Telling Our Stories: Screenwriters and the Production of Screen-Based Culture in English-Speaking Canada

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ABSTRACT Screenwriters are a vital part of the production of cultural products in the Canadian screen industry, but little has been written about how they perceive the environment in which they practice their craft. Situating our methodology within the general production culture framework, particularly in regards to industrial reflexivity, we present an analysis of 50 in-depth interviews with English-language Canadian screenwriters. As our subjects reflect on their experiences, a portrait emerges of the factors affecting the screenwriter’s role in the production of screen culture in English-speaking Canada. Their stories reveal a complex plot: one in which screenwriters, much like the characters they create, maneuver through a landscape with its own boundaries, pitfalls, rewards, and consequences in their quest to attract elusive homegrown audiences.

KEYWORDS Production studies; Broadcasting; Screenwriting; Media/mass media; Media policy

RÉSUMÉ Les scénaristes jouent un rôle vital dans la création de produits culturels pour l’industrie de l’écran canadienne, mais on a peu écrit sur comment ils perçoivent le milieu dans lequel ils pratiquent leur métier. En situant notre méthodologie dans le cadre général de la culture de production, particulièrement en ce qui a trait à la réflexivité industrielle, nous présentons l’analyse de cinquante entretiens en profondeur avec des scénaristes anglo-canadiens. À mesure que ceux-ci racontent leurs expériences, un portrait se dessine des facteurs influant sur le rôle du scénariste dans la production d’une culture de l’écran au Canada anglophone. Leurs histoires révèlent une trame complexe, où les scénaristes, à la manière des personnages qu’ils inventent, traversent un environnement avec ses propres frontières, obstacles, récompenses et conséquences, à la quête d’un public d’ici-même qui s’avère passablement éluïs.

MOTS CLÉS Études de la production; Radiodiffusion; Scénarisation; Médias de masse; Politique médiatique

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If all a Canadian audience sees is American drama, we might as well really be Americans. Unless you want a country with children growing up thinking of themselves as American in which case, why even have a country?

(Pamela Brand, National Executive Director, Director’s Guild of Canada, as quoted in McKeown, 2003)

I would take the American “crud” over the crud you guys in the Canadian TV industry keep making. I’ll toss you a helpful hint of advice, try making things most Canadians actually want to watch. Not stuff you’d like to force them to watch. We are the customers remember, we’re supposed to have a choice not have garbage we don’t want rammed down our throat.

(Posting by Mr Ottawa from Canada, Robertson, 2009)

Introduction

For many decades, Canadian content (CanCon) policies have supported domestic production in print, musical, theatrical, and screen industries (Babe, 1979; Collins, 1990; Edwardson, 2008; Grant & Wood, 2004; Raboy, 1990). These policies—their rationale, mission, and execution—have regularly been discussed and debated in specialized policy circles and in the affected creative and industrial communities, but with little spillover into the general public. The exception is television. A multitude of vociferous postings on online news sites in response to recent stories about the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) and Canadian television programming provides a strong indication that many ordinary Canadians are not fond of scripted Canadian content on television, nor of the regulatory regime that supports it.

Canadian scripted programming attracts a low and declining share of the domestic television audience. When English-speaking Canadian audiences watch drama or comedy on television, about 80 percent of the time they are watching imported fare (CRTC, 2013). The top ten television series in English-speaking Canada in recent years, in terms of audience share, were American (CMPA, 2013), and the domestic market share of Canadian English-language feature films has never been more than a few percent (CMPA, 2013). The low level of demand among English-speaking Canadian audiences for domestic scripted content is not matched by their taste for Canadian content in news and sports, which exceeds 70 percent of viewing hours among Anglophone audiences (CMPA, 2013).

Public subsidy in the form of federal and provincial tax credits remains the largest source of support for Canadian television and film production (CMPA, 2013). In 2012, nearly $3 billion was spent to create Canadian screen content (CMPA, 2013); of this, nearly half was devoted to fiction in the form of 663 television episodes, 47 miniseries, and 87 feature films (CMPA, 2013). The total amount spent to create scripted English-language television entertainment (e.g., CRTC’s program category 7: drama and comedy) was about $345 million (CMPA, 2013), and another $381 million was devoted to
feature films, nearly all of which received public support in the form of grants and tax incentives (CMPA, 2013).

Public subsidy of screen storytelling is intended to ensure that Canadian stories are told to Canadian audiences on Canadian screens (Canadian Heritage Standing Committee, 2003; Collins, 1990; Gasher, 2002; Le Goff, Brunet, Davis, Giroux, & Sauveageau, 2011). Scripted drama and comedy, the most expensive and subsidized forms of screen content to produce (DGC, 2013), are at the heart of the cultural nationalist rationale for promoting domestic screen storytelling as the kind of cultural product most likely to nourish national myths and national identity (Collins, 1990). And yet, these products attract the smallest share of domestic audiences.

