially by candidates who work in some Australian Universities, there have been papers that were describing the path of research and achievements in writing a practice-led PhD dissertation, taking the form of a feature length script accompanied by a more theoretical research side. This is something that in some countries is still unheard of, but it could be something that opens up a new and interesting level in the presence of research about screenwriting in many Universities in the world.

Rosanne Welch writes:

Fresh from a tour of the WETA Workshops in Wellington (see www.wetaworkshops.com), I arrived in Otago with my husband and 19 year-old son in tow (he was the reason for the WETA tour side trip) full of excitement for another SRN – but this one in the most exotic spot I had yet visited. The team from Otago did not disappoint. From the opening welcome ceremony in Te Tumo Hall to the school choir at the closing ceremony in the St. David Theatre (and then topped by the optional but way-too-much-fun-to-miss! boat trip that passed the Royal Albatross Colony at Taiaroa Head on the tip of the Otago Peninsula – the only mainland breeding colony of Albatross in the world), each day was full of interesting papers, peoples and presentations.

In Ian W. Macdonald's keynote, he happily informed the SRN delegates of the strides this group of researchers has taken since the network's inception 10 years ago, when he and others questioned why no-one had been studying screenplays in their own right, or why people valued only the film as the alleged 'end product'. He reminded us that studying screenwriting in its broadest sense is massively important, if only because of the immense amount of production and consumption of screen narratives worldwide, and of their importance to us as individuals on

a daily basis. Quoting David Hesmondhalgh and Sarah Baker, Macdonald pointed out that cultural products ‘have the ability to influence our understanding of the world more than any other product’ and so we really can’t just look at the appearance of such products – films, TV series – without going into the ‘knowledge, values and beliefs that underpin their creation’. In broad terms, that’s what the work of the SRN is grounded in.

However, the conference had many specific themes to explore, and of particular interest to me was the focus on how difficult it is to create TV programmes with a regional voice – and to sustain them financially – as many practitioner-presenters discussed. That conversation began with NZ filmmaker and Chief Executive of the New Zealand Film Commission Dave Gibson’s opening keynote speech ‘Taking New Zealand to the World’. Frankly, this is an issue we Americans take for granted, as we know our media permeates the world. This conference served as a solid reminder that, while financially fruitful, seeing a New Zealand television schedule from 1990 that included US shows *Chico and the Man* (ABC 1974-78), *The Beverly Hillbillies* (CBS 1962-71), and – the show I cut my Writer’s Assistant teeth on – *21 Jump Street* (Fox 1987-91), is just artistically wrong. If media transmits culture then there has to be room for local creators to transmit their own culture to their own people, as well as (hopefully) to the world. Happily, as was noted in several ad hoc conversations during lunches and coffee breaks, Netflix and other streaming services offer a new opportunity for bringing these new voices to a broader world – a goal we should all work toward. It would be a shame if all streaming did for this cause was create a new way for more – mostly U.S.-based – media to corner yet another market.

Another oft-mentioned goal that goes hand and hand with providing such a platform for regional voices was the idea of making diversity unremarkable. ‘The importance of being able to see ourselves on screen is paramount to a healthy society’ was the theme of the keynote panel on

Indigenous Stories/Indigenous Structures, ‘Fitting and/or Breaking Hollywood’s Norms’. I would love to see such a panel at ALL of our future conferences covering whoever are the indigenous filmmakers of the host countries, so I make a plea for that here and now.

One lesson I learned regarding representation came in the way teachers often learn – in an answer that comes off the top of their head in the middle of a class discussion (or in the case of a conference, in the middle of a Q&A). It had to do with the question ‘Can you write outside your ethnicity or gender?’ It came after my presentation on *Gidget* (ABC 1965-66) and my discovery that whenever female television writers wrote her, *Gidget* was a smart young feminist and whenever male television writers wrote her she became a boy-hungry babe. The answer that came to me so quickly? ‘Yes, writers can write outside such things, as long as they utilize the two Rs: ‘Research’ and ‘Respect’.’

