

# Evaluation and Emotion: Where Theory Meets Practice in Screenwriting

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It's time that academics begin to evaluate the texts they study (see Jason Mittell, 2015). As a practitioner *and* an academic I know the inherent tension in this statement, but I also know how vital it is for the academic world to begin to engage with how television is actually written, produced and consumed. And that is through the constant stream of evaluative questions producers and audiences are constantly asking. "Is this any good?", "Is this horror show scary?", "Is this comedy funny?" and "Does this drama pack a punch?"

It is academia's instinct to shy away from evaluation. To maintain that knowledge and authority comes from objectivity. But drama, especially good drama, cannot be examined objectively and to do so would rob those studying it of true knowledge. Emotional engagement with drama is drama's goal – its purpose and function as a work of art (or commerce). Therefore in order to study it effectively, one must allow it to work its magic (or fail to!). How else are we to understand that drama's effectiveness, or ineffectiveness, or understand how drama works?

In order for us to study the act of screenwriting (as opposed to merely studying the screenplay as text – See Ian W. DacDonald 2013) we must engage with a writer's *intent*. We must ask what the writer *thought* they were doing and, in conjunction, whether they were successful. This is how writers themselves work, evaluating what they themselves consume and asking "what works? And why? And how can I make it work for me?"

Screenwriters work within an accepted orthodoxy, one created by screenwriting manuals, classes, seminars and a certain writing 'culture'. But writers also work within their personal schema of what they consider effective storytelling. This is based upon what they themselves have consumed and what they have emotionally engaged with. In order to truly understand why writer's write what they write, we must understand (and feel) what they do. Why exactly is it so thrilling when Peggy tells Don she's quitting in *Mad Men*? Or so compelling when Camille first comes face to face with Léna in French series *The Returned*? By feeling these things, and by evaluating them, we are better able to understand how stories work, and how audiences gain pleasure from them; incredibly helpful knowledge to a screenwriting practitioner and similarly of interest to all those who study television and film.

Increasingly universities aim to teach theory alongside practice. But these two sides do not, and seemingly cannot, talk to each other. Whilst I teach the "craft" of effective narrative construction, the theory side is concerned with issues of representation, of historical context, of the way power moves through institutions and audiences. All of these are compelling and important issues but issues that seem severed from the rest of a student's education. In order for all elements of film and television research to feel grounded, relevant and significant, it is important to get these two sides speaking, if not the same dialect, then at least the same language.

These are two sides of the same coin, not different currencies.

If screen narratives are written, produced and consumed in a creative context that favours evaluative judgements, then should it not be, at least in part, how academics study screen

narratives? As institutions continue to search for a way to marry theory and practice it seems to me logical that we should engage with issues of evaluation and how texts were created. Not just in their wider industrial context, but in their creative ones.

What did the writers think they were doing? And did they pull it off? And what does that teach us about how story works?