

IMAGINING FOR THE SCREEN

- the original screenplay as poiesis

(Å DIKTE FOR FILM - originalmanuskriptet som diktverk)

Reflections on an artistic research project

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PROLOGUE

1. A personal note

"When you write drama, you're so dependent on everybody else."

Briony, 12

At the start of the film Atonement (Hampton/Wright, U.K. 2007) twelve year old Briony announces proudly that - after having written stories for years - she has switched genres and written her first drama. She is thrilled by the new format - imagine not having to write all the boring "she saids" - and anticipates her debut as an auteur director of her own script.

But at the very first rehearsal, obstacles occur. Briony's actors, a band of visiting cousins, keep making suggestions that challenge the originator's own. The young artist realizes how writing for performance differs drastically from writing for reading. That difference, alas, is not just about literary form.

Briony's exclamation about the dependence on others expresses something essential about the theatrical and filmic arts: They are complex, collaborative artistic ventures, the success of which depends on contributions from multiple specialists and the creative exchange between them. Even the strongest artistic personality is required to keep her ego within bounds. What's more, no single artist can have complete control over the whole, final work.

As a stage director and screenwriter, I have, like Briony, at times found that situation frustrating. Still, the interplay of different minds, arts and sensibilities represents a type of dynamic creativity that is unique and sought after by certain creative temperaments, my own included. The tension between the personal vision and the group undertaking is keen, but irresistible.

The double task of preserving the first, yet cultivating and tapping into the second, is essential, but difficult. As I review my careers in the film and theatre worlds, I find that my every venture in directing or writing has indeed involved such a delicate balancing act.

*Also like Briony, I caught an interest in the art of drama at an early age. I adored going to plays and films. I took theatre classes, wrote, and acted from the time I was 10. Later, I attended the only high school in Oslo that had a drama program, although I had to separate from my friends and travel one hour every morning to get to it. Improvisation and exercises in freeing the imagination were central parts of the drama program. The fact that the dramatic arts - for their makers as well as their receivers - are collective in nature, was a part of the magic I did not reflect upon at the time. The possibility of bringing stories to life through living people - what Aristotle calls *mimesis praxos*, or imitation of action (Aristotle, c.330 B.C., Ch. III), simply appealed to me enormously. It still does.*

*My first love in the world of drama was acting. The idea of pretending to be somebody else, of blowing the spirit of life into an imagined character was fascinating – almost subversive. As another character, I could do the most shameful things and be guilty of meanness and evil. The notion of embodying a story and of filling an empty space with life was endlessly appealing. The privilege of working out the details of human behaviour through one's own imagination was interesting beyond anything I had encountered in life so far. When a scene started “playing” between two actors – meaning that the interaction clicked along without willed interference – a fresh vision of reality emerged. When this live action proved potent enough to move an audience to laughter or tears, another kind of magic occurred. The phenomena I later learned to refer to as *eleos* (pity) and *catharsis* (emotional cleansing) were loves of my life from the beginning.*

My directing ambitions originated in a high school drama class. Sitting next to our teacher-director during rehearsal, I caught interest in how the elements of a mimetic performance were put together. I started making suggestions. She

listened, and occasionally approved. How could the author's vision, or the subtext of a scene, be interpreted in different ways? How could the position, movements and timing of an actor create life or deepen the meaning of a scene? Would a line have a more powerful effect if a pause or gesture was placed before or toward the end of it? Would a costume, a prop, a certain kind of light from a certain angle, not to speak of a selected piece of music, enhance the total expression of a particular moment of recreated life?

After earning a degree in stage directing, I proceeded to stage thirty-some professional theatrical productions, most of them in Norwegian, resident theatres¹. A stage director is, if anything, a true multi-tasker. She is at once an interpreter of literary texts, a conceptualizer, a translator of words into visuality, a composer of moving imagery, a coach, a dramaturg, a group leader, an administrator, and more. I collaborated closely with creative professionals such as dramatists, actors, composers, stage designers, choreographers, costume designers, lighting designers, sound designers, stage managers, stage technicians, seamstresses, prop makers, carpenters, and, of course, producers – the artistic directors of various theatres. My work was, in Briony's words, deeply "dependent on everybody else". How could anything in the working world possibly be more interesting, challenging and complex?

Young Briony would not agree. In McEwan's book, she abandons her dramatic, collaborative venture and grows into the goddess of her own fictional universe as a writer of novels. I myself have been writing since I was a girl, but my desire – and courage – to write professionally, sprang from years of close collaboration, pre-production, with playwrights and screenwriters on their scripts. While I worked in the theatre, participation in the genesis of new text and the process of conceiving a dramatic performance "from scratch", was for me an essential part of the directing vocation. I could not seem to mobilize the same enthusiasm for the task of restaging a classic that had been tested and interpreted repeatedly.

¹ What is generally known in Scandinavia as "institutional theatres" such as Rogaland Teater, Den Nationale Scene, Oslo Nye Teater.

After two decades of staging drama in an enclosed space, I was drawn into screenwriting, tempted by the enormous freedom of time and space offered by the movie screen. The creative possibilities of actually writing sound and image, in addition to action, dialogue and story, seemed fascinating beyond any kind of writing I had done so far.

My debut as a screenwriter came with the second script I wrote. It was an eye-opener indeed. I had worked on the screenplay, an adaptation of a 19th century novel, intermittently for three years. My producer and his experienced dramaturg were brilliant dialogue partners. The story – a tale of a young girl's attraction to the theatre - was deeply connected to my own life. I had been coached by my dialogue partners into liberating myself from the novel: "Dare to make it your own" was the mantra of the adaptation process. Eventually, I did. The main characters and the theme remained, but only a minority of the screenplay's scenes were based on the literary text. I had drawn on personal experience, mobilized my imagination, and enlivened the story with original material. I believe I had written a screenplay with an identity of its own.

After three years of script development, and about a dozen versions, my producer finally found the director he wanted. His entrance brought new energy to the project. First, he declared my script to be "the best Norwegian screenplay" he had read. Then he dug into it with admirable gusto. I had to do rewrites, of course. For one thing, he placed more emphasis on the built-in love triangle than on my "girl-follows-her-dream" story. Where I had seen a protagonist whose passion for her calling led her to place it above all other concerns, including the emotions of others, he saw a more relationship oriented focus. He asked me, for example, to rewrite a scene because the actress found the protagonist "unkind" to her lover. He wrote a couple of scenes of his own. But by now I had adopted the temperament of a screenwriter: After three exhausting years of "development", the idea of imminent production turned me into a compliant creature.

Not surprisingly, the film turned out a hybrid of two different visions. But the real surprise came on opening night. It wasn't just the "film by" credit to the director, untimely as it may have been in that particular context. The possessory credit was followed by an on-screen dedication of the film to his two daughters, mentioned by name. My own daughters were sitting in the seats next to mine. While secluding myself to work, I had repeatedly told them that I was writing the story of a young girl's self-empowerment for them. The director's intimate declaration of ownership indicated that a film can indeed be a medium of individual expression – only not that of its writer. That evening, the first seed to the present project was sown.

In the aftermath I began to ask questions about the status of the screenplay as a genre and its writers as creative artists. Reading and informal research among colleagues confirmed that the practises I had encountered were more the rule than the exception (See Berg, 2010, Millard, 2010, Macdonald 2011).

Was my fascinating, new artistic genre not, as I had thought, a form of imaginative writing and individual expression? I had a strong intuition, supported by my experience, that it could be just that, and that there were unique qualities – or poetics - that set the genre of screen fiction apart from other genres of fiction text. What were they? If the textual/conceptual contribution to a film work was considered to be mere raw material, which would then be changed and adapted at will, without any integrity or voice of its own, this also indicated a significant distance between the writer's original vision and the actual, physical making of the film. That is, unless the director and writer was the same person, something that certainly was not always the case. How did this distance affect the integrity and quality of film works in general? How can a vision which undergoes so many metamorphoses produce the 'personal voice' craved by European, and Norwegian as well as US independent cinema ?

At this point I was burning with questions: Did screenplays, like stage plays, represent a valid, independent genre of fiction writing? Could they then be considered as creative works in their own right? Would a heightened awareness of the screenplay as an actual act of creation potentially lead to films with more original "voices"? Such films have been much sought after and discussed in the Norwegian film community during the last decade². In this context, I define such works as films that capture something more unexpected, more original, more personal, more emotional and also more contemporary than the average, often formulaic, commercial fare. This does not, of course, mean that such films may not have commercial appeal.

*From those first reflections grew the original impulse for the current research project **Imagining for the Screen – the original screenplay as poiesis.***

² Exemplified in two seminars on the topic, held by NFR (Norwegian Directors Guild, October 2010) and the Department of "Filmvitenskap" at Høgskolen i Lillehammer (March, 2009) during my fellowship period.

2. On the Artistic Research Project and the present text.

The more I think about what I am doing and about the way the Greeks treated their tragedies, the more I realize that the cardo rei, the most important thing, in art is the discovery of the poetic idea³.

Johan Wolfgang von Goethe

My fellowship in screenwriting has resulted in two original screen fictions, *Days of Winter* and *September*. *Days of Winter* is as close to a final version as I can come, outside of a production context. *September*, originally expected to be handed in as a first draft, has now been written through three times, but is still to be considered a *work-in-progress*. I have, as mapped out in my Project Description, written the two screenplays using different methodologies, exploring how the 'personal voice' of the movie emerges.

Through my artistic research Fellowship project, *Imagining for the Screen - the original screenplay as poiesis*, I have posed the questions: what kind of art work is an original screenplay, and, how can such a text represent a form of individual expression and an artistic work with a value of its own? Through the two screenplays, and my critical reflection upon them and the process of creating them, I have sought to throw light on those questions, in order to clarify my own practice and, perhaps, inspire others to develop theirs. Goethe's words about the importance of the *poetic idea* in art confirm my central contention, emerging from intuition; namely that the overall answer must lie in what I have called the element of *diktning*.

"Making it up"

In my native Norwegian, the verb *dikte* denotes the act of *making up* stories or poems. The word carries an ambiguity; it is also used to describe certain kinds of lying or boasting - as when characters like Ibsen's Peer Gynt tells wild fantasy tales of his own grand adventures. A piece of *diktning* is unquestionably an artifact of the human imagination, and such stuff is what my research has been made of. For lack of the evocative word *diktning* in English, I borrowed the word *poiesis* from ancient Greek for my English

³ From a letter written to Schiller (quoted in Kallas, 2010, p. 5)

project title. An act of *poiesis* is an act of *making*, of bringing into the world something that was decidedly not there before.

The research into screenwriting I have carried out in order to contextualise and give depth to my own practice has convinced me that the strong emphasis on technique and craft in the field has been an important factor behind what has been named the marginalization of screenwriting as an artistic genre (see Price, 2011, pp. 42-44, Boon, 2008, p.3-35). Thus, by using the term *original poiesis*, I mean to move the emphasis in screenwriting away from technical terms like *structure* and *development* and into the world of the imagination, of *diktning* and *invention*.

Toward the end of my fellowship period, I found considerable support for my views in the work of the Greek-German screenwriter, researcher and teacher Dr. Christina Kallas:

The structural models, which consist of numerous analytical steps, are impressive tools to apply to film and screenplay analysis; but scarcely permit any room for innovation and in the end prevent the creative process from unfolding or even make it difficult
(Kallas, 2010, p.5).

I am not saying that technique and narrative structure are unimportant in writing for the screen. Rather, I take issue with their dominating position in development and teaching, and in the literature on screenwriting, at the expense of other aspects of the art of *making things up* - imagining - specifically for the screen.

The premise for my investigation and reflection is that anything with the ambition of becoming a work of art must be built upon an act of original *poiesis*; of bringing "something new" into the world. The term "new", in this context, pertains to the originality and quality of the idea itself, rather than to the form it eventually finds. As stated in my 2011 Project Description, the artistic research project *Imagining for the Screen* sets out to

focus on original screenplays as poiesis. By writing two contrasting, original screenplays, I will explore the genre's poetics and study the genesis of the texts, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the genre and throw light on the original screenplay's uniqueness as a fiction text (Senje, Revised Project Description, 2011).

Underlying my artistic research project has been my investigation into exactly what a screenplay needs to achieve, and what precisely it represents. I believe this work to have a general application as well as a personal one, and I have tried in my digital media essay *Sculpting for the Screen* (Senje 2012), which constitutes the other element of my 'critical reflection' in my Fellowship, as well as in the present essay text, to contextualise my artistic work on the two scripts in order to open my insights and experiences to others. My experience in working and reflecting upon these two original screenplays, has shown me that the screenplay and the process of creating it have very special characteristics; suggesting that the questions I formulated at the beginning of my research period really were worth posing.

Method

I have, as mapped out in the Project Description, written the two screenplays using different methodology:

With *Days of Winter* I followed the common chronology of screenwriting documents; *synopsis, treatment, step-outlines*, and a strong emphasis on structure. I produced a large number of full drafts and revisions, based upon substantial feedback received from various professional sources. I first wrote the screenplay within the collaborative structures of a publicly funded, Norwegian script development agency (*Norsk Filmutvikling*), and, later, within what has been termed a *Screen Idea Work Group*, or *SIWG* (Macdonald, 2011), formed by a producer, a director, certain scriptconsultants, and myself. In addition, I attended an *éQuinoxe Germany* scriptwriting workshop, in which my producer also participated.

With *September*, on the other hand, I designed a process entirely my own. I wanted to put to use certain concepts and tools I had found through my research, in tracing my steps through the *Days of Winter* writing process. One key concept was what a fellow screenwriter, who recently completed his work in the Artistic Research Programme, has called *the original impulse* (Berg, 2010). Another was the clear articulation of what I call *a screen idea* (Parker, 1998, Macdonald, 2007). I also aimed to adapt creative methods from my theatre work, and, through this, get as close to an improvisational writing process (for the writer, not using actors) as possible. Through the first phase of the writing process, I would work alone, with minimal feedback from

other professionals. In addition, I wanted to try out the software named *CeltX*, a screenwriting tool that allows the inclusion of images and other attachments into the screenplay file.

The *September* writing process, as it turned out, fell into three phases: In Phase 1, I wrote associatively, without any structural devices, treatments or outlines. My writing moved freely in time and space, and did not follow a linear chronology or timeline. I started out using *CeltX*, found that it did not fulfill its promise, and dropped the experiment after a short time (see p.57). I produced 129 pages of text before I even began to think about structuring. The material was, up to that point, by conscious decision, minimally exposed to feedback from others. In Phase 2, when the material was fully written out, but rather shapeless, I consulted readers and rewrote the manuscript, before attending an *éQuinoxe* workshop. In Phase 3, after that workshop, I wrote a third version, strongly focusing on the emotional core of the screenplay and its *poetic myth* (see p. 68), and beginning to apply structure. In this phase, I also shaped the document into the current screenplay version (work-in-progress).

The process that led to *Days of Winter* is documented and reflected upon in the digital media essay *Sculpting for the Screen* (Senje 2012). *Days of Winter* will therefore be commented on briefly here, but not treated in detail in this reflection text. The digital media essay also deals with the four research questions posed by the Programme for Artistic Research (<http://artistic-research.no/>) and mentioned in my Project Description - questions that have been central to my artistic research project as a whole.

Format and presentation

The present reflection-text on my screenwriting research is divided into three sections, using the four questions of the *Norwegian Artistic Research Programme's* Regulations as a guide to structure and content: The first section, *Outlook*, sets out to clarify where I come from - in other words, my position in my artistic field. In the second section, *Artistic Process*, I document and reflect upon the writing of the *September*, and, in the final chapter of that section, discuss my results. In the third section, *Insights*, I deal with the the relevance of my research to the screenwriting field.

I. OUTLOOK

"Personal/artistic position related to subject area nationally and internationally."

The current research project asks how an original screenplay can be a form of individual expression and a work of art with its own specific value. Why should an artistic research project pose such an apparently elementary question about the nature and status of its own genre, one may ask?

My project poses the question because the original screenplay, a young genre that has existed and developed for only a little more than a hundred years, still has a weak identity as an art work and an uncertain status as a species of fiction text. In his recent book on the genre, Dr. Steven Price emphasizes the invisibility of the screenplay and lists several factors that have *"persistently pushed the scenenplay into an ontological state of non-being"* (Price, 2011, p. 42).

A number of other recent works (Maras, 2009, Boon, 2008, Sternberg, 1999) present similar characterisations of the genre's lack of status and identity in the film (as well as in the academic) worlds. While academic discourse has long concerned itself with the stage play, research and discourse around the screenplay is comparatively new; it has in fact boomed during the years of my Fellowship writing and research, 2009-2012. The initiative of the international *Screenwriting Research Network* (Macdonald, 2011) and the advent of the *Journal of Screenwriting Research* (2010) have been key events in the field. The annual conferences on screenwriting research arranged by the network have been a significant arena for me, providing sources of knowledge, networking and inspiration to my work. While many of the network's participants are practising directors and writers, the discourse around the screenplay within the artistic field of filmmaking itself is still limited internationally, and even more so nationally, in Norway. This is exemplified by the fact that nothing had been published on the screenplay genre in Norwegian language until screenwriter Ståle Stein Berg presented his fellowship artistic research project on narrator-oriented film in 2010 (Berg, 2010).