To that end, I greatly appreciated the conference focus on female filmmakers and the telling of female-centric stories, not just because that is the focus of my own MFA program, but also because those stories need to be told. This came out in a couple of great keynotes, beginning with writer/director Gaylene Preston, who wrote *Mr. Wrong* (1984) and *Hope and Wire* (NZ on Air, 2014). She spoke of the ‘her-story’ of her life, giving moments in the lives of the women in her family that were transformative to them, and to her. She advised that ‘Purpose is what gives the artist the long game’, and that ‘Outrage is necessary to act.’ Preston’s strong belief in the importance of the arts in schools made me wonder if the SRN could branch out and offer presenters to schools in the members’ local areas as a way to expand that support...

Preston was followed by Fiona Samuel and Kathryn Burnett, two New Zealand television writers and consultants who presented a session on ‘Creating 3-dimensional Female Characters’. They chose to illustrate what NOT to do, with the ironic title of ‘10 Ways to F#ck Up your

Female Character’. I promptly emailed all 10 (12 actually) to my Masters’ candidates back in the States. You can read them all for yourself in the transcript published in this issue of the Journal of Screenwriting, but I have to share my two favourite examples here:

6. Make her a nympho (happy to have sex at the drop of a hat, in high heels, up against a cold, craggy stone wall covered in moss...)

8. Deny her the capacity for independent thought in her dialogue – let her ask handy questions ‘What can we do?’ ‘Where are we going?’ ‘What’s going to happen?’ (i.e. create ‘word ping pong’ between a human being and a doormat).

OR... You can flagrantly ignore ALL these points and create a real woman.

For me, the last day’s keynote by writer/creator Rachel Lang was alone worth the plane fare from Los Angeles. Having come to the conference already a fan of her *Almighty Johnsons* (Network 10 2011-13), again thanks to Netflix, I left needing to binge on her earlier series, *Go Girls* (TV2 2009-13), and found myself ready to write a paper comparing it to several American shows about female friendships (but not yet!) and to hop online to catch up on some of the show’s fandom and see which ‘team’ had the most support (Brita/Brad or Brita/Ross). Lang started things off with a rather female-centric laugh when she said, ‘Creating anything is like giving birth... it starts out as a fun drunken night and then you have to wake up and go to work.’ From a more serious standpoint, she advocates casting control for writer-creators, as vital for the success of the project.

Outside the keynotes, the papers that stood out were Alfio Leotta's 'In Search of the Perfect Wave: John Milius and *Big Wednesday* as a Cult Film' which focused on how Milius' time as both a Vietnam war veteran and a surfer infused the film with an honesty that was sadly missed by the reviewers, causing the film to be considered another bubble-gum beach romp; Carmen Sofia Brenes' 'From Fact to Fiction and Back in Pablo Larrain's Films', which took a look at how international films can be when a Chilean director takes on the story of America's most iconic First Lady (*Jackie*, 2016); and Armando Fumagalli's paper, which taught us a new way to study the structure of a biopic with 'The Re-elaboration of a Life into an Oscar-winning Film: Truth and Drama in *A Beautiful Mind*', the adaptation of which also involves learning what not to include from the real life story, and staying focused on the 'universal question'. For Fumagalli, the universal question of *A Beautiful Mind* (2001) is, 'Is it more important to have a beautiful mind or a beautiful heart?'

Finally, the two-person panel on Race in US Television included Caryn Murphy covering how the Kerner Report on Race, a report commissioned by President Lyndon Johnson to investigate the causes of the race riots then raging across the United States, affected the characterization of the only person of colour on *Ironside* (NBC 1967-75), in her paper 'Network Television Writers and the "Race Problems" of 1968'. With Desha Dauchan's case study on 'The Wire vs. Shots Fired: The Author's Voice in Television on Race Relations and Policing in America', here were two papers proving to be bold and deeply topical for the current political situation in the United States. And there was another Q&A learning moment, when an audience member noticed the weight Dauchan gave to the fact that the creators of *Shots Fired* (Fox 2017) were parents, so the question became which aspect of their identity permeated their programme

more – their parenting or their being people of colour? It became another of those gem moments that make attending such a conference so important to our continued work as scholars.

