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# **Doxa, Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy in Irish Screenwriting:**

A Case Study

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## **Abstract**

Despite extensive scholarship on Irish film, the study of Irish screenwriting is underrepresented. This study seeks to address this gap via a qualitative case study. The data for this study consists of interviews with 19 participants who intersect with the practice of screenwriting in Ireland: screenwriters, academics, directors, producers, and teachers. The study focuses on film screen production; while some participants also work in television, the primary concern is with the Irish film industry. It employs a theoretical approach, first developed by Pierre Bourdieu, and subsequently applied to UK screenwriting by Macdonald, utilising the framework of doxa, orthodoxy, and heterodoxy as an analytical tool. For Bourdieu ‘doxa’ refers to the taken-for-granted assumptions that shape a field of practice. In the case of Irish screenwriting this study finds that at the heart of the doxa of Irish screenwriting there are a series of tensions. The fundamental tension is between orthodoxy and heterodoxy. There is a tension between acceptance of a traditional, orthodox approach to screenwriting that aligns with commercial practice and a more heterodox view that questions the orthodoxy and strives for a more artistic practice. By orthodox is meant a traditional view on the importance of commerciality, structure, drama, conflict and change. By heterodox is meant an arthouse, experimental approach to these ideas. This tension between orthodox/heterodox *is* the doxa of Irish screenwriting. The tension between orthodoxy and heterodoxy manifests in several thematic areas such as approaches to learning the craft, attitudes toward formal rules, views on distinctly Irish narrative styles, and relationships with funding institutions such as Screen Ireland (Fís Éireann). The framework of doxa, orthodoxy, and heterodoxy is significant as it reveals how unquestioned assumptions influence Irish screenwriting practice, shaping not just screenwriters, but the ecosystem of Irish filmmaking and its place in the wider global industry. This study builds upon previous work by Bourdieu (1977), Schultz (2007), and Macdonald (2013), extending their frameworks to the context of Irish screenwriting.



## Chapter 1 Introduction

Several scholars argue that screenwriting has been relatively neglected in academic research, with the screenplay often viewed as merely a tool for film production (Koivumäki, 2016; Macdonald, 2004a). In Film Studies, the screenplay is a secondary focus of analysis to the finished film, yet in practice the screenplay precedes and, in many ways, fundamentally defines the film (Koivumäki, 2016; Langford, 2010; Macdonald, 2004a). The film industry has similarly tended to view screenwriting through a derisory lens, positioning it as market driven 'hack' writing (Korte and Schneider, 2000, p.93). This view has obscured the importance of the screenplay, facilitated its neglect, and allowed the guiding principles underpinning the screenplay to be taken-for-granted (Langford, 2010, p.253).

There are many manuals written on how to write a screenplay, but historically there were very few critical academic studies that took the screenplay as their central object of analysis (Koivumäki, 2016, p.15). This neglect has begun to change in recent years, with some significant academic research on screenwriting emerging internationally via the Screenwriting Research Network and the *Journal of Screenwriting* (Batty, 2014; Koivumäki, 2016; Macdonald, 2013). These efforts have come to constitute a sub-field of screenwriting studies.

The domain of screenwriting studies has grown significantly over the past twenty years. Early scholarship emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000s, with pioneering work by scholars such as Macdonald (2004c) and Nelmes (2007), challenging the marginalisation of the screenplay as a literary and cultural form. The field of screenwriting studies gained further legitimacy via the development of the Screenwriting Research Network in 2006. This contributed to a growing community of scholarship interrogating the histories, practices, and theories of screenwriting (Davies et al., 2023).

Screenwriting studies first emerged from the UK, Australia, Nordic countries, and the USA. It has established itself in academic departments of media studies, and creative writing, and in Film Schools. *The Journal of Screenwriting* (2010) and Palgrave Studies in Screenwriting (2013) have become significant publishers of academic work in the field. Additionally, journals such as *New Writing*, *The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing* (2004) publish articles on screenwriting (Davies et al., 2023). Thematically, screenwriting studies has examined various areas, such as the history of the practice, screenwriting pedagogy, industrial conditions, experimental approaches, and theoretical frameworks for analysing screenwriting as a unique genre of creative practice (Davies et al., 2023). This growing depth of scholarship on screenwriting stands in contrast to examination of Irish screenwriting.

Irish cinema is widely researched across multiple dimensions including national cinema (Barton, 2004; Barton, 2019), screen culture and ‘Celtic Tiger’ consumerism (Brereton, 2009), heritage, sport, and diaspora cinema (Crosson, 2003; Crosson, 2024), masculinity and gender (Ging, 2006; O'Brien, 2019), cultural memory (Carlsten, 2015), genre (Macdougall, 2009), narrative strategies (O'Connell, 2010), and industry trends and policy (Flynn, 2019, Flynn and Tracy, 2019; Murphy, 2024; Noonan, 2024; O'Brien, 2024)<sup>1</sup>. The key issue is that the focus in Irish research has typically been on the finished film text rather than on the screenplay or screenwriters. A 2014 study by Liddy (2014) involving interviews with six first-time writers about the craft of screenwriting represents a rare exception. A search for critical academic studies on Irish screenwriting yielded few results. This study does not attempt textual analysis of finished films or broad policy interrogation; instead, it focuses on screenwriting practice and practitioners' voices, addressing a significant gap in Irish film scholarship.

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<sup>1</sup> This list is necessarily selective and omits many important contributors.

In the wider context of screenwriting studies, the case of Irish screenwriting remains underexplored. The predominantly Anglophone scholarship has examined screenwriting from different positions such as industry, labour, and craft however, less attention has been given to the ontological and epistemological dimensions of screenwriting practice, namely, the fundamental assumptions that shape how Irish screenwriters understand their practice. This leaves a gap in the understanding of a central aspect of Irish filmmaking: the doxa of screenwriting. This research seeks to further advance this underrepresented area via a case study of Irish screenwriting practice, by asking what is the doxa of screenwriting in Ireland, building directly upon the theoretical framework of Bourdieu (1977) as applied to screenwriting by Macdonald (2013). Rather than textual analysis of finished films or political economy analysis, this study works from practitioners' voices, bracketing questions of Irish national cinema to focus on the practice itself. The primary focus is on feature film screen production, though many practitioners work across film and television. Central to this approach is the theoretical framework through which that practice is examined.

### **The Concepts of Doxa, Orthodoxy, and Heterodoxy**

The sections that follow will provide a precise explanation of the concepts of doxa, orthodoxy and heterodoxy (Bourdieu, 1977, pp.159-171). It will explore how the concept of doxa has been utilised by studies of media and how it can be used to examine screenwriting.

The concept of doxa emerged from the work of French sociologist and philosopher, Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu's concept of doxa has been widely used in academia over many years to examine how social practices become naturalised or taken-for-granted within domains, fields, or practices (Grenfell, 2014, pp.1-25; Vakalopoulos, 2023). Doxa refers to implicit, subconscious or internalised beliefs. Doxa is the implicit assumptions embedded in a practice that are perceived as self-evident, which shape both the production and consumption of media

and reinforce existing power structures. Through critical analysis, media studies researchers have used doxa to reveal the underlying, often invisible norms and power dynamics that structure media such as journalism, news, broadcasting, television, film and social media (Danzon-Chambaud, 2023; Schultz, 2007, pp. 190-207). This approach has enabled a deeper understanding of how media reflects and reinforces the status quo across many domains. In screenwriting studies doxa appears as the screenwriting conventions visible in things like manuals and educational settings (universities, Film Schools, short courses), which prescribe narrative structures, character development approaches, and other conventions as natural or necessary for creating successful screenplays (Macdonald, 2013).

By applying the concept of doxa to media practices scholars can successfully interrogate and potentially revise assumptions, fostering greater innovation and reflexivity in their creative practice. This critical examination enables practitioners and scholars to question what has been previously regarded as natural or essential in the practice. The analysis of doxa in the media studies context exposes how power structures and normative concepts are maintained through naturalisation, yet by making these implicit assumptions explicit researchers open pathways toward more diverse approaches and challenge existing power hierarchies (Grenfell, 2014, pp.114-125; Jansson, 2015).

In his 1972 work *Outline of a Theory of Practice* Bourdieu used the concept of doxa<sup>2</sup> to describe a communities' assumed and unquestioned rules or paradigms (Bourdieu, 1977, pp.159-171). The concept of doxa was first used by Bourdieu in his anthropological studies of traditional societies in France and Algeria. As Deer notes 'Doxa was first used by Bourdieu in

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<sup>2</sup> The nature of doxa was originally examined by Plato in his philosophical works, *Timaeus*, *Theaetetus*, and Book V of *The Republic*, though its meaning and role shifts across these texts. While doxa is broadly associated with belief or opinion, as distinct from *episteme*, the nature of that distinction varies depending on the context. The precise nature of the episteme/doxa distinction and its variation across Plato's dialogues remains a subject of debate (Szaif, 2007; Moss, 2021), however, a full examination of this debate is beyond the scope of this research.

his description and explanation of “natural” practices and attitudes in traditional societies from a phenomenological perspective’ (Deer, 2014, p.115). His stated aim was to provide an understanding of the practical reasoning of groups of people based on their own vision and experience of the world (Deer, 2014, p.115). Bourdieu used the word *doxa* to describe the unquestioned rules of a society, the things that are accepted because they *appear* part of the natural order, they ‘go without saying’ because there are no words to say them since they are considered so normal and unremarkable. As Bourdieu notes ‘what is essential goes without saying because it comes without saying’ (Bourdieu, 1977, pp.159-171, p.167). Bourdieu subsequently extended and applied these concepts of *doxa*, *orthodoxy*, and *heterodoxy* to diverse fields such as literature, art and academia, most notably in *The Field of Cultural Production* (1993, pp.232, 307) and *The Rules of Art* (1996, pp.205-206, 266), where he examined how struggles over legitimacy within fields, including the tension between art and commerce, are structured by the tension between established norms and heretical challenges to them.

*Doxa* has a number of related meanings (Deer, 2014, p.114). At the centre it is the idea that in any society there are set of a misrecognised ‘socially arbitrary’ rules that are internalised and reproduce themselves in ‘minds and bodies, expectations and behaviour’ (Deer, 2014, p.115). *Doxa* is a shared set of opinions that come to shape and determine practice ‘via [an] internalised sense of limits’ (Deer, 2014, p.115). As Bourdieu notes

Every established order tends to produce (to very different degrees and with very different means) the naturalisation of its own arbitrariness. Of all the mechanisms tending to produce this effect, the most important and the best concealed is undoubtedly the dialectic of the objective chances and the agents' aspirations, out of which arises the sense of limits, commonly called the sense of reality (Bourdieu, 1977, p.164).

Doxa is the sense of the limits for what is possible and underpins a society's sense of reality. It 'is the assumptions of an epoch which are taken-for-granted and lie beyond ideologies (orthodoxies) yet which can generate conscious struggles' (Deer, 2014, p.115). Doxa relates to 'what is taken-for-granted' (Deer, 2014, p.115). It cannot be questioned because it cannot be spoken because '*Doxa* as a form of symbolic power requires that those subjected to it to not question its legitimacy or the legitimacy of those who exert it' (Deer, 2014, pp.116-117, italics in original). In fact, for Bourdieu '[t]he truth of doxa is only ever fully revealed when negatively constituted by the constitution of a field of opinion' (Bourdieu, 1977, p.168). Doxa is only understood negatively, that is, once it is no longer doxa. Once there is awareness of doxa, new concepts are required to describe this new state, these are captured in Bourdieu's concepts of the orthodox and heterodox. These concepts emerge specifically through the dynamics of crisis and contestation.

### **The Orthodoxy/Heterodoxy Tension**

For Bourdieu doxa could only be questioned or overhauled in times of crisis that would 'undermine the prevailing *doxa* and foster the emergence of other ones' (Deer, 2014, p.118). But crisis is not enough *per se* to establish a new doxa, which depends on power and hierarchy. Crisis disrupts the taken-for-granted unity between social structures and everyday practice, making visible what previously appeared self-evident and necessary. But crisis is not enough to establish a new doxa. The transition from disrupted doxa to new doxa is shaped by struggles within and between fields, between actors possessing unequal amounts of power and capital. What then emerges as the new 'common sense' reflects not the inherent merit of competing worldviews but rather the capacity of specific groups, such as those occupying powerful positions in the state, education, or media, to impose their view of reality as universally legitimate. Symbolic power for Bourdieu, the power to make things seen and believed is

concentrated in these institutional sites enabling powerful actors to impose their interests as the general interest or common sense (doxa). This is because ‘the ability of the socially dominated to effectively act upon their condition is ... weak’ (Deer, 2014, p.118).

Bourdieu did anticipate a situation whereby a doxa could be questioned and resisted. This connects with the tension between orthodoxy and its opposite heterodoxy. ‘Orthodoxy refers to a situation where the arbitrariness of doxa is recognised but accepted in practice. The rules of the game are known and played accordingly’ (Bourdieu, 1977, p.169). Orthodoxy represents conscious adherence to established norms even when their arbitrary nature has been revealed as such. It functions as a conservative force in a practice that tries to maintain existing power structures and hierarchies within a field. Orthodoxy does not hide that there are rules but simply insists that these rules, though arbitrary, are necessary and beneficial. Those who follow orthodox rules typically have a vested interest in preserving the status quo, as they often hold positions of advantage in the field. On the other hand, heterodoxy depends on

The recognition of the possibility of competing beliefs and the emergence of such competing beliefs which entails a move from practical action to discursive exchanges and the emergence of a field of opinion. Heterodoxy, in its most effective form, often comes from groups which are well endowed in cultural capital but are poor in economic capital and whose experience of life is neither that of the lower nor that of the higher reaches of society. However, though it may seek to be critical and even heretic, heterodoxy remains essentially mediated by the ruling doxa (Deer, 2014, pp.118-119).