Why is it that English-language Canadian screen stories do not appeal to Canadian audiences? This question has inspired a large literature that attributes the marginalization of English-Canadian screen storytelling to the small size of the domestic market, cultural imperialism, or inferior storytelling capabilities (for reviews see Gasher, 1992; Globerman, 2014; Grant & Wood, 2004). It has been suggested that Canadian screen fare that is popular among audiences is either more authentic, more complex, riskier, or less formulaic than mainstream American screen products (Beaty & Sullivan, 2006; Byers, 2005, 2008), demanding more of audiences and asking them to work harder to derive meaning from their storylines (Miller, 1993), or (on the other hand) downplays elements of “Canadianness” that might make the production seem stereotypically earnest, educational, or boring (Kaye & Davis, 2011). Canadian scripted screen stories often need to efface nationally specific elements if they aspire to circulate in the American market (Davis & Nadler, 2010). These elements, however, may also be an asset contributing to a heightened sense of authenticity that can be appreciated both domestically and internationally (Levine, 2009; Lowry, 2008; Tate & Allen, 2003).

In English-speaking Canada, the challenge of winning domestic audiences shapes the professional culture of screen storytellers. In this article we investigate the ways Canadian screenwriters themselves describe the uphill battle of winning Anglophone screen audiences. We situate our work within the general “production culture” framework (Caldwell, 2008; Mayer, 2011; Mayer, Banks, & Caldwell, 2009), especially in our attention to “industrial reflexivity”—the ways in which culture producers reflect on and explain their choices, their practices, their products, and their cultural impacts. Screenwriters can be quite articulate about themselves, concurring with accounts in the scholarly literature that this occupation is both competitive and risky, with considerable rewards for the most successful writers and considerable economic and psychological tribulations for others (Conor, 2014; Davis, Shtern, Coutanche, & Godo, 2014; Kaye & Davis, 2011). Below, we present a portrait of the unique factors affecting the screenwriter’s role in the production of screen culture in English-speaking Canada, as screenwriters reflect on the complex occupational conditions, risks, and tradeoffs they face as they attempt to tell stories for homegrown audiences.

**Screenwriters as producers of culture**

A recent report describes the major contours of the screenwriting occupation in Canada (Coutanche & Davis, 2013). Most English-Canadian screenwriters mainly write for tele-
vision, although the majority also writes film screenplays. Most have more than ten years of experience as writers, and more than half earn less than $40,000 annually from screenwriting. Nearly three-quarters were born in Canada; of the immigrants, most come from English-speaking countries. Writers are highly educated: around 80 percent have a postsecondary degree. Around half of Canadian English-speaking screenwriters reside in the Toronto region, and around 10 percent in the Los Angeles area. About two-thirds of screenwriters are male, and about three-quarters of writers are in their thirties, forties, or fifties. About 4 percent of screenwriters are visible minorities.

The research literature on screenwriting treats factors influencing the screenwriter’s role in cultural production in terms of screenwriting’s generic, institutional, and idiosyncratic characteristics. Screenwriting’s generic characteristics are ones shared by other creative occupations—for example, flexibility, precarity, and self-performance. Its institutional characteristics derive from the particular role that screenwriting plays as a provider of a key creative input in the screen industry’s value chain (Conor, 2014). These generic and institutional characteristics do not vary extensively from country to country. It is when we explore screenwriting’s idiosyncratic characteristics, often referring to the local conditions of production, that a clearer picture emerges of the factors affecting the screenwriter’s role in the production of screen culture in English-speaking Canada (Davis et al., 2014; Kaye & Davis, 2011). English-speaking Canadian screenwriters’ comments on their occupational environment exhibit a high degree of reflexivity in describing the conditions of screen production in Canada, the ways these conditions affect the screen storytelling process, the outcomes on screens, and the reasons for the generally low traction of Canadian English-language scripted screen stories among national audiences. When prompted to reflect on their personal professional histories, screenwriters evoke or emulate certain shared ideals, including the image of the screenwriter as marginalized, egotistical, and invisible (Conor, 2014). These shared devices foster knowability, understanding, and a sense of common tongue and accepted and expected standards (both good and bad) among screenwriters and their collaborators (Conor, 2014). While analysis of screenwriters’ recounted professional histories reveals continuities across both time and space (Conor, 2014), it also—because screenwriting is influenced by local conditions—reflects domestic issues and evokes nation-specific concerns, constructs, and considerations.

Our analysis builds on the prevailing, largely qualitative, approaches to research on the “culture of production” by using an analytical technique to aggregate qualitative observations. Our method is as follows. We interviewed about 50 Canadian English-language screenwriters between 2008 and 2013, asking them about their work, careers and professional histories, views about the screen industry in Canada, and factors affecting the success of domestic screen products. These writers were recruited using purposive snowball sampling, with attention paid to maximizing the diversity of respondents in terms of stage of career, gender, ethnicity, age, and region (Greater Toronto Area, elsewhere in Canada, or California). Two of us coded the interview write-ups on the basis of apparent themes, using a specialized software tool for qualitative analysis: QDA Miner. Our coding scheme was deliberately open-ended. We shared the-
matic categories as we created them and we conducted two coding passes to ensure relative consistency. Altogether we created about two dozen thematic categories. We then used QDA Miner’s clustering function to sort the themes into six groups, on the basis of co-occurrences of themes. Figure 1 presents the results, displaying groups of themes in two-dimensional space in relative relationship with each other. The six groups of themes represent the main factors that our respondents believe affect screen storytelling in English-speaking Canada: the career aspirations of screenwriters, mentorships and mentoring, the television-centrism of Canadian screen storytelling, regionalism and Toronto-centrism, the policy and economic landscape of screen production in Canada, and talent and diversity issues in screen storytelling. We discuss these six factors below.