The role and position of the original screenwriter has, in my view, been strengthened internationally in the past ten years, not least by the growth of open discussion around them. This is largely due to successful screenwriters such as, for example, Alan Ball (GB, *American Beauty*, 1999), Charlie Kaufman (US, *Adaptation*, 1999, *Being John Malkovich*, 2002), Guillermo Arriaga (MX, *Amores Perros*, 2002, *Babel*, 2004), Diablo Cody (US, *Juno*, 2007), and Miranda July (US, *You and Me and Everyone we Know*, 2005, *The Future*, 2011). While these are extremely different writers, they are all what I would term *storytellers* and can be placed in a tradition of narrative screenwriting. A common feature in their screenplays is a strong element of imaginative invention, or *poiesis*. Their texts in and of themselves possess what we call personal and original voices. These voices are important references for me in my screenwriting work.

What, then, is my artistic position in the young field of screenwriting?

I believe the following three aspects have been really significant in the formation of my identity as a practising screenwriter:

- My conviction that the original screenplay, and through it, *the personal voice*, are vital factors in the development of film as a compelling and engaging art form
- My classical theatre training, based on the theories of Aristotle and of Constantin Stanislavsky
- My theatrical directing experience and my "crossover outlook" as a practitioner in two fields, those of theatre and film

I will deal with these three aspects of my artistic identity in turn.

2. The Personal Voice in film

Original stories! Original photoplays written especially for the screen by competent scenario writers! That is the urgent need of the film manufacturing companies. Nearly all stage plays and published books that lent themselves to film adaptation have been produced or are in the course of production (Peacock, 1916, quoted in Maras, 2009, p.140).

Theatre and film are both hybrid art forms, in that they represent the marriage of oral-visual and written traditions of storytelling. Their final products, the theatre performance and the film, blend visuals and text into a

new, realized whole. To my mind, such art forms cannot maintain their vitality through interpretation, recreation and adaptation alone. The theatre practice of restaging and reinterpreting the classics is mirrored in the film field's attraction to adaptations of popular and well-tried literary works. I am not opposed to restagings and adaptations per se, but it is my firm belief that, to legitimize themselves as art forms, and develop their identity, film and theatre must recruit imaginative talent and generate new, fully original works of *poiesis* with voices of their own.

What do I mean by *a personal voice* in film? In the introductory part of my digital media essay, *Sculpting for the Screen* (Senje, 2012) I refer to practitioners like Paul Schrader and Michael Rabiger and their views on original screenwriting. Schrader emphasizes personal vulnerability and coaches screenwriters to dare to expose themselves (Schrader, 2002). Rabiger writes explicitly about *looking for causes and effects in your own life and grasping the nature of what you feel most deeply*. (Rabiger, 2006, p.15). In other words, both put in strong arguments for the necessity of personal and emotional engagement from the writer of original screen texts. While the *auteur*, director-oriented, school of thought emphasizes personal signature through visual style ('le caméra-stylo') in cinematic storytelling (see Truffaut, 1954, Austruc, 1968), Schrader and Rabiger make strong cases for the vision and content that is, ideally, inherent in the original screenplay (see Mehring, 1989, Berg, 2010, Seger, 1999) .

Days of Winter and *September* are both screenplays whose central ideas originated in intense, emotional experiences and the circumstances around them. In my digital media essay (DME), and in Section 2 of the present text, I treat their origins and genesis in detail. In both cases, the experiences the themes and stories sprang from were painful and harrowing, exposing personal vulnerability. I believe it is this vulnerability, and my personal engagement in the themes, that, at the core (Goethe's 'cardo rei'), imbue the screenplays with their *personal voice* – much more than the issues of structure or form. At a secondary level, the process by which the scripts were developed affects the extent to which this personal voice transmits itself.

From my theatre training, I am familiar with another interesting articulation of the vulnerability, or pain, of the originator. Dr. Irina Malochevskaja, my former colleague and teacher at the Oslo National Academy of the Arts, includes in her Stanislavskij-inspired analytical model the central concept *the basic circumstance (den grunnleggende omstendighet)* of a play.

Underneath the *basic circumstance* inherent in a dramatic text, she writes, lies *the spiritual pain of the author (forfatterens sjelelige smerte, Malochevskaya, 2004, p.55)*, as a driving force behind the writing of the drama. Directors, in their pre-production analysis of a dramatic text, must determine exactly the aspect of life the author found so painful that it was necessary to write about it – not by studying the biography of the writer, but by identifying the sustained note of feeling that powers the drama through the text itself .

My own definition of the *personal voice* in film has been refined and developed throughout my artistic research work. I have found it essential not to define it merely through form, style and visual signature, but also through the *poiesis* that lies in the *original impulse* and *screen idea*, which may originate in a seed of emotion, but need to be developed through a coherent aesthetic process. In an ideal collaborative relation between writer and director, the original impulse is nurtured, strengthened and translated into a visual whole by the director.

As illustrated by the opening quote to this section, the call for original works as opposed to adaptations is nothing new in the film world. In 1921, producer and director William C. deMille echoed the screenwriter Peacock:

I have come to the conclusion that the screen must create its own literature. It is not enough that we steal novelists and playwrights for short periods each year (DeMille, 1921, q. in Maras, 2009, p. 141).

Following up during the "golden years" of Hollywood filmmaking, seasoned screenwriter Dudley Nichols wrote in an essay, published in one of the first printed collections of screenplay texts:

Hollywood is used to taking works of fiction in other forms and translating them into film; and for this and other reasons, the talented writer does not feel encouraged to write directly for the screen. This is to be regretted because the screenplay might easily become a

fascinating new form of literature, provided the studio heads acquired sufficient taste to recognize and desire literary quality (Nichols, 1959, p.12).

Auteur vs. author

The prevalence of adaptations and restagings, in spite of these arguments, is, of course, linked to commercial factors that are strongly influential in both artistic fields. But the call for originality has a *qualitative* element in addition to the obvious, quantitative one. For while these early writers clearly saw a potential for vitalizing the art of film through *original screenwriting*, the next phase of European and, later, American, film history, largely due to the influence of the *auteur* school of thought, was to evolve around the director. While Peacock, deMille and Nichols were convinced that the sought-for original voices belonged to writers of screenplays, the *auteur* school of thought pointed to the film director as the carrier of a singular creative vision (see Truffaut, 1954, Austruc, 1968, Sarris, 1968, Caughie, 1981) .

The influential *auteur school* (I use the term *school* because it was not, as often proposed, a theory) originated in the milieu around the French film journal *Cahiers de Cinema* in the 1950ies and 60ies. Its dogma as developed in the US (see Sarris 1968) and subsequently widely popularized (Caughie 1981), *the politique des auteurs*, holds that any film of quality reflects, above all, its director's personal creative vision, making the director the "author" of the film. The American film critic Andrew Sarris, who expanded on the ideas of the French *auteur* writers, claimed that the director's signature needs to be distinctive enough to shine through all kinds of studio interference, commercial demands and through the collective process of filmmaking, in order to give the final work its clarity (see Sarris, 1968). In the years since, the not-always-well-understood ideas of the *auteur* school have been influential, but also criticized and debated continuously. While the *auteur* approach has, as Kevin Boon states, probably *contributed more (albeit unintentionally) to the continued dismissal of the screenplay's merit than any other factor* (Boon, 2008, p.31), it has undoubtedly also contributed to the status and identity of film as an art form, and a mode of individual expression.

Yet, when Francois Truffaut attacked the “quality drama” of the French cinema in his famous, polemical article, he was - paradoxically - quietly assuming that most films made were adaptations. His chief target was the writers and directors of those - to his mind - poorly adapted screenplays and the tradition of merely filming those screenplays “straight off the page”, without visual interpretation or personal style (Truffaut,1954). The director he installed as the true artist of auteurist cinema, was only in a handful of cases an *idea-maker* or actual *writer* of his own fictions, rather, he was a creator of visual style which could transform a scenario and dialogue into cinematographic terms in a personal, characteristic way using the ‘camera stylo’, the camera as writing instrument (Truffaut,1954, Austruc, 1968).

My artistic research project does not enter into the old, and much-publicized debate about the tensions – sometimes schism - between writer and director in the film world. However, it does take issue with the view of the director as the sole producer of the personal voice and creative vision for films with original screenplays written by another artist. To me, the two professions are naturally collaborative and interdependent, both needing to mature and nurture their relationship and dialogue, rather than compete for ownership of the final film work (Pelo, 2009, Berg, 2010, Senje, 2011). At a seminar called *The Personal Voice in Film*, arranged by the Norwegian Film Directors’ Guild in 2010, Ståle Stein Berg articulated the possibility that the coveted *voice* of a film can indeed stem from more than one human being, as a symbiosis of multiple creatives developing a voice for a particular film:

The personal voice in a film is not necessarily personal in the sense of linked to one physical subject. The narrative subject can of course consist of several persons. The premise is that these persons share the same world view, the same “world feeling”, the same aesthetics. The personal voice of a film is embedded in the telling of it (Berg, 2011, p.4, my translation).

In the critical reflection made during his artistic fellowship, film director Trygve Allister Diesen writes that *vision is about who you are and how that makes you see and interpret the world around you* (Diesen, 2011, p. 4). He goes on to state that:

Personal vision has as much to do with story as style or the visuals. At least that is true for me. I have always seen myself as a director that writes, rather than vice versa. I might have to reconsider. Perhaps I'm not writing to have something to direct, but just as much directing to have control over my stories (Diesen, 2010 p.11)?

My position, then, is that *the voice* of an original screen work is embedded in the content that is core to its conception, and in the writer's vision which develops it, as well as in its final, realized visuality, controlled by the director. I regard my screenplays *Days of Winter* and *September* as screenplays with a personal voice and vision: those of the writer. I do not quarrel with the director's task of adding an interpretive and visual signature to the finished film, but I contend that without my personal core of feeling, my story and my need to tell it, there would be no film. And it is up to me as a writer to write my stories in such a way as to give a director access to my emotional material, so that it can inform the direction, but also to transmit my own, writer's version of the 'camera stylo', which is not the vision of a director, but the feeling insight of a writer. It is the combination of these crafts that makes the screenplay distinct from any other written fiction text.

But of course there is no content without form, and form comes from tradition and genre as well as from personal feeling and talent. As I set out to study the screenplay's genesis, methodology and poetics, it is impossible to ignore the first theorist to define drama as an art form for the European world, and whose theories, alongside those of Stanislavskij, have been a significant inspiration in my work as in that of so many others I admire.

3. The legacy of Aristotle

"Once upon a time there were two tomatoes," says my six year old.

"Really," I reply. "And then...?"

"One was red and one was yellow," she says. "And both were going to start school."

"What did they DO?"

"They started walking. Because, to get to their school, they had to cross a really biiiiig road!"

"How did that go," I say, trembling with suspense by now.

My six-year old describes every obstacle and danger that can befall a soft berry (yes, a tomato is a berry) on an arid highway. Yet our soft-bodied friends roll bravely across the tarmac toward their goal. And then. A huge trailer growls in the distance. The growl grows into a roar. Blinding lights, screaming brakes.

"And then ???"

"Then it crash-banged right into them and CRUSHED THE RED ONE TO A PULP!"

A dramatic silence ensues. Now what? Did our tomato let twelve pairs of giant trailer wheels stop her progress toward her goal? Certainly not.

"Then the yellow yelled to the red one: Come on, let's go, KETCHUP!"⁴

The storyteller laughs her head off.

The tomato-story is a well-known children's joke, included here for its intrinsic properties as a classical drama in-a-nutshell: It features a hero who encounters a dilemma, develops a desire for something, goes for it, meets obstacles, fights them and experiences change in the process. In dramaturgical terms: A protagonist, an inciting incident, obstacles, rising conflict and suspense, a climax in which something is changed by a reversal; and a denouement in which we find out what it all led to for our protagonist in the end. Aristotle should have approved. Fundamentally drama is about *change* (see also Öden, 1988, pp.9-25; Brenes, 2011, pp.105-106).

In both my artistic genres – theatre and film - I have defined myself as someone who works with *drama*. While there is much disagreement about the relationship between the stage and screen art forms, there is consensus that both have been important domains for the human activity that is referred to as *drama* and has been practised for more than 2000 years. My training and practice in the dramatic arts have been informed and developed through the theories of two giants in the field – Aristotle on dramatic theory and Stanislavskij on the practical methodology of acting and directing, the principles of which also inform my writing process.

However, in order to explain how these great thinkers have influenced me, I have to start by asserting that, in my view, both have been much

⁴ Quoted from my own article: *Aristoteles - et monster fra fortiden?* <http://rushprint.no/2011/10/aristoteles-et-monster-fra-fortiden/> Rushprint, (my translation)

misinterpreted and simplified – sometimes to the point of corruption. In the section on the *September* process, I will touch upon my adaptation of Stanislavskij’s improvisation methodology to my own method of writing a screenplay. First, I will deal with some aspects of Aristotle’s *Poetics* that inspire my work but which have hitherto received surprisingly little attention in the context of screenwriting.

A lesser known Aristotle

“*It is through our actions that we attain happiness or its opposite.*”
(Aristotle, c. 330 BC, Ch. VI)

We can only speculate about what Aristotle’s intentions were when he wrote down, in short, pointed phrases, his views *on poetry*. What Aristotle left behind was a roll of papyrus with handwritten notes, quite possibly written - like a screenplay - “to be performed”, most likely as a lecture talk (Andersen, 2008, Introductory essay, p. x), the most common form of academic discourse in his day. The notes - or, rather, what remained of them - were translated and published as a book almost two thousand years after Aristotle’s death. It seems relevant, then, to reexamine these notes on the craft of drama and ask, as many screenwriters and directors have, whether they might be obsolete. But, as evident from the small quote above, the *Poetics* does not deal with craft alone. Aristotle was a philosopher and scientist, not a dramaturg. Only after expounding on the role of poetry, including drama, in our lives, does he go on to deal with the technical analysis he has become famous, or notorious, for.

Implicitly in the *Poetics* and Aristotle’s rumination on drama lies the idea that a basic human drive is the pursuit of “happiness - defined in relation to story, character and time. How does an individual strive to find meaning within the life space he or she is given between the cradle and the grave? How can the mimesis of drama illuminate this search for the audience in such a way as to help them find their own paths in the context of their society? This is certainly my concern in my screenplays *Days Of Winter* and *September*. Can my characters Anniken (*Days Of Winter*) and Ebba (*September*), through their struggles, sacrifices and actions, find meaning, happiness or, at least, better lives? Will Anniken save her children? Will Ebba reconcile herself with her father and her difficult childhood? Are their

struggles sufficiently universal in nature for audience members to recognize and empathise with the *pursuit of happiness* by these two women as their own?

Existential questions such as these do not, in my view, become outdated. The ultimate *phobos* (fear) for a protagonist may be, at the edge of the grave, to realize - like Ibsen's Peer Gynt - that the project of his life on this earth has been a failure: "*I fear I was dead long before I died*" (Ibsen, 1918 p.436). To witness other human beings as they seek and struggle for meaning and happiness, will, according to Aristotle, help us become more satisfied, perhaps even more civilized, human beings. I agree with him.

American and European film and theatre tradition is permeated by elements of Aristotle's teachings, or, rather, an interpretation of his views on structure and craft. In the early days of Hollywood, there are few references to classical models or structural rules, but professor and film researcher David Bordwell (2010), suggests that the early film professionals worked "intuitively" in adapting the ancient dramatic precepts of storytelling to their own, new medium.

In the last two decades of the 20th century, however, articulating the principles of dramatic storytelling for the screen became a specific genre of non-fiction, as a flood of handbooks on screenwriting were published, tempting potential screenwriters with models and "recipes" that would give instant screen success. Influential screenwriting manuals like those of Syd Field (1979, 1984, 2003), Linda Seger (1987, 1990), Robert McKee (1997), and Christopher Vogler (1998) all referred to Aristotle's *Poetics* to legitimize their particular models⁵. The message of "universality" in their storytelling principles has been strong - and the principles of these gurus have been widely adopted in the practical field of screenwriting in the USA, Europe and Scandinavia. According to Christina Kallas, American screenwriters and teachers brought Aristotle back to Europe in the 1980i's through a wave of what she calls *seminarization* (Kallas, 2010, p.2). Terms such as protagonist, antagonist, hubris and peripety, or plot points, main conflict, arcs, and

⁵ A brief overview of how the various manuals present classical, structural principles can be found in Dancyger, Ken and Rush, Jeff (2007): *Alternative Scriptwriting: successfully breaking the rules*. London & New York: Focal Press. Pp. 48-49.

sequences, deriving from Aristotle through this wave of preceptors, have been nearly universally adopted by producers and gatekeepers in the screen industry in dialogue with creatives.