Within screenwriting practice, orthodoxy typically aligns with adherence to rules, conventions, classical structure, character arcs, mass audience appeal, craft principles, commercial imperatives, industry standards and genre formulas. The orthodox position privileges established screenwriting wisdom found in manuals and taught in educational settings, emphasising proven narrative structures and commercially viable storytelling approaches. In

contrast heterodoxy manifests through creativity, art, rule breaking, experimentation, authorial voice, resistance to formula, notions of genius, and the privileging of the artist over the craftsperson (Banks, 2010; Batty et al., 2017; Conor, 2014b). The heterodox position rejects formulaic approaches in favour of innovation, personal experience, and artistic integrity or commercial considerations. This binary opposition between orthodoxy and heterodoxy defines the field of screenwriting practice with each position seeking dominance over the other (Batty et al., 2017; Conor, 2014b; Macdonald, 2013).

Critically, this tension between orthodox and heterodox positions is itself doxic. The art versus commerce binary, whichever position is privileged in any given moment or context, represents the taken-for-granted framework within which screenwriting practice is conceived and discussed. There is no third option, no space outside this fundamental tension. Participants find themselves unable to conceptualise positions that exist beyond this binary framework regardless of whether they align themselves with orthodox or heterodox positions. The very structure of the debate does not allow for alternative possibilities.

This research reveals that the doxa of Irish screenwriting operates across three interconnected but distinct levels.

1. Irish screenwriting aligns with what might be termed a Hollywood doxa when discussing fundamental aspects of craft such as learning screenwriting, the utility of screenwriting manuals and the rules of the game. In these contexts, participants' views reflect industrial screenwriting orthodoxy, associated with structural principles, character development and what might be broadly defined as the 'Neo-Aristotelian' consensus around craft rules.
2. The Irish doxa diverges from this consensus in distinctly Irish stylistic preferences and production priorities, particularly regarding Irish scripts and frustrations with



funding models. In these contexts what constitutes orthodoxy and heterodoxy is challenged and contested, with specific local characteristics evident in the doxa.

3. Regardless of which position dominates or how the orthodoxy/heterodoxy manifests, both operate within the same art/commerce binary. There is no position articulated outside of this binary tension. This evidences doxa, a taken-for-granted position that participants regard as self-evident. The art/commerce binary operates as an apparently natural feature of screenwriting practice rather than something that has evolved. This binary remains unquestioned, naturalised simply as 'how things are' rather than a contingent construction that could be challenged.

For Bourdieu, once a doxa is revealed as such, it cannot be accepted in the same taken-for-granted way as before. The only way its rules can be restored is as orthodoxy, where its rules are acknowledged as arbitrary but played anyway. This then opens the possibility for other opinions, even heretical or blasphemous opinions. As Bourdieu notes orthodoxy is

Straight, or rather straightened, opinion, which aims, without ever entirely succeeding, at restoring the primal state of innocence of doxa, [it] exists only in the objective relationship which opposes it to heterodoxy, that is, by reference to the choice - haireisis, heresy - made possible by the existence of competing possibles and to the explicit critique of the sum total of the alternatives not chosen that the established order implies. It is defined as a system of euphemisms, of acceptable ways of thinking and speaking the natural and social world, which rejects heretical remarks as blasphemies (Bourdieu, 1977, p.169).

It is important to note that questioning the doxa does not represent a radical departure from it, instead, there is a 'contained' questioning, which is how doxa works. It can include resistance to the orthodox because resistance is not enough to fundamentally challenge a doxa. The post doxic-state differs from the doxic in that the arbitrary nature of the rules has been revealed,

creating a field of competing opinions (orthodox and heterodox) rather than unquestioned assumptions. Both orthodox and heterodox positions remain in relationship to the original doxa, either defending or challenging its premises (Bourdieu, 1977, pp.159-171). Doxa, as constituted through orthodoxy and heterodoxy, is a useful way in which to interrogate the practices of Irish screenwriting. A similar approach was adopted by Schultz (2007, pp. 190-207) and Macdonald (2013) who offer useful models for the use of doxa and orthodox/heterodox in analysing different media practices. Schultz's study of journalism provides a particularly instructive methodological precedent.

### **Doxa and Media Analysis**

Schultz's (2007) article '*The journalistic gut feeling, Journalistic doxa, news habitus and orthodox news values*', utilises Bourdieu's concepts of doxa, orthodoxy, and heterodoxy as tools to analyse journalistic practice in a Danish television newsroom. Schultz's work employs ethnographic methods, including participant observation in a newsroom setting and in-depth interviews with journalists. Through this approach, she identifies both explicit news values that journalists could articulate (orthodox values) and implicit values that were embedded in practice but rarely articulated (doxic values). Her findings reveal that journalistic practice operated according to a set of professional norms that were taken-for-granted, including assumptions about what constituted 'newsworthiness' and the hierarchy of news types (Schultz, 2007).

Schultz identifies a useful distinction between 'silent doxic' values contrasted with explicit and 'seemingly self-evident orthodox' values, embedded in practice (Schultz, 2007, p.191). She argues that 'an important task for media sociology is to investigate the seemingly self-evident orthodox/heterodox news values as well as making visible the doxic news values embedded in journalistic practice' (Schultz, 2007, p.191). This study adopts a similar approach

to investigate the ‘seemingly self-evident’ values that are embedded in Irish screenwriting practice.

This research builds on Schultz’s (2007) work, but more directly extends Macdonald’s (2013), who has applied Bourdieu’s concepts to the domain of screenwriting in the UK. In his groundbreaking work Macdonald identifies the central features of the doxa of UK screenwriting and uses it to examine the concept of what he terms the ‘Screen Idea’, a broader concept than simply the screenplay, which acknowledges the collaborative nature of filmmaking. Like Schultz, Macdonald identifies an orthodox and heterodox side of screenwriting practice in the UK, examining how these two sides of the practice interact. Macdonald analyses how UK screenwriters navigate between orthodox constraints and heterodox aspirations, demonstrating how the doxa of screenwriting shapes and constrains creative choices. Schultz (2007) and Macdonald (2013) provide a crucial foundation for the current study, offering both methodological approaches and theoretical insights that can be extended to a case study of Irish screenwriting.

As well as employing Bourdieu’s concept of doxa, both Schultz and Macdonald examine their respective topics through Bourdieu’s idea of the ‘field’. The concepts of doxa, orthodoxy and heterodoxy emerge from Bourdieu’s Field Theory (Bourdieu, 1977, pp.159-171; Grenfell, 2014, pp.114-125) For Bourdieu ‘the concept of field is a research tool, the main function of which is to enable the scientific construction of social objects’ (Bourdieu, 2005, p.30) Like, journalism, and UK screenwriting, the Irish screenwriting field ‘is part of the field of cultural production together with the arts and sciences, a field that is occupied with producing cultural, “symbolic goods” (Schultz, 2007, p.192). As Schultz notes ‘an important assumption in Bourdieu’s sociology is the fact that social practice is never completely “free” but will always and at the same time be structured’ (Schultz, 2007, p.194). This suggests that just as was the case for Schulz (2007) with journalism and Macdonald (2013) with UK

screenwriting, so too Irish screenwriting practice has an implicit and explicit structure. This is an essential aspect of doxa, it only appears natural and universal but is constructed and negotiated by the dominant practitioners in a field. As Bourdieu notes ‘doxa is a particular point of view, the point of view of the dominant, which presents and imposes itself as a universal point of view’ (Bourdieu, 1998, p.57).

This research extends the doxa, orthodoxy, heterodoxy framework developed first by Bourdieu, applied to journalism by Schultz (2007), and employed in UK screenwriting by Macdonald (2013) to the context of Irish screenwriting. It examines to what extent there is a doxa present in the practice of Irish screenwriting, conducting a case study via interviews with 19 practitioners. The findings reveal strong evidence of a taken-for-granted doxa across multiple thematic domains of screenwriting practice in Ireland.

It is important to acknowledge, as Korzybski (1931) noted that ‘the map is not the territory’, there are limitations to any framework such as this, there is a danger that viewing everything through a simple lens of orthodoxy and heterodoxy may lead to a loss of nuance. The data collected in this study shows that practitioners grapple with their own ambivalence toward doxa throughout the interviews, often holding contradictory positions simultaneously. This ambivalence is particularly evident in how the Irish doxa diverges from the Hollywood consensus in its stylistic preferences and production priorities. In the Irish context what is regarded as orthodoxy and heterodoxy reveals specific local characteristics. What is artistic and arthouse moves to the orthodox position, and commercial, genre work becomes heterodox. This complexity reveals a distinctly Irish mode of screenwriting practice that complicates a straightforward orthodox/heterodox binary. While the framework serves as a useful analytical tool it cannot capture the full complexity of practitioners lived experience within the field. The concept of doxa forms the theoretical lens for this project, with the orthodox/heterodox binary

as a significant site of tension in the Irish doxa, but other binaries and concepts intersect. These intersections reveal the multidimensional nature of creative practice in Irish screenwriting.

### **Tensions and Binaries**

The tensions and binaries evidenced through this research include art versus commerce, creative versus professional identity, global versus local, and transnational cinema versus Ireland's literary legacy, the tragi-comic and the art versus craft distinction. While these are frequently framed as binaries, the literature around them is contested and complicated, particularly in the case of the art versus commerce tension, the theoretical complexity of which is a recurring concern throughout this dissertation. A significant body of research examines the complexity of creative practices such as screenwriting. As this research examines interconnected concepts and binaries, it is important to frame the most significant ideas and research that are later developed because they are central to understanding Irish screenwriting practice. The tension between artistic and commercial values provides the primary organising principle for these intersecting concerns.

### ***The Art/Commerce Binary***

The relationship between artistic practices and commercial imperatives remains foundational in scholarship on creative industries. Bourdieu identifies this tension between art and commerce as a fundamental feature of the literary and artistic fields. (Bourdieu, 1996, p.142; Bourdieu, 1993, p.38). Radermecker and Loots (2025), Banks (2010), Conor (2014c), Lee (2008), Macdonald (2013), all investigate how creative workers, such as filmmakers, craftspeople, or screenwriters navigate the tension between artistic authenticity and economic pressures.

Radermecker and Loots (2025) outline how creative professionals actively ‘juggle’ between what they term the ‘artistic logic’ (innovation and aesthetic value) and the ‘commercial logic’ (market viability and entrepreneurship), demonstrating how these are rarely mutually exclusive but continually negotiated by creative practitioners. Similarly, Banks (2010) and Conor (2014c) explore how artistic identity is constructed within the dominant structures of commerce and industry, revealing how creative practitioners must negotiate between artistic self-expression and market imperatives. Banks (2010) argues that autonomy ‘exists in a constant flux state; that is, it is subject to seemingly endless negotiation and affected by complex and unstable exigencies of personal and social origin’ (Banks, 2010, p.265), [positioning the cultural worker as] ‘a constantly shifting terrain of interrelationships that encompass the logics of art, commerce, the internal demands of the practice and other exterior demands of the social’ (Banks, 2010, p.265). This negotiation is focused less on resisting capitalism outright and more on ‘seeking opportunities for meaningful self-expression within its limits’ (Banks, 2010, p.262). Conor (2014) similarly demonstrates that individual screenwriters ‘must juggle the contrary logics of the screen production industry and the wider cultural economy, logics that call on these workers to take pride in their individual inputs but be ready and willing to “let go”, to disinvest in their projects as they become collectively managed and developed’ (Conor, 2014b, p.67). To navigate these tensions, writers cultivate ‘disinvestment and pragmatism ... to build beneficial industrial relationships, secure commissions, avoid “preciousness” and over-attachment to their work and to build income streams’ (Conor, 2014b, p.62), functioning as ‘autonomous and responsible workers’ reminded of ‘the traits needed to “make it” within the profession – energy, initiative, ambition, calculation and personal responsibility’ (Conor, 2014b, p.84). Artistic integrity thus emerges not as a fixed position but as an ongoing practice of reconciling creative integrity with commercial necessity. This negotiation extends beyond commerce to encompass fundamental questions of professional identity and labour.

### *The Art/Craft Binary and the Romantic Genius*

The art/craft distinction is deeply connected with the art/commerce debate and shapes the professional identities and doxa of those working in fields of cultural labour. Both Conor (2014c) and Lee (2008) explore how contemporary screenwriters and artists draw on craft traditions while striving for the cultural capital of the ‘artist’. Radermecker and Loots (2025) expand on this through their consideration of the identity ‘struggles and juggles’ that arise as creative craft workers negotiate between practitioner, entrepreneur and artist roles.

This art/craft binary is further illuminated by scholarship on Romanticism, such as Abrams (1971) and Engell (1981) which trace how the notion of the ‘Romantic genius’, the idea that true artistic creativity is mystical, singular, inspired, and fundamentally at odds with commercialisation became embedded in Western cultural consciousness during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a myth that Andersen (2024) argues continues to shape how both practitioners and researchers understand creative work today. Andersen (2024) extends this critique, showing that the romantic myth persists even within academic research itself, with scholarship sometimes unconsciously reproducing romantic assumptions rather than recognising how constraints actively constitute creative processes. However, Banks (2010) explicitly challenges this romantic mythology, arguing that it obscures the material realities of creative practice. Rather than accepting creativity as mystical inspiration, Banks (2010) reframes it as a form of work that is socially situated, collaborative, and inseparable from the institutional, economic, and material conditions of production. His critique exposes how the romantic ideal functions ideologically, masking the labour processes, power dynamics, and commercial pressures that actually shape creative practices. In the context of Irish screenwriting doxa, the persistence of the romantic idea of the ‘artist’ legitimises both heterodox resistance to commercial pressures and orthodox adaptation to them. These

negotiations between artistic identity and economic reality acquire additional complexity when considered within Ireland's specific cultural and industrial context.