Figure 1: Thematic clusters of factors affecting screen storytelling in English speaking Canada, according to interviewed screenwriters

The sociological research on creative labour is stronger on factors affecting employment and psychological gratification than on the implications of gender, ethnicity, age, and other diversity attributes in the lived experiences, occupational trajectories, and cultural production of creative workers (but see Hesmondhalgh & Saha, 2013). Yet abundant evidence from Canada, the United States, and Europe points to the continued marginalization of women, individuals with disabilities, and visible minorities in the audiovisual sector (CMG, 2013; Creative Skillset, 2012; Davis et al., 2014; Hill & Capriotti, 2009; Murray, 2002; Smith, Choueiti, & Gall, 2011; WIV, 2013a; WIV, 2013b), especially in top creative and decision-making roles (WIFT, 2012). Because our interviews provided strong evidence that identity factors are centrally important in the experiences of screenwriters, we have not “written them out” of our story. Canadian
screenwriters view the six occupation-shaping factors mentioned above very differently according to their age, gender, and ethnicity. Consequently, we emphasize that these factors are experienced differently according to the screenwriters’ sociological characteristics. Screenwriters do not all start on equal footing, and they encounter dissimilar structures of opportunity throughout their careers. To avoid effacement of these varied perspectives, we are careful to include insights about how screenwriters view ascriptive identity, and its effects on writers’ career opportunities.

Career aspirations of screenwriters
Two preoccupations dominate the career aspirations of Canadian screenwriters: finding work and having creative control over the stories they tell. Screen production is a project-based industry, and screenwriters (like other creative workers) are employed on a “life-of-project” basis (Bielby & Bielby, 1999). Intense competition for work is pervasive—thousands of screenplays are offered annually to industrial gatekeepers, but only a tiny percentage of scripts reach production. While some screenwriters do very well, most screenwriters do not earn a living from their writing, and many must generate income from multiple sources (WGA, 2009). The contraction of the California-based feature film industry, the turn to remakes and sequels, the rise of reality programming, and the struggle over residuals have led to a deterioration of screenwriters’ economic prospects in recent years (Leary, 2012). In Canada, an additional factor was the 1999 CRTC decision to relax the requirement for broadcasters to fund domestic drama. Since then, the CRTC has ushered in a new “programs of national interest” category that funnels a certain portion of broadcaster spending toward the production of dramatic content (among other things) (CRTC decision 2010-167), but its 2010 decision to institute group-based licensing has reportedly led to fewer original programming commissions, again decreasing opportunities for writers (Vlessing, 2013b).

Unsurprisingly, then, the most significant short-term goal as expressed by Canadian screenwriters of all ages and career levels is to simply stay employed. “Finding work,” “getting the gig,” getting “projects into production,” and making “a living” dominated their short-term goals. One writer summed up the intense competition for jobs:

It is a challenge to find work on exciting projects every year ... remaining gainfully employed! There are almost 2,000 Writers Guild of Canada (WGC) members and only a handful of [television] series hiring each year. Amid pressures of finding work, most of the writers we interviewed believe that telling stories that are personally significant will engage audiences. A young male writer on the verge of establishing his career wants to make the audience “feel” and “relate” by telling stories that express his personal experiences. But some screenwriters encounter tradeoffs between telling stories that speak to their own experience and reaching mainstream Canadian audiences. A visible minority male screenwriter said that when he develops a story, he keeps the “mainstream” audience in mind. He realizes that if he wants to “specifically ... make programming that only speaks to [an audience of his ethnicity]” he will “be very limited because we [people of his ethnicity] make up a very small percentage of the Canadian population.” To reach larger audiences he sug-
gests “focusing on something that you are passionate about, that has value to mainstream audiences” and insists that then, the “chances of a broadcaster commissioning it are high because they want to reach that audience.”

Screenwriters said once they are employed (i.e., once a project is “green lit” for production), having creative control in storytelling is a very important aspect of their career aspirations. But social factors can affect both career opportunities and the degree of storytelling integrity in the collective production environment of episodic television. A female writer told us that as a young television writer, “even if you have a great idea, sometimes your voice is overlooked”—even among writers. She sometimes feels intimidated in the writers’ room (on a television series), and has “trouble being at the bottom of the barrel.” Sometimes she second-guesses herself and reveals that she is often quiet and tries to “figure out what everybody wants.” She looks forward to when she can be the “boss” and although she acknowledges that not even showrunners have “the last say,” she believes being a showrunner will give her more control over determining how a story is told.

A racialized minority female writer expressed very personal reasons for wanting greater control over the kinds of stories she tells. She is interested in telling stories that have resonance with ethnic minorities and women. She says that growing up, she never “saw herself” reflected on or behind the screen, and so she makes it her goal to promote greater diversity within the industry. Her experiences corroborate the many studies that reveal the frequently shallow, unsubstantial, or “rootless” portrayal of visible minorities on Canadian television (Fleras, 2011; Murray, 2002; Solutions Research Group, 2003). She said that despite the fact that she is a third-generation Canadian, she grew up in a community where “women are less than” men. She tells us that it is her mission to give voice to such women by “telling their stories,” and she believes that she can accomplish this goal by becoming a showrunner, a position she thinks would give her more creative control.