No doubt, the common language of screen storytelling that developed in the 1980i's and 90i's has been useful, and also instrumental in paving the way for screenwriting as an independent profession. But the universality claim of certain manuals has, not surprisingly, led to criticism and suspicion. From creative people who aspire to artistic freedom and seek not to imitate but to originate. The models proposed by screenwriting "gurus" are frequently perceived – and used - as prescriptive to the point of the dictatorial, the most notorious example being Syd Field's (1984) list of plot points and set three-act structure. Though studio moguls driven by the need to assure commercial success, anxious that a screenplay should push the traditionally effective buttons, in cases of doubt will probably reach for a manual to use as a checklist, many writers and directors who value innovation and the personal voice shy away from what is perceived as a "one-size-fits-all" methodology and are disconcerted by the thought that their films may end up being perceived to be "like all the rest"

Fortunately, not everyone accepts without quibble the adapted ideas of craft purported to represent Aristotle, or the checklists to which his analyses have sometimes been reduced. In my work on *Days of Winter* and *September*, two contemporary theorists and interpreters of Aristotle have provided important input and inspiration in adapting the principles of the *Poetics* to my screenwriting in a different and stimulating way. Dr. Christina Kallas and professor in screenwriting Dr. Carmen Brenes emphasize other aspects of Aristotle's work than the well-worn dicta, and both take issue with the common notion that the only useful thing about the *Poetics* is what it has to convey about structure. In an essay on teaching Aristotle to screenwriting students, Dr. Carmen Brenes writes:

more often than not, Poetics is quoted only as if it were a handbook on "how" to write stories, despite the fact that, as some contemporary writers have pointed out, it also says something about "what" they are and "why" they are thus made up (Brenes, 2011, p.110).

Brenes analyzes the ways in which Aristotelian thought goes beyond structural principles and technique and contends that the other dimensions of Aristotle's teachings can and should be applied to practical screenwriting (as well as to teaching it). Her focus is on the concept of *mimesis praxos* - the imitation of human action - as what gives the Aristotelian dramatic model its usefulness as a guiding tool for screenwriters. Classical drama, according to Brenes, is not primarily identified by an adherence to a specific act structure; rather, it is recognized in the presence of individuals encountering challenge that propel them into action and change:

On this basis, the poetic proposal sustains that tragedy, animated by the poetic myth⁶ always has to do with human praxis, understood as progress towards what is inherent to the identity of human beings according to their nature, or, in the words of Aristotle, "towards themselves" (epídoxis eis autón). (...) Saying that the tragedy is always about human praxis also means saying that it deals with the infinite variety of ways to pursue and attain (or not) "the same: happiness" (Brenes, 2011, pp.105-106).

Further, she claims that our existence as human individuals rests in exactly this ability to choose, act and pursue our goals:

In the practical sphere, human beings must make up their minds whether to do something or not, and it is in this decisionmaking process that man – as it were – comes into being (Brenes, 2011, p. 110).

Significantly, Aristotle writes of tragedy and its *mimesis praxos* not as a textual genre, but as the totality of the performance. He assures us that the dramatic text alone can give much satisfaction and an experience to the reader but not as much as the full, realized *mimesis praxos* of the performance (Aristotle, c. 330 B.C., Ch. XXVI). His concept of tragedy includes the six elements he defines as *mythos* (plot), *ethé* (characters), *dianoia* (the characters' thoughts), *lexis* (the language by means of which the previous elements are communicated), *opsis* (visual elements) and *melopea* (rhythm), (Aristotle, *Poetics*, Ch.VI). All six elements of the dramatic performance can be perceived in modern cinematic drama. A screenplay is, in my view, enriched by a systematic development of all these aspects, not just attention to structure (plot) and character. *Lexis* and *opsis* (usually translated as 'language' and 'spectacle') are particularly important to the

⁶*Poetic myth* is here understood as the *mythos*, Aristotle's concept of "plot".

screenwriter – not just the language of dialogue, but the broader sense of ‘language’ – the means of communication of the idea, core, feeling, and vision, through both prose and speaking lines. In cinema, communication is dominantly through *opsis*, the visual; but *melopea* is particularly important, because in film it is fixed once the edited footage is released – the rhythm and pace cannot adapt to the response and feeling of the audience as they did in Aristotle’s live theatre. The screenwriter must be aware of and responsible for the first poesis of all these aspects of the drama.

When writing *of poetry* Aristotle’s starting point is how it originated, *why* it exists and what kind of meaning and purpose it has in human lives (Aristotle, Ch. I). Drama – or, rather, tragedy – was, according to the Greeks, designed to elicit *eleos* (pity) and *phobos* (fear) in the audience at witnessing the crises and catastrophes that struck the characters. Through the tension built up by these emotions, the audience could experience an emotional release, or cleansing, also known as *catharsis* (Kallas, 2010 p.30). Christina Kallas describes this emotional release in her book on emotional structure in screenwriting:

The spectator is afraid that pain or ignoble events could threaten him and his beloved ones and feels compassion because the hero suffers undeservedly. In addition, in reality, the viewer knows (...) that it is a mimesis, that is, a representation of events. This safety zone makes it possible for the audience to think about the human situation about pain and misfortune as inseparable components of human existence, and to reject the extreme, high-spirited emotions that, though unconscious, are latent in the human condition (Kallas, 2010, p.30).

Kallas also brings a new perspective to the idea of *catharsis* through a nuanced and interesting account of the Greek concept of *eleos* – “pity” – which, according to her, does not correspond to our common ideas of empathy or compassion. She distinguishes it from the Christian concept (Latin, from *pieta*), which stems from the idea of human beings sharing their Christian piety toward God with each other: “*For the Greeks, eleos and oiktos refer strictly to human relationships.*” (Kallas, p.116)

The Aristotelian idea of ‘pity’ (*eleos*) refers, according to Kallas, to the civilizing power that lies in our capacity for love, care and concern for other human beings. Tragedy, for the Greeks, represented a civilizing force through

its role as *paideia eleos* or “education in pity”. The potentially civilizing force of *paideia eleos* has been referred to as the “Poet’s solution” to the eternal problem of uncontrollable human passions such as greed, rage, violence and the desire for power over others⁷. Kallas writes of the purpose of tragedy, according to the Greeks:

Tragedy is born when men and women begin to redefine nobility. It is not only about the shared suffering. It is the shared suffering. Greek tragedy is about the willingness and ability of the people to share each other’s pain. Pain sharing is transformed into an act of civic virtue. Such virtue is tantamount to democracy, it is its very ground
(Kallas, p.117).

Perhaps we should translate ‘*eleos*’ as ‘empathy’ rather than ‘pity’. The idea of shared suffering as essential to drama brings me back to the contention of Paul Schrader and Michael Rabiger (see p.13) that it is vital that screenwriters bring their own vulnerability and deep emotions to their work.

In an earlier chapter of this essay (p.17), I touch on the theme of “writing as sharing one’s suffering” in the context of the Stanislavskij’s method of drama analysis, and its emphasis on “*the spiritual pain of the author*” as one key to the understanding and interpretation of a play (Malotchevskaya, 2002, p.55). In *Days of Winter* and *September*, I have exposed my protagonists to events like natural catastrophes, displacement, sudden illness and death. These events are extraordinary, yet fundamental in the suffering inherent in the human condition, and deal with the kind of pain that the genre of drama is meant to share.

To Kallas, drama, through “education in pity” can be a force for generating and sustaining democracy. Democratic ideals, by their nature, promote a society that is dynamic and changeable, as the spirit of the times and ideals of its contributing citizens ebb and flow. A totalitarian regime is, by contrast, an attempt at a static model of societal organization where authorities attempt to hold change and unpredictable forces under strict control. Needless to say, a genre that accepts and celebrates change will thrive under democratic conditions and be suppressed as a subversive force under a

⁷ Quoted in Kallas, pp. 115. The concept “*Poet’s solution*” originated in Alford, Fred C. (1993): *Greek Tragedy and Civilization: the Cultivation of Pity*. In *Political Research Quarterly*, Vol.46, No.2. pp. 259 - 280.

dictatorship.

As a scientist and philosopher, Aristotle did not have a dramaturgical agenda to defend, as today's gurus and dramaturgs frequently do, in what has become a marketplace of dramaturgical schools, competing to offer the best, or most well paid, advice to writers, directors and producers. We have no reason to believe the philosopher would have rejected new, contemporary storytelling devices, as long as they served as means to the desired end: to assist human understanding in our unavoidable dealings with catastrophes or changing fortunes - thus acting as a civilizing force in human society.

The contemporary drama-comedy

The ruling genre described by the practical how-to books of modern screenwriting is, of course, not drama, or tragedy, in the classical sense. It is our modern version of *mimesis praxos*, a hybrid sometimes referred to as the *drama-comedy*. This genre, fully developed in the second half of the 20th century, places itself somewhere between comedy and tragedy. It features stories with "serious" themes and issues, often expressed through the structural principles outlined in the *Poetics*, but usually coupled with something unheard of in the tragic tradition: a happy, "feel-good" ending. When did our cinematic heroes and heroines cease to meet truly tragic ends? Exceptions from the rule of happy endings are represented by contemporary biographical and historic films: It is, of course, not possible to rewrite history and alter the tragic fates of "bio-pic" personalities like Karen Blixen, Harvey Milk, Edith Piaf or Richard Nixon.

Several of Henrik Ibsen's realist dramas, such as *Ghosts*, *John Gabriel Borkman*, and *The Wild Duck*, to name a few, are tragedies in the Aristotelian sense, in which the character's transformations bring about irreversible change that crushes the protagonist as mercilessly as King Oedipus is crushed in Sophocles play, *Oedipus Rex*. Later, famous plays/screenplays like Tennessee William's *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947, screenplay 1951), Arthur Miller's *Death of A Salesman* (1949, screenplay 1985) and Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf* (1961/62, screenplay by Ernst Lehmann, 1966) chronicle the downfall of a Southern Belle, an American

victim of capitalism, and a middle-class marriage, respectively. From around the 1970s onward, however, modern drama and “fulfilling” endings make their presence known.

Christina Kallas deplores the connecting of Aristotle’s teachings with the modern genre of drama-comedy or, as she calls it, *the moralistic approach of cinema drama* (Kallas, p.30) and argues that the Aristotelian *safety zone* for the expression of negative human emotions appears to be too small for Hollywood.

The reproach made by various avant-garde filmmakers that commercial cinema is very remote from reality stems largely from this intersection. (Kallas, p.30)

It could be added that much of the criticism of Aristotle and his so-called model originates in that same phenomenon. The hybrid genre of drama-comedy is thoroughly treated in Ken Dancyger and Jeff Rush’ *Alternative Scriptwriting* (2008). The work of these theorists has been a significant inspiration in my work, and their book is one of the rare works on screenwriting that does not deal mainly with structure (see also Mehring, 1999, Parker, 2006, Kallas, 2011). Instead, the authors discuss content, message and theme in relation to dramaturgical form - an area of screenwriting that has only recently begun to be explored outside a tiny circle of practicing screenwriters. They offer an interesting, theme- and content related critique of the present-day simplified adaptations of ancient, dramatic principles. According to the authors, today’s mainstream drama generally employs what they call “*the restorative three-act structure*“ (Dancyger and Rush, 2007, pp. 29-38). They provide a thorough and interesting critique of this modern, hybrid form:

The restorative three-act structure (...) is a moralistic form of storytelling with the basic premise that good motives triumph, that the world is understandable, consistent, manageable, and responsive to goodness and truth. As a result, external events are rarely arbitrary, they are earned (Dancyger and Rush, p. 30).

The aspect of moralisation, of course, enters the picture only when the protagonist of a story struggles and goes through a transformation, or development, that is, unequivocally, “for the better.”

The articulation of the concept of moralistic storytelling has been of great importance to me in the writing of *Days of Winter* and *September*. The happy, somewhat simplistic ending originally imposed on *Days of Winter* after lengthy discussions with prospective funders, producers and directors, is treated in my digital essay (Senje, 2012). Its current replacement is a more ambiguous conclusion to the story, containing an element of tragedy. As before, the protagonist chooses to give up on a future life in Western Europe and actually settle in the remote Turkish village to which she has escaped from the police. But in the course of the story, the protagonist has found a significant friend, who has become a close confidante. Together, the two single mothers and their children form a new family structure. In the present ending, Anniken and Rita must part, and lose each other forever. Two contrasting ways of *pursuing happiness* are what finally separate these two women, raised in different cultures. I am not attempting to claim that one is inherently “better” than the other, but the ending is not the totally ‘feel-good’ one resolved through the re-uniting of a splintered nuclear family which was favoured by a number of my consultants. I don’t think Aristotle was wrong: human beings need models in drama which do not oversimplify life’s choices, but help audiences to see the options more clearly and recognize that there are few roses without thorns.

In *September*, I worked on a number of different endings, struggling again to avoid the restorative, moralistic form. In an earlier version, father and daughter were both fulfilled as Eilif drew his last breath in his daughter’s arms. In the most recent version of this work-in-progress, I aim for an ending that is more “bittersweet”. Eilif sacrifices his last wish, and insists that Ebba return to her work in the theatre, which he has previously despised. Ebba is torn, but makes the difficult decision to leave her father. He dies alone in the hospital, while Ebba returns to the theatre, where she instead portrays on stage the image of a fulfilling death through her production of Ibsen’s *Peer Gynt*. Again, I am not implying that one of these is the “better” choice and makes Ebba a “better” person. My aim has been to imbue the last few minutes of the story with an element of ambiguity, and thus move closer to the kind of drama Aristotle describes as *mimesis praxos* - of human action and change - avoiding the moralisation of the currently favored cinematic drama-comedy.

While Dancyger and Rush are close to dogmatic in their claim that classical dramaturgy will and must shape content and even dictate the world-view of the writer, contemporary writers such as Christina Kallas and screenwriter/teacher Carmen Brenes see Aristotle as relevant and eminently useful to the present-day screenwriter but not prescriptively so. Both deem him to be widely misunderstood and take it upon themselves to apply his theories of dramatic poetry to the practice of screenwriting in an original way. The moralistic, pedagogical version of classical drama described by Dancyger and Rush, the one that permeates screenwriting handbooks, is a modern invention - far from anything Aristotle knew or wrote about. That, surely, is not Aristotle's responsibility.

Aristotle's teachings, thus reconsidered, are certainly still of use to modern screenwriting and cinema, and I have found, as I indicate above, both inspiration and practical application in the *Poetics*. Human lives are in constant motion and change, hardly a circumstance that will disappear in the near future. The tomato of my opening illustrative story went through a major life-change; as did the story's vulnerable six-year old teller, who faced the new, frightening prospect of starting a new life in school. Both confronted danger and challenge through changing themselves. The aspect of moralisation enters the picture only when the writer makes the claim that this change is "for the better." To me, the most interesting film dramas have an element of ambiguity and loss in their resolutions. No rose without thorns.

In conclusion, my contention is that as long as there are soft creatures who may be exposed to trailerhits, there will be dramas written about them. The best dramas will be about profound, human change. Within the context of this kind of drama is where I wish to place my screenwriting work.

4. Film versus Theatre

The film's path to a real art will be found only when it has been freed from the dictates of an art form foreign to it, that is, the theatre (Pudovkin, 1976 q. in Boon, 2008, p. 39).

Film director Robert Bresson, in his *Notes on Cinematography*, demonstrates the same animosity toward the theatre as Pudovkin and claims that: *Any*

marriage between the drama and the cinema is bound to destroy both (Bresson, 1975, q. in Berg, 2009, p.18). This sweeping declaration has inspired an exploration of the dichotomy between the dramatic and the visual/descriptive ("*skildring*"), or poetic, of film in contemporary screenwriting. The essay *Reflections on Narrator-Oriented Film* (Berg,2009), asks whether there is actually a contradiction between the concrete elements of drama, such as suspense and conflict, and the more poetic - frequently visual - elements of tension, atmosphere and unspoken elements of meaning. The essay concludes that:

In spite of contradictory formal features, the visual-descriptive and the dramatic share the same substantial platform: The fable. The story.
(Berg, 2009, p.34)

This conclusion, made 40 years after Bresson and Pudovkin, clearly ends up by contradicting their anti-theatrical, anti-dramatic stance. Instead, the supremacy of the fable, and thus the storyteller, who will need, use and combine all the available tools in conceptualizing a screen work, emerges as paramount, whether the viewing form be live theatre or cinema. The conclusion also echoes my own, arrived at through the trajectory I have taken from staging plays to writing screenplays.

My extensive experience as a director and dramaturg for the stage have been seminal influences on my approach to screenwriting and film. I have already mentioned the theorists Aristotle and Stanislavskij, the latter also a practitioner, whose influence on my way of thinking and working has been profound. In seeking to understand the screenplay genre, the theatre field has, for me, been a natural and inevitable comparative context.

I believe I have always drawn, unconsciously, on my theatre-experience in my work as a screenwriter and dramaturg. My way of writing scenes in my screenplays, by dividing them into small segments, as in a rehearsal process, is an outcome of this influence. Another is the fact that I write a great deal more than I know is necessary, as a way of trying out various interpretations of my material - similar to the explorations of a play-rehearsal process. My use of frequent print-outs of scenes for reading is a parallel to the director's sitting in the back of the rehearsal room, watching the run-through of a scene after a particular, new element has been added. In the same way, I

need to *see* the text, on paper, before me. However, through my three years of artistic research/practice in the screenwriting field, I have articulated this influence and attempted to use it consciously, as a resource in my screenwriting work, to develop my own potential.