### ***Irish Cinema: Local and Global***

A further important dimension, crucial to this project, is how Irish cinema positions itself in an increasingly global and transnational film industry. As far back as 2003, Crosson in his article 'Vanishing Point', noted that the global reach of Hollywood film style has contributed to 'the effacement of people, politics and place in contemporary Irish film as film-makers endeavour to attract a global audience for their work (Crosson, 2003). Here 'vanishing' does not mean the disappearance of Irish cinema but a dilution of local specificity, where stories are increasingly shaped with international markets in mind. O'Brien and Canning (2020) examine films such as *Brooklyn* (Crowley, 2015) to show how Irish cinema now operates through international co-production, and festival-oriented prestige genres that target global audiences while still trading on a sense of 'Irishness'. Their work demonstrates how national 'branding', and commercial risk management, interconnect in a global film market that rewards portable, English language, heritage or prestige films. Crosson (2024) and other recent industrial analyses such as Barton (2019) 21st century overview of Irish film, highlight that Irish cinema is now structurally transnational, in funding, talent, and audience. Yet they stress that film policy and criticism continue to invoke the idea of a distinctive 'national cinema', generating tension between the ideals of cultural 'authenticity' versus the realities of an export driven film industry. O'Brien (2024) notes that the Irish state treated film primarily as an industrial rather than cultural endeavour until the 1990s, while contemporary policy emphasises both cultural expression and economic value, job creation and foreign direct investment (O'Brien, 2024). Noonan (2024) particularly emphasises the structural constraints shaping the Irish industry, pointing to chronic underinvestment, dependence on foreign finance, and the pressure to secure international



partners, all of which narrow the range of viable projects and favour particular film genres and styles. Over time, these factors have shaped the Irish industrial doxa, where implicit rules about style, tone, genre, and subject matter become intertwined with commercial imperatives, tax incentives and festival positioning. These works underscore how the Irish screenwriting doxa is shaped by many competing forces, both internal and external. Among these forces, Ireland's literary and theatrical traditions exert a particularly distinctive influence on contemporary screen practice.

### ***Ireland's Literary Legacy and the Tragi-comic***

The influence of Ireland's literary tradition is a further concept that intersects with the doxa of screenwriting. An examination of the work of scholars such as Alférez Mendiá, (2023), Grene, (2004), Harrington, (2004), and McDonald, (2004), illuminates how there is a line of influence from Ireland's writers and dramatists to its modern filmmakers. One enduring legacy noted by these scholars is the tragi-comic, the blending of tragedy and comedy, as a thematic mode that is used to explore Ireland's history and present. In the Irish context, tragicomedy is a genre without being a genre. Texts, from Beckett's and O'Casey's theatre to modern films by filmmakers such as Lenny Abrahamson, Mark O'Halloran, Martin McDonagh, and writers such as Sally Rooney, demonstrate how tragedy and humour are mined and intertwined to examine the contradictions of modern Irish life. These works use dark absurd comedy to explore themes of sexuality, greed, ambition, and mental illness, balance horror with moments of tenderness, and juxtapose witty dialogue with depictions of drug use and psychological dysfunction. Dark comedy exposes the hidden violence and moral hypocrisy beneath respectable surfaces, challenging visions of 'decent' Ireland and post-Celtic Tiger modernity (Alférez Mendiá, 2023; Barton, 2019).

Critics frequently identify tragicomedy as particularly suited to examining and interrogating recurring Irish themes of ambivalence and disillusionment, especially around Ireland's troubled history of political violence, religion, and national identity. This approach allows for narratives that often present extreme circumstances, such as family breakdown, marginalisation, and endemic violence, without collapsing into despair, by deflecting or intensifying them through irony and dark humour. Theatrical precedents from Beckett and O'Casey established frameworks where catastrophe and everyday life coexist side by side, with characters failing to escape their fate, that many contemporary screen stories continue to echo. Barton (2019), for example observes this continuity in Abrahamson's *Garage* (Abrahamson, 2007) where characters communicate through 'Beckettian non sequiturs, fragmented sentences and silences' (Barton, 2019, p.170), while John Michael McDonagh's *The Guard* (McDonagh et al., 2011) and *Calvary* (McDonagh, 2014) demonstrate how contemporary filmmakers 'take on the archetypes of Irish rural fictions' and 'rework them first of all as comedy and secondly as tragedy' (Barton, 2019, p.186). Likewise, films by Abrahamson and O'Halloran such as *Garage* (Abrahamson, 2007) and *Adam and Paul* (Abrahamson, 2004), echo a Joycean odyssey, as tragic characters, shift between deadpan humour and devastating pathos (Gillespie, 2008), while Rooney's adapted fiction applies this sensibility to intimate relationships and class mobility within post-crash Ireland (Alfárez Mendiá, 2023). Across these texts the tragi-comic tone mirrors lived experience where notions of progress constantly collide with deep legacies of violence, trauma, and institutional abuse. As Barton notes contemporary Irish cinema addresses 'intense contemporary anxieties about the failure of authority' through works where 'the loss of the old orthodoxies' creates tensions that 'lead to an emotional void' (Barton, 2019, p.191.) suggesting that the tragi-comic is a deeply embedded 'genre' in Irish culture, and an implicit doxic principle for negotiating the ambivalent relationship between Ireland's past and present.

Together, these binaries and concepts play an essential role in the examination of the Irish screenwriting doxa. They help illuminate how Irish creative practitioners and institutions respond to and reshape the doxa around art and commerce, art and craft, literary legacy, simultaneously negotiating their place in a globalised industry. These themes will be central to this analysis of Irish screenwriting practice. The prevalence of binary thinking in this analysis reflects a deeper pattern within Irish cultural discourse itself.

### ***Transitions and Ambivalence***

It must be recognised that though this study examines a series of binary tensions in Irish screenwriting practice, the identification of these binaries is not entirely new in an Irish cultural context. For example, Richard Kearney in his study *Transitions* (Kearney, 1988) identified a similar ambiguity in Irish cultural works, noting that artists such as Seamus Heaney, Brian Friel, James Joyce, Neil Jordan, and Pat Murphy, contain an ambivalence in their work, embodying what Kearney calls the ‘two-minds’ (Kearney, 1988, p.14) of Irish identity and history, caught between the modern and the post-modern. Similarly, Martin McLoone has previously identified how Irish films are caught between artistic and commercial impulses, caught between Boston and Berlin, revealing a comparable tension between global market forces and artistic traditions (McLoone, 1994). The current study echoes these insights, applying a more specific theoretical lens of doxa to the domain of screenwriting. The striking parallels between Kearney’s and McLoone’s theory and the orthodox/heterodox tensions in Irish screenwriting will be explored further in the discussion and conclusion sections, which problematise the simple binary and suggest that these tensions may be fundamental to the Irish doxa. Having outlined the concept of the doxa, mapped its use as a tool of media analysis and noted other theoretical concepts and binaries relevant to Irish film, it is necessary to define the

international screenwriting orthodoxy, before examining how doxa intersects with screenwriting in Ireland.

### **The Hollywood/Anglophone Doxa**

It is important to establish the broader international context within which the Irish doxa operates. Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson (1985) identify a Hollywood narrative consensus that they termed ‘classical’, describing a system that privileges causally linked plots, psychologically motivated characters, narrative clarity and structural unity. This classical system restricts creativity, establishing orthodox norms that dominate film production across Anglophone filmmaking (Staiger et al., 1985). While originating in Hollywood, this classical system has become a dominant framework across Anglophone screenwriting contexts. Macdonald (2013) defines these constraints as the orthodox rules of screenwriting, describing how they determine what is deemed professionally viable within Anglophone screenwriting practice. Screenwriters who attempt to work outside these boundaries risk being seen as incompetent or amateur (Macdonald, 2013, p.10). A significant feature of this consensus is that the classical Hollywood narrative style functions as a taken-for-granted foundation of screenwriting pedagogy and development. For this reason, this will be referred to as the ‘Anglophone doxa’. Understanding this consensus is essential for examining how Irish screenwriting practice negotiates its relationship to these dominant narrative models.

### **The Doxa and Irish Screenwriting**

This project examines the doxa of Irish screenwriting through a case study approach, interviewing those who work in the context of screenwriting and ‘systematically gathering enough information about [the doxa] to effectively understand how it operates or functions’ (Berg, 2001, p.225). Ireland offers an excellent case for the study of screenwriting doxa, as the

structure and form of the Irish film industry mirrors wider Anglophone contexts but the Irish scale of industry is small and densely networked, which makes participants accessible.

The research examines how the doxa of Irish screenwriting functions, and encompasses several interconnected domains including education, training, practice and industry. Each of these domains contributes to the formation of Irish screenwriters' understanding of their craft and the limits of possibility within it. The evidence that will be presented in the findings suggests that there is indeed a tension in the doxa of Irish screenwriting practice between orthodox and heterodox, between art and commerce, between acceptance of a traditional, orthodox approach to screenwriting and a more heterodox view that questions the orthodoxy. This aligns broadly with the Anglophone doxa of screenwriting. Where the Irish doxa differs is in how participants consider the specificity of the doxa of Irish scripts and funding models. Here the evidence from participants suggests that the orthodox/heterodox binary reveals specific local characteristics, and what was orthodox (commerciality) becomes heterodoxy and what was heterodoxy (artistic authenticity) becomes orthodox. This offers a very different and much more nuanced reading of the doxa of Irish screenwriting than a simple orthodox/heterodox binary.

Where this study further diverges from previous studies of doxa is in its conceptualisation of the relationship between doxa, orthodoxy, and heterodoxy. Bourdieu argues that orthodoxy and heterodoxy emerge only after doxa has been revealed as such, that is once the 'natural', unquestioned assumptions have been revealed. This study proposes a more nuanced reading of this theoretical framework specifically applicable to Irish screenwriting practice. In Bourdieu's theoretical framework doxa represents the undiscussed or undisputed, namely that which is taken-for-granted within a field of practice, like art or education. Once this apparent 'natural' state is exposed, then the binary opposition between orthodoxy (the conservation of doxa) and heterodoxy (the challenge to doxa) appear. This research suggests

that within Irish screenwriting practice the tension between orthodoxy and heterodoxy constitutes the doxa itself. The tension between orthodox/heterodox, between commerce and art *is* the doxa.

What is taken-for-granted across screenwriting practice is this fundamental tension between formulaic rules and artistic expression, a site of struggle between commercial goals and creative aspirations. This tension is not secondary to the practice but is instead embodied and articulated by practitioners who struggle to conceptualise or think of positions outside of this binary. There is evidence that discourse surrounding screenwriting ultimately collapses back into this tension between artistic imperatives and formulaic commercial interests.

Within an industrial capitalist system this dialectic between art and commerce, between orthodoxy and heterodoxy is not incidental or secondary to creative practice rather it is intrinsic to the practice itself, the practice cannot exist without this tension. This constitutes the doxa of Irish screenwriting, a doxa which shapes the boundaries of what is thinkable within the field of Irish screenwriting practice. It becomes almost impossible to conceive of a position that is outside of this framework of art and commerce. The signification distinction in this research's theoretical position is that the tension between commercial and artistic imperatives is itself the thing that is taken-for-granted. Having established this theoretical foundation, the structure of the thesis now requires clarification.

## **Overview of the Thesis**

This thesis will continue with a comprehensive literature review in Chapter 2, examining the existing scholarship on screenwriting and Irish film. Chapter 3 will detail the methodology used in the research, including the case study approach, interview methods and theoretical framework. The tension between orthodoxy/heterodoxy in the doxa of Irish screenwriting is explored via five thematic chapters, 4-8.

- Chapter 4: The Learning Journey. This chapter examines how screenwriters acquire knowledge about their practice, revealing tensions between formal educational approaches that often promote both orthodox structural principles *and* more intuitive experiential learning that may challenge these conventions. The findings show how the doxa is transmitted and internalised through various educational domains.
- Chapter 5: Screenwriting Manuals. This chapter explores Irish screenwriters' attitudes toward screenwriting how-to-manuals and their place in Irish screenwriting practice. It finds significant ambivalence toward manuals as embodying the orthodox rules. They are both acknowledged as useful yet regarded as detrimental to true creativity. Participants' attitudes toward manuals reveals an ambivalence in the Irish doxa.
- Chapter 6: Rules of the Game. This chapter investigates screenwriters' relationship to the structural rules of screenwriting, exploring how they negotiate between adherence to established formal conventions like three-act structure, character arcs, conflict, and more experimental approaches. The findings reveal how these rules function as both supportive scaffolding and potential limitations on creative expression.
- Chapter 7: Irish Scripts. This chapter examines how notions of Irishness in screenwriting reflect tensions between global industry standards and local cultural expression. The findings demonstrate how screenwriters navigate between internationally recognised storytelling conventions and distinctly Irish narrative traditions, revealing the specific local characteristics of the Irish doxa.
- Chapter 8: Frustration with Funders. This chapter explores how institutional funding structures influence Irish screenwriting practice, highlighting frustrations for practitioners between administrative requirements, commercial industrial imperatives and artistic expression. The findings examine how funding bodies, such as Screen

Ireland, both enforce orthodoxy through their selection criteria, while simultaneously claiming to support innovative work.

Across each of these chapters the research demonstrates how to varying degrees participants are aware of the rules of the game, aware of the doxa as such and accept certain practices or aspects of the orthodoxy while questioning others. Some aspects, such as learning the craft or rules of the game, are more aligned with the orthodoxy, but others, such as frustration with funders, are more questioning and challenging. Throughout the data participants can be heard ‘speaking the doxa’ articulating sometimes unwittingly the unspoken rules and assumptions that guide their practice. Once the findings are outlined Chapter 9 will offer conclusions and discussion of the implications of this work for future research on the practice of Irish screenwriting. This structure enables both empirical discovery and theoretical contribution.

