Ted Nannicelli

The Ontology and Literary Status of the Screenplay: The Case of »Scriptfic«
(Abstract)

Are screenplays – or at least some screenplays – works of literature? Until relatively recently, very few theorists had addressed this question. Thanks to recent work by scholars such as Ian W. Macdonald, Steven Maras, and Steven Price, theorizing the nature of the screenplay is back on the agenda after years of neglect (albeit with a few important exceptions) by film studies and literary studies (Macdonald 2004; Maras 2009; Price 2010). What has emerged from this work, however, is a general acceptance that the screenplay is ontologically peculiar and, as a result, a divergence of opinion about whether or not it is the kind of thing that can be literature.

Specifically, recent discussion about the nature of the screenplay has tended to emphasize its putative lack of ontological autonomy from the film, its supposed inherent incompleteness, or both (Carroll 2008, 68–69; Maras 2009, 48; Price 2010, 38–42). Moreover, these sorts of claims about the screenplay's ontology – its essential nature – are often hitched to broader arguments. According to one such argument, a screenplay's supposed ontological tie to the production of a film is said to vitiate the possibility of it being a work of literature in its own right (Carroll 2008, 68–69; Maras 2009, 48). According to another, the screenplay's tenuous literary status is putatively explained by the idea that it is perpetually unfinished, akin to a Barthesian »writerly text« (Price 2010, 41).

Contemporary theorists interested in the screenplay as a potential literary form thus face three interrelated questions – one about the screenplay's ontology, one about its literary status, and one about the methodology of theorizing the screenplay (both with specific regard to ontology and literary status, but also more broadly): (1) Are we to proceed in our theorizing under the assumption that the screenplay is, as the current theoretical trend suggests, ontologically mysterious – something that essentially lacks autonomy from the film (despite appearing to be textually instantiated) or is essentially incomplete? (2) Are we to proceed in our theorizing under the assumption that the screenplay's literary status is somehow problematized by its ontological nature – by the kind of thing it is essentially? (3) Is our theorizing about the screenplay – specifically in terms of (1) and (2) but also more broadly – to be constrained by our actual creative and appreciative practices? Most proponents of the recent theoretical trend I describe would, I think, answer »Yes« to all three questions. However, I want to argue that answering »Yes« to (3) obligates us to answer »No« to (1) and (2).

This essay examines a kind of fan-fiction work – »scriptfic« – as a case study for analysing and evaluating current theories of the screenplay. In the first part of the essay, I briefly describe the practice of writing »scriptfic« and the sorts of screenplays produced by that practice. In the second part of the essay, I argue that a particular sort of »scriptfic«, the virtual series screenplay, not only shows that extant accounts of the screenplay as essentially linked to a screen work or as essentially unfinished fail, but furthermore that our theorizing must be constrained by our actual creative and appreciative practices.

»Scriptfics« may take the form of feature length screenplays, one-off teleplays, or an entire »series« constituted by teleplays. The latter, which are known as »virtual series«, will be my focus here for challenging some of the prevailing ideas about the nature of the screenplay and its literary status. Roughly, a virtual series is a web-based, fan-authored television series that »airs« in the form of uploaded texts that usually either present an entirely original narrative (original virtual series), continue the storyline of an actual television series that has ended (virtual continuations), or use certain elements of an actual series as jumping-off points to tell an original story (virtual spin-offs).

My central argument is that if the goal of theorizing the screenplay is to actually explain the evidence supplied by our practices, then theories that involve ontological claims about the screenplay's putative lack of ontological autonomy from the film and/or inherent incompleteness must be abandoned. I shall argue that virtual series traffic in screenplays that are ontologically autonomous works that have been finished by their authors in just the ways these theories claim they are not. If this is right, it follows that such accounts of the screenplay's ontology *do not* in fact offer reasons or explanations for denying that screenplays can be literature. This is because ontological claims are claims about the *essential* features of a given kind – that is, the features that the kind has *of necessity*.

Virtual series screenplays offer strong evidence, I submit, that practitioners determine the boundaries of our screenplay concept, that our screenplay concept has changed over time, that we are now in an historical moment when some screenplays are complete, autonomous works, and that we are also now in an historical moment when some people write screenplays with the intention of creating literature while certain communities of readers appreciate them as such.

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