From stage to screen

In making the transition, ten years ago, from staged to filmed drama, and from directing to writing, I was a complete innocent. I had never reflected on the differences between the two genres. My first professional experience in the film world was in working on the scripts of others: while working as a stage director, I was, together with a playwright, appointed to a position as gatekeeper and script consultant for a new funding scheme for screenwriters⁸. The mere fact that the new venue for screenwriting was set up with two theatre professionals as its keepers confirmed my impressions of the close relationship between the art forms.

As far as I could see, I was venturing into a sister artform that was in multiple respects similar to my original one. After all, Ingmar Bergman, probably the best internationally known modern Scandinavian film-writer and director, had started his career in the theatre, directing. As it turned out, I was soon to learn that several practitioners and theorists of the film world strongly disagreed with my linking the two artistic fields to each other. I found that there was little interaction between film and theatre in the Norwegian artistic communities. While actors frequently practise in both fields, few of our directors and writers cross the borders between them (director Petter Næss, *Elling* 2001, *Tatt av Kvinnen*, 2007 and screenwriters Arthur Johansen and Axel Hellstenius are notable exceptions). A common simplification – or prejudice – I encountered, was that theatre is a *literary* art form, based on dialogue, while the film is a *visual* one, based on *action* and *imagery*.

One need only read a few pages of an Ibsen play to realize that his stage directions on both action and visuals are quite detailed (this is, of course, not the case with all stage plays). In his *Hedda Gabler* (1890), he gives almost a full page description of Hedda's new home, follows this up with a description

⁸ *Manuskriptstøtteordningen*, Statens Studiesenter for Film, 1990, nå under Norsk Filminstitutt

of each of the characters as they enter, and continuously intersperses the dialogue text with descriptions of physical behaviours (Ibsen, 1918). Further, the visual and conceptual work behind a theatrical performance is, as my experience also tells me, as central to the final product and as significant as that done in the preparation for shooting a film. It is true that the prose, descriptive or *action* text of most stage plays is, today, often less voluminous than in a screenplay; but to assume that the stage play is more "literary" because the actors speak *more* words is superficial and misleading. The essence of drama, as defined in the previous section, is human *action* - *mimesis praxos* - that leads to inner and outer change. Dramas are built not mainly on what the characters *say*, but on what they *do* to each other, affecting each other through attitudes, deeds or speech - all of which are expressed and embedded in both action- and dialogue-text of plays and screenplays.

For example, in Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* (1888), when his heroine sends her former sweetheart off to a wild stag-party, burns the only copy of his precious manuscript, keeps the truth secret for him and his companion, and finally gives him a pistol to commit suicide with, she is carrying out vital dramatic actions that make up the very spine of that play's text. These actions are not dialogue-dependent, and her story could not be told without them, no matter how cleverly one *fills out the blanks*, as Petter Næss puts it (included in my digital essay: Senje, 2012).

Why, then, the mood of contradiction and polarization between the theatre and film arts, my two genres? It seems to include the underestimation, on the part of film people, of the theatre as a visual and conceptual art form.

One explanation could be, that the film genre, today considered one of our most powerful and influential artistic genres, is also our youngest form of artistic expression. This may partly explain the intense need to define itself by emphasizing how it *differs* from other artistic genres rather than relates to, or borrows from, them. In his book *Script Culture and the American Screenplay*, Kevin A. Boon writes of the early days of film that

The medium was new and needed to establish itself first as a creative enterprise and then as an art form on a par with the theater or the novel (Boon, 2008, p. 36).

In my own work, I find it both rewarding and enlightening to explore, compare and come to terms with the similarities and differences of stage and screen texts. Needless to say, the two are different media of expression, and require certain different skills of their practitioners. But Dr. Kevin Boon, writing of the screenplay in American script-culture, sees no principal difference in the literary or artistic value of the written fiction texts that lay behind the theatrical and filmic performance:

In fact, the screenplay has much in common with the stage play. Both are written to be performed. Both employ dramatic elements: conflict, resolution, irony, paradox, and so on. Both include technical information about sets, costumes, props, sound effects, visual effects, and movement. Other than the fact that the stage play has existed much longer than screenplays, it is difficult to come up with objective criteria that would enable us to embrace one and eschew the other (Boon, 2008, p.32).

In teasing out the differences and similarities of my two fields, and exploring the cross-fertilization between their artistic processes, I also seek - ultimately - the reconciliation between them. I made the conversion from theatre director into screenwriter and - while needing to acquire several new skills - I could also employ in full my knowledge of interpretation, conceptualization, acting, storytelling, dialogue, dramaturgy and mise-en-scène. After all, my focus was the same as before: To communicate human experience in the form of *imitation of action*.

That desire remains at the root of most writers' and directors' work in both genres. Michael Rabiger, writing of the driving force behind any artistic creation, puts it this way:

Art, however, is other directed, and people make it to grapple with the mysteries of human existence. It is a way to share with others the patterns, meanings, and mysteries of simply what is. (Rabiger, 2010, p.17)

II. ARTISTIC PROCESS AND RESULT

SEPTEMBER – approaching a story in a different way

”Critical reflection on the process, artistic choices and turning points, theory applied, dialogue with various networks and the professional environment.”

1. The artistic process

A poet only learns his intention after the poem is completed, for if he knew what he meant to say before writing the poem, the poem would already be written (Bradley, 1901).

Eight years ago, I had the privilege of attending a seminar in Paris with the renowned screenwriter Jean Claude Carrière, arranged by the agency then known as *Norwegian Film Development*. Where we had all expected lecturing and secrets of the trade, the five days turned out to be, above all, a practical exercise in the development of screen ideas through improvisational thinking. On the second day, each of the twelve participants brought an idea, or a starting point for a story. To know the ending in advance was strictly forbidden. Sitting in a circle, we dealt with one idea at a time, imagining and improvising out loud a story that *could have* developed from that particular starting point. One of Carrière’s main credos, repeated throughout the workshop, was that a synopsis can only be written *after the film has been made* (Carrière, 2004). How else would the imagination be able to do its essential work?

Carrière’s screenwriting exercise reminds me of the improvisational work that is part of Konstantin Stanislavskij’s acting methodology, often used in theatrical rehearsals. A difference between Carrière’s playful, non-committal approach and the methods I know from my theatre work, is the rather strict element of structuring that is employed in the theatre. The improvisation method I am familiar with is based on the ideas of Stanislavskij and his follower, Tovstonogov, who developed the *method of action analysis* and the *method of physical actions*, described in detail in Irina Malochevskaya’s work, *Regiskolen* (2002), and in the artistic research work of Tyra Tønnesen (2009). I describe this method briefly in Chapter 3 of this section.

The improvisational method of Carrière is not typical of most professional screenwriting processes; rather, the opposite. The financial and practical constraints of a costly and, in Norway, highly subsidized, art form, are often actively present from the very outset of the screenwriting process.

In the film culture within which I practise, professional screenwriters generally seek funding for their writing work either through producers or through agencies like the *Norwegian Film Institute's* script development programme. A universal demand by both producers and screenwriting support agencies is - legitimately - that written material must be submitted before a financed writing-process begins. Usually, that required material is a *synopsis*. By a synopsis, one generally means the structural outline of a story from A to Z, with a beginning, middle and end. As a link in the chain of a creative process, this tradition could be named the "paradox of predescription". How to describe an original screenplay that does not yet exist, or exists only as an idea, *a piece of clay to be formed* (Senje, 2012)? How to convince someone of the worth, in Bradley's words, of *the poem* when it is not already written?

The experienced screenwriter Andy Cox (*Lucky Country*, AUS, 2009, *Under a Red Moon*, AUS, 2008) said, when interviewed about his genre, that he found it far easier to write screenplays that were commissions or adaptations, than original pieces in which his own, personal material would form the basis for the work (Cox, 2011). When that was the case, he said, he would prefer to write in another genre. He regretted this fact, but maintained that the screenplay is an extremely challenging genre for the expression of a personal vision; the reason for this being the strict frameworks and demands of the genre. He referred to both the accepted working methods and dramaturgies of mainstream filmmaking, but also to inherent constraints imposed by the contextual frameworks of the feature-film, and thus screenplay, genres themselves.

One such constraint is the element of time. The screenwriter may make a number of creative choices and, for example, choose a linear or a non-linear form of storytelling. In either case, the absolute time-frame of a screening in a cinema will apply, meaning that the writing is restricted to something that

can be shown continuously and within the approximate time frame of 90 minutes. This calls for a kind of efficiency in storytelling that is unique to screen- as well as stage writing. A novel, by contrast, can span anything from a hundred to a thousand pages.

Writing *September* within the framework of an artistic fellowship in screenwriting, I was determined to take on the challenge Cox described, in the context of an alternative methodology. I intended to draw on deeply personal material, yet had the privilege of working outside all constraints in the development field. Inspired by the experience of writing *Days of Winter*, I had set myself specific goals for the working process, outlined below.

II. 1. Research tasks and questions, September

Research tasks:

1. **Method:** To
 - attempt, in the first writing phase, to abandon my usual tools of structure and storylining principles as major signposts to the screenwriting process
 - write without the aid of treatments or other prose documents.
 - experiment with writing powered by improvising, associating, and inventing rather than "developing."
 - articulate knowledge from my work as a stage director and apply it to the writing of screenplays.
2. **Tools:** To
 - actively employ the concepts *original impulse* and *screen idea*.
 - keep in mind my new awareness of the existence and ambiguous nature of the *Screen Idea Work Group*
3. **Context:** To work through the complete first draft of *September* with minimal consultation with readers – that is, avoid forming a *Screen Idea Work Group* until the material could be fully written out in a script version.
4. **Application of new knowledge:** To employ heightened awareness of the screenplay's unique poetics, the significance of the "action text" (Senje, 2012) and the description of the film, not just the story, as creative tools.

5. **Technology:** To try out alternative scripting software, CeltX, in the writing process itself, in particular to see whether visual images could be used to help structure and express what Aristotle termed *opsis* (visual elements/spectacle).

In addition, I tentatively formulated the following research questions for the process:

- Are there ways to write screenplays that access the sources of the imagination in the first phase, finding or inventing (*dikte*) rather than "developing"?
- Is the "set stage chronology" (synopsis, treatment, step outlines) of script development counterproductive to the creative imagination – and thus to film works as "original poiesis"?
- Could it be that the industry practise of developing screenplays through "set stage chronology" and Screen Idea Work Groups (SIWGs) is far more counterproductive to original *poiesis* in films than the use of "classical" dramaturgical models?
- Might this alternative methodology support the use of the screenplay as a medium for expression of more personal themes?
- Could certain alternative ways of writing lead to more efficient methodology and more "films with a personal voice"?

II. 2. The Original impulse, *September*

There is a power in the original vision that transcends all others. It is the source of our original inspiration, our moment of greatest clarity.
(Mehring, 1989, p.6).

The idea for *September* had first been articulated before my artistic research fellowship began, in a project description (Senje, 2008) which was a part of my application to the *Norwegian Artistic Fellowship Program*. I started my

fellowship in 2009, and began actually working on the second project, *September*, early in 2011. I had, in the meantime, had the opportunity afforded by the program of studying the genre and examining my own creative process in writing *Days of Winter* (Senje 2012). The original impulse for *Days of Winter* was the experience of finding unexpected resources within myself when my small daughter fell ill, and I was alone. The first image was that of *a waking mother, walking the hospital corridors tirelessly through the night, in a war against microorganisms*. (Senje, 2012). I started the *September* process by defining *the original impulse* for the new work:

Original Impulse for September

One September morning in 1993, I got a phone call I will never forget: My father had been hospitalized during the night. The diagnosis was pneumonia, and - I was told - not very serious. A few hours earlier, we had had a barbecue in my little garden, in the presence of my baby daughter, my mother and my Czech au-pair girl. My father played delightedly with his granddaughter before and after our meal. I have a beautiful photo from the dinner, which was enjoyed outside, in the golden evening sunshine of autumn. That photo became the last one ever taken of my father.

After six harrowing weeks, filled with uncertainty, medical errors of judgement, and other absurdities, my father died in the hospital without a diagnosis. Throughout the last weeks of his hospital stay, the doctors subjected him to what I experienced as an avid search for a hidden cancer, including two lung biopsies, both of which led to the collapse of his lung (what is known as pneumo-thorax), a life-threatening condition under his circumstances. During those last weeks, he kept asking us to get him "out of here". But until two days before he fell into the coma that preceded his death, I received no hint or information regarding the fact that my father was actually dying. Rather, I was repeatedly given the impression that the doctors were actively problemsolving, seeking a diagnosis and a cure.

During the last 72 hours of his life, my father was unconscious and attached to a respirator. I stayed by his side as much as I could. At home, I had a child of eleven months and the preparations for an exciting, new theatre project pulling at me. There was no way I could spend every waking moment by my father's bedside. The conflict between the desire to be with him and the needs of my life tore me apart.

At the moment of my father's death, I had gone home two hours before. When the phone call came, informing me that the end was near, I rushed back to the hospital. I arrived only minutes late for the moment of his passing across the threshold. Getting there before any other family members, I was, fortunately, able to spend a few minutes alone in his room. His cheek was still warm when I touched my own with it. The scent of his hair and skin were the same as when he was living. I whispered my goodbyes and told him how much I had loved him. Those few minutes, alone by his bed, are precious to me still.

After the apparent mystery of my father's passing, I spent a full year researching its cause and attempting to persuade the personnel at the hospital to assume responsibility for his untimely death. Finally, after that lengthy struggle with the hospital authorities, his death was judged to be the result of a misdiagnosis. The autopsy declared embolism, or bloodclots, in his lung as the cause of death, while my father had been treated, in vain, with antibiotics for pneumonia. My mother received financial compensation, but never an apology .

My father was an author of both fiction and non-fiction works. He was also rather an eccentric, a free spirit and a great lover of nature and the outdoors, the subject of many of his books. Until the day before his hospitalization, he walked or biked through the forest near his home every day. He was an unusually fit man in his early seventies. Because of this, his rapid decline and death in the hospital came as a brutal shock to me and the rest of the family.

In retrospect, I have realized that my passionate battle with the health-care system was my way of tackling - or projecting - the true, deep grief I felt about missing out so completely on my father's death. That grief wasn't only about his actual moment of passing - although that loss was bad enough - it was the sense of being cheated of the awareness that what I was witnessing was the process of somebody I loved actually slipping away from me forever. That experience caused me to reflect upon the place of death in our modern lives.

I consulted my imagination: What would I have done if I had actually known? The obvious answer to that question was that I would have taken him away, out of the hospital, to die in the place of his choice. In the hospital, my father continuously expressed his desire to get out of there and go home. What I would have wanted for him was the opportunity to take his death into his own hands and own it, the way he had so passionately owned his life⁹. At the same time, I was aware of how difficult it would have been for me to actually do so. How my own choices had structured a life that might not allow me to perform such an act of love for one of the persons closest and most important to me ever.

Sensing the possibility of that act of love and its dilemmas, I had discovered the very first impulse for the story of my screenplay September. The first image of Days of Winter was the image of a waking mother, walking the hospital corridors with a child cradled in her arms.

The first image of September was almost its opposite, that of a daughter cradling her father.

⁹ The Norwegian doctor Per Fugelli has written lucidly on the subject of "owning one's death" in contemporary life (Fugelli, 2010).

II. The Screen Idea for *September*

While *the original impulse* for *Days of Winter* was drawn from my first, somewhat raw, experience of mothering, the second screenplay in my project draws on the emotion of a daughter supporting her dying father. The figure of a *pietà*, in which a daughter cradled, or held, the spent body of her aging father, was the first image in the project.

The material of pure emotion contained in an *original impulse* naturally needs refinement and development in order to become an actual *screen idea*. In addition, that essence of *author's pain* needs to be transformed by the imagination and removed from its autobiographical base, into the world of fiction. Based on my original impulse, I proceeded to put my imagination to work, improvising and inventing from a central image before a single word had been written.

In my digital essay, I refer to screenwriter and teacher Philip Parker and his definition of a *screen idea* (Parker, 1998). In the case of *Days of Winter*, the *screen idea* was born when I coupled the waking mother image with the Gulf stream theory (Senje, 2012). In *September*, I knew that the material that would turn the impulse into a screen idea had to be found in the relationship between the father and the daughter of the story. In *Days of Winter*, the relationship of Anniken to her three children was a passionate one, of unconditional love and devotion. In *September*, writing about a grown-up daughter and her aging father, I sensed that the relationship between parent and child also needed to be passionate, but far more ambiguous and complex. The story that started with an image of a daughter cradling her father needed friction and resistance to create drama and avoid sentimentality. Of course, it also needed the context of a story. The father I envisioned from the beginning was - much like my own - eccentric and egocentric, but certainly not unlovable. I knew from my own experience with such strong and unpredictable personalities that the daughter-protagonist would have an unresolved relationship to him. As of yet, I was uncertain of what their particular conflict would consist in.