## **Conclusion**

This research aims to contribute to the growing domain of screenwriting scholarship by applying the concept of doxa to the case of Irish screenwriting practice, building upon Bourdieu (1977), Schultz (2007) and Macdonald’s (2013) earlier application of these concepts to creative practices. It does so by examining the tension between orthodox and heterodox positions between commerce and art, across various dimensions of Irish screenwriting practice. This research reveals how taken-for-granted assumptions shape not just individual practitioners’ creative choices but potentially an entire ecosystem of film production in Ireland. This approach offers new insights into the attitudes toward creative inspiration and formal constraints in cultural production with potential applications beyond an Irish context to screenwriting and other creative practices globally.



## Chapter 2 Literature Review

### Introduction

This literature review examines existing research on the doxa of screenwriting, building primarily on the foundational work of Bourdieu (1977) Schultz (2007) and Macdonald (2013). As discussed previously, Bourdieu's (1977) framework of doxa, orthodoxy, and heterodoxy form the framework for this research. Doxa represents beliefs and assumptions so fundamental to a field that they are simply taken-for-granted and appear natural. The transformation from doxa to conscious debate occurs when crises or changing circumstances disrupt the alignment between accepted doxa and lived experience. This rupture produces orthodoxy and heterodoxy as opposing forces. Orthodoxy is the conscious defence of what was previously unspoken, heterodoxy represents the challenging voice, offering alternative beliefs and practices that contest the dominant orthodoxy. Over time, this dynamic tension between orthodoxy and heterodoxy can create the conditions for new forms of doxa to emerge (Bourdieu, 1977; Deer, 2014, pp.114-125; Grenfell, 2014, pp.114-125). This research argues that this tension is in fact a defining feature of the practice of Irish screenwriting.

Macdonald's two works - *The presentation of the screen idea in narrative film-making* (Macdonald, 2004c) and *Screenwriting Poetics and the Screen Idea* (2013) - provide the theoretical foundation for establishing how doxa operates within screenwriting practice, applying Bourdieu's concept of doxa to the practice of screenwriting in the UK. Macdonald identifies how an orthodoxy and heterodoxy operate in tension within a doxa of screenwriting. This Irish study takes Macdonald's framework as a tool for examining three domains that influence Irish screenwriting - manuals, industry, and academia. This chapter adopts Macdonald's use of doxa in screenwriting poetics to review the relevant literature in each

domain, identifying how this research will extend his analysis through a specific case study of Irish screenwriting practice.

Macdonald (2013) defines doxa as received wisdom, the shared understanding of what constitutes right and wrong practice in screenwriting. He distinguishes between orthodoxy, namely the codified subset of doxa as found in manuals and how-to books, as opposed to heterodoxy, namely perspectives offering broader, more artistic options, outside mainstream commercial practice (Macdonald, 2013, p.10). His analysis reveals fundamental tensions between industrial requirements for formula versus artistic aspirations for complexity and experimentation. Where Macdonald's work provides a comprehensive analysis of UK screenwriting practice, this research extends that framework to examine whether similar patterns exist in Irish screenwriting and what specific characteristics might emerge from Ireland's specific cultural and industrial context.

Following an outline of Macdonald's use of doxa, this chapter reviews literature across the three identified domains. Firstly, it examines research on screenwriting manuals and their role in establishing orthodoxy. Secondly, it explores how industrial practices and history shape the screenwriting doxa. Thirdly, it considers academia's dual role in both reinforcing and challenging established practices. This chapter concludes by identifying gaps in current knowledge about Irish screenwriting doxa and establishing the foundation for this studies' analysis. The investigation of these gaps begins with a mapping of the domains through which screenwriting practice operates.

### **Domains of Screenwriting**

This research explores whether Irish screenwriters operate within a doxa that shapes their practice, examining if they write with a set of beliefs about screenwriting and the screenplay that can be described as doxic. To answer this question the research adopts

Macdonald's use of the concept of doxa, as established by Pierre Bourdieu, exploring three domains as potentially influencing screenwriters:

1. Screenwriting manuals, which provide popular and widely shared guidance on screenwriting.
2. Industry, which shapes screenwriters by commissioning and producing screenplays.
3. Academia, which influences screenwriters through training and education.

This chapter reviews the relevant literature on each domain, examining how they may be shaping screenwriting practice, with particular attention paid to Macdonald's foundational analysis. The first domain, screenwriting manuals, represents the most explicit codification of screenwriting knowledge.

### **Manuals and Screenwriting**

Numerous 'how to' manuals are available to the screenwriter. They are not a new phenomenon, having their origins in playwriting manuals of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Kristin Thompson argues that dominant Hollywood storytelling strategies trace back about a century linking them to classical narrative principles from the early film era (Thompson, 1999). Koivumäki (2016) also connects this to the heritage of dramatic theory, adopted in theatre playwriting, originating from sources such as Eugene Scribe and his concept of the well-made play, William Archer's *Play-making* (1912), Gustav Freytag's *Technique of the Drama* (Freytag, 1895) and Ferdinand Brunetière's, *The Law of the Drama* (Brunetiere, 1914). Price (2013) notes that early examples of manuals include Eustace Hale Ball's *Cinema Plays: How to Write Them, How to Sell Them* (Ball, 1920), J. Arthur Nelson's *The Photo-Play: How to Write, How to Sell* (Nelson, 1913) and Epes Winthrop Sargent's *The Technique of the Photoplay* (Sargent, 1916). As the Hollywood studio system evolved during the 20<sup>th</sup> century the continuity script became standardised, and manuals emerged as guides to meet the industry's need for

production efficiency and uniformity. These early manuals emerged alongside the establishment of cinema as a commercial industry, suggesting that the desire to systematise screenwriting has deep historical roots (Conor, 2014b, p.16.).

Early screenwriting manuals emerged primarily from industrial imperatives rather than artistic concerns. The process of writing for the screen did not naturally emerge from other literary forms such as the play script, the novel, or poetry, nor to meet the artistic impulse of filmmakers, but developed primarily to address the needs of an industrial production process (Price, 2013; Staiger et al., 1985). These manuals codified narrative and formatting conventions to streamline studio operations, standardising script layout, scene structure, and story elements to enable efficient scheduling, budgeting, and a division of labour across departments. By establishing shared frameworks and terminology, they facilitated communication between writers, directors, producers, and technical staff, transforming screenwriting into a systematised craft that could support the demands of mass production (Price, 2013). Within this Hollywood system manuals served a normative and pedagogical function within a highly structured and industrialised production system (Tieber, 2012).

The contemporary explosion of screenwriting manuals did not occur until the late 1970s and 1980s. This period marked a shift toward the master-scene format, an industry standard screenplay layout used in modern Hollywood scripts. This format convention organises stories into discrete scenes, without specifying camera shots or cuts, leaving those choices to directors (Price, 2013). This format has subsequently become the industry standard, which coincided with increased academic and commercial interest in screenwriting pedagogy (Langford, 2010; Price, 2013). Syd Field's *Screenplay*, published in 1979 is widely credited as the first modern manual and as initiating the contemporary boom in screenplay manuals. Field's work established many of the conventions that continue to dominate manual discourse, particularly the emphasis on three-act structure, plot points, conflict and psychological depth in characters,

as fundamental to effective screenwriting. Between 2007 and 2012 over a hundred screenwriting manuals were published, which underpins their importance to the practice of screenwriting and their potential role in the construction of a doxa of screenwriting (Brenes, 2014).

The meaning and function of these manuals varied significantly across national cinema contexts. In European cinema, screenwriting discourse developed differently, due to unique cultural and industrial histories. France, for example was late to formalise and codify their screenwriting compared to American practices (Leahy, 2015). In the Soviet system screenwriting served ideological functions within Communism (Tieber, 2012). In Indian cinema, screenwriting manuals achieved widespread circulation for amateurs seeking to learn the craft outside of the industrial system (Yadav, 2011). These differences across national cinemas demonstrate how screenwriting manuals interact with unique cultural contexts, mediating between local and global artistic traditions.

Central to this project is previous analysis done by Macdonald (2004c, 2013), which sets out to identify what is deemed ‘normal practice’ in screenwriting through a meta-analysis of the literature, including screenwriting manuals (Macdonald, 2004c, p.71) Through this process Macdonald (2004c) identifies and describes a *doxa* of screenwriting, the body of ‘received wisdom’ which represents everything within the field, the right and wrong way to work within the practice (Macdonald, 2004c, p.70). Drawing on Bourdieu’s theoretical framework, Macdonald regards the screenwriting doxa as that which appears self-evident within the practice, but upon which all subsequent discussion and creative judgement rests. Within this analytical framework screenwriting manuals emerge as particularly significant sites of investigation, as they codify the practices of the industry, representing explicit expressions of beliefs about the doxa itself (Macdonald, 2013, p.10). From this doxa Macdonald extracts what he considers the ‘screenwriting orthodoxy’, a codified set of prescriptive practices, such

as three-act structure, character arcs, conflict, and character change. These represent some aspects of mainstream Hollywood narrative style (Staiger et al., 1985), often manifesting as doctrine or the way that things *must* be done. The central finding of Macdonald's meta-analysis is that this orthodoxy is pervasive within global screenwriting practice, establishing a normative framework within which the field operates, even as this orthodoxy potentially constrains the boundaries of creativity (Macdonald, 2013, p.10).

Critical to understanding Macdonald's view is recognising the epistemological status he assigns to screenwriting manuals themselves. For Macdonald, these texts are not 'authoritative' in any prescriptive sense; rather 'manuals emanate from the *doxa*' (Macdonald, 2004c, p.70), functioning as texts that reveal rather than establish the field's received wisdom. He argues that manuals are to some extent representative of 'normative practice' (Macdonald, 2004c). Macdonald argues that a strong 'correlation of views' in a sample of manuals might demonstrate evidence of a *doxa* or conventional view of what is accepted in industrial practice (Macdonald, 2004c). For Macdonald there is a deep connection between the conventions found in manuals and their domination in industrial practice (Macdonald, 2004c).

This connection between the conventions formalised in screenwriting manuals and their dominance in industrial practice is central to understanding the orthodoxy of screenwriting. For Macdonald, manuals do not simply describe existing practices, they actively rationalise and codify them, exerting a powerful, shaping influence on how screen narratives are developed in the film industry (Macdonald, 2013). This process of codification transforms implicit knowledge into prescriptive doctrine, which then shapes industrial practice through both economic and ideological mechanisms. The industry embraces these standardised frameworks because 'it suits the industry to promote any framework of skills and principles that reduce the risk of financial failure' (Macdonald, 2013, p.18), creating a self-perpetuating system where manuals provide the illusion of control in a highly uncertain market. The resulting orthodoxy

functions as a disciplinary mechanism, as ‘concrete directives about story, structure, characterisation, conflict and rewriting are all designed to mould and control the labour of the screenwriter at the level of the individual’ (Macdonald, 2013, p.42). Through this connection manuals achieve far more than simply pedagogical influence, they establish the very terms upon which industrial practice operates, defining not only how scripts should be written but what constitutes legitimate screenwriting itself.

Other scholars, such as (Conor, 2014b, p.16.) also note that manuals are normative, in that they define the standards and conventions of screenwriting, they are pedagogic, and they claim to offer ‘insider’ knowledge of the industry. Conor argues that these three characteristics operate in specific ways. Manuals define standards by establishing what constitutes correct screenplay format, structure and content. The manuals standardise screenwriting by promoting homogenous approaches, particularly the three-act structure popularised by Syd Field, with structure constructed as paramount and as a ‘natural law’ (Conor, 2014a, p.129). They present screenwriting as knowable and ‘do-able’ through rigid formulas, structural planning and universal principles (often citing Ancient Greek philosopher, Aristotle), with manuals asserting that ‘Aristotle’s work on story is foundational (Conor, 2014a, p.128) and relying on ‘discourses of the ancient and timeless’ (Conor, 2014a, p.128) to legitimise contemporary conventions, prescribing specific techniques for character creation and conflict development with ‘the need for conflict as another crucial node of the successful screenplay’ (Conor, 2014a, p.129), repeated in ‘mantra-like form’ (Conor, 2014a, p.129).

They are pedagogic and offer step-by-step guidance for aspiring writers. They serve as educational tools and alternatives to formal education, offering both friction-free paths to success and a ready alternative to higher education courses’ (Conor, 2014a, p.122), and function as what Conor terms ‘psy-technology’, that shape writers into independent and responsible workers. These texts ‘purportedly offer the tools and skills required to fashion a working

subjecthood from scratch' (Conor, 2014a, p.122), advising writers on 'how to be a writer, how to harness one's creativity, how to organise one's daily writing life' (Conor, 2014a, p.124) in order to make the screenwriting self utterly 'thinkable and manageable' (Conor, 2014a, p.124).

Conor claims that they promote a form of self-help discourse, encouraging traits like 'energy, initiative and personal responsibility' (Conor, 2014a, p.124). They claim insider knowledge by positioning their authors as industry professionals who understand the real requirements for commercial success. Manuals legitimate themselves by presenting expert advice from industry 'gurus' and successful writers, offering supposed insider secrets and commercial understanding, with 'a how-to-career' at times able to 'far eclipse a screenwriting career, as the guru status of Syd Field or Robert McKee illustrates' (Conor, 2014a, p.133). They promote an entrepreneurial writer identity focused on pitching, selling and networking as much as writing itself. However, Conor argues that the advice in the manuals is often chaotic and inconsistent, but they are embedded in industry and education, being written for and used by writers, producers and commissioners. She notes the ambivalence with which they are viewed by screenwriters, that 'writers decried the hegemony of manuals and repudiated them as well as acknowledging their centrality to their profession' describing them as both 'a wall to bounce ideas off' and the 'worst thing you could possibly do' (Conor, 2014a, p.133) with some stating 'I blow hot and cold on using the books' and 'I've stopped looking at them' (Conor, 2014a, p.133).