The goal of Canadian screenwriters—irrespective of their career level or background—is to tell stories that resonate with audiences. However, they face shrinking opportunities and increased pressure to attract large homegrown audiences with fewer and fewer products. Furthermore, the screenwriter’s social identity, and the ways the writer responds to it, affects the kinds of stories they tell. These obstacles prove daunting for many screenwriters, and the assistance of an experienced guide is needed.

**Mentorships and mentoring**

Mentoring plays an important role in helping screenwriters establish their careers (Davis et al., 2014). It involves formal apprenticeship situations as well as informal relationships that provide advice, information, and networking opportunities to facilitate writers “getting in” the industry and “getting on” in their careers. Screenwriters value being mentored in the early stages of their careers, and a large percentage of those with established careers have served as mentors to emerging screenwriters (Coutanche & Davis, 2013). The writers we interviewed, regardless of their ascriptive characteristics and career stage, almost unanimously acknowledged the importance of mentoring, although some writers disagreed over its effectiveness in practice.
A fifty-year-old minority female writer attributes much of her initial success in screenwriting to her mentor, someone who trusted and encouraged her. Her mentor allowed her to produce content that challenged social and cultural norms and helped her find and establish her voice. As a minority screenwriter, she told us that it is important to have “someone to champion you from outside the [minority] community as people in the industry from the community are just hanging on.” Because of the importance of mentoring in her career, she now mentors other emerging minority screenwriters.

A young female writer in the early stages of her career also believes that having a mentor is important, especially as a woman. She was initially hired onto her first screenwriting job as script coordinator, a position requiring no writing. It was her female boss who encouraged her to write for the show. “Having that female mentor is really important,” she said.

A male writer told us that networking and mentoring are crucial, and that some of his biggest projects happened as a result of someone passing on his name to someone else. Despite the fact that he is well established in his career, he values mentoring as a way to seek out “people who he can work with.”

An older writer with many credits said he has been mentoring young screenwriters for many years, and he himself was mentored by a “major influence” in his early days. He takes on at least three “mentees” a year because, as he told us, “I made a deal with God.” Successful with his very first script, this writer promised to give back. “I felt very blessed,” he told us. “Mentoring changed my approach to my work.” He expressed his desire to broaden his approach to mentoring by bringing “on board” writers who have not had the opportunity to be heard.

Not all screenwriters have such a positive view of the mentoring process. One young non-white writer who is just beginning his career expressed frustration at not being able to make connections due to his ethnicity: “There is a definite bias against visible minorities being considered for creative positions, and because of few positions and intense competition, people with connections to established networks are successful.”

A female writer in her thirties said that mentoring in Canada is underdeveloped simply because of the lack of opportunity. “As a whole, the industry would be more effective at apprenticing new talent if there were more shows to work on.”

A male in his forties agreed about the limited mentorship opportunities available in the Canadian industry, noting that for the most part:

The industry doesn’t really mentor. It puts in place a story editor in television or a director in film to help guide the writer. But it is not a mentor relationship; rather it is a business relationship.

While individual screenwriters have varying experiences with mentorship, it is widely practiced and highly valued in the Canadian screen industry (Coutanche & Davis, 2013). Mentoring can provide emerging screenwriters with advice, training, and confidence and connects both mentor and mentee to potential future collaborators. The experience of a mentor is particularly valuable in navigating the idiosyncratic environment of the Canadian screen industry—a landscape defined by TV-centrism, regionalism, and the domestic policy and environment.
TV-centrism of English-Canadian screenwriting

English-Canadian screenwriters are keenly aware that television is the economic centre of gravity of the Canadian screen industry, providing more economic opportunity and greater likelihood of attracting audiences than film. One writer said that in English Canada TV is “your best bet”; it means “a regular paycheque.” As a female screenwriter in her fifties told us: “the [television] audience is larger and [more] people get to see your work.” She believes that Canada’s economic environment is not favourable to film production, a sentiment shared by many of the screenwriters with whom we spoke. Another writer said that film in Canada is a “cottage industry” and not really worth pursuing. As one male screenwriter in his seventies put it: “Being a [feature film] screenplay writer in Canada is like looking for love in all the wrong places.” A male writer in his late thirties commented that even Canada’s most successful feature film writers work in television between projects to sustain themselves. “It takes five to twenty years to get a film made” in Canada, he said. There is “no support” for features in Canada; “there’s no market for it.” One male writer in his fifties said that while he eventually would like to write a feature film, he is currently in demand in television and the drawbacks of shifting to feature film in the Canadian landscape outweigh the benefits—especially given his general belief that film is a director’s medium: “directors take all the credit.”

Television is seen to have certain advantages in addition to economic opportunity and audience reach. A female writer in her twenties stated that she is focused on television right now, because it is experiencing a worldwide renaissance due to new opportunities presented by “over-the-top” media platforms such as Netflix. She also thinks that Canadian television in general “is getting better and better” at attracting audiences because “we have more experience now” after several decades of developmental experience. She cites *Flashpoint* as an example of a program that demonstrates that “Canadian TV can be good.”