In writing *Days of Winter*, I had done extensive research, travelling to Turkey to seek out locations and imagery for my story. With *September*, I wanted to set the action in a world I knew well, and would enjoy communicating. To find the right external framework for *September*, I looked to my two decades of experience in the professional theatre world, as a stage director. In that profession I lived, like most theatre-artists, a life-style that was largely dictated by my work and my passion for it. In my most active years, I directed two to three performances a year. When I was in production, I rarely made it home from the theatre until late in the evening. I felt deeply appreciative and grateful for the fact that I was actually making a living out of my life's passion, but I also realized that my choice, to a large extent, excluded me from aspects of life that people around me seemed to enjoy. The morale and loyalty of theatre-artists toward their work is, in my experience, exceptionally high - and so was my own. The old saying "the show must go on" is taken quite literally in Norwegian "institutional" theatre houses. Stories abound about actors who have gone on stage sick, depressed, or in the process of miscarrying - or while a loved one was dying. A good way to intensify dramatic action which has to run a gamut of emotions in a mere 90 minutes is to "raise the stakes". To place my protagonist in the theatrical context of passion, morale and loyalty seemed a good way to heighten her dilemma and give her a more difficult, existential choice to make. In addition, the theatre was an environment I knew well and wanted to share with my audience.

I felt satisfied with my choice that the protagonist of *September* would be a young and ambitious stage director, a character I could identify with on every level. This was also in keeping with the themes for my work (as articulated in my project description, Senje, 2011):

Both screen stories will concern themselves with themes that touch upon what I have called "the Nordic individual of affluence" - that is, the educated, upper middle-class that I, and the majority of Norway's population, are members of. In this way, the stories set themselves apart from the themes and environments that have marked Norwegian film stories after 2000. Within this social majority, I will, in both scripts, portray female protagonists, a character-group that has been in extreme minority in Norwegian film production during the past 10 years (Senje, 2011, p.8).

In the choice of name for my protagonist, I kept a certain link to my own. My name, Siri Senje, is close to a female version of the name of my father, Sigurd Senje. I named my character Ebba Enge and her father Eilif Enge, echoing the alliterative sound of those names and attempting to emphasize the deep connection that had existed between them, and was now lost. As I went on to search for an artistic project for my character Ebba to be involved in, when she finds out that her father is dying, I did wonder about whether I was placing the characters and story too close to my own autobiography. I decided to take a chance; I had never before worked on such personal material, and the artistic freedom of the fellowship seemed the perfect opportunity to do so.

Again, as with the previous choices, the next one came to me easily. It was as if the material was presenting itself to me, waiting to be written. That Ebba's artistic project would be Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* seemed a natural next step. The scope and complexity of such a production project would put her abilities and confidence to a real test - "raising the stakes" again. Besides, that particular Ibsen text has been a kind of *leitmotif* throughout my career in the arts, from the time I began working on a doctorate (not completed, but with *Peer Gynt* as a major subject) in Scandinavian Studies in the U.S. in the 1980ies, until I was employed by the Norwegian cultural festival *Per Gynt Stemnet* from 2008 - 2011, contributing to their plans for what they called a *Peer Gynt Academy*. *Peer Gynt* is, to me, Ibsen's most existentially-oriented work; a play in which he scrutinizes his main character, undresses him to the bone, and chastises him mercilessly for wasting the amazing gift of life that has been graciously granted to him. At the same time, Ibsen, of course, provokes his audience into asking themselves basic questions about how they are spending their precious few years under the sun. I found it exciting to imagine Ebba dealing with exactly these themes at the point where her own life suddenly takes a dramatic turn; when she collides with death in the midst of life, and a clear, moral choice has to be made.

Equally important, *Peer Gynt* contains a poignant scene in which a son - Peer - accompanies and consoles his mother through the last minutes of her life. The scene *Mor Åses Død* - the Death of Mother Åse - is one of the most iconic in Norwegian theatre tradition. It has been documented and photographed

for almost a hundred years, and the image of country boy Peer sitting behind his mother in a wooden bed, stretching his arms before him as if holding the reins of his horse, Grane, is recognizable to most Norwegians who have completed high school. The context of the scene is a renegade son, declared an outcast, who has just left the girl he actually loves in order to escape Norway, a country where his fate is sealed. On the run, he passes by his mother's cottage to bid her farewell. But when Peer reaches the little farmstead, he finds a situation from which he cannot escape: His mother is dying. Recognizing her pain and fear, he decides to guide her across the threshold through engaging her in the kind of dramatic play-acting the two of them used to enjoy when he was a boy. Peer climbs into his mother's sickbed and takes her on an imaginary sleighride to the Heavens, where the good Mor Åse is welcomed and fêted by Our Lord himself. At the end of the ride, he closes her eyes, thanks her, kisses her goodbye, and leaves. The interpretation of this death-scene is dealt with in the scenenplay *September* itself, and will not be commented upon here. Suffice it to say that my protagonist Ebba and I choose to go against the performance-tradition of a key scene in what is frequently seen as Norway's national epos.

The possibility of Mor Åse's death-scene informing and influencing Ebba's inner process, dilemma and decision seemed to me a perfect stepping stone in my story. I sensed a potential story-beat in which the demands of art and the demands of life crossed each other in an unusual and original way. The concept of my theatre-director protagonist and her dream project seemed to blend well with the story of a daughter who must decide whether she should put everything else aside to fulfill her father's last wish and take him on the journey that would end in his death, and possibly in her own reconciliation with her childhood.

My screen idea for *September* was born.

II. 3. The writing process: Phase 1.

With the use of these methods, I think the result becomes more unexpected, more original, more personal, more emotional and almost always more contemporary and modern. (Tønnessen, 2009, p.6, speaking of Stanislavskij and improvisation)

The word improvisation stems from the Latin word *improvisus* which means “unforeseen”, thus ‘unexpected’.

When artists improvise, a central goal is to gain access to the subconscious and imagine freely from one’s inner source, something that may, as Norwegian stage director Tønnessen proposes, lead to greater originality. Such creative freedom has been a desired goal for artists in many genres and the means to the end have been numerous. What, then, does “improvisation” mean, in the laboratory of a screenwriter? The experience I had in this area was from the theatre, where I had participated in multiple improvisation-games - first, when I was a girl interested in drama, later, as a professional. As an experienced theatre-director, I gained further insight into structured methods of improvisation through my encounter with Irina Malochevskaya and her work (see p.15). As her colleague at the Norwegian Academy of the Arts, Theatre section, in the 1990ies, I had the opportunity to follow her classes when she worked with actors, in addition to attending a course in her analytical method.

Tønnessen, formerly a student of Malochevskaya’s, describes in her critical reflection text, *Planned intuition, conscious roads to the unconscious*, (Tønnessen, 2002) her artistic research work with this improvisation method, first developed by Konstantin Stanislavskij and his follower, Tovstonogov (see also Malochevskaja, 2002). In brief, this method of improvisation entails breaking the stage-play text into the smallest beats, or actions, possible, defining each beat with an active verb, as a kind of micro-action. In other words, the approach takes Aristotle’s ‘*praxis*’ as its core, translating it to active human *praxis*, or action, second by second. The main action of a scene is always defined in terms of a character’s wanting something (i.e. “the pursuit of happiness”), the micro-actions by each of the tactics that the character employs in order to achieve that desired goal. In a

scene that involves for example a proposal or a seduction, the goal itself would be easily defined, but the character's *way toward it* would, in a rich dramatic text, would include a number of different obstacles, which would demand a frequent change of tactics (=verbs), that might elicit interesting *acting* - and be fascinating for an audience to watch.

After breaking the text down into micro-actions (hendelser) the next step of this method would be, without use of the play's text, to let the actors improvise, using one verb - or micro-action - at a time, beat for beat, again and again, through the whole play. As a scene of 2-3 pages easily translates into 5-15 such micro-beats; structured improvisation is a timeconsuming process. Getting through a full stageplay text can take several weeks of rehearsal time. The reward is that selected parts of the emotional and physical material that emerges spontaneously from the improvisations are usable in the final performance of the play. Often, as Tønnessen points out, the material found through improvisation is original and unexpected. But contrary to the playful method of Carrière, this is a highly developed form of improvisation, thus the word "*planned*" in her project title. In adapting improvisation to a writing process, I chose to do it in a similarly "structured" way, by using certain signposts guiding me through unknown terrain.

Writing as improvisation.

An improvisation in Carrière's workshop, or in the theatre rehearsal, has the obvious advantage of the presence of other players in the game. The closeness of other people, and the immediacy of having to respond to the ideas and impulses they offer, is a powerful antidote against the self-censoring and self-consciousness that improvisation aims to defeat. In the solitude of my writer's room, I was left to battle these anti-creative forces on my own. (When I learned, late in the process, that Christina Kallas had started an improvisation-studio for screenwriters, where they get actors to improvise around scenes in their screenplays, I decided to try that option with my next project.)

Kallas writes of improvisation that it is:

a particularly constructive way to increase the riches of creativity – has played an important part in dance and music plus the performing arts for a long time, from Commedia dell'arte to the happenings of The

Living Theatre. (Kallas, 2010, p. 12),

In writing *September*, I tried, by myself, to get as close to an improvisational writing process as is possible. The method I attempted was not, like certain kinds of automatic writing exercises, based on pure randomness. I had my signposts in place of those defined beats of micro-action (*praxos*) used in the Stanislavskij/Tovstonogov method. I knew, to an extent, what my main character wanted, and where I was going, as I was moving toward - and around- the image of the daughter cradling her father. But I had no idea how to get there nor what I would discover during the course of my writer's journey. I had determined to write associatively, without chronology, using a freely associative process, and especially to avoid the use of extensive, plot and character based prose documents like treatments, that may consume the creative energy of invention before the actual "dikterprozess" - creative process of *poiesis* - has been applied to its full potential.

In starting the work, I had the articulated original impulse and screen idea as signposts. Also, the concept for *September*, as mentioned, had already been set forth in a project description, written before my research began. In it, I named my themes, described three significant locations of action and gave a sketch of a story. These descriptions from the document are included below. I sense in them the seeds of an original impulse and a screen idea, before I knew how to name those concepts. Also, there is a clear visual outline of three worlds where the action in this screenplay is imagined to take place: The world of a major theatre, the world of a large hospital and the natural environment around a cabin by the sea. These three worlds - art, science and nature - were to become additional signposts through the improvisational process of creating my first draft of *September*. Included below are excerpts from the original (a translation to English is attached at the end of the document, Appendix 1.).

SEPTEMBER - idea for an original screenplay, by Siri Senje



FILMIC UNIVERSE:

September takes place in a theatre, a hospital and a cabin by the sea. Ebba moves between two of organized society's most highly developed institutions: A theatre - palace of high culture - and a university hospital - palace of science. Art, science and, at a later point, nature.

In the theatre, the complete spectrum of colors, voices, styles, emotions and imagination exist. This is a physical universe of nooks and crannies, of old columns, velvet and chandeliers; housing costumes and primadonnas, rivalization and vanity. It is a world in which the irrational is allowed a large space, but there is also a broad tolerance for human error, much empathy, freedom and creative power.

In the hospital's square, identical rooms, minimalism and monochromatic tones rule. The endless, unadorned corridors are silent, sounds are muffled, humans are soft-spoken. Technological inventions in steel and glass glitter in newly polished, small and closed temples of their own, whose guardians are gods in wooden clogs and white or pastel green uniforms. The language is encoded and at times undecipherable, the hierarchy is unusually advanced and visible, the objectivization of the human subject obvious. Rationality rules - or so it seems - and camouflages the personal, emotionally controlled agendas. Goal-direction is strong: The pursuit of the absolute diagnosis and the perfect treatment - this

controls everything. But there are exceptions; individuals with empathy, presence and the gift of intimacy to give others.

These two worlds have contrasting values, codes, visuality, auditory qualities, and language. Both are defined by man-made qualities and all inhabitants are human.

The story will also unfold in a totally contrasting world, close to nature, in a simple cabin by the sea, on the Norwegian South Coast. The landscape here is open, sparsely developed and populated, the view from the terrace is a panorama of sea, islands and forest. Other inhabitants are fish, birds, sea animals, and other small animals like snakes and squirrels. The tourist season is over and it is quiet here. Sounds only of seagulls, wind, lapping waves and an occasional, small motorboat chugging by. All the signs of seasons changing from summer to autumn come very close. Shorter and shorter days, more and more slanting sunlight, leaves turning, birds migrating, the smell of rotting leaves and seaweed, lingonberries and blackberries ripening. Long evenings on the terrace before an open fire, time moving slowly, sound carrying far away across the waters in the silvery twilight.

My aim is to reflect each "world" and its visuality at the screenplay stage, in spite of this being to a large extent a character- and dialogue-driven film story.

THEMES: *September touches upon one of our last taboos - death. How do we manage to approach it, as adult individuals in the midst of modern life's hectic whirl? Is it ugly and sordid, or can it be beautiful? Can we take it into our own hands and shape it? Seventy percent of Norwegian die in hospitals. Most of us may dream, vaguely, of "falling quietly into death's sleep in our own home", surrounded by our loved ones. " Very few do.*

September is also about a father and a daughter in a complex and unresolved relationship. It is about an encounter with death in the midst of life and the eternal conflict between calling and love.

Last, but not least, the story is about our ability and tendency to love a PLACE on earth - the intense and unexplicable love an individual can feel for that spot of earth, that garden, that rock, that view where she or he senses that her soul is "at home."

September is inspired by actual event, in my own life. This means that the history of the illness itself is real and can be confirmed medically. The rest of the story is fiction.

These three worlds of imagery correspond, interestingly, to the three worlds I imagined before writing *Days of Winter*; the frosty world of Norway without the Gulf Stream, the heat and chaos of the Istanbul slums, and the openness and proximity to nature in the Turkish countryside (Senje, 2012). Why these two stories both appeared to me, early on, in the shape of such a triptych of imagery, which corresponds to a three-act-structure and end in an open landscape, is a

fact I find truly interesting, but cannot rationally explain, unless it is rooted in my long exposure to dramatic works which frequently take such a form.

The first draft.

Improvisation can be time-consuming. It involved, in my case, lengthy sojourns into the worlds and backgrounds of my characters, followed by descriptions of what surrounded them. Writing the first draft of *September* took about eight months (intermittently, I was also developing and expanding on the digital media essay), which is not an unusual amount of time for such work. Writing without my usual structuring tools, I held onto my concepts and my three images as instruments of navigation in the open and unknown landscape of the development process. I entered the rooms and places of my characters, I spied, listened, watched, and sometimes acted out, in the solitude of my writer's room. I took literally the advice of Aristotle when he proposes how those who write – or imagine – *mimesis praxos* for the performing arts should behave:

In constructing the plot and working it out with the proper diction, the poet should place the scene, as far as possible, before his eyes. In this way, seeing everything with the utmost vividness, as if he were a spectator of the action, he will discover what is in keeping with it, and be most unlikely to overlook inconsistencies. (...)
Again, the poet should work out his play, to the best of his power, with appropriate gestures; for those who feel emotion are most convincing through natural sympathy with the characters they represent; and one who is agitated storms, one who is angry rages, with the most lifelike reality. Hence poetry implies either a happy gift of nature or a strain of madness. In the one case a man can take the mould of any character; in the other, he is lifted out of his proper self
(Aristotle, c. 330 B.C., Ch. XVII).

The first weeks of work were explosively creative. I was excited about my idea, and felt liberated by the new working method. Writing without a linear chronology, I almost immediately produced several scenes which I felt had a strong dramatic nerve and premise and which I truly enjoyed writing. The scenes seemed to have been stored in my imagination, and "poured out" in quick succession, with no particular links between them. These scenes, all of which are, in some form, in the current script, were:

- A scene in which Ebba presents her concept for *Peer Gynt* to her actors
- A scene in which Ebba learns that her father is dying.

- A scene in which Ebba tells the theatre's artistic director that she is leaving her theatre-production to take her father away to die
- Several detailed scenes in which Ebba directs her actors in *Peer Gynt*
- Several scenes in which the theatre's aging primadonna, Carla, comments derisively on Ebba's person

The second and third of the scenes mentioned above are major turning points of the story. As such, they are rife with conflict and appeared dynamic and powerful. Having produced these scenes rather rapidly, I suddenly seemed to lose my creative courage.

Where would I go from here? Doubts about the project crept into my consciousness. The challenge of writing about death in a way that an audience might actually identify with, respond to, or even want to see in the cinema, overwhelmed me. I feared a complete writer's block, but forced myself to keep going, aware that interruption might kill my momentum and make things even more difficult. I kept repeating to myself the old mantra, "If you want to be a writer, write!" And I continued to write, more scenes that took place in the theatre. In them, I made an effort to describe some of the processes that take place between actors and directors in rehearsals - a theme that I found fascinating, but that clearly had no significant bearing on my story, nor connection to the original impulse and the screen idea. Some of the material had a tone of comedy - and much of it has been removed from the current script. In this phase, I also sought to find written reflection on the topic of death in contemporary culture. In the work of Dr. Per Fugelli (*Døden, skal vi Danse?* "Death, Shall We Dance", 2010) I found especially inspiring material and asked for a meeting with him. After the meeting, I wrote a scene in the hospital that is directly inspired by a "scene" in his book; that in which a doctor explains routinely to a hospital patient what an "embolism" is, completely disregarding the deep *angst* the patient must be feeling.