A particular highlight of any SRN conference is the inclusion of PhD candidates making what is often their first appearance as presenters. Such was the case with Amie Taua who covered ‘Harry Potter and the Negotiated Space: A Bicultural Perspective’ thoroughly in her presentation; and Levi Dean who studied how writers handle telling the stories of truly horrific crimes in ‘Screening the truth: applying moral psychology to the analysis of Australian biographical crime drama, *Snowtown* (2011)’. Both students acquitted themselves nicely among the tenured folks.

Kudos to the crew at Otago University for a fine week. I hope we continue our coverage of regional voices, our coverage of diversity in media – and I hope in future SRNs there is always that final day group excursion, so that folks from far away can experience a bit of the natural wonders of the places that inspire the colleagues we come to know at these events. It’s also a way to come to know our colleagues in a more relaxed setting than sitting in rows before a smart screen in a classroom. In that way we could all cultivate a taste for the regional voices and bring that interest home.

Ian W. Macdonald writes:

Despite the ever-present pull of Europe for many of the SRN members – like the elastic bungee hitched to your trousers made popular by A. J. Hackett and other New Zealanders – our research community has a genuine desire to experience ideas and stories from everywhere and everyone, and the 10th SRN Conference at the University of Otago presented the proof of that.

Two years in the planning, and Davinia Thornley had thought of everything for us, from the welcome to country and farewell from Maori and Pakeha singing Maori songs, to the recommended boat tour of the albatross colony out on the headland. Just as welcome was the presence of many writers and other practitioners, non-academics attracted by the participation of the NZ Writers' Guild and the keynotes who were almost entirely professional writers and producers. SRN members are very often practitioners turned teachers and researchers, but the immediate contact with those who are still managing to earn a crust by thumping out works of art on the old Olivetti was a reminder to us of the benefits of not erecting any ivory towers. Of course, the work of the SRN is based firmly on academic-oriented research, but membership is open to anyone, whether affiliated to a Higher Education institution or not. There may be more industry-oriented conferences (like the London Screenwriting Festival) than academic ones, but my own view is that professional practitioners are likely to be as interested in the fundamental questions around screenwriting studies as the rest of us academics, so it's great to see that actually happening under the roof of one conference. This tradition will continue in Milan.

My colleagues above have already shone a light on some of the many interesting papers presented here, so here's just a few further comments. The interest in non-Western cultures and how they construct screen ideas appears to be growing amongst SRN members. There was Sheridan Humphreys' account of the touristic interaction between first peoples and their colonists, and Samantha Lang's interest in human time and geological time, significant for indigenous Australians and connecting with the notion of geopoetics outlined by Elizabeth Grosz. Christina Milligan's paper on difference between the dominant conventions of the Western 'dogme' vs. Maori story traditions – not least the importance of the group as protagonist – led to a well-focussed Q&A. On a practical note, Christina pointed to the value of short films

as vehicles for Maori film-making, places for “ideas less diluted by commercial imperatives” and by implication likely to allow ‘different’ stories to flourish.

Binitesh Baruri’s paper on teaching film using the Indian rulebook of drama (largely used in dance) the *Natyasastra*, was fascinating, not only because of the differences to Western beliefs, but also the similarities (‘every scene must be in flux’, ‘emotion is inferred by how the character behaves’). Binitesh’s outline of this approach came with examples of his pedagogy; practical application alongside a system quite different to the ancient Greek tablet of stone us Europeans are used to.

Trans-national comparison was also with us in the panel from Stayci Taylor, Radha O’Meara and Cath Moore, who linked three stimulating presentations about screenplay language and its trans-national readability. Stayci raised questions around the use of the second person in connection with the female perspective, arguing that the use of ‘you’ may compel the reader to become (more?) complicit, and quoting de Beauvoir: ‘subjectivity is a woman’s lived experience’. Radha took on tense and aspect, to argue that the commonly-used present tense directed the writer towards linear storytelling, the ‘unfolding here and now’ (quoting from Price), presenting what then appeared to be a ‘natural’ order of events. The use of the past tense suggested different realities, as with the example of the story *Where the Wild Things Are*, and raised questions around ekphrasis, i.e. the literary description of a work of art in another medium. Cath tackled the title theme of transnational readability by referring to the Danish ‘collaborative auteur’ model alongside the dominant Hollywood model. One illuminating point here was her observation that if US practice was to cut in the script, Danish practice was to cut in the edit, a simple production difference that conceivably leads to very different results in the final work.