Ninety percent of screenwriters in English-speaking Canada write for television (Coutanche & Davis, 2013) and yet, in spite of their appreciation for television’s economic benefits, audience reach, and greater openness to writers than film, six out of ten also write screenplays for feature films (Coutanche & Davis, 2013), most of which evidently are not produced—in Canada, at least. The diminishing audience potential for Canadian feature films has mightily constrained Canadian screenwriters, leading almost invariably to the television production arena. This presents unique challenges for writers looking to tell alternative stories. Many of the minority screenwriters we interviewed pointed out that the lack of vitality of the English-Canadian film sector significantly diminishes the chances for alternative stories to find a place in mainstream venues, limiting the types of stories they are able to tell, and shaping an opportunity structure that is unfriendly to new talent, as we discuss in a later section.

Regionalism and Toronto-centrism

Just as having to write mostly for television to stay employed has strong effects on the career trajectories and occupational experiences of English-speaking Canadian screenwriters, so, too, does the geographic division of labour. Many regional production incentives are offered to support screen production activities outside the larger urban centres of Toronto, Vancouver, and Montreal, with the goal of better reflecting
Canadian culture on our screens. Many screenwriters with whom we spoke viewed these incentives as either supporting their desire to reach audiences or as obstacles in their way. Others had not given the incentives much thought, most often due to not having been in contact with them yet as a consequence of being in the early stages of their careers, or due to working outside of the system.

One senior writer argued that screen production is an “extraordinarily complex activity, requiring a huge range of specialists not available everywhere so it would make more sense not to … [provide regional incentives].” He added that regional incentives scatter talent rather than concentrate it. A racialized female writer in her fifties has also given careful thought to regional incentives. While many screenwriters expressed their disapproval of policies aimed at supporting screen production in provinces other than Ontario, this screenwriter believes these policies play an important role in preserving the diversity of Canadian voices. She insisted that these policies prevent homogenization and allow for the expression of perspectives from outside the Greater Toronto Area (GTA).

A male writer in his thirties agrees with tax breaks for productions in different regions, but thinks that expecting most of the crew and cast come from that region is “a bit onerous and pre-supposes that Canada should have several Hollywoods. The U.S. only has one and it works pretty well for them.” He did note that “there is talent across Canada. To give 99 percent of the funding to Toronto producers is to force regional producers to either quit or move, which would further lose regional expression and representation on TV and so in our culture.”

Having less experience, young writers are not so sensitive to the regional politics of the Canadian screen industry. Similar to the other young writers with whom we spoke, a female writer in her twenties told us that she has not thought about the regional aspect of Canadian screen industry policy in great depth. Her main focus is finding her next job. She knows that Toronto is the centre of the screen industry in English-speaking Canada: “anything that will happen, will come through Toronto.”

In fact, many young writers flock to Toronto to enter the screen industry (Davis et al., 2014). One said: “It’s the Emerald City thing. There’s a lot going on … the volume of dance, movies, plays, galleries, festivals. It’s exciting and it reinforces the sense of being in a place of creative firmament.” On a more practical level: “There’s a much bigger network [in Toronto], all the major producers are here. There’s a feeling of being in the centre of things.” And “the decision-makers are [in Toronto].” A female screenwriter in her fifties commented that Toronto is the more natural location for production. She told us: “things develop here [in Toronto] for a reason. Regina wasn’t naturally developing a film and television industry. You can’t make a living in Regina as a writer.” But other screenwriters lamented the fact that they must move to Toronto to fulfill their goal of staying employed. One said, “I think that it’s a big country out there … successes from the margins can have a profound impact.”

How successful are regional production incentives in aiding screenwriters’ aspirations to tell Canadian stories on our screens and attract audiences? Regional incentives have negative impacts on worker mobility and working conditions (Coles, 2010), and
Screenwriters are divided on whether or not these incentives enhance or inhibit creative production. With nearly 50 percent of English-language Canadian screenwriters living in the GTA (Coutanche & Davis, 2013), the majority recognize that the GTA is the de facto centre of screen production in English-speaking Canada, whether they like it or not.

**The policy and economic landscape**

Regional production incentives are only one facet of the complex policy and economic landscape of the Canadian screen industry. The mandate of government policies and funding institutions such as Telefilm Canada, the Ontario Media Development Corporation, and the Canada Media Fund is to support indigenous screen production and curtail “brain drain” in the Canadian screen industry. Screenwriters have mixed views on how government support of the screen industry affects their ability to reach audiences. While funding is appreciated, the way it is distributed and the methods of evaluating which projects receive money are often a source of frustration and ambivalence among screenwriters. However, screenwriters do agree that Canada imports stories and exports storytellers, and they are keenly aware of how close cultural and geographic proximity to the United States affects their goal of reaching domestic audiences.

Many screenwriters we interviewed mentioned the ubiquity of American screen products as a defining characteristic of the English-Canadian screen media environment. As one writer put it: “No other country imports everything the Americans make.” Canadian audiences easily identify with characters and stories in American films and television, and American screen products circulate easily in Canada, but frustratingly, the inverse is not true. Said one writer:

> Canada is in a bad position vis-à-vis the U.S. Britain doesn’t necessarily like U.S. programming as much as we do. The U.S. knows what their people like but it’s tough in Canada because we like a lot of what they like.

The ubiquity and omnipresence of Hollywood screen stories in Anglophone Canada inevitably makes American film and television the main reference points for Canadian screenwriters. Audiences compare Canadian screen products to American ones, inevitably making assessments of quality. Writers do the same. Indeed, in a recent report on the Canadian screenwriting occupation, only 3 percent of screenwriters named a Canadian television show as their favourite and fewer than 1 percent named a Canadian film (Coutanche & Davis, 2013).