In retrospect, I see that the theatre world was a comfort zone as well as a zone where fantasy and reality naturally commingle. On the other hand, entering the emotional world of Ebba and her relation to her father seemed daunting. I experimented with that, too. I wrote scenes between father and daughter in which Eilif was a true monster, completely unlovable. I read through them two

days later, regretted them terribly, and wrote new ones in which he was too much of a nice guy. I tried desperately to fill in the spaces between my theatre portrayals and the existing milestone scenes, but found the process extremely taxing, my signposts notwithstanding. Several times during this initial phase, I felt so uncertain of my progress that I considered leaving the screen idea of *September* and trying my luck with different material.

Looking back on that period with the current third draft in my hands, I feel confident in saying that the difficulties were due to the personal nature of the material, rather than the methodological approach; and that finally the method did enable me to transmute the personal into the universal and dramatic. There were elements in the emotional story of Ebba and her father that I found too difficult to write about. I needed to work through them and fictionalize the material in order to move it farther away from my own, personal story. Thus, I stayed in the theatre world, writing a number of scenes that were not really relevant as expressions of the screen idea of *September*.

In January 2011, at a point of peak frustration, I decided to send the project to the script development program at the Norwegian Film Institute. I felt, at that point, an intense need for an evaluation, in a professional context, of the project as a screen idea. Was it worth even trying to write out as a screenplay? The idea of exposing my fledgling project to the keen competition of a writer's support program that, according to its coordinating executive, Anne Skistad, receives 200 - 230 applications a year and rejects 80 - 85% of them, seemed significant. Here was, above all, the possibility of a professional test, and an affirmation or rejection of my screen idea.

My application contained the previously-written project description and several of the existing scenes. In addition, I wrote a letter describing the projected work method and process, and I specifically asked for permission to work unconventionally, without treatment, outlines, or set chronology, if I were to be admitted into the program. Script consultant Tone Johnsen at NFI accepted my application and wrote an enthusiastic response. What was more, she welcomed my desire to work untraditionally, and we made an agreement that she would refrain from structural and prescriptive feedback, allowing me to continue my associative writing process in peace.

The official approval of the script development program gave my confidence a much needed boost. The acceptance may also have given me the courage to leave my comfort zone, possibly coupled with the effect of the natural maturing process of my relationship to the *September* material.

In the course of the following months, I continued to approach the central moment of daughter-father *pietà*, as intended, from several angles. I had to push myself to stop circling around the daughter-father relationship without actually touching upon it. First, I wrote some short scenes, or glimpses, to portray Ebbas's father Eilif. These were scenes into which Ebba did not enter. Father and daughter were apart. Eilif's scenes mostly took place in the "third world" of the material, the natural environment, in which he thrived and excelled - the comfort zone that he would be robbed of through his illness. Little by little, I moved in on the character of Eilif and gave him new character traits that did not correspond to my father's.

Simultaneously, I was writing about Ebba where she felt most at home, in the theatre. The scenes with Ebba in the theatre and Eilif in the woods or by the sea, grew into long sequences, in which the focus moved back and forth between Ebba's life and her father's. Still, the two strands did not meet. I realized, through this improvisational imagining around their separate situations, that I was describing a relationship in which daughter and father probably had very little contact in the present. They had, it appeared, more or less lost each other. Intuitively, I felt that this element of distance was true, and that it had a dramatic value. Finally, through my moving through the two relatively "safe" worlds, I found the courage to enter the world of the hospital, a world I had long feared revisiting.

On the way toward approaching the difficult "second world" of the hospital, I had gradually sketched out a back story for the two main characters, a back story that in a number of central aspects diverged from my own autobiography:

Eilif, an orphan and a loner, had married late, after fighting his way to providing himself with an academic education. Ebba's mother Anita was more than ten years his junior - a young woman who adored and admired her more mature

partner. When Ebba was born, Anita was in her early twenties, while Eilif was in his mid-thirties. He was already an acknowledged writer and photographer, producing successful books that expressed his passionate interest in wildlife, nature and explorations of the outdoors. The Enge family life centred on Eilif and his needs, such as going to his remote cabin to write while Anita and Ebba were left to themselves. Anita's own life was put on hold. She did most of the childrearing while Eilif was engaged in his career. After 10 years, she had had enough of both his absence and his personality, with his eccentric, irrational, domineering and bullying ways. She left him and started a new life, getting an academic education and an exciting career, fifteen years later than her peers. Eilif, who had few friends, was deeply hurt and shocked by her departure, and sank even further into a heremital existence. Gradually, he and Ebba lost contact with each other, a process that accelerated when Ebba grew out of the playful simplicity of the daughter-father activities they had enjoyed when she was a child. As she grew into a teenager, crazy songs, rain dancing and hikes in the woods during which Eilif lectured about snakes and ants became insufferable. Ebba protested in her petulant, teenage manner, Eilif was hurt and, childishly, blew up, way out of proportion, as he always had. Eilif's frightening temperament, earlier a given factor of her existence, was now something she could avoid by not coming to stay with him every other weekend anymore. Finally, when she grew older, Ebba's interests and activities concentrated increasingly on the dramatic arts, which Eilif claimed to abhor. As a nature-lover and scientist, he felt a certain arrogant contempt for all manners of fiction as expressions of "falsehood" and "play-acting", that could never get close to "the real stuff" that he himself had chosen to focus on. Ebba, with her excellent grades and intellect, should find something "serious" to spend her talents on. Ebba's choice of profession was a disappointment to him, and through this, a more articulated and "adult" conflict emerged between them.

As the character of Eilif started to emerge, my writing also ventured into his private environment, the old villa at Kjelsås which was Ebba's childhood home. I relished making up the old, musty villa filled with books, photos, periodicals and newspapers, the world in which Eilif had spent some twenty years since his divorce from Ebba's mother.

In order to explore Ebba's and Eilif's history further, I wrote a number of flashback scenes. I enjoyed the process of exploring Ebba's childhood and the use of flashbacks, an element I had never used in my screenwriting before. I considered a possible flashback structure for the film I was beginning to create. I did have a vague sense that I was postponing the "real thing", namely the present, where daughter and father must meet, and confront each other. My problem was that that would have to happen, to a large extent, in the hospital – a place where I was still finding it very hard to go. Throughout this first writing process, I see in retrospect that I was moving in circles around the present-day relationship.

Also, after the experience of *Days of Winter*, in which the father character for a long time threatened to upstage the mother (Senje. 2012), I was keenly aware that *September* was a story with a female protagonist. Although the father was her most important relationship in the story, and his desire to choose his own death needed to be clear, I had chosen Ebba to be the proactive character in the screenplay. I wanted to write a daughter-father, not a father-daughter story. In recent years, much critical and political attention has been paid to the fact that there are few strong female heroines in Norwegian films (Bransjerådet for Film, 2008). I am a woman and a screenwriter – if I do not address this issue, who will? To write strong, female roles was a clearly articulated intent from the start of my fellowship project (Senje, 2011, p.8).

By February 2012, I had written a full, first draft of *September*. Not surprisingly, it was a large and unstructured document, 129 pages in all. It differed from the current screenplay in several major ways:

- It contained a number of flashbacks, which I had written to work out and visualize the former relationship between daughter and father. The current version contains one flashback only.
- It contained what were in effect two parallel stories, Ebba's and Eilif's. The current version contains mainly Ebba's story, and she is present in practically every single scene.
- It had more scenes in the theatre than scenes between daughter and father. In the current version, about 2/3 of the scenes are beats in, or related to, the daughter/father story.

- It contained rather long descriptions of environments around the characters and attempts to evoke atmosphere. In the current version, these are more condensed, evoked rather than described.
- In the final scene, Eilif died in Ebba's presence on the terrace of his little cabin and she never returned to the theatre at all - a fact that made the story seem just as much, in fact rather more, Eilif's than Ebba's.

My sense of relief as I wrote the final words, completing a first version of the ending, was enormous. I had actually gotten through to my *pièta*, the point where Ebba's father dies. I had done it with the help of my signposts, by delving into my three worlds, and by turning the original impulse and screen idea into dramatic action.

Still, I was well aware that what I had was material in-the-raw. The first draft was unstructured and wordy, but it was physically *there* - an object in my hand. The associative writing method no doubt encourages more voluminous documents than the usual screenplay format. The first draft of *September* was shapeless, yes, but now I had my *something* to shape and refine. I had more than a small *lump of clay* (Senje, 2012), I had the full, raw material of an original screenplay - clay formed into a rough shape.

The CeltX experiment.

My desire to try out alternative scriptwriting software, CeltX, was initially inspired by an article by screenwriter, filmmaker and researcher Dr. Kathryn Millard in *Journal of Screenwriting*. In it, Millard claims that *screenwriting in its present practice is based upon methodology from the era of the typewriter* (Millard, 2010, p. 11). She goes on to present a critique of conventional screenwriting methods and suggests that, in our digital age, screenwriters and directors have new tools at hand that have not yet been fully put to use in the pre-production process. She takes issue with the standard formats of software like *Final Draft* and *Screenwriter*, the makers of which, with slogans like "just add words", ignore the potential of the use of images and cause all screenplays to look exactly alike. These constrictions of form affect content, Millard claims.

Millard proposes that alternative software like *CeltX*, which allows writers to include images, filmclips, and notes into the script file, might be the future of screenwriting. Further, she claims that various forms of pre-visualization will give a new fluidity to the work of the screenwriter. Reading about that possibility for the first time, I decided to try out *CeltX*, a different kind of software, for the writing of *September*.

However, as mentioned above, my experiment with *CeltX* soon turned out a failure. First of all, the program did not allow the inclusion of images in the text itself, the way I had imagined. Photos and clips are stored in *CeltX* as attachments, demanding separate actions and clicks outside the screenplay text itself to become available to the reader. Only the storyboard option permits the direct inclusion of images, and although access to the storyboard is easy alongside the screenplay itself (scenes are numbered correspondingly and automatically updated), I did not aim to create a storyboard for *September* – just to associate certain images and melodies with particular moments. It turned out that I could not attach sound files in MP3 format at all (I had already been planning to include several important songs sung by my characters). Finally, the screenplay section of the program looked exactly the same as in classical screenwriting software, only with a large number of standardized note-taking functions on various elements.

To me, the extra files represented the opposite of fluidity for the reader. I had envisioned the visual and aural resources being available in the reading itself, so that, for instance, in the last act of *September*, a photo of Eilif's red maple tree might come up at the end of the scene. Or, as Ebba sings to him at the hospital, a click would allow a sound file, recorded by the writer, to give added life to the scene in the reader's mind. As it turned out, this kind of flexibility is not yet fluently developed in *CeltX* software, meaning that the fluidity in following a story would be interrupted by having to consult separate files during the reading. Still, this weakness was not the major factor behind my giving up *CeltX* up so quickly.

During the first weeks of writing *September*, I conscientiously included a photo for each scene of the opening sequence I was attempting to write. As long as the photos were in my library, taken by me for the express purpose of

use or inspiration for the *September* work, it functioned fairly well, although this practice added only minimally to my creative process. However, I quickly found that the constant searching for suitable photos I didn't have felt like an annoying waste of writing time. Surfing the internet to find an image of Norway's National Theatre, or similar, was a rather uninspiring chore that did nothing for the creative process except interrupt my writing flow. Since flow was precisely what I was after in this writing approach, I soon realized that this way of working was not right for me. After having attempted to add photos in the first version of a former opening sequence, I determined that the frustration involved in finding visual material was interfering with my creative process. There were practical problems as well: The program contained a "bug", so that my printouts came in half-filled pages unless I converted to pdf-files before printing. Converting CeltX to PDF demanded that the writer was online. Since I did a great deal of the work at my small writer's retreat, with a poor internet-connection, this was another hindrance that I did not have the patience for. I gave up on CeltX and returned to Final Draft.

These practical difficulties aside, I still conclude that, even with the improvements which no doubt will appear in the CeltX software, possibly giving more fluidity to the inclusion of files, the very principles behind this program are not for everyone. Rather, I found out through my attempts at working with images that I have an extremely strong attachment to words. They are my main tools of expression and, as a writer, I find them magical. Working with words is, simply spoken, what gives me creative joy. Being "in flow" for me, means, literally, that there is a chain of communication between my imagination, my hands and, finally, my eyes, as I see sentences form on the screen before me. A lot of the actual invention - or *poiesis* - in the screenplay process happens then and there, *as I write my words on the page*.

This truly improvisational aspect of the writing process is, for me, also a strong argument against the excessive use of pre-planning and prose documents in the phase before the first draft is written. After all, the finished screenplay has its own, unique form; it contains elements of continuous prose, but is hardly a prose document. If a substantial part of the creative energy of invention has gone into writing 30-50 pages of prose, the writer

might end up just “dialoguing the treatment”, hardly as complete a creative process as that of writing drama “from scratch,” word for word, by using the *actual, poetic devices of the screenplay form itself* in the true, formative phase of a work. (The poetics of the screenplay are reviewed in Sternberg, 1999 and in see Senje, 2012.)

In creating a film from scratch, I would, strange as it may seem, prefer to describe images in words in my script, rather than put photos of reddening maples (an important image in *September*) into my text. I can see how the inclusion of images might be rewarding and inspiring at a later stage - such as the one where I am as I write this essay text, with an advanced draft of the screenplay on hand. As I presently begin to plan the staged reading of *September*, which will take place in a physical space before an audience, the use of images and sound appear as natural parts of the work-process. The reading will be, in itself, a vague sketch of the actual, final realization the text might be given as a finished film. The screenplay is written to inspire a performance in the screenplayreader’s *movie theatre of the mind*.

It seems then, that the very paradox of the sceneyplay form, as a text that sets out to describe a visual medium in words, is the basis and the *raison d’être* for my work as a screenwriter. To evoke through words the moving imagery of the final film is the very essence of my creative process. I suspect screenwriters’ attitudes about using means other than words in their work differ greatly. A guess would be that those who are writers who practise also in several other media, as I do, be it novels, poems, or non-fiction - might be the ones to place words most highly in their personal hierarchy as means of expression and communication.

II.4. The writing process, Phase 2.

When the first draft of *September* was completed in February 2012, that milestone also meant that I had to come out of my writer’s closet at last. I wanted to expose the rough draft to a group of readers, resembling a *Screen Idea Work Group* (Macdonald, 2010), in order to gather some initial impressions of how the story worked, as well as concrete feedback and suggestions for change. Based on my analysis of the *Screen Idea Work Group* (Senje 2012), I was keenly aware of the possibility for conflicting opinions

and opposing views. I intended to navigate through this creative chaos and filter the feedback by reflecting it against the signposts I had set up for myself, through a clear awareness of what formed the core *poiesis* in this material.

The first readers of the draft of *September* were my advisor Sveinbjørn Baldvinsson, script consultant Tone Johnsen (both of whom had to read the draft as part of the Norwegian Film School and Norwegian Film Institute structures I was working within), screenwriter Ulf Breistrand (who read it as part of an application to an *éQuinoxe Germany* workshop), and my own, selected readers, screenwriter Monica Boracco and producer Tom Rysstad, who were colleagues whose talents and integrity I had faith in.

As I exposed my extended *lump of clay* to this first group of readers, their general reactions were, all in all, largely on the positive side. All were informed, before reading, of the writing process and the fact that the version they read was a starting point. All five expressed a basic interest in the idea itself and reported that they were moved emotionally by the story. The two female readers were by far the most enthusiastic, reporting that the daughter-father relationship moved them to tears and the theatre scenes to laughter. At the same time, I sensed in my readers a certain shyness of criticism, which I guess was based on their awareness of the fact that this material was deeply personal and might even contain biographical details. After all, the story of a stage director whose father was a writer corresponded to biographical data of my life of which they were well aware.

The suggestions made by these first readers were, to my mind, non-controversial and largely focused on *craft*. They did not involve major rewrites, significant character change, or doubts about the main theme or story line. They were, in a word, "unthreatening" to my project's emerging identity. I could easily go through my notes from the meetings and select the suggestions that were compatible with my original impulse and screen idea. Because of the uncontroversial nature of these first responses, and the fact that they led to a rewrite that did not involve drastic change, I will not recount them in detail in this essay. The general feedback was as follows:

All readers pointed out the need for the two story strands, the theatre and the daughter-father, to relate to each other more clearly and, specifically, for the theatre strand to throw light on the daughter-father story. They also brought up questions like length and quantity of dialogue. Interestingly, one (female) reader described the character of Ebba as "too competent/infallible" (suveren) while a male reader found her helpless and incompetent (hjelpeløs) in dealing with the difficulties she encountered. One reader's main concern was that he thought "too little happened", whereas another felt I had "put too much in there." Also, the readers divided themselves into two camps regarding the theatre material. Four out of five readers had some theatre experience and interest; these all claimed that they thoroughly enjoyed the theatre scenes. The fifth reader found the scenes in the theatre less interesting, and Ebba's passion and commitment in this area difficult to identify with. He pointed out that theatre is not "interesting in and of itself". I could certainly see his point; still, to me and the other four readers, it actually *was* just that.

Needless to say, such inconsistencies were expected, and confirmed my conclusion from my digital media essay, that the Screen Idea Work Group, even when it consists of extremely competent professionals, is

a creative, but also informal and subjective context, thus, it is to a surprising extent subject to coincidence, contradiction, and sheer luck. Members of a Screen idea Work Group such as directors, producers, script consultants and others are frequently creative people who are trained and inclined to invest their personalities, emotions and heartfelt concerns into the work in question. This personal engagement is a double-edged sword, as it represents both a prerequisite for quality, and a potential hazard to a screen idea's integrity (Senje, 2012).