The growing interest in screen idea development is producing some nice discussion around the Network. Craig Batty, Stacy Taylor and Louise Sawtell's boldly-titled session 'script development: a new field of study?' was a lesson in how to make three people seem like a whole new school. The Journal of Screenwriting special issue on script development (8.3) had not yet appeared, but this was a full-length promo for it, and a pitch for a bunch of potential new work (the discussion around which continues in this issue of The Journal). We knew what was happening, of course, but the room was happily united in enthusiasm for the possibilities for research, and the many questions that popped up covered interest in documents like the 'emotion chart', in the nature of collaboration, film schools, re-writing and the impact of happenstance during production, and gender issues.

As always the conference was over in a flash, and I look back over my notes with some dismay at what I missed, from mis-heard key points in individual papers, to whole sessions, whole afternoons that passed me by because I had to attend other strands. I enjoyed many presentations (Sandra Sciberras, Liam Brannigan, Pablo Goncalo, Dan Weldon etc. etc.) and keynotes like Jane Wrightson on making film and TV in the NZ context, and Rachel (Almighty Johnsons etc.) Lang.

But, as usual with New Zealand, what starts off seeming familiar and even comfortable (to this European at least), ends up sliding towards the slightly odd and even surreal (a theme already noted by Hester Joyce at the start of this Conference Review). As I arrived into Dunedin by taxi late on a Saturday night, we drove past what seemed to be several individual traffic accidents, with a person lying prone in the road being tended by 2 or 3 others, all trying to wave us down. Even odder, the horizontal one was usually raising one hand holding a cigarette lighter, lit. It wasn't until the taxi driver laughed and said 'these students will do anything to get a cab

after a rugby match!', and I remembered the All Blacks were in town. And this was not a one-off frisson; examples of NZ reality seeped into the actual conference, too. I have never experienced a senior keynote speaker – in this case the doyenne of NZ film-makers and winner of awards like the NZ Order of Merit, Gaylene Preston – start her address by bringing the house down, reciting:

I'm on the bridge at Leith

I'm on the bridge at Leith

I've forgotten the key to my arsehole

So I'm pissing through my teeth...

And this was at 9:00 in the morning. Was she still swigging from last night's bottle? No matter; her stories and bon mots made perfect sense and created the same warm feeling as a shitload of whisky, with no hangover. And to prove these are not one-offs, as I left the student hostel I had been comfortably staying in all week, an interior world quite close to Twin Peaks, with its tasty cherry pies and wood-paneled, trophy-hung walls, there was a list of messages from the Bursar to students leaving for their break. One of these just read 'Tell Christine if you have a fish'.

I love New Zealand.

REFERENCES

21 Jump Street (1987-1991), Crs: Stephen J. Cannell and Patrick Hasburgh; USA, FOX; 60 mins x 102 eps.

The Almighty Johnsons (2011–13), Crs: James Griffin and Rachel Lang; NZ, Network Ten; 47 mins x 36 eps.

A Beautiful Mind (2001), Wr: Akiva Goldsman, Dir: Ron Howard, USA 135 mins.

The Beverly Hillbillies (1962-1971), Cr: Paul Henning; USA, CBS, 24 mins x 274 eps.

Big Wednesday (1978), Wrs: John Milius, Dennis Aaberg; USA, 120 mins.

Chico and the Man (1974-1978), Cr: James Komack; USA, NBC 30 mins. x 88 eps.

Gidget (1965-1966), Cr: Frederick Kohner; USA, ABC 30 mins. x 32 eps.

Go Girls (2009-2013), Crs: Gavin Strawhan and Rachel Lang; NZ, TV2; 60 mins x 65 eps.

Hope and Wire (2014), Crs: Dave Armstrong and Gaylene Preston, NZ, NZ on Air; 90 mins x 3 eps.

Ironside (1967-1975), Cr: Collier Young; USA, NBC 60 x 105 eps.

Jackie, (2016), Wr: Noah Oppenheim, Dir: Pablo Larraín, USA 100 mins.