Several writers pointed out how the discrepancy in production values skew assessments of quality in favour of Hollywood products. One remarked that “it’s big business in the U.S., big product” and “in the U.S., anything less than $10 million isn’t worth making.” In comparison, he says of Canada: “As a writer you’re forced to think small here.” While “there can be wonderful and creative things that emerge from having a limited amount of colours you can use,” he prefers to use a bigger “palette” — as is available in Hollywood. Another writer expressed a similar perspective on Hollywood proximity: “Los Angeles is where all the business is — that’s where most of the companies are and where you get the most meetings.” He noted that there are simply fewer opportunities for screenwriters in Canada than in the U.S.
However, many screenwriters believe that Canadian writers have been successful in telling screen stories that stand out from the American product. One said screenwriters here have “a Canadian perspective on the world, and it is a unique perspective.” He considers that “Canadians are proud of nationalism and independence and don’t want to be perceived to be too influenced by American culture.” The biggest advantage of being a screenwriter in Canada, compared to an American counterpart, is the versatility one gains:

In a smaller market you have to be good at everything. Canadian writers have respect in Hollywood because you’re tough, talented, and can work in various genres.

But this Canadian “screenwriter versatility” only seems to pay off in Hollywood. If Canadian writers develop unusual versatility, then why do they not command more domestic audience share? Many writers believe that the current policy and economic landscape has created a Canadian story industry that does not aim for excellence. A male writer said the Canadian industry is “an under-developed market that rewards mediocrity—it’s been hijacked by a band that will not let Canadian industry bloom.” Other writers expressed similar perspectives. One seasoned writer with many credits on both sides of the border told us:

It’s too much trouble to stand in line for Telefilm. In L.A. you’re thinking, “I can sell this.” At Telefilm they’re going to find a reason to say no. In L.A. if you succeed, people embrace you more because they know success breeds success.

Many writers believe that the requirements and application procedures to receive government funds create barriers between them and their ability to reach audiences. Still, the public support is appreciated: one writer affirmed that government incentives “are essential for an indigenous industry in a country of our size.” He believes this support of the screen industry is a sign of cultural maturity and that this is a worthwhile place to invest money, “like roads and bridges … it’s recognized as important to the economy.”

Access to incentive funds usually determines whether or not a screenplay is produced and reaches an audience, but many writers believe that the cultural outcomes are not optimal because the funding decisions are based on politics. One writer said: “The industry is a combination of government managed and commercial enterprise, so the way writers are hired is not based on merit.” Other screenwriters expressed frustration that regulations are “fulfilling bureaucratic needs instead of storytelling or creative needs.” One writer said: “A script is not a script. It’s a political document.”

Screenwriters believe the idiosyncratic economic and policy-related characteristics of Canada’s screen production system definitively shape the kind of stories writers can tell. Like many other senior screenwriters we interviewed, a writer with two decades of experience says that a fundamental problem in the Canadian screen industry is that it is not run by creatives, but by dealmakers who are mainly concerned about the bottom line. She told us that she has seen original Canadian shows rejected by Canadian broadcasters that then opt to import already produced foreign content on a similar topic simply because of “the money.”
Another experienced writer agreed that by allowing Canadian networks to simply license and rebroadcast American shows there is little incentive to fund and produce successful homegrown screen stories. He noted that when broadcasters do license Canadian television shows, they do not invest much in the actual production:

Broadcasters are not required to air as much Canadian content as they should and they don't pay as much as they should. Typically they want to pay between 10 to 20% of the cost of a project as a license. They used to pay much more. I won't do a project of any size and take on that risk.

A male writer’s experience leads him to believe that the lack of awareness among Canadian broadcasters and distributors about “who their audiences are [puts them] behind the times.” He feels that by offsetting risk by importing popular American shows that have guaranteed audiences, broadcasters do not give much thought to how Canadian stories might attract a homegrown audience. He believes that if the government and broadcasters were serious about raising the level of Canadian content and reducing reliance on imported American products, more opportunities would arise:

That means telling the broadcasters, “I'm sorry you're not going to make $6 billion this year. You're going to make $5 billion this year.” Or “I'm sorry you're not going to be able to overspend on U.S. products—you're going to have to hire individuals to shepherd work creatively here.”

And yet, the financial incentives offered for screen production in Canada, and growing appreciation in the U.S. for Canadian screen production talent, have induced the development of co-ventures involving Canadian producers and broadcasters and American broadcasters and studios. Jeff Bader, President of Program Planning, Strategy and Research at NBC Entertainment called Canada his “favourite partner” at a recent panel on co-ventures at the Banff World Media Festival (Vlessing, 2013a). He assured Canadians that Canadian-American programs would be given the same treatment as those produced solely by the U.S., and would no longer be regarded as off-season filler (Vlessing, 2013a).

