

**Review of *The Screenplay: Authorship, Theory and Criticism*
by Steven Price
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xvi + 209 pp. £60.00/\$100.00 cloth; £16.99/\$33.00 paper.**

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punctuation of the review.]

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Were one to encounter a book on the writing of music entitled 'The Composition: Authorship, Theory and Criticism,' one would hope that the author had written music (however modest the achievement) and assimilated what our most distinguished composers have said about composing and the scores that they deemed exemplary. Were one to discover instead that the author had never mastered the craft but wished nonetheless to controvert a bedrock consensus of those who have done so, one might defer reading *sine die*.

Steven Price was struck while studying the works of David Mamet by the disparate afterlives of Mamet's plays and his screenplays. Both had been written to enable readers working on productions to imagine characters and events within stories, and both could be read by others to comparable effect. Only the plays, however, would be published.

The fate of Mamet's screenplays was typical, for few screenplays of consequence have been published and none to literary acclaim. Why so? Price decided to write a book introducing readers to how screenplays are 'authored' and used, and why they are so seldom read thereafter, and even screenwriters could find much that he says to be clear, true and provocative.

By the evidence of the book, however, Price has neither written screenplays nor pondered what our most esteemed screenwriters have said about how screenplays must appear. He seems unaware, indeed, of how few texts by screenwriters, other than screenplays, he has read, for he quotes from only a half-dozen or so and puts only one to use (a memoir by Evan Hunter on the writing of the screenplays for *THE BIRDS* [1963] to which he attends at length within Chapter 5). The neglect is likely inadvertent, for Price, in company with so many film scholars, misconstrues as 'screenwriters' those 'directors' who influenced the shape of their movies but never wrote screenplays, or who, writing for themselves, could ignore the common constraints of the craft. Only a handful of the directors that he quotes ever worked as screenwriters.

Consequently, Price misdirects the aim of his book toward an extraordinary and unreachable target, for he wishes no less than to establish "the screenplay as a literary form" (page 112), controverting "the most familiar and insidious argument" blocking his path condensed within the "metaphor ... pervasive to the point of near-ubiquity" that a

screenplay, like a "blueprint", can be "nothing more than a planning document" (page 44). Unfortunately, the depth of the analogy eludes him.

When Price shows through examples how characters and events that readers imagine when reading a screenplay can be pondered as profoundly as those envisaged when reading a novel, short story or play, he fails to sense that his discussions, however fascinating in themselves, bring him no closer to his goal, for that is how wary readers must scrutinize them when using a screenplay as a 'planning document' while making a movie. Price, looking elsewhere, fails to focus upon the distinguishing feature of the analogy that screenwriters have found so useful when explaining their craft to others, namely that a screenplay must stimulate those imaginings *differently* from how a literary text might do it.

Long before Philip Dunne, one of the most respected screenwriters of his era (*HOW GREEN WAS MY VALLEY* [1941]; *THE GHOST AND MRS. MUIR* [1947]), articulated the consensus of his peers, screenwriters had realized that screenplays – to be useful – had to appear differently from novels, short stories or plays, eschewing readerly aspects upon which literary appreciation is grounded, just as blueprints had to appear differently from paintings or drawings, avoiding aspects of two-dimensional depiction upon which pictorial appreciation centres.

Novelists construct their sentences so that readers can imagine what it would be like to be 'telling the story' in those very words, and painters configure the surface of their paintings so that viewers can imagine what it would be like to be 'seeing' their subjects in exactly that way. Screenwriters, however, must write their texts so that readers can imagine how audiences at a movie would feel were they to be seeing and hearing the events *apart from any description of them*, just as architects must draft their blueprints so that builders can imagine how the parts and the whole of a building would be *apart from any depiction of them*, pruning their works of aspects of appearance that would prove distracting.

No wonder screenplays and blueprints become uninteresting after use. Unlike novels, short stories, plays and paintings, they are *designed* to be disposable. No wonder vigilant screenwriters, contra Price's remarkable recommendations (pages 68 and 69; Chapter 7), will continue to avoid cluttering their screenplays with 'backstories' of characters, accounts of their thinking, commentaries or amplified descriptions of action. The distractions would blunt their use as screenplays.

Only an author unfamiliar with screenwriting and its history could suppose that screenwriters have avoided the entrapments of literary style for nearly a century through a collective misconstrual of their craft. Price's work bears promise of better things to come. I should hope that his next book fulfils it.