Medici - Masters of Florence (2016) Crs: Luisa Cotta Ramosino, Frank Spotnitz, Nicholas

Meyer etc.; Italy, RAI; tx. 18/10/16-09/12/16, 60mins x 8 eps.

Mr. Wrong (1984), Wrs: Geoff Murphy, Gaylene Preston and Graeme Tetley; Dir: Gaylene Preston, NZ 88 mins.

Shots Fired (2017), Crs: Gina Prince-Bythewood and Reggie Rock Bythewood, USA, FOX 43 mins x 10 eps.

Snowtown (2011), Wr: Shaun Grant, Dir: Justin Kurzel; Australia 119 mins.

The Wire (2002-2008), Cr: David Simon, USA, HBO 59 x 60 eps.

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Hester Joyce combines creative practice in screenwriting and performance with research into screen cultures, screenwriting, screen aesthetics and national cinema.

Contact: Department of Creative Arts and English, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, La Trobe University, Bundoora, VIC 3083, Australia.

Email: h.joyce@latrobe.edu.au

Armando Fumagalli is professor of Semiotics and History of Cinema at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in Milan, where he is also the Director of the Masters Program in International Screenwriting and Production (MISP). Since 1999 he has also worked as script consultant for Lux Vide, a production company especially active in International TV miniseries (*Anna Karenina*, *War and Peace*, *Medici - Masters of Florence*, etc.). He has taught and lectured in many Universities and screenwriting courses in Europe, USA, Argentina, Chile, Mexico, etc. His most recent books are *Creatività al potere. Da Hollywood alla Pixar passando per l'Italia*, Torino: Lindau 2013 (published also in Spain by Rialp) and, with Paolo Braga and Giulia Cavazza, *The Dark Side. Bad guys, antagonisti e antieroi del cinema e della serialità contemporanea*, Roma: Audino 2016.

Contact: Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Largo A. Gemelli, 1 – 20123 MILANO (Italy)

Email: armando.fumagalli@unicatt.it

Rosanne Welch, the Reviews Editor of the Journal of Screenwriting, teaches the History of Screenwriting and One-Hour Drama courses for the Stephens College MFA in Screenwriting. Her writing/producing credits include Beverly Hills 90210, Picket Fences, ABCNEWS: Nightline and Touched by an Angel. Recent publications include Why The Monkees Matter: Teenagers, Television and American Pop (McFarland); and with Peg Lamphier she co-edited Women in American History: A Social, Political, and Cultural Encyclopedia (ABC-CLIO Publishing), named to the 2018 Outstanding References Sources List, by the Reference and User Services Association (RUSA), a division of the American Library Association. Essays appear in Torchwood Declassified: Investigating Mainstream Cult Television (I.B.Tauris) and in Doctor Who and Race: An Anthology (Intellect). Welch currently serves on the Editorial Advisory Board for Written By magazine, the magazine of the Writers Guild. Her talk, 'The Importance of Having a Female Voice in the Room', at the 2016 TEDxCPP can be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8JFNsqKBRnA>.

Contact: Rosanne Welch, Stephens College MFA Office, 12178 Ventura Blvd., #203. Studio City, CA 91604

Email: rosanne@welchwrite.com

Ian W. Macdonald, Ph.D., FHEA, is visiting associate professor at the University of Leeds, United Kingdom, and docent of screenwriting research at Aalto University, Helsinki. He is the co-founder of the Screenwriting Research Network (www.screenwritingresearch.com), a founding co-editor of the Journal of Screenwriting, and was the founding co-editor of the book

series Palgrave Studies in Screenwriting. His book *Screenwriting Poetics and the Screen Idea* (2013 [p/bk 2017]) has been described as ‘enlightening’ by the eminent film scholar David Bordwell, as demonstrating ‘exemplary scholarship’ according to Emeritus Professor Charles Barr, and ‘should be required reading for ourselves and our students’ according to Professor Jonathan Powell of Royal Holloway, University of London (and former Head of BBC Drama). A full CV can be found at academia.edu.

Contact: School of Media and Communication, University of Leeds, LS2 9JT, UK.

E-mail: i.w.macdonald@leeds.ac.uk

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