Conor's argument is that manuals both reflect and reinforce the new cultural economy by individualising screenwriting labour, simultaneously standardising it through formulaic approaches, demonstrating 'the discursive power of this how-to-genre to simultaneously produce individual careers ... and mould those careers' (Conor, 2014a, p.130). She argues that manuals 'foreground and facilitate the persistent atomisation of their readers' (Conor, 2014a, p.135), precisely because they speak to writers as 'necessarily precarious, isolated, and



belaboured individuals' (Conor, 2014a, p.135) which 'severely delimit[s] the possibilities for professional agency, creative collaboration, and criticality beyond the individual career biography' (Conor, 2014a, p.133), thereby creating enterprising writers who know how to navigate between personal creativity and market demands (Conor, 2014a, p.133.).

The significance of Conor's analysis for understanding doxa is that it reveals how screenwriting manuals operate as a significant mechanism through which orthodox assumptions become naturalised and internalised. By positioning writers as isolated individuals who must master standardised formulas to succeed, manuals embed the orthodox principles of commerciality, structure, and market logic as self-evident truths. This individualisation of practice obscures alternative, more collaborative or heterodox approaches to screenwriting, reinforcing the very tensions that constitute the doxa of the field. In this way, manuals do not simply reflect existing orthodoxies but actively produce and perpetuate them, shaping the taken-for-granted assumptions that govern screenwriting practice.

Similarly, Koivumäki (2016) shows how manuals connect to doxa by identifying two sub-genres of manual, the self-help manual and the collection of screenwriter interviews (this research refers only to the self-help versions) (Koivumäki, 2016, p.44). The self-help manual is characterised by prescriptive advice, step by step processes and claims to offer formulaic approaches to successful screenwriting (Koivumäki, 2016, p.44). The collection of screenwriter interviews, by contrast, tends to emphasise the individual creative process and unique approaches of established professionals. Regardless of their status, each manual stands alone, rarely acknowledging previous work or other manuals on the subject of screenwriting (Koivumäki, 2016, p.44).

Manuals therefore shape screenwriting in a variety of ways. One of the ways they shape the practice of screenwriting is through strict adherence to Hollywood narrative orthodoxy, with a resulting homogenisation and standardisation of screenwriting emerging because of the

manuals. This homogenising tendency has been examined in detail by Macdonald (2013) who considers that standardisation can present itself through features that become increasingly normative, for example, the use of a neo-Aristotelian three-act approach to structuring the screenplay and through how character and conflict are approached. Manuals typically construct character as an individual protagonist with a clear external goal, an internal flaw or need, and a transformation arc that resolves with a climactic choice (Field, 1979; McKee, 1999). Conflict is framed as ‘rising action’, a relentless obstacle escalation designed to keep an ‘imagined’ mainstream audience emotionally engaged (Sedgwick, 2018). This manual approach to teaching screenwriting favours certain story types and protagonists, who are ‘heroic’, often male or individualist protagonists, while ignoring ensemble, situational, or structural narrative central characters. The consequence of this is that most scripts begin to resemble one another, not only at the level of structure, but in their fundamental approach to things like character, pacing, and theme, because they are all built from the same small set of models (O’Meara et al., 2023). When three-act, goal oriented, conflictual story is treated as universal, deviations from this template risk being read as ‘wrong’ rather than as creative choices (Thompson, 1999). Scripts that delay or just reimagine conflict, emphasise atmosphere, or experiment with time, can be labelled as ‘slow’ or ‘unstructured’ against the mainstream standard (Dancyger and Rush, 2002). This narrows the range of viable forms, marginalising other types of heterodox stories that do not prioritise the rules found in the manuals. O’Meara et al (2023) argue that these assumptions operate as a ‘hidden curriculum’ in university and professional training contexts, where only stories that fit the manual model seemed to represent ‘good’ films, leading to the reproduction of dominant industrial patterns.

The contemporary screenwriting manual industry is dominated by what is often termed the ‘guru’ system, where certain authors have achieved fame and near-canonical status. Christopher Vogler’s *The Writer’s Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers* (1992) adapted Joseph

Campbell's monomyth (Campbell, 2008) for screenwriters, creating an influential structural approach. Linda Seger contributed feminist perspectives with *Making a Good Script Great* (1987). William Goldman's *Adventures in the Screen Trade* (1983) provided insider industry knowledge that many consider essential reading. In more recent years Robert McKee has been the dominant 'guru'. His book '*Story: Style, Structure, Substance, and the Principles of Screenwriting*' (1997) has been a dominant voice in screenwriting circles for many years. Both his written work and his seminars achieved significant institutional standing within the Hollywood industry. Whereas, Blake Snyder's *Save the Cat!* (Snyder, 2005), gets as much praise as criticism for its overtly formulaic and commercial approach (Price, 2013).

Beyond these established classic manuals, a large sub-industry has emerged, often building on their ideas. Academic publishers like Focal Press, Methuen Drama, and Michael Wiese Productions have developed large screenwriting catalogues. Software companies like 'Final Draft' have integrated manual style guidance into their products, alongside a proliferation of online platforms that offer courses, webinars and downloadable guides (Price, 2013). This proliferation demonstrates how screenwriting manuals have evolved from basic instructional texts for industry into a self-sustaining commercial enterprise in their own right, which both responds to and creates demand for screenwriting education.

In addition to the sheer volume of screenwriting manuals on offer, which serves to construct a doxa of screenwriting, the guidance that manuals offer is homogeneous and normative (Ashton and Conor, 2016, p.128; Macdonald, 2013, p.38). Broadly speaking, manuals promote a classical Hollywood style (Staiger et al., 1985). This style has a number of features such as drama built on conflict, linear narrative, Aristotelian three-act structure, psychological 'realism and naturalism, intelligible motives behind human actions, and believable and recognisable behaviour of characters' (Koivumäki, 2016, p.42). The manuals often overlap and create normativity by emphasising these elements in the screenplay, such as

structure, conflict, character, linear narrative and psychological realism. This normative approach shapes screenwriting practice by establishing clear expectations about what constitutes effective storytelling. For example, this sense of overlap in the manuals is clearly seen in the appendix of John Yorke's manual *Into the Woods* (Yorke, 2013), where Yorke offers a useful meta-overview of the typical advice found in most 'how-to' manuals.

|                       | ONE                                                                                                                                   | TWO                                                                | THREE                                                                                               | FOUR                                                                                                            | FIVE                                                  |                  |                  |                       |                  |
|-----------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|------------------|------------------|-----------------------|------------------|
| TERENCE/<br>FREYTAG   | Set-up and call to action<br><br>Inciting incident                                                                                    | Things go well<br>Initial objectives achieved<br><br>Turning point | Things start to go wrong as forces of antagonism gather strength<br><br>Midpoint                    | Things go really badly wrong precipitating final confrontation with antagonist<br><br>Turning point/worst point | Overcoming flaw<br>Matters resolve for good or ill    |                  |                  |                       |                  |
| VLADIMIR<br>PROPP     | Villainy or lack                                                                                                                      | Departure                                                          | Struggle<br>Victory<br>Midpoint<br>Liquidation                                                      | Return<br>Pursuit<br>Unrecognized Arrival                                                                       | Difficult Task<br>Marriage                            |                  |                  |                       |                  |
| JOSEPH<br>CAMPBELL    | Innocent<br><br>Call to world of adventure<br><br>Childhood separation                                                                | Refusal of call<br><br>Supernatural aid                            | Crossing threshold<br>Atonement With father<br>Midpoint<br>Apotheosis                               | Refusal of the return<br><br>Magic flight                                                                       | Rescue<br>Freedom to live<br><br>Master of two worlds |                  |                  |                       |                  |
| MAUREEN<br>MURDOCK*   | Separation from feminine<br><br>Identification with masculine                                                                         | Road of trials<br>2-headed dragon<br>Slaying the ogre              | Illusory boon<br>Initiation and descent to goddess<br>Midpoint<br>Yearning to connect with feminine | Wild woman<br>Healing                                                                                           | Integrating the feminine<br>Beyond duality            |                  |                  |                       |                  |
|                       | ONE                                                                                                                                   | TWO                                                                |                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                 | THREE                                                 |                  |                  |                       |                  |
| SYD<br>FIELD          | Set up                                                                                                                                | Confrontation<br>Pinch Point<br>Pinch Point                        |                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                 | Climax and resolution                                 |                  |                  |                       |                  |
|                       | ONE                                                                                                                                   | TWO                                                                | THREE                                                                                               | FOUR                                                                                                            | FIVE                                                  |                  |                  |                       |                  |
| VOGLER                | Ordinary world<br>Call to adventure                                                                                                   | Reluctance or refusal of call<br>Encouragement by mentor           | Crossing 1st threshold<br>Supreme ordeal<br>Midpoint<br>Tests allies enemies                        | Reward<br>Pursuit on the road back<br>3rd threshold<br>Death                                                    | Resurrection<br>Return with elixir                    |                  |                  |                       |                  |
| BLAKE<br>SNYDER       | Opening image<br>Theme stated<br>Set-up<br>Catalyst<br>Inciting incident                                                              | Debate<br>B-Story<br>Break into Act Two                            | Fun and games<br>Midpoint<br>Bad guys close in                                                      | All is lost<br>Dark Night of the Soul                                                                           | Break into last act<br>Finale<br>Final image          |                  |                  |                       |                  |
| JOHN<br>TRUBY         | Need/Desire<br>1st reversal                                                                                                           | Plan<br>1st Counter-attack                                         | Drive<br>Seeming defeats<br>2nd reversal                                                            | Audience revelation by ally<br>3rd reversal                                                                     | Battle<br>Moral decision<br>New equilibrium           |                  |                  |                       |                  |
|                       | ONE                                                                                                                                   | TWO                                                                | THREE                                                                                               | FOUR                                                                                                            | FIVE                                                  | SIX              | SEVEN            | EIGHT                 |                  |
| FRANK<br>DANIEL†      | Status quo                                                                                                                            | The external want made explicit                                    | Exploring the new world                                                                             | 1st big test overcome                                                                                           | Forces gathering                                      | Hitting the wall | Desperate action | Success and aftermath |                  |
| LINDA<br>ARONSON      | Normality Disturbance Protagonist Plan Surprise Obstacle Complications Sub-stories More complications and Obstacles Climax Resolution |                                                                    |                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                 |                                                       |                  |                  |                       |                  |
| CHRISTOPHER<br>BOOKER | Call to action                                                                                                                        |                                                                    | Dream                                                                                               |                                                                                                                 | Frustration                                           |                  | Nightmare        |                       | Matters resolved |
| MICHAEL<br>HAUGE      | 1. Set-up                                                                                                                             | 2. New situation                                                   | 3. Progress                                                                                         |                                                                                                                 | 4. Complications & higher stakes                      |                  | 5. Final push    | 6. Aftermath          |                  |

(Yorke, 2013)

What is evident from this graphic is the conceptual overlap in twelve of the most widely used screenwriting manuals,<sup>3</sup> which repeat the same advice. They do so in many ways, yet the most pertinent examples include Neo-Aristotelian dramatic theory, with its emphasis on three-act structure, conflict and character change. From a narrative perspective this shows that they are indebted to a Neo-Aristotelian tradition as it is received and transmitted through the screenwriting manuals themselves, rather than through direct engagement with Aristotle's *Poetics* (Aristotle, 1997) as a primary philosophical text (Brenes, 2014).

Most of the manuals can be broadly defined as Neo-Aristotelian in their presentation of dramatic theory and narrative structure (Brenes, 2014). For example, Koivumäki observes 'classical dramaturgy as proposed by Aristotle – [establishes many] of [the] essential elements such as problem (conflict), cause and effect, turning points and closed ending' (Koivumäki, 2016, p.43). This is significant as in so doing the manuals draw on classical culture to present the view that conventional screenplay rules are timeless and universal and so they are natural and therefore taken-for-granted - or doxic. For most screenwriting manuals, the Neo-Aristotelian inheritance is filtered through the manuals', rather than cited from Aristotle's *Poetics* directly (Koivumäki, 2016, p.43; Pope, 1998, p.xv). Manuals revel in the apparent simplicity of Aristotle, regularly repeating the mantra of the importance of the three-act structure to storytelling, that all stories must have a beginning, middle and an end (Ashton and Conor, 2016, p.129). This three-act structure typically divides a screenplay into: setup (Act I), confrontation (Act II), and resolution (Act III), with specific plot points marking transitions between acts. Blake Snyder emphasises the importance of structure, '[t]he craftsmanship it

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<sup>3</sup> John Yorke includes Vladimir Propp and Joseph Campbell in this list, even though Propp or Campbell never wrote a manual. Yorke notes 'I have included Vladimir Propp and Joseph Campbell in the table, neither of whom would have seen themselves as 'gurus' but whose inclusion underlines the argument for a unifying structure. All their models fit, though some more readily than others. It's grossly simplistic, and for more detail all should be read, but it serves I hope to illustrate the main point – all are grasping to capture the true shape of story.' YORKE, J. 2013. *Into the Woods: How stories work and why we tell them*, Penguin UK. (p.255)

takes, the patient work, the magic of storytelling on film, all come together in how you execute and realise structure. It is a skill you must know' (Snyder, 2005, p.158). As Syd Field concludes 'Set-up, confrontation, and resolution. It is the stuff of drama' (Field, 2005, p.28).

Structure is *the* central theme in the manuals (Field, 2005; Sedgwick, 2018; Snyder, 2005). Robert McKee (McKee, 1999), has become a significant figure in screenwriting discourse through his influential worldwide screenwriting seminars and his popular and widely used manual *Story: Substance, Style and the Principles of Screenwriting*, (McKee, 1999). McKee argues for a universal story structure, and it is through figures such as McKee that the Neo-Aristotelian inheritance principally reaches screenwriting practitioners.