Armed with my signposts, and my newly articulated awareness of that double-edged sword, I navigated more competently this time through this first *Screen Idea Work Group*.

Out of my five readers, the producer Tom Rysstad was the only one to comment on my extensive use of action text and description. I include here a comment from his e-mail, as I believe it has bearing on my evaluation of the

improvisational writing process I had attempted. It also became significant in my consideration of my detailed action text in the further work:

You write so well, actually so beautifully, that paradoxically, you are in danger of writing too much and through this, "lose" the core and the nerve of your story. The great language and the entertaining nuances/digressions function wonderfully in articles of yours that I have read on rushprint.no., but my experience is that this unfortunately may come in the way of the necessary drive in a feature film. When that is said, you have the framework of a story in place, so it is mainly a matter of cutting down on things
(Rysstad, 2012).

The voluminous description and *action text* was, to my mind, a direct result of the improvisational writing process. I did, eventually, condense the prose text a good deal. The detailed dialogue, however, is actually an integral part of my way of writing screenplays. Due to my broad experience with actors, I rarely worry about too much dialogue in a script. I fully expect what is there to be trimmed down by the director, often through impulses from the actors.

Nevertheless, in this case, I felt that the byway of "writing too much" of both text types was useful and necessary, and the extra work a small price to pay for a creative process that had, so far, produced usable raw material in a shorter time than any comparable process I had been in, or witnessed, before. Also, the composition of the prose text was inspired by my study of the screenplay's unique poetics, in which I found Claudia Sternberg's (1999) and Bela Balász' (1948) contributions to be significant sources of inspiration.

Sternberg's work is discussed in some detail in *Sculpting for the Screen* (Senje 2012). The Hungarian theorist and screenwriter Bela Balász, one of the first to write expansively on the theory of the cinematic art, wrote in 1948 that the screenplay was now a fully developed artistic genre, born of the movie screen, as the stage play before it had been born of the theatre stage (Balász, 1948, p.245). In a lucid chapter on the screenplay and how it differs from epic fiction and stage plays, he writes of the role of the prose text:

The stage, though indicated by the author's directions, is not presented in literary form. In the abstract, spiritual space of the drama the visual surroundings of the dramatis personae were a mere background which could not influence their state of mind and hence could not take part in the action. But in the film, visible and audible things are projected on to the

same plane as human characters and in that pictorial composition common to them all, they are all equivalent participants in the action. For this reason, the scriptwriter cannot deal with the scene of action by means of a few stage directions. He must present, characterize, depict the visual aspect as well as the rest, express it by literary means, in much greater detail than the novelist (...) In the script, the scriptwriter must define the part played by images of things every bit as carefully as all the other parts, for it is through them that the human characters fulfill themselves. (Balasz, 1948, p. 248-9)

Balázs also predicted that the screenwriting genre would produce masters and come to be respected as an independent art form, a development that may now, more than fifty years later, gradually be occurring.

Based on the feedback I had received, I was able to write a second draft of *September* in a mere two weeks. I will describe it as a somewhat refined and adjusted version of the raw material - the part-shaped but still amorphous *lump of clay* - I had produced by February 2012. The new version was sent to the advisors at *éQuinoxe*, after I had been selected to participate in the upcoming workshop in Balestrand.

Phase 3 and éQuinoxe Germany, Balestrand May 2012

When the screenwriter works at rewriting, he needs to get feedback on his work so as to get to know what the core of the story is, which poetic myth rules it. And this accounts for the importance of story editors, story doctors, analysts (Brenes, 2010, p.116).

In *Sculpting for the Screen*, I describe the development philosophy of *éQuinoxe Germany* and quote two of its advisors. When I participated with *Days of Winter* in 2008, the focus was strongly on what Laurie Hutzler calls *helping the artist find the story* (Senje, 2012). Through meetings with five advisors, all of whom turned out to know my screenplay extremely well, I was guided back to the original impulse for *Days of Winter*. I found out, in Brenes words, which *poetic myth* actually ruled my story.

With the second draft of *September* in hand, I was eager to expose my script to five different advisors, all prominent and experienced practitioners in the screenplay and film field. On the *éQuinoxe Germany*'s webpages, the workshops are described as follows:

An international jury selects 10 talented screenwriters to participate in the workshop. These ten screenwriters come to the one-week workshops and meet on the basis of one-to-one discussions with ten advisors from all over the world – internationally known and experienced writers, directors and producers- who without remuneration share their knowledge and experiences with the most promising talent the European and international film scene has to offer (éQuinoxe Germany, 2012),

The expressed goals of the workshops, according to the same web-page, are *to enable talented screenwriters to learn from the best in the business and to get the best possible result out of strong stories with an inherent cultural identity.*

During my first workshop, with *Days of Winter*, all the sessions were of high quality. However, the meetings with one advisor, the American screenwriter, teacher and script advisor Laurie Hutzler, became a major turning point for my project and process (Senje, 2012). The éQuinoxe advisors have separate advisors' meetings before the workshop begins, as well as between the individual sessions with the writers. This means that the processes each writer goes through, ideally, will have continuity and consistency. These advisors' sessions, in which I had the chance to participate when I myself worked as an advisor for éQuinoxe in 2011, are extremely interesting creative exchanges, in which each project and author is dealt with thoroughly by the whole collegium of advisors who will meet with that particular writer.

With *September*, several sessions gave vital, creative contributions to the process and the project. Below, I will touch upon my meetings with director and screenwriter Susanne Schneider (GER, *The Days Comes*, 2009), screenwriter and novelist Gregory Widen (US, *Highlander*, 1986), playwright and screenwriter Martin Sherman (US/GB, *Bent*, 1978), and screenwriter James V. Hart. (US, *Hook*, 1991, *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, 1992).

The first meeting, with Schneider, focused on the emotional content of the project, as echoed in the protagonist's inner conflict and her emotional journey through the story. Although Schneider expressed it with diplomacy, it was clear that the éQuinoxe advisors felt I had let myself off far too easily in this work. My theme, the emotional conflict, and the story's relationships

were all treated too superficially. What followed in our meeting was a tracing of Ebba's emotional journey and an in-depth discussion of the traumas and conflicts related to her father and his role in her childhood.

After my longstanding reluctance toward entering into this emotional heart of the story, the criticism was almost a relief. Deep down, I knew that I had been floating on the surface of my themes, packaging the lack of emotional core in vivid descriptions, clever tributes to the stage director profession, and multiple small, quirky moments. I had, to a large extent, stayed in my comfort zone after all. This was illustrated by the too numerous scenes in the theatre, my presenting Ebba and her father in separate worlds, and my dealing with their relationship in childhood flashbacks as much as in the bothersome present. I was found out at last, possibly partially through the somewhat rough translation, in which the humor and finesse of the theatre scenes were lost. What was left without the seductive charm of those scenes?

During the meeting with Schneider, we worked on giving the conflict of *September* more gravity. Primarily, this work consisted in finding and expressing the wound in Ebba that needed to be healed - in other words, the inner drive that finally propels her into making the choice of helping her father to a dignified death - a decision which will also bring her some form of reward. What emerged during the meeting was the story of a young, female artist carrying a hidden emotional need to accept her father for who he is, an egocentric and narcissistic personality who will not change, and who rarely saw, or sees, beyond his own needs. Can she forgive this man for giving her the childhood he did? Can she re-find his redeeming features and what was once their relation? Does she need to, for her own sake? Ebba, like so many of us, Schneider suggested, had to *take that childhood in her pocket and run as fast as she could - then, go home*. This seemed to be in accordance to my idea of a story context containing ambiguity, in which "no rose is without thorns".

The next meeting, with Gregory Widen, followed up my work with Schneider closely. We first discussed the possible consequences of a narcissistic father for the development of his daughter's personality. What happens when you have a parent who can't be bothered with your needs, and basically see them

as not worth noticing? We agreed that Ebba, as a girl, had a loving mother, who “saved” her emotionally, but also, throughout her childhood, defended her absent, egocentric and frequently aggressive father. A consequence of having lived with a parent with an unpredictable temperament would also be a reason for Ebba’s aversion to conflict and her tactic of accepting affronts from others with a heroic smile. Behind this strategy, I concluded, lay a deep-seated fear that any aggression from her would drive others away - the way she herself withdrew gradually from her shouting father. Also, she struggled with an unstable sense of self-confidence, especially considering her professional success. After this session, I began to focus on Ebba’s vulnerability and also on the redeeming features of Eilif. What was *his* hidden vulnerability? He had, after all, been a playful father with a charming, crazy side (the crazy songs and the dancing and singing naked in the rain, existent in the first draft, constituted some proof). I was awakened to the fact that the dark aspects of Ebba’s childhood also might have carried a gift - the good might have come with the bad.

Thus, after my two first meetings, the emotional cornerstones of my main character and her journey were in place. I had begun to dig deeper into my material, searching for its emotional core - and for a clearer view of the *poetic myth* that ruled it. I had some foundations on which to continue building a framework for the next version.

In my session with Martin Sherman, several new aspects emerged. Sherman, an internationally renowned playwright, has extensive theatre experience. Whereas Widen, a filmmaker, found it strange that anyone would even consider working on stage while their father was dying, Sherman felt that Ebba was committing an absolute cardinal sin against her profession. The sense that there was something vital and necessary for her to gain was paramount for him. What was in it for Ebba? I was on my way toward defining that reward, in terms of her need to believe in herself and her need for reconciliation with her childhood and with her father. Somewhere in that area I saw the origin of her inner wound, but also of her artistic talent and creative temperament. I had already imagined her shouting to the artistic director, when he accuses her father of madness, that “*Without that madness, I probably would have been - a banker!*”

Also on the point of Ebba's final choice, Sherman was the one who first proposed that the tyrannical father must somehow redeem himself to deserve Ebba's potential sacrifice. Why should she perform such an act of love for someone, unless that person was - ultimately - capable of enough insight to perceive his own wrongdoing and make an effort to make up for it? Or, even more important, unless he housed, deep within himself, a core of love and concern for her in return? From that thought came the turning point in which Eilif, sensing that the end is near, relinquishes his daughter's comforting closeness and asks that Ebba return to the theatre instead of staying with him until he passes the threshold. That moment of redemption was the starting point of a new, different and more ambiguous ending.

A new emotional structure and a number of new scenes were by now buzzing in my head. My last session, with seasoned screenwriter James V. Hart, was spent charting the new story-beats and seeing them in relation to each other. Hart has developed a model for this work, which he calls his *Hart Chart*, naming and mapping out what he calls *the heartbeats of the story*. Our dialogue mainly consisted of his asking me challenging key questions about how the story now unfolded and why, making me articulate my new material myself, and testing out the wholeness of the inner fable - or *poetic myth* - was contained in the new version of *September*.

On the last day of the workshop, I presented three of my advisors with an enormous sheet of paper, on which I had drawn a chart of my new, revised story in meticulous detail, as a progression of scenes along a timeline, tracing Ebbas trajectory and its emotional ups and downs. I had removed a large number of scenes in the theatre. Also, I had removed all the flashbacks except the one where father and daughter sing and dance naked in the rain, placed now in the middle of the story, not at the beginning, where it had been before. New material was added only in the first act, establishing Ebba's way to her dream theatre project, and sketching out a clear conflict between Ebba and Eilif in the present. The rest of the story-beats were all there already, and had mainly needed some rearrangement and a deeper emotional journey to carry them. The major turning points of the second two thirds of the story remained the same, but the ending was different, as I now

imagined that Ebba would return to the theatre with her father's blessing, an end note that carried far more ambiguity (see pp.27-28). The advisors' reactions were so enthusiastic, I came away with great creative energy from that session alone. The following day, I returned from the workshop with my roll of paper in my bag, wondering whether the new version of the story would come as naturally as now seemed likely.

Miraculously, it did. I had found my *poetic myth*. In fact, rewriting has never been easier. I was now ready to enter the next phase in my writing process, that of giving my material *a shape*. For the first time in the alternative writing process, I had a clear idea of a structure I wished to follow. Most of the scenes already existed; I had only to write a handful of new ones, as well as make adjustments to the material I had. Much material was cut - I would estimate about 35 pages. The writing itself flowed and the new scenes came easily. Also, I had the experience of the improvisatory, first-draft process under my belt. I knew the emotional content of my screenplay - though it was now more clearly articulated than before. The payoff I now received from the former work process was that I knew my characters utterly. I knew their surroundings. I had invented most of the milestones of the story. Now it was a question of deepening, and of what Aristotle called *the arrangement of the incidents* (Aristotle, c.330 B.C. Ch. VI), what is also known as plot. In a mere four weeks, I wrote the new story, which is the current version of the work-in-progress, *September*.

September is not yet a finished screenplay text, and I am well aware that the work of grasping the material's emotional core will have to continue in the months ahead, after the completion of my Fellowship. However, it is a piece of work I can stand by, and it also contains features I am deeply satisfied with. I feel I know how to deploy a creative practice and process which are tailored to suit my own way of working, and which also produces results.

II.5. The result: *Days of Winter and September*

"Critical reflection on result, self-evaluation in the perspective of the revised project description."

During my three years of artistic research, I have re-appraised and developed my artistic research project significantly. Still, the Project Description of January 2011, as I reread it today, comes very close to serving as a "map" for the road I have now travelled. Two very different screenplays have been written, through different methodologies. Both have been documented as "case studies" of screenwriting processes. The project's identity as a creative exploration of a young genre of fiction-writing stands firm. The articulated research questions of 2010 have been treated in *Sculpting for the Screen*, and certain new ones, listed in this written reflective essay, were tentatively formulated in 2012 for the *September* process.

Imagining for the Screen is an artistic research project but also to an extent a genre-study, exercised through writing two screenplays with different methods and in different contexts, and reflecting upon the processes. That intention has remained firmly at the center of my project, and my conviction is, as I now hand over my final piece of reflection, that it has been fulfilled. And that from it I take a more mature and confident attitude to my professional work and my own ability to use the talents I have as a screenwriter well.

Political issues

One point I have frequently been challenged on, in the fellowship context, is what has been named the possibly "political", as opposed to the "artistic," aspect of my research work. These comments have referred to my extensive treatment of the screenplay field's development processes and structures, where I do not always agree with current practise in my own environment. My response to this is that analysis of current development methods is not, in the screenplay field, a "political issue" that can be separated from the "artistic work" itself. The film field is a collaborative arena and an industry, albeit in Norway a highly subsidized one. The field of screenplay-development - its conventions, methods and tools - is necessarily more often than not an integral part of any screenwriter's artistic process and, as such, can hardly be avoided by practitioners, unless they want to work completely outside of

the realities of the film world. Because of this, the SIWGs and other aspects of the development field clearly merit analysis and discussion in an artistic research project that sets out to explore the screenplay genre and its identity as a type of fiction text, as a context for the production of such texts by an individual screenwriter.

Areas of further development

There are, of course, areas into which I would have liked to delve more deeply:

- First of all, improvising around the *September* text with actors, which I believe to be the next important stage in developing the script (or any script). Reading of Christina Kallas improvisation studio in New York, and her experiments with screen texts and improvising actors, I caught a strong interest in trying her method. However, it was too late at that point to attend a workshop abroad. My own workshop with actors on the *September* project will be held at the end of October/beginning of November, before my final presentation, too late for inclusion in this reflection. Hopefully, it will, however, contribute to a new version of *September*, written outside of the Fellowship context
-
- My study of the poetics of the screenplay has made me see what great advantages to a screenwriter there are to going into this topic in more depth. Specifically, I will go on to look much more closely at the action text, exploring the possibilities and limitations of describing sound, image and atmosphere in words, a theme I find fascinating and of critical importance to all screenwriters.
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- I want to "test" my screenplays on a broader group of readers, *not* professionals in the film field, to discover to what extent an emotional, sensory and intellectual experience can be communicated in a screenplay text. The results of these experiments will, I hope, help me to texture my future screenplays in such a way as to communicate the central feeling optimally.

Insight gained through methodology

At the outset of the *September* process I posed certain questions, mainly about the possible advantages of alternative methods of writing and screenplay development (see p. 37). Based on the *September* experience, I can now, at the end of my research period, give affirmative answers to the questions that concerned my own writing process:

-Yes, I found that the method I chose with *September* helped me access the sources of my imagination more easily.

-Also, I found that avoiding, in the first phase, the usual treatments and outlines of the screenplay process liberated creative energy for the writing, made me more spontaneous and inventive, caused less self-censorship, and also made the writing process more enjoyable.

-I now actually believe that, in certain contexts relating to original work, the "set stage chronology" of synopsis, treatment and outlines in screenwriting development can be counterproductive to the creative imagination.

-In addition, I found my new working method more efficient. After a shorter, and far lonelier, process, I feel the *September* screenplay has become farther advanced, in a shorter time, than my earlier screen works have done. Not listening to the din of multiple voices during the most generative stage was an excellent strategy for me.

In short, I believe the processes I have gone through in writing the two screenplays, and reflecting upon the processes, have made me a better screenwriter with a deeper understanding of my genre. I also hope that by sharing the process and results of my fellowship with the consultants at the Norwegian Film Institute and with a wider public through publishing both the screenplays and my reflections on the process in print, I will be stimulating fellow professionals to review their own field, processes and position.