Some writers believe increased co-venturing is a sign that the Canadian industry is maturing: instead of brain drain, Canada is beginning to export high-quality content to Hollywood. A young writer expressed exhilaration about the rise of the American-Canadian co-venture, citing Flashpoint, Orphan Black, and Rookie Blue as successful examples of this model. She believes that Canadian-American co-ventures “give us the money to make TV.” But more experienced writers recognize that the quest for larger audiences and larger production budgets via co-ventures may displace the Canadian perspective in favour of prevailing American interests. Said one writer:

It will be much harder to make specifically Canadian stories and even though [our current show] is set in downtown Toronto, we have to be careful about references to Canadian healthcare and things like that, specific things that might alienate American audiences … So absolutely, co-venturing affects the creative, but, at the same time, you have a much bigger potential audience, which will lead to more work for everybody, and more stories being told. So, it’s worth it … I think.
Another writer experienced dilution of the Canadian perspective firsthand in a Canada-America co-venture. She said the most frustrating part of the experience was watching the Canadian network yield to the Americans on creative matters, remaining essentially “mute” through the development and production process. She noted that prior to the partnership, the Canadian network was more receptive to alternative ideas and perspectives, but this openness evaporated the moment the American broadcaster stepped in. As she sees it, the problem with partnering with such a globally dominant collaborator is that “you are going to be catering to their sensitivities, to their storytelling and points of view.” She says the Canadian broadcaster was too ready to acquiesce for fear of losing the “cachet” and potential audience that come with having an American partner.

Canadian screenwriters’ reflections on cultural geography; domestic policy remedies meant to offset the effects of proximity to Hollywood; domestic economic realities; diminishing audiences; and creative leadership disparities reveal a complex set of conditions under which they practice their craft. The cultural policy environment is a major idiosyncratic characteristic of the Canadian screen industry, one intended to facilitate the creation of homegrown stories that reflect our culture on our screens. Yet, while government incentives are meant to support high-quality screen products, the policy and economic landscape often mitigate the screenwriter’s goal of telling personally significant stories that will resonate with Canadian audiences.

**Talent and diversity in screenwriter careers**

In addition to policy and economic factors, issues relating to talent and diversity affect screenwriting in English-speaking Canada. In the quest to tell the most compelling stories to the largest possible audience, one might naturally assume the most skilled screenwriters would rise to the top, and the stories they tell would be the ones that represent Canada on our screens. But this is not so clear to English-Canadian screenwriters, since talent alone does not determine success (Davis et al., 2014). Many of the screenwriters we interviewed believe that their age, gender, or race affects the likelihood that they will be able to reach audiences with their stories. Some screenwriters regard these identity factors as very significant constraints on their career opportunities. Others consider these factors to be important career shapers, but not determinants of success.

The research literature on exclusionary networks in the screen industry emphasizes that work opportunities are differentially allocated to white males, while females, ethnic/cultural minorities, less-educated writers, and older writers are pigeonholed or deflected (Allen, Quinn, Hollingworth, & Rose, 2013; Antcliff, Saundry, & Stuart, 2007; Christopherson 2009; Elkhof & Warhurst, 2013; Grugalis & Stoyanova, 2012; Lee, 2011). In the U.S., middle-aged white males dominate screenwriting despite decades of efforts to call attention to the problem and induce greater diversity in the occupation (cf. WGA West, 2009). In English-speaking Canada, these generic and institutional tendencies in the screenwriting occupation are exacerbated by the idiosyncratic characteristic of weak demand among domestic broadcasters and film distributors for diversity programming (Coutanche & Davis, 2013).

A non-white female writer has reflected extensively on her own career trajectory and what she regards as systemic impediments to her ability to tell the stories she dreams
of telling. She recalls the emotionally turbulent experience of pitching ethnic and culturally specific stories to Canadian broadcasters. While several of her initiatives made it into the development phase, only one made it into production. She said that although Canada is comprised of a large percentage of ethnic minorities and immigrants:

> The truth is coloured people, visible minorities ... when you're pitching those types of stories that relate to your own learning experience, your own life experience growing up in this country [as a visible minority] ... those stories never get picked up to be produced.

A male visible minority writer also described difficulty in pitching shows as a non-white person. He said it is “doubly hard to pitch a diverse program if you are a visible minority” and he found it much less complicated to pitch a “non-diverse project.” When pitching stories with ethnic and culturally specific content, he has encountered a “politically correct reaction” and a “lot of tiptoeing around the issues.”

White male writers greet such perspectives with some skepticism. A well-established white male writer in his fifties is unsure whether minority screenwriters face career barriers. He told us, “I don’t think there is anything going on. I’m not of colour, so I have no idea whether there are any doors being closed. I can’t imagine it from everything that I hear.” He added that he believes there are “huge initiatives at work” that help minority screenwriters enter into the industry and recalled having to develop a “diversity plan” for his previous project with a major Canadian broadcaster.²

A female minority writer views diversity initiatives in a different light. She believes that even diversity programs that are designed to help minority screenwriters launch their careers are exclusionary in that the minimum requirements are often set too high and frequently require a writer to have had a certain amount screen credits. Further, many of these internships do not seem to lead to paid writing opportunities. She told us that “getting your foot in the door is difficult” since writers and producers tend to hire those writers they have worked with previously.

> I think it has a lot to do with economics, because this is a business and you have to deliver, and there’s millions of dollars on the table. You know—at one level, it makes sense why they’d pick their buddies who they know can deliver.

She confessed that even when she was working as a writer in a writing room, she “felt inferior” to the others because she did not have the “same opportunities” and was the least experienced writer in the room. Differences in the objective structure of opportunity available to non-white cultural producers compared with their nonminority counterparts stem from differential access to key decision-making networks (Conor, 2014; Grugalis & Stoyanova, 2012; Lee, 2011). The same woman said that she often wonders whether the apparently exclusionary nature of the television industry is “a racial thing” or “just an economic choice.”

A young female writer has also found it very difficult to break into new shows where she is unknown. She notices that people tend to work with and hire those they are familiar with, those who they can “jive with in the room.” Her inability to find a job since her first major writing contract ended a year ago has left her feeling anxious.
She confessed, “It’s one of those things that’s often the debate, you wonder—is it because of your age or your gender or is it your talent?” Her worries allude to what Conor (2014) describes as inequalities that exist at the level of screenwriting subject-hood. The dominant figures (e.g., the screenwriter as geek, hero, and entrepreneur), personal traits, and practices that are associated with the screenwriting profession are implicitly gendered, and thus perpetuate and mask inequalities by affecting the writer’s own imagination (Conor, 2014). Conversely, the young male writers we spoke with did not express similar gender-related uncertainty when reflecting on their career trajectories.

One middle-aged female writer lamented being “thrown in the baby ghetto” after having children, and resented the perception that as a woman with children, she could only write stories related to the topic. While a young female writer also expressed resentment at being pigeonholed, she did indicate her belief that her gender has likely both hindered and helped her career. She told us that on teen-oriented television shows, like the one she worked on, a female writer is desired, but on shows where this is not the case, the female voice is not as valued. She thinks that both men and women have preconceptions of what a female writer should be like. She told us that as a woman she is expected to write to “the emotional side of things,” and has been assigned research about stereotypically female-oriented story subjects, such as fashion, by her male showrunner.

The same young woman told us that there is often only one other more senior female writer in the writing room and that she feels like she is “in competition with the other few women that are out there.” She told us: “Being in the room, if you can have a real presence, it almost doesn’t matter what your writing is like.” She recalled the greater success of a similarly aged female screenwriter who was “louder” in meetings, again corroborating research suggesting that implicitly, the desired “presence” in screenwriting, and its associated traits, are traditionally and implicitly masculine (Conor, 2014).

In sum, while screenwriters may disagree on the nature and prevalence of systemic barriers in the screen production industry, it is clear that some storytellers are marginalized and, as a result, their stories never have the chance to reach Canadian audiences.

Conclusion: The sound of one hand clapping

As researchers, our quest here has been to interpret how Canadian screenwriters view the conditions that affect their ability to tell Canadian stories on Canadian screens. These conditions, and the ways that screenwriters confront them, ultimately represent a uniquely Canadian story—one that is dominated by the elusiveness of homegrown audiences.

The screenwriters we spoke with are mindful of how their cultural products reflect Canadian perspectives on screen, and how this affects audience engagement. One writer said that the inability to attract audiences is because the need to do “something different than the American, mass-market pop culture industry” has led Canadian filmmakers to produce stories that are:
Not about anybody I know or want to know. [Canadian filmmakers] are not thinking about the audience. It’s about what they want to say and maybe that’s their right, but it doesn’t mean you’re in the business.

Another writer said that Canadian stories are about individual voices and have nothing to do with geography. One of his shows was popular in the U.S., and American critics called it “essentially Canadian” but he is not sure what that means. He has lived all his life in Canada, “so I have whatever that Canadian perspective is.” In the end, he does not think Canadian audiences would recognize a Canadian voice if they did not know who wrote the screenplay.

Other screenwriters believe the Canadian industry is undergoing a transformation, becoming more accepting of creating shows that are less “overtly” Canadian in order to engage audiences. A young female writer insists: “If you are a Canadian writing the show, you are obviously bringing that Canadian perspective.” She told us that Canadian characters do not “have to say ‘eh’ all the time” and that “nobody wants to set out to write a Canadian show that has hockey and Tim Hortons.”

The WGC (2014) recently suggested that Canadian viewers suffer from “cultural cringe,” an inferiority complex that allegedly causes them to reject Canadian content not on the basis of its quality, but simply because it is Canadian. This would suggest that screenwriters’ desire to appeal to domestic audiences is even more difficult than envisioned. At the very least, it implies that the Canadian screen story industry faces an important brand revitalization challenge.

While screenwriters may disagree on how the Canadian screen industry’s idiosyncratic characteristics affect both their ability to reach domestic audiences and the stories they can tell, their overall reflections introduce important elements of production culture that are not present in the scholarly literature on creative labour or in the economic or political-economic accounts of the marginalization of Canadian stories on Canadian screens. Canada’s unique production environment affects the way screenwriters conceive, develop, pitch, mentor, and express themselves in their work. It also very much affects the crucial question of who gets to tell the stories that end up on Canadian screens, and which stories are told. Like the characters they create, English-speaking screenwriters adapt to challenges presented in the pursuit of their goals. Their quest to tell stories they are passionate about and that reflect Canadian perspectives back to Canadian audiences is the ultimate goal. The question that remains is whether Canadian audiences will ever have a taste for it.

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Notes
1. That is content that meets Canadian content requirements established by the CRTC or CAVCO (CMPA, 2013).
2. Indeed, this writer is more sensitive to age- and gender-related diversity issues than ones related to race. When we asked him what career advice he would give to a 55-year-old female screenwriter, he replied: “That’s a tough one.”
References