As well as Aristotle, McKee also draws on the structural work of Vladimir Propp (1928) and Joseph Campbell (1949) in arguing that archetypal story is universal but expresses itself differently in each culture. The structuralism of Propp is clearly reflected in the work of McKee and many other screenwriting manuals. In his most influential work, *Morphology of the Folktale*, first published in Russian in 1928 and later translated into English in 1958, Propp argued that all Russian folk tales shared a common underlying structure composed of narrative functions that occur in a fixed sequence regardless of the tale's specific content or characters. He identified recurring character types such as the hero, villain, and helper, and his structural approach demonstrated that stories could be analysed and understood by breaking them down into fundamental repeatable components (Propp, 1968).

In a similar manner, Joseph Campbell's work on story structure centres on the concept of the monomyth or the hero's journey, which he established in his 1949 book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Campbell, 2008). Campbell argued that myths and stories from cultures around the world share fundamental narrative patterns, which he broke down into three stages - departure, initiation and return. Within these stages Campbell identified a series of recurring steps such as the call to adventure, crossing, facing trials, achieving a boon, and returning

transformed, which together form a universal template for the hero's transformative journey (Campbell, 2008). The ideas of Joseph Campbell became particularly influential after they were referenced by George Lucas in the creation of his Star Wars saga (Vogler, 1992).

Similarly, McKee, following this structuralist approach, contends that storytelling follows universal patterns derived from human psychology and cultural myths, making his approach applicable across different national contexts. Revelling in apparent simplicity he argues that there is no mystery to these principles because storytelling craft has been around since Aristotle's *Poetics* (McKee, 1999, p.7). The orthodox modern screenplay is defined to a large degree by that structure. Most subsequent manuals emphasise this structural element of screenwriting, perhaps because it is easy to teach and learn. Though not as widely influential, contemporary Irish manual writer Lindsay Sedgwick repeats the importance of the three-act 'formula' as something essential to a successful script, 'In the three-act formula, *story* is more important than *texture*. (Sedgwick, 2018, p.82). Field concurs 'Structure is the foundation, the base, the blueprint of the screenplay; as William Goldman says, "Screenplay is structure." If you don't know the basic structure of your story line, 'you're not really ready to start writing' (Field, 2005, p.144).

Though three-act structure is something quickly grasped, the apparent simplicity of the three-act structure obscures a lot of detail (Nelmes, 2007, p.111). While, the three-act framework provides a broad organising principle, it does not clarify what exactly goes in each act, how long they should be or what characters should do or say. Though easy to grasp conceptually it offers limited practical guidance for writers attempting to develop their material, creating a gap between theoretical framework and practical application. Structure is easy to teach but practically useless for a writer to employ (Nelmes, 2007). This tension between theoretical simplicity and practical utility perhaps reveals a fundamental issue with how screenwriting structure is taught and conceptualised. Though the three-act model is useful

as a pedagogical tool for introducing narrative structure, its oversimplification ultimately fails to provide screenwriters with the specific, practical guidance they require to write a screenplay. It obscures as much as it reveals but nonetheless plays an important role in forming a doxa of screenwriting.

A further aspect of the orthodox position presented in most of the manuals is a preoccupation with character and conflict. Most manuals argue that the main character requires a compelling goal, the main character must be active. ‘The classical Aristotelian dramatic story has one main character with a problem that will be resolved at the end of a linear narrative’ (Koivumäki, 2016, p.42). Manuals often borrow from psychological theory in character creation strategies. Whenever there is a screenplay that concerns characters, and inevitably popular screenplays do in some form, then there will be a concern with psychology and identity. (Ashton and Conor, 2016, p.129; Dooley, 2016, p.132; Vogler, 1992). For Sedgwick, ‘the story tends to be linear, constantly moving forward and events are transparent. They exist to show how your central character is changing or to force her to change. They’re not arbitrary or open to various interpretations’ (Sedgwick, 2018, p.82).

Many manuals argue that character arcs are essential to the screenplay (Batty, 2011, p.9; Truby, 2008). Most manuals argue that characters must go on a journey of self-discovery. ‘One of the things they talk about a lot in a story is the character arc. Your character’s got to change’ (Austin Film Festival, 2013, pp.66-67). The position is that a ‘good’ screenplay must have a character arc where they change from how they were in the beginning to how they are at the end. For example, ‘something about the script that’s intriguing: These characters are doing something that’s interesting to me—it’s a story that I can’t stop reading. You just want to keep turning the pages’ (Hanson and Herman, 2010, p.49). Connected to this is the concept of ‘rising action’ where the drama intensifies as the story progresses toward a major climactic event where everything changes for the character (Macdonald, 2013). For example, in the 1989



film *Rainman* (Levinson et al., 1989), the central character Charlie Babbit (Tom Cruise) changes from being selfish and money oriented to being kind and caring when he finds out he has an autistic brother Raymond (Dustin Hoffman), who he never knew about and he builds a relationship with Raymond as they travel across America (Levinson et al., 1989). The manuals make it clear that the character must be on a journey of change (Sedgwick, 2018). As Sedgwick notes

Everything in your three-act script works towards your central character recognising her weakness or need. She reaches into herself, overcomes her ‘fatal flaw’ and finds her inner strength *just in time* to overcome injustice or succeed in her goal. In doing so, she achieves personal redemption and regains self-respect. Good wins out over evil and we celebrate. It is unrealistic, but then again, you’re telling a story (Sedgwick, 2018, p.82).

This analysis and overview of the screenwriting manuals outlined above demonstrates how they come together to generate a coherent normativity and a set of established and agreed rules that shape the practice of screenwriting. Examples outlined above of where this occurs include the neo-Aristotelian sensibility of the manuals, their approach to structure, to conflict and to character. Following Macdonald’s (2013) analysis, manuals will be a significant source of information that will help to establish if there is a doxa relating to Irish screenwriting. Though most manuals offer a set of strategies to help write a screenplay they repeat and overlap with each other. This raises the question as to whether repeated and simplistic ‘rules’ as expressed in manuals go on to shape an industry orthodoxy. This question will be addressed in the findings Chapter 5: Screenwriting manuals.

The above analysis demonstrates how screenwriting manuals and gurus are not just an obscure sideline to what happens in the industry, relevant only to new entrants, or amateurs who want to learn the craft of screenwriting but have grown to fundamentally shape discourse within industry in simplistic, formulaic and arguably negative ways (Conor, 2014b, p.123.).

Conor sees the impact as negative because it simplifies and homogenises the shape of stories and prescribes a formula for screenplays. This impacts on industry as manuals are being written for and used by writers, producers and commissioners (Conor, 2014a, p.133). All of this leads to a standardisation and conventional orthodoxy in screenwriting practice and aligns with Ashton and Conor (2016) who argue that '[s]chemas in the manuals vary somewhat in technical terms they use but generally map onto 'each other in strikingly homogenous ways' (Ashton and Conor, 2016, p.128). This lack of narrative diversity shapes conventional screenwriting practice. However, though they are extremely significant, manuals are just one aspect of the doxa surrounding screenwriting (Price, 2013, p.206). Another aspect is industrial which has its own sometimes conflicting, sometimes overlapping discourse. The second domain, industrial practice, operates through different mechanisms yet exerts equally powerful influence.

### **Industry and Screenwriting**

Following Macdonald's framework, the doxa of screenwriting is significantly influenced by a wider industrial context (Macdonald, 2013, pp.36-37). Much of the literature around screenwriting identifies how the doxa of screenwriting is shaped by the realities of the job as currently defined in the industry. Work in that sector is characterised by precarity, the constraints of commercial filmmaking, collaboration, and a lack of authorial control and (Magnéli, 2015; O'Brien and Oakley, 2015; Taylor and Batty, 2016). This section examines how these industrial aspects shape screenwriting practice, firstly exploring the historical development of the screenwriter's role and then the contemporary conditions that influence how screenwriters work.

## **The Historical Development of Screenwriting Practice**

A series of interconnected historical periods that transformed cinematic storytelling, from an informal literary practice to a highly codified industrial craft, characterise the historical development of modern screenwriting. The first phase began in the late Victorian period with a proliferation of narrative forms, from serialised fiction to popular magazines, and the beginning of early mass entertainment (Price, 2013). Thompson (2003) points to an expansion in storytelling media in the late 19th century in both the US and Britain which, she says, led to more writers, who turned to ‘simplified notions of what constitutes a story’ (Thompson, 2003, p.20). A second phase emerged directly out of cinema’s formative years, establishing standardised methods for visual storytelling that would prove remarkably durable (Thompson, 2003). Out of this emerged a narrative style often termed ‘classical’ (Bordwell, 1998). This refers ‘to ‘a stable set of norms of storytelling that were formulated during the early years of [US] cinema, primarily about 1909 to 1917’ (Macdonald, 2013, p.40). These norms included three-act structure, cause-and-effect plotting, character driven drama and clear narrative resolution. The third phase saw the gradual formalisation of screenplay form, so that by the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century the screenplay had broadly acquired its present format, with numbered scenes, a capitalised slug line and other standardised elements’ (Norman, 2008, p.21). These developments reached their mature expression during Hollywood’s Golden Age, when the studio system fully integrated these narrative and formatting innovations into a comprehensive production process (Norman, 2008; Price, 2013).

Certain aspects of film industry history and practice are significant here because the screenplay has been shaped by Hollywood’s transformation from informal, artisanal filmmaking into a systematic industrial business. This shift, which accelerated in the 1920s and 1930s, established screenwriting as a distinct professional occupation within a highly stratified division of creative labour. Where early cinema relied on improvisation and the creative

instincts of individual filmmakers, the studio system's emphasis on consistent product delivery and commercial predictability necessitated the development of standardised storytelling formulas and reliable production processes (Gomery, 2017; Price, 2013).

Hollywood's industrial model, which has dominated the film industry globally since 1918 and subsequently influenced worldwide practices (Price, 2013; Staiger et al., 1985; Stempel, 2000), institutionalised several practices that continue to shape screenwriting today. The division of labour between different creative roles, separating writing from directing, producing and performance, transformed screenwriting from an occasional craft into a full-time profession with its own guild structures and contractual frameworks. The systematic use of genre conventions emerged as a risk mitigation strategy, allowing studios to leverage audience expectations and proven narrative patterns to ensure commercial viability (Staiger et al., 1985). Perhaps most significantly, the development of formulaic screenplay formats, such as three-act structure, standardised scene construction and prescribed page-to-minute ratios, created a production blueprint model that allowed studios to estimate costs, schedule shoots and coordinate the complex logistics of industrial filmmaking (Price, 2013; Staiger et al., 1985; Stempel, 2000). This industrialisation process fundamentally altered the screenwriter's position within the filmmaking ecology, establishing them as essential but often subordinate workers in a hierarchical system designed to balance creative artistic expression with commercial imperatives and operational efficiency (Gomery, 2017; Price, 2013).

As the film industry developed a film canon was established. These 'good' films became templates for later filmmakers to follow. Screenwriters looked to those films as models to use in writing new work (Macdonald, 2004b, p.264). In that process 'stylistic norms' were established as genre conventions that became normative in film production processes such as screenwriting (Staiger et al., 1985, p.xvii). Screenwriting became standardised. During the early years of cinema formulas for screenwriting begin to emerge, giving the impression that

writing was simply a blueprint. Then as the studio system developed between 1917-1948 the control of screen production shifted from creatives such as screenwriters into corporate control by producers and studio bosses. This had a negative impact on the control screenwriters had over their work (Gomery, 2017). This historical shift fundamentally reconfigured the screenwriters' position within the creative hierarchy.

### ***The Evolving Role of the Screenwriter***

As the studio system consolidated power, the status and power of the screenwriter and screenplay was eroded through systematic reduction of creative autonomy. Industrial practice came to regard the screenwriter as a weak voice within the production process. This system continued to dominate screen production of 'mainstream filmmaking inside and outside Hollywood' (Conor, 2014b, p.23.; Maras, 2009). This shift of creative control has problematised screenwriting authorship.

The role of the screenwriter underwent a dramatic transformation from cinema's early days through the establishment of the Hollywood studio system, evolving from an informal, often anonymous craft into a specialised but increasingly constrained profession. In the industry's early days, screenwriting barely existed as a distinct craft (Casella, 2017). Screenwriters primarily submitted simple one-page plot synopses or brief story ideas adapted from existing literature. Directors like D.W. Griffith dominated the creative process, often improvising narratives during production and receiving sole authorship credit, with many screenwriters remaining entirely anonymous (Staiger et al., 1985).

As the industry expanded during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the 'scenario' evolved from basic plot summaries into visualised treatments, and the development of the continuity script, pioneered by figures like June Mathis and Thomas Ince, transformed screenwriting into comprehensive production blueprints (Casella, 2017; Staiger et al., 1985). This systematisation

fragmented authorship among multiple people, leaving many screenwriters feeling distanced from the final product. Interestingly, women writers played a crucial but largely unrecognised role in early screenwriting, working as freelance scenario writers and ‘script girls’ but rarely received credit (Casella, 2017; Staiger et al., 1985). As the industry expanded, studios confined women to writing genres, such as romantic comedies, melodramas and domestic dramas, based on assumptions about ‘female’ narratives. Though some women writers achieved some influence, such as June Mathis, the advent of sound proved devastating, as women virtually disappeared under the new producer system, erasing decades of female contributions to screenwriting craft (Casella, 2017). The advent of sound and the producer system fundamentally altered the role of the screenwriter, codifying creative roles within strict hierarchies in an industrial Hollywood machine that prioritised commerce over creativity. This evolution reveals how the creative role of the screenwriter became subordinate to a production process over which screenwriters had limited control (Casella, 2017).