The screenplays themselves

To me, the act of self-evaluation is by far most challenging when it comes to the screenplays themselves. At this point, soon after finishing recent rewrites, I have yet to gain the perspective of reflective distance. *September* is a work-in-progress and will no doubt be rewritten several times.

Also, my screenplays are texts written to be performed and, as such, have not yet met their intended audience. I have no reactions or feedback from a theatre, concert or exhibition audience to confidently lean on or refer to in my assessment, as my colleagues in other art forms would. My task here, then, is to consider two pieces of artistic work that have been experienced by only a few, select readers from my field. Granted, they have been largely positive, but they remain a rather small reference group.

At the outset of my research, I had an idea that I would, toward the end, expose my screenplays to a group of readers outside the film field. They would then report back to me as to whether they had responded to the material emotionally and intellectually, the way they would to another fiction text. Although I did contact a publishing house to recruit readers, the idea was dropped along the way as time got short and I found myself still working on both screenplays until close to the date of final delivery.

Still, I do believe my two screenplays to be readable. I had this confirmed recently as I have, in the process of recruiting actors for my presentation, received the responses of four fresh readers of the last *September* version. The four are seasoned professional actors, three from the National Theatre, the fourth a freelance actress with 45 years of experience. All four were my first choices for the roles, and all agreed, with enthusiasm, to participate in the project of rehearsed reading in spite of the small remuneration. In the absence of more public feedback, I choose to interpret their reactions as important confirmations of certain qualities inherent in my screenplay.

Still, *Days of Winter* and *September* are visions of other works, namely, the films they begin to create. After my three years of exploring the original screenplay genre, I remain convinced that original screenplays can have integral artistic value and that they do not qualitatively differ from stage

plays in this respect. Nevertheless, if the film created by the screenplay is financed and produced, the work would be transformed into another medium before meeting its final, full audience, just as a stage play would.

It appears impossible to assess by personal judgement alone my two original screenplays. Another dilemma is how to evaluate performative works that have not yet met their audience. How am I to know whether the works are successful, in the sense of communicating what I hoped they would; no less than my personal vision? The art of screenwriting is, undoubtedly, an art of public communication. But the screenwriter's arena of assessment, pre-production, is, indeed, a lonely one.

Responses from the world outside.

How do my original screenplay works compare to screenplay standards, nationally and internationally? At this point, I cannot refer to reviews, prizes, ticket sales or ratings. But when still in a fledgling state, both of my screenplays were selected by gatekeepers and admitted into public funding programs for writers that receives 200 - 220 applications a years and rejects 80 - 85%. Both have been selected to participate in international workshops, and *Days of Winter* won an international contest for a pitching event (*European Pitch Point*, see Senje, 2012). It has, in addition, been optioned, and currently has a producer, Jürgen Seidler and director, Trygve Allister Diesen. In an extremely competitive art form, these facts in themselves signify a certain degree of success, or, at least *acceptance* for the works, and suggest that they are considered by qualified assessors to be of an appropriate professional standard. *September* has not yet been exposed to directors or producers.

With *Days of Winter*, the readers have been far more numerous than with the *September*, largely due to the length of the process. Responses have focused a great deal on the idea itself, commenting that the reverse refugee story concept is original, that the emotionality is strong and moving, and that the story carries a greater meaning beyond its dramatic qualities and has, as its translator, British playwright Julian Garner put it, "something useful to say about the world."

The responses to *September* have been articulated on a more emotional level. A majority of the readers have reported that they were moved by the daughter-father story. Concerning the other story strand, that of Ebba's work in the theatre, the readers divide into two groups: Those who find the process of creating a theatrical performance interesting, and those who do not. Of the now fourteen readers, two fall into the latter group. Both have commented that the scenes that take place in the theatre are largely uninteresting and that they find the play itself, *Peer Gynt*, rather boring. The remaining readers all commented that they found the "inside view" of the institutional theatre world interesting, funny and moving.

Which of the two screenplays come closer to carrying what I have named a *personal voice*? This is a question I may be better able to answer a few months into the future. But my current intuition is that the choice must be *September*.

III. INSIGHTS

"How the project contributes to the professional development in the subject area."

Great scripts do not spring from a vacuum. They come from writers who are willing to explore darkness, rough roads, and confrontations in their journey toward transformation. This is where drama resides (Seger, 2008, p. 177).

In what way can the project *Imagining for the Screen* be said to have contributed to the screenwriting, and thus the film, field? In this third, and final, part of this reflective text, I will attempt to answer that question. With the words of Seger in mind, my number-one ambition would be that my project has contributed to a stronger and more general recognition of the kind of writer she refers to.

At the beginning of this essay, I posed the question: How can an original screenplay be a form of individual expression and an integral work of art with its own value?

The subtext of that question is, of course, the prospect, or hope, that if the screenwriting genre is validated in this way, it would - ideally - lead to changes in the way screenwriters and their collaborators work, think, develop projects, engage in discourse around screenplays, and, last, but not least, perceive themselves. These changes would in turn - again ideally - contribute to screenplays with more original and personal voices and, consequently, more interesting and original films.

My two case studies - or stories of the making of screen stories - represent a type of work that, to my knowledge, has not been done in the field of screenwriting before. Based on this documentation of creative processes that to a large degree parallel those of stage plays or novels, I believe I have made a strong case for the original screenplay's status as a piece of *poiesis* or creative writing on the same level as works in those fiction genres. I do not mean to assert that *all* original screenplays embody such qualities, just as most of us would not claim that *all* novels, plays, paintings or pieces of music ascend to the level of something we would call works of art.

If the present practice-based artistic research project can contribute to the wider recognition of the need for screenwriters with creative courage and a personal voice, I would feel it had fulfilled one of its central goals. And if the readers of this essay, presumably practitioners in my field and other parties interested in fully understanding the art, craft and science of screenwriting, and/or of improving film, have been moved even a few steps closer to a reevaluation of the screenplay genre as a genre and an art form, I believe this project to have contributed significantly to its field.

On a less lofty note, I will venture to say that *Imagining for the Screen* has added insights to my understanding of the screenwriting field in the areas of *method, development processes* and *creative collaboration*. Further, I believe I have contributed, mainly through my observations and foregrounding of the *action text* in my digital essay *Sculpting for the Screen*, to a deeper understanding of the unique textual composition - *the poetics* - of the screenplay. Finally, I have brought forth my own new understanding of the genre expressed through metaphor in what I have called my *sculpting theory of screenwriting*, first in *Sculpting for the Screen* (Senje 2012)

Each of these aspects have been dealt with in some detail in the last third of my Digital Media Essay *Sculpting for the Screen* (Senje 2012). Below, I will supplement the conclusions of that first essay and bring forth some further reflections.

III. 1. Method, development processes and creative collaboration

In writing the screenplay *September*, I worked outside the context of the industry and could design a writing process entirely my own. While realizing that each writer has his or her own work methods, I am also aware that conventions and expectations of the film field tend to determine in some detail how screenwriters work. The chronology of documents I refer to, is reflected in most development contracts in Norway, and also in the standard contracts worked out in agreement between the *Norwegian Writers Guild* and the *Producers' Association*. Through my experiment with an alternative process, I hope to raise consciousness levels on such issues in my field and inspire my colleagues to make more personal choices and experiment on

their own.

In *Sculpting for the Screen*, I presented a case study of a complex development process. I employed the newly introduced concept of the *Screen Idea Work Group*, or *SIWG* (Macdonald, 2011), and concluded that while the genesis of an original screenplay parallels that of other fiction texts in most areas, one aspect in which it differs is the existence of an elaborate and structured development field. Because of the various established development agencies, the phenomenon of SIWGs, and the call for multiple script versions and changes they frequently elicit, the development processes themselves have been used as an argument against the screenplay as an independent creative work (see Kohn, Maras, 2009, Macdonald, 2011, Sternberg, 1999).

I have dealt with the anatomy and effect of the SIWG in some depth in my digital media essay. To broaden my argument, I wish to add that, as a writer practised in several genres, I know from personal experience that the screenplay is not unique in its subjection to consultants, rewrites and continuous textual change. Such procedures in fact also exist in other fields of creative text production, such as journalism, stage play work¹⁰ and publishing houses, though perhaps in a manner less organized and less pluralistic.

Where novels and other prose fiction are concerned, the role of editors is - in my own experience¹¹ - quite similar to that of script consultants. They read, discuss, give feedback on the text, and may well propose changes in both content and form. External consultants and experts are often used on specific issues, and copy editors (in Norwegian word *språkvaskere*, meaning text launderers) hired by publishing houses go through every manuscript in detail before publication. In his recent book on the screenplay, Steven Price gives several examples of collaborative text development in the literary world - and argues that such processes are far more common in the production of prose fiction than is generally thought. Price also mentions the significant,

¹⁰ Illustrated by the establishment, in 2010, of *Dramatikkens Hus* in Oslo, a center of development for new stage texts.

¹¹ Published at Gyldendal Norsk Forlag; *De unge hos Ibsen*, 2006 and *Camilla, Stemmen fra de Stummes Leir*, 2009, both part fiction, part non-fiction.

“informal” consultancy that occurs between writers of all genres and their friends, families and colleagues. (Price, 2011, pp. 6-12). However, there is no ambiguity about the attribution of the creativity and style (form and content) solely to the author, that is, the writer, or novelist.

To contribute to the discourse around script development has been an important secondary aspect of my research. Recently, writers have begun to question and comment on the functions and competence of SIWGs. Ståle Stein Berg describes how the original idea for a television drama was fundamentally distorted by the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation’s SIWG, whose members insisted on conventional dramaturgies that were on a collision course with the very screen idea as originally presented (Berg, 2010, p.15). In his essay *The dangerous dramaturg*, dramatist Arne Berggren comments on the ambiguous and powerful role of the scriptconsultant or dramaturg :

The most dangerous dramaturg you can encounter is the one who torments you for months at the synopsis stage. Through a quasi-structural process, you are forced to give an answer to all that the actual writing itself is supposed to bring forth. (Berggren, 2011).

Ian McDonald, in the essay in which he coined the term *Screen Idea Work Group*, writes:

The way the SIWG works requires an individual to submit their contributions to a process of review an decisionmaking in an arena fraught with social complexities, industrial and cultural conventions and individual habitus masquerading as «sound artistic judgement». This makes a screenwriter immediately vulnerable [...] their status as the originator of the screen idea is initially high until others have become familiar with it and begin contributing, but then the writer is in practice no different from any other contributor (Macdonald, 2010, p.55).

This can make the outcome of the collaborative process very different from that of the development of a novel, where the novelist always retains creative control and owns the copyright. In my research, I have identified the following paradox, in the case of the screenplay:

In a costly, competitive and high-tech art form – or creative industry – into which large sums of taxpayer’s money are invested and the emphasis on pre-

production planning, control and predictability is great - we have a field of elaborate and organized, but frequently informal and unstructured, development contexts that, even when at their most creative and dynamic, may threaten to seriously compromise projects.

Since a screenplay text may be subjected to a multiplicity of voices and a lengthier development period than most other fiction genres, often spanning several years, chances of encountering pitfalls and endangering the integrity of the original work must by definition be considerably greater than in other genres of fiction writing, especially literary ones. However, the existence, in and of itself, of such processes and a complex development field, do not negate the screenplay text's potential as a work of individual expression nor as an integral work of art. Rather, it places higher demands on the screenwriter and the strength of the original screen idea.

In the area of the development field also, I hope to have contributed to a higher awareness of the processes and problems involved.

Creative collaboration

In my digital essay I also touch briefly upon the most central, creative collaborative relation in the film field, that between the director and the writer. I describe my own working relationship with Trygve Allister Diesen, a collaboration which I sense is based upon what Ståle Stein Berg calls *the same world view, the same "world feeling"* (Berg, 2011 p. 4). On the other hand, if the relation between director and writer is not balanced and satisfactory on both sides, it can embody what Steven Maras has called the separation of conception and execution (Maras, 2009, p.32), which may result in a film not exploiting its full potential. In my DME, I also mention recent investigations into the process of collaboration between writers and directors, such as that of screenwriter, dramaturg and PhD researcher Rikka Pelo from the Finnish Film School, who describes the creative relation between Tarkovskij and Tonino Guerra (Pelo, 2010). In Denmark, Dr. Eva Novrup Redvall has also done extensive and interesting research on the collaboration between directors and writers (Redvall, 2010). My research work reinforces the already strong case for the importance of nurturing and

developing that central, creative partnership, one which I have spent much energy debating and foregrounding in various arenas (see e.g. Senje, 2010).

In recent years, European film schools, including the Norwegian Film School, have focused on the so-called *Triangle Model* of collaboration (Wadman, 2005), integrating the writing, directing and producing functions from early on in the conceptual stage. The *Triangle* appears, in an ideal situation, to be a method that would fuse the three functions and thus beat the separation between conception and execution that I discuss in my DME, and which has often proved the unravelling of a film project. Wadman, dean of the Norwegian Film School from 1997-2008, has described the *Triangle Model* of creative collaboration in pre-production as follows:

The triangle method is intended to put a greater attention to this very vital part of the production process. It is also a very important issue in stressing the cooperative creative process that any film or TV production is by definition (Wadman, p.3).

A significant difference between a Triangle and a SIWG is that in the former, the participants are by definition the persons responsible for the final product, whereas in the SIWG, as defined by Ian Macdonald, it is not unusual to include members who have no particular creative responsibility in the end (Macdonald, 2010). However, the pluralistic SIWG is, no doubt, here to stay, and consequently, writers need to develop specific skills in order to prepare themselves for navigation through its complex landscape. Through my case study and analysis of SIWGs, I offer certain survival techniques to my fellow screenwriters. Also, I hope my example will have inspired in some the courage to choose their own writing methods, as well as take pride in their status as practitioners of a unique and complex genre of fiction text.

An important prerequisite for desirable change in the development field is, to my mind, the acknowledgement of the central premise that an original screenplay indeed can be a work of individual expression in a genre of imaginative writing with its own artistic merit.

III. 3. On the poetics of the screenplay

The way a screenplay is composed, apart from its structure, has rarely been discussed in literature on the genre. I will not repeat my analysis here, but for me, this work constitutes a relevant and practical contribution to my field. Volumes have been written on screenplay structure (Syd Field 1979, 1984, Linda Seger, 1987, 1990, Robert McKee, 1997), and a few works concentrate on character (Seeger, 1990, Horton, 1994). The most thoroughly ignored elements of the screenplay are, as Brenes and Kallas both point out (see pp.22-27 above), without question, the *poetic idea* itself and, as I expound on in my DME, the complex text type I have named *the action text*. The term *action text* covers, in the screenplay, Aristotle's *lexis* (the language by means of which the elements of the drama are communicated), *opsis* (visual elements) and *melopea* (rhythm). My own foregrounding of this text type through my practice-based research has, for me, produced some of the most enlightening and useful part of my findings. I deal with the action text at some length in *Sculpting for the Screen*, citing Claudia Sternberg's analysis as a major source of inspiration (Sternberg, 1999, pp.108-220) and illustrating the usability of action text in film production through an example from the film *The Greatest Thing* (2001).

While some still question the presence and volume of action and descriptive text in screenplays, I see this text type as an inherent part of the genre's elements of *poiesis* – or *diktning*. To illustrate my point I have included, below, a small excerpt of the action text of an Ingmar Bergman classic, *The Seventh Seal* (1958), which I believe speaks for itself.

"The KNIGHT has risen and waded into the shallow water, where he rinses his sunburned face and blistered lips. JONS rolls over to face the forest and the darkness. He moans in his sleep and vigorously scratches the stubbled hair on his head. A scar stretches diagonally across his scalp, as white as lightning against the grime.

The KNIGHT returns to the beach and falls on his knees. With his eyes closed and brow furrowed, he says his morning prayers. His hands are clenched together and his lips form the words silently. His face is sad and bitter. He opens his eyes and stares directly into the morning sun which wallows up from the misty sea like some bloated, dying fish. The sky is gray and immobile, a dome of lead. A cloud hangs mute and dark over the western horizon. High up, barely visible, a seagull floats on motionless wings. Its cry is weird and restless. The KNIGHT'S large gray horse lifts its head and whinnies. Antonius Block turns around." (Bergman, 1958)

IV. 4. A piece of clay

In *Sculpting for the Screen*, I formulated what I have coined my “*clay theory of screenwriting*.” I quote it here, as the final note of my essay:

One might say that the original screen idea needs to be like a piece of clay, resilient and solid at the same time, so that it can retain its core; that is, not change its weight and volume, only its shape, through the development process. The shape must indeed be malleable until the moment it reaches the set, the editing room and the screen. Every draft of the screenplay is then a moment in the shaping of a sculpture.

The constant weight and volume of the clay may be defined as the element of original poiesis. The stronger and more clearly defined the element of original poiesis is, the greater are the chances of the screen idea to survive the multiple shapings and reshapings of the screen idea work group context with its integrity intact.

The metaphor of the clay expresses the conclusion I have come to based on exploring and testing my premise, namely, that the original screenplay can be a means of individual expression and a unique work of integral, artistic value.

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