This evolution explains how a particular narrative of a downtrodden, marginalised and mistreated screenwriter emerged (Conor, 2014b). This narrative became embedded in industry through films like *Sunset Boulevard* (Wilder, 1950), in which a writer floats face-down in a swimming pool as the film begins ...’ (Baer et al., 2003, p.xii; Conor, 2014b, p.14.). Conor, (2014c) identifies certain ‘foundational moments... from the early years of the scenario writer and into the golden era of Hollywood filmmaking in the studio system – which have fuelled a standard historical narrative’ of the marginalised screenwriter (Conor, 2014b, p.14.; Maras, 2009). These defining ‘moments’ shaped a narrative, whereby screenwriting becomes standardised over time, a craft versus art debate ensues and questions around authorship and artistic legitimacy develop, while precarious employment, villainous producers and studio bosses claim more and more power (Conor, 2014b, p.15.; Maras, 2009). This historical narrative continues to influence contemporary perceptions of screenwriting work and

highlights a certain mythic image of the screenwriter that is still prevalent and shapes the practice of screenwriting. The mythology defines the screenwriter as a marginalised artistic maverick. A creative outsider who must fight his or her way to the top through genius, and artistic talent. This narrative of rebellion masks a ‘degrading’ of the position of the screenwriter and the connected anxieties and insecurity. In reality, in order to be successful as a screenwriter writers must learn the rules and style to play the industry ‘game’ and do so ‘as quickly as possible’ (Conor, 2014b, p.22.).

This early narrative about the rise of the studio system and role of the screenwriter within it still largely defines how the role is perceived in the industry (Conor, 2014b, p.27.). As mentioned above Conor (2014c) divides the history into two phases the classical studio era of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and the ‘new Hollywood’ era of the later 20<sup>th</sup> century. As part of this shift screenwriters moved from being employed by the studio to being freelancers hired by the studio when required (Conor, 2014b, p.29.). This shift toward freelance work fundamentally altered the nature of screenwriting as a profession, creating new forms of insecurity and competition among writers. The independent era led to a preoccupation with the validity of the cinema as an artform and a consequent problematising of the role of the author. This preoccupation found its most influential expression in auteur theory.

### ***Auteur Theory***

Parallel to changes in the industrial practices of filmmaking, another more theoretical change had a strong and negative influence on screenwriting. Auteur theory (Bazin, 2004; Staiger, 1985) was particularly damaging to the role of screenwriter.

After World War II the status of the screenwriter was weakened with the 'politique des auteurs' in France (Koivumäki, 2016, pp.28-29). ‘In 1948, Alexandre Astruc wrote an article in Andre Bazin’s influential film journal, *Cahiers du Cinema*, claiming that the true “author” of

the film was any director who was able to exert his own personal style and vision during the production of his films. Astruc's point of view was soon championed by several young French critics who wrote for Cahiers, like Francois Truffaut, and they began to carefully examine American films made during the previous few decades searching for directors whose body of work displayed a personal, "authorial" style. The examples of Hitchcock and Welles were explored at length, and other notable Hollywood directors like John Ford and Howard Hawks began receiving the artistic recognition and attention they deserved. In the United States, the cause of auteurism was vigorously championed by Andrew Sarris in his important articles in Film Comment in 1962. ... Of course, Astruc's original notion had much more validity in Europe where many of the finest directors—like Renoir, Fellini, and Bergman—were also the writers or co-authors of their scripts' (Baer et al., 2003, p.xiv) 'The Cahiers du Cinema Critics, whilst encouraging appreciation of film as an art form, focused on the director as the creator of the film and elevated certain directors to auteur status, so neglecting the importance of screenplay. It does though appear easier to attribute authorship in the novel, poetry and play forms even though they often have external or editorial input' (Nelmes, 2007, p.108).

Auteur theory was championed by film-critic filmmakers like Truffaut who wanted to identify the 'voice' of the author in film and then went about making films that had this supposed singular voice (Sarris, 2008). In other words, it was their proposition of the director-author coupled with their putting this into practice, that marginalised the other creative forces in film. Andrew Sarris later defined this idea as 'auteur theory', adapting it to the Anglophone world for the purpose of film criticism (Baer et al., 2003, p.xiv; Koivumäki, 2016, pp.28-29; Sarris, 2008). Auteur theory argues that the director is the author of the film. The screenwriter and screenplay are of minimal importance (Nelmes, 2007, p.108). Auteur theory answers the question of authorship by *necessarily* erasing the screenwriter and ascribing authorship to the director. The screenwriter is only a marginal technician (Conor, 2014b, p.52.). This theory had



significant real world material effects on screenwriters. It reinforced their subordinate position in industry and legitimised directors' claims to creative authorship of films. It contributed to the systematic devaluation of screenwriters' contributions that persist in contemporary film criticism and industry practice (Conor, 2014b; Nelmes, 2007).

However, in the 1970s, challenges to auteurism emerged, led by Corliss who noted 'Auteur criticism is essentially theme criticism; and themes – as expressed through plot, characterisation, and dialogue – belong primarily to the writer' (Corliss, 1975, p.xxii.; Maras, 2009). 'In his book *Talking Pictures Screen-writers in the American Cinema, 1927–1973*, Corliss examined one-hundred films by thirty-five screenwriters whose work ... revealed the writers' uniquely personal "auteurist" styles' (Baer et al., 2003, p.xiv). Later Gore Vidal in "Who Makes the Movies," 'exalted' the screenwriter and mocked the idea of auteurism describing directors as simply 'interpreters' of the screenwriters' work (Baer et al., 2003, p.xiv).

A significant issue with auteur theory is that assigning authorship to a film is fundamentally problematic given 'the collaborative nature of screen production' (Conor, 2014b, p.48.). '[T]here are both ontological and epistemological issues raised by the question of authorship' (Conor, 2014b, p.49.). Ontologically, film production is complex, involving large numbers of people and therefore seems to lack a single author. Epistemologically, there is the lack of evidence from conception to production to definitively trace authorship' (Conor, 2014b, p.49.).

But it is not an either/or, there is no catch-all type of film production. Claims of singular authorship, even in cases of writer-directors or writer-director-producers, perpetuate the same erasure that auteur theory inflicted on screenwriters by reducing inherently collaborative processes to individual attribution. Producers also play a creative role, often initiating projects and guiding them to completion (Gerstner and Staiger, 2002; Macdonald, 2013; Pardo, 2010; Spicer, 2004). By erasing producers, there is a danger of defaulting to identifying a single

creative figure that ‘authors’ a film (Spicer, McKenna & Meir, 2014). This ignores the collaborative nature of filmmaking, shifting the invisibility from screenwriters to producers (Gerstner and Staiger, 2002; Macdonald, 2013). Many films can be made by committee, such as when a toy company wants to promote a product and hires a team to make it (*GI Joe* franchise films for example). This ‘works to problematise the notion of cinematic authorship itself, suggesting that questions of authorship must be examined in relation to the specific contexts of individual productions’ (Conor, 2014b, p.49.).

Despite these criticisms of auteurism the problematic issue of authorship continues to shape industrial practice, and it still denies screenwriters complete ownership of the stories they create. Contemporary screenwriting practice requires writers to accept and work within this ambiguity. This means that as they write, they work within the knowledge that during the production process their screenplay may be rewritten or written over. Economic shifts in the industry further complicated the screenwriters’ position.

### ***The Blockbuster***

In the late 1970s the commercial success of films like *Jaws* (Spielberg, 1975) and *Star Wars* (Lucas et al., 1977) shifted cinema in a new direction toward visual spectacle and a post-classical high concept aesthetic. This shift had consequences for the screenplay. Price notes three developments that have come to define the screenplay, ‘the rise of the spec script, films based on story templates and the rise of screenwriting manuals’ (Price, 2013, p.201) These developments reinstated ‘linear storytelling at the centre of Hollywood film-making’ (Maras, 2009; Price, 2013, p.203) consolidating the importance of conventional narrative structures that had been established during the Studio era and contributing to the standardisation that characterises much of contemporary screenwriting practice. Genre conventions became firmly embedded in the studio system since the 1930s, with individual studios known for specific

genres like MGM and the musical, Warner Bros and gangster films, Universal and horror. This post-classical Hollywood period intensified their role in shaping screenwriting practice, defining what is ‘good’ and what is deemed unacceptable in a screenplay (Maras, 2009). This influence can happen as the screenwriter is writing, via self-censorship or after the process during the development process when other voices get involved. Also, because the majority of film funding comes from the US, ‘Hollywood-oriented standards of structure, character and conflict within screen storytelling’ (Conor, 2014b, p.34.) have become standardised, even in the UK. British screenwriters were being ‘conditioned’ to speak the industry language (Conor, 2014b, p.34.). This is evident in the Irish cinema industry. Ireland's particular trajectory within these global industrial dynamics warrants specific attention.

## **Irish Cinema**

The practices that emerged through the rise of the Hollywood studio system were widely adopted across the world, albeit relatively slowly in Ireland. As Rockett, Gibbons, and Hill (2014) established in their foundational studies on cinema and Ireland, Irish cinema has occupied at a uniquely ambiguous position, shaped by a colonial legacy, limited domestic production, and external influences that complicated the development of a coherent national cinema (Rockett et al., 2014). Ireland has had an ambivalent relationship with cinema. The early Free State was anxious about cinema’s possible moral corrosiveness and the loss of national culture (Barton, 2004, p.9.). This may explain why Irish film production developed unevenly throughout much of the twentieth century (Liddy, 2020). Gibbons argues that Irish cinema resisted Hollywood realism instead favouring a romantic tradition rooted in cultural hybridity, and aesthetic tension between nationalist romanticism and cinematic realism, that persisted throughout the 20th century (Gibbons, 2014). Eventually a national Irish cinema emerged with The Irish Film Board (IFB) established in 1980 in an Irish state which had

traditionally seen cinema as a threatening foreign force (Barton, 2004, O'Connell, 2010). However, Rockett (2014) highlighted the challenges of Ireland's emerging film industry in the 1980s, including reliance on international co-productions enabled by the 1980 Film Board Act, amid chronic underfunding and limited domestic output (Rockett et al., 2014).

The Irish state's relationship with film was further shaped by policy interventions that sought to balance cultural and economic imperatives. O'Brien (2024) 'provide[s] a brief history of policy interventions in Ireland towards the audiovisual industries' that traces a trajectory from mid 20th century policy that treated film primarily as an industrial undertaking that has eventually moved toward explicit recognition of screen media as culturally and economically significant. Key moments included early formal investigations on the value of film, such as the report of the Report of the Inter-Departmental Committee on the Film Industry 1942 and the Report of the Film Industry Committee 1968, the creation of Ardmore Studios, the introduction of tax incentives through the Finance Act 1987, and later Section 481, and the evolution of the Irish Film Board into Screen Ireland. These policy frameworks increasingly positioned audiovisual production within overlapping discourses of national economic strategy, the use of film to project Irish culture and identity globally as a form of soft power, and compliance with EU state and rules and global regulatory standards governing audiovisual services and online platforms (O'Brien, 2024).

The State's ambivalent relationship with film shaped the domestic doxa. An indigenous industry was slow to develop, as it lacked financial, intellectual or cultural investment in the new creative medium (O'Brien and Canning, 2020). Despite Gibbons' (2014) identification of an indigenous, romantic-realist aesthetic tradition, in practice, Hollywood set a template for the world to follow, including Ireland (Crosson, 2003; McLoone, 1994). 'Irish film is, "a form of regional Hollywood"' (Morgan, p.40) a characterisation that reflects how Irish productions have emulated Hollywood conventions rather than develop a distinctively Irish cinematic

voice. As McLoone notes ‘we have, with unparalleled frivolity, deliberately thrown away our birth right and Los-Angelesised ourselves’ (McLoone, 1994, p.152). Crosson argues that ‘Irish films draw heavily on the Hollywood classical narrative (Crosson, 2003, p.9). This created a fundamental contradiction; while Irish cinema maintained thematic and aesthetic elements drawn from Celtic mythology, folklore, and literary traditions (Barton, 2019; Gibbons, 2014), structurally, Irish screenwriting increasingly adopted Hollywood three-act narrative framework and genre conventions (Crosson, 2003). This tension between indigenous cultural expression and global narrative templates have shaped the development of screenwriting practices from the 1980s onwards.

This adoption of Hollywood conventions has been noted since at least the 1980s. For example, McLoone notes that ‘one can detect in the short films of many of the graduate students in Ireland in the 1980s, an attempt to master this universal film language’ (McLoone, 1994, p.174). Though, it may appear to be a big leap from student short films to commercial feature length film, it could be argued that this was an early indication that Hollywood conventions were beginning to seep into the discourse of Irish filmmaking. By the 1990s, this influence had matured, with ‘[c]ontemporary filmmakers from the 1990s [who] in many ways emulate a universal and materially wealthy, post-colonial, urban environment’ (Brereton, 2009, p.30). ‘The striving for commercial success – usually the preserve of industrial capitalist enterprise, rather than artistic endeavour – essentially calls upon universalising mythic tropes, as quintessentially exemplified by the Hollywood image factory’ (Brereton, 2009, p.30).

This historical trajectory reveals an enduring tension in Irish cinema between commercial viability and cultural distinctiveness. However, the relationship between Hollywood conventions and Irish success has proven more complex than simple cultural dilution. Contemporary Irish cinema demonstrates that commercial success and cultural distinctiveness need not be mutually exclusive. Irish filmmakers adapt Hollywood genres to

local contexts of identity, class, and gender, as Barton (2019) analyses, contemporary productions blend global forms with Irish themes. Barton identifies the 21st century proliferation of genre filmmaking in Irish cinema, particularly horror, as Irish filmmakers' strategic appropriation of global conventions. The commercial and critical success of films such as *The Banshees of Inisherin* (McDonagh et al., 2023) and *An Cailín Ciúin* (Bairéad et al., 2022) demonstrates this complex negotiation. Both films achieved significant box office returns, with *An Cailín Ciúin* (Bairéad et al., 2022) becoming the highest grossing Irish language film ever (O'Connell, 2025), while maintaining distinctive Irish cultural elements. O'Brien notes that recent policy developments, including increased film tax credit caps and strategic frameworks such as the Digital Creative Industries Roadmap, have been credited with fostering this global success of Irish language cinema (O'Brien, 2024). These successes exemplify Irish cinema's hybrid negotiation of global conventions with local storytelling as identified by Barton and Crosson.

Yet success remains inconsistent; Barton (2019) notes that while *The Guard* (McDonagh et al., 2011) achieved both domestic and international commercial success by balancing genre conventions with Irish humour and landscape, director Paddy Breathnach's genre films *I Went Down* (Breathnach, 1998) and *Shrooms* (Breathnach, 2007) failed to replicate this formula, thus demonstrating the challenge of appealing simultaneously to local and global audiences.

Therefore, rather than a straightforward cultural dilution, contemporary Irish cinema functions as a crucial site for negotiating the tensions inherent in globalisation (Barton, 2019; O'Brien and Canning, 2020). The adoption of Hollywood narrative structures creates not homogenisation but fundamentally transnational production practices, where attempts to rigidly define Irishness prove counterproductive (Crosson, 2003). The outcome is neither pure commercial product nor culturally isolated art form, but cinema characterised by the condition

Kearney (1988) identifies as distinctively Irish, existing between ‘two worlds’, navigating competing loyalties. The question for Irish screenwriting practice becomes not whether to adopt Hollywood conventions but how to negotiate the space between global legibility and local specificity, a negotiation that sometimes succeeds and sometimes fails.

The pursuit of commercial viability via ‘universalising mythic tropes’, and the formulaic storytelling models perfected by Hollywood’s industrial model, creates a paradox where Irish filmmakers must suppress their cultural specificity to achieve broader market appeal. This process not only homogenises creative expression but actively diminishes the diversity that might otherwise distinguish Irish cinema from other national cinemas. The Hollywood studio system, therefore, operates as both a route to professional success and a mechanism for cultural dilution.

This historical evolution of screenwriting reveals how screenwriting and screenwriters became gradually subsumed into a system that simultaneously demands and devalues creative labour (Magnéli, 2015; O'Brien and Oakley, 2015; Taylor and Batty, 2016). The evolution from early cinema’s informal, experimental storytelling practices to Hollywood’s industrial standardisation established screenwriting as essential to the process while systematically eroding the screenwriter’s creative autonomy. The studio system’s emphasis on formulaic structures and genre conventions created a profession defined by paradox and contradiction. Screenwriters became indispensable and yet subordinate, creative yet constrained by commercial imperatives. Auteur theory compounded this marginalisation by theoretically legitimating the erasure of the writer’s contribution to the finished film, while the blockbuster era’s intensification of genre conventions further codified what constitutes a ‘good’ screenplay. The global adoption of these Hollywood practices, evident in emerging national cinemas like Ireland demonstrates how local film cultures can become subsumed into a homogenised commercial-industrial model. This industrial context has created a screenwriting practice

characterised by precarity, collaborative compromise, and an ongoing struggle for artistic legitimacy. Screenwriting emerges from this as a profession caught between creative aspirations of individual writers and commercial demands that treats storytelling as a manufactured product (Conor, 2014b; Macdonald, 2013; Taylor and Batty, 2016).

Screenwriting occupies a paradoxical position within the industry. It is caught between creativity and craft. Almost invisible, it is typically viewed as the ‘least creative’ form of creative writing. It is overtly commercial, part of a capitalist-intensive system. It is collectively written to rigid genre formulae that ‘denies claims to individual creative authorship’ and has always struggled to claim artistic legitimacy (Conor, 2014b, p.1.). The academic domain is another crucial force in defining screenwriting orthodoxy, operating through a dual mechanism that both reinforces industrial conventions through pedagogical practice while simultaneously challenging them through scholarly inquiry. This third domain has evolved its own distinctive tensions and contradictions.

### **Academia and Screenwriting**

The status of screenwriting within academia is complex and contested. The literature notes that it is characterised by inherent tensions between commercial imperatives and artistic intentions. In this context, academia refers to the institutional structures of higher education; universities and colleges, where screenwriting is taught, practiced, and researched. This encompasses the pedagogical frameworks through which screenwriting is taught as a discipline, the scholarly discourse surrounding it (including practice-led research, and the professional position of screenwriting practitioners working within university systems (Batty et al., 2016; Cordaiy, 2002). Crucially it includes the institutional expectations and value systems that shape how screenwriting attempts to justify itself as both a legitimate creative practice and a discipline worthy of academic examination (Kerrigan and Batty, 2016; Langford, 2010). The term is



important to define because screenwriting's contested status within academic institutions stems from its need to navigate between competing demands: industry standards of commerciality, artistic aspirations, and university requirements for scholarly rigour and demonstrable research contribution (Baker, 2013; Batty, 2016).

The doxa of screenwriting is shaped by multiple, often competing, domains of influence. Academic discourse critiques screenwriting manuals for shaping practice in 'ambiguous' and 'chaotic' ways (Ashton and Conor, 2016), positioning itself in opposition by advocating for alternative artistic or experimental approaches. Meanwhile, long established industrial systems and practices exert their own influence on screenwriting, creative labour characterised by precarity, limited authorial control, and collaborative processes (Conor, 2014b; Magnéli, 2015; O'Brien and Oakley, 2015; Taylor and Batty, 2016). Screenwriting thus exists in a contested space between commerce and art, between creativity and craft, with commercial imperatives and rigid genre conventions complicating its claims to artistic legitimacy. These domains - academia, manuals, and industry - operate at different points in the screenwriting process and from different positions of authority. Manuals and academia typically influence practice at formative stages through teaching and learning, while industry exerts influence closer to production through script development, collaboration, and editorial intervention. However, these boundaries are permeable rather than fixed. Industry practices feed into and inform pedagogical approaches, while academic and manual based frameworks filter into industrial contexts. In everyday screenwriting practice, these domains frequently overlap and blur. Examining these intersecting domains of influence therefore reveals significant questions about how screenwriting knowledge is produced, transmitted, and contested.

The academy's engagement with screenwriting operates on several levels, as an object of critical study, as a pedagogical practice and as a site of theoretical investigation. Unpacking

how academic discourse shapes screenwriting practice requires careful examination, particularly given the relatively recent emergence of screenwriting studies as a significant research area. The questions that arise from this, are not only academic but have practice implications for how screenwriters are trained, how scripts are developed and how the industry evolves. This section explores the ways in which academic discourse both challenges and reinforces dominant screenwriting practices, exposing the complex dynamics between scholarship and creative practice in the field of screenwriting.

Academic discourse plays a role in shaping the practice of screenwriting. It does this simultaneously through research and teaching. Academic discourse on screenwriting problematises the simplistic formulas and narrative strategies of the orthodoxy as found in the manuals and industry. At the same time, it can reinforce that orthodoxy through teaching of the formula and rules. This demonstrates that the domain of 'academia' is not homogenous. Some academics are positioned in the study of screenwriting and the industry (from outside), while others take a position of reflective practice on screenwriting (and research from within) offering alternative heterodox strategies for practice.

The status of the screenplay within academia has traditionally been problematic. It was typically viewed as just a blueprint for a film and not worthy of study in and of itself (Baker, 2013; Batty, 2016). There has been a strong discipline bias in media studies which has relegated scripts to a minor position below finished films and TV programmes (Baker, 2013). According to Baker, screenplays have had limited critical analysis in the academy which 'means that the dialogue between the academy and the industry on scriptwriting [has been] rather one-way' (Baker, 2013, p.3). Only in recent years has serious academic study of screenwriting emerged. Craig Batty, an academic engaged with both the research of and teaching of screenwriting, argues that there has been a 'screenwriting turn' in recent years (Batty, 2016). This 'screenwriting turn' is evidenced by the volume of studies to emerge on the topic of

screenwriting in recent years, including *Screenwriting History, Theory, and Practice* (Maras 2009), *The Screenplay Authorship, Theory and Criticism* (Price 2010), *Analysing the Screenplay* (Nelmes 2010), *Movies That Move Us Screenwriting and the Power of the Protagonist's Journey* (Batty 2011), *The Psychology of Screenwriting Theory and Practice* (Lee 2013), *Screenwriting Poetics and the Screen Idea* (Macdonald, 2013), *Writing and Producing Television Drama in Denmark From The Kingdom to The Killing* (Redvall 2013), *A History of the Screenplay* (Price 2013), *Screenwriting Creative Labour and Professional Practice* (Conor, 2014) and *Screenwriters and Screenwriting Putting Practice into Context* (Batty 2014). Along with scholarly articles found in publications such as *the Journal of Screenwriting*, *Journal of Media Practice*, *New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing*, *Media Education Research Journal* and *TEXT Journal of Writing and Writing Courses*.

A wide range of topics are being explored such as, audience interest, industry expectations, screenwriting as an underexplored domain, screenwriting's place in creative writing studies, how-to manuals, and academic screenwriting. Further topics include moving beyond a director-centric perspective, the screenwriter and academia, practice-based versus practice-led research, tensions arising between 'how-to' books and 'screenwriting studies', legitimising new forms of research, script development, experimental approaches, interviews with screenwriters, and authorship (Batty, 2014). Through this 'screenwriting turn' Batty (2016) observes that the presence of screenwriting in the academy is rapidly expanding. Screenwriting studies, therefore, is a relatively new research domain (Baker, 2015). The history of screenwriting studies and its emergence as a research practice can be traced to approximately 2010 with the creation of the Screenwriting Research Network and the *Journal of Screenwriting*. This scholarly research has opened up a space for the study of the screenplay and the role of the screenwriter within the screenwriting industry (Baker, 2015).

The academic field encompasses diverse and sometimes conflicting approaches to screenwriting. Some scholars examine screenwriting and industry practices from an external analytical perspective, others work as practitioner-researchers, drawing on their own writing experience to develop alternative methodologies that challenge conventional industry orthodoxy. This internal division within academia creates competing voices in how screenwriting discourse is constructed and transmitted. For example, one alternative strategy suggested is a process of screenwriting through fragments rather than plotted stories and finding cohesion as the story progresses (Blumenberg, 1990; Clayton, 2007). These alternative approaches emphasise that quality lies in ‘unknown spaces’ in the text, where some space is left for the audience to fill in the gaps. ‘To stir the imagination is the essential condition of aesthetic activity as well as the basic law of the fine arts’ (Nash, 2013, p.159). Another alternative strategy is to work from ‘theme rather than plot structure’ (Batty, 2015, p.116). Alternative approaches such as these generally position screenwriting as art, with the screenwriter allowed the space to find their own voice, to write and let the story evolve in whatever way feels right (Brenes, 2011; Nash, 2013). Academic voices such as Batty (2015); Blumenberg (1990); Brenes (2011); Clayton (2007); and Nash (2013) problematise screenwriting discourse, presenting alternatives to the orthodoxy, arguing for the merits of creative exploration as opposed to creation for a commercial industrial context.

Academic critiques of screenwriting manuals highlight several concerns. For example, manuals are criticised by academics as being content thin and serving capitalistic modes of screen production (Batty, 2014, p.2). Batty states that such manuals are examples of ‘slippery writing’ as opposed to the ‘controlled writing’ found within academia (Batty, 2010, pp.292-293). Another criticism is that manuals shape practice in ‘ambiguous’ and ‘chaotic’ ways (Ashton and Conor, 2016). Another repeated criticism levelled at the screenwriting manuals by academics is the dominance of conventional structure (Blumenberg, 1990; Conor, 2014a).

For Price (2013) this is problematic as three-act structure is based on completed films not screenplays themselves and argues that screenplays do not clearly delineate acts. This raises a question as to whether screenwriters write in acts or not. This, however, is hard to clearly define and probably varies in practice depending on the screenwriter. However, the point Price is making is that acts are not an overt structure in screenplays in the same way that it is evident in traditional playscripts, they are imposed through analysis of finalised scripts and films. The evidence for act structure is therefore based on after the fact interpretation and convention rooted in film analysis. Price argues that screenplays could just as easily be divided into eight acts (Price, 2013, p.209). Yet it remains the case that screen stories have a chronological beginning and an end so there is always an implied structure. Bordwell points to this challenging puzzle whereby a diverse range of films (even *Memento* which tells a story in reverse) resolve ‘naturally’ to a three-act structure (Bordwell, 2006). However, the problem with the manuals is they regard this implied act structure as a universal doctrine (Macdonald, 2013, p.49). It is not that screenplays often do fall naturally into three acts, it’s the ‘rule’ found in most manuals that they *should*. Nash argues that many aspiring screenwriters follow the ‘rules’ and end up with a formulaic screenplay (Nash, 2013, p.159).

However, manuals, are written from within industry by insiders and are concerned with helping writers write commercially viable work. For example, ‘scholarly sources such as Bordwell (1985), Thompson (2003) and Murphy (2007) describe a dominant/alternative model of film structure’ (Macdonald, 2013, p.43). However, academic analysis challenges the clarity of this divide between commercial and artistic imperatives given that there are industry-produced indie screenwriting manuals. For example, according to Aronson (2010) and Murphy (2007) independent films have their own formulae and conventions (Aronson, 2010; Murphy, 2007). More significantly, the academic screenwriting discourse takes a critical stance toward the simple narrative models of the orthodoxy found in manuals and industry.

A central concern within academic screenwriting scholarship is the questioning of the dominance of commerciality and the simplistic rules of the manuals in favour of alternative artistic strategies. Academic writers in the field argue for more nuanced approaches to screenwriting pedagogy and practice that resist reductive formula and acknowledge the complexity of the craft (Aronson, 2010; Langford, 2010; Murphy, 2007). This scholarly positioning reflects academia's broader investment in critical analysis and creative experimentation, over prescriptive market driven methodologies. The academic critique thus serves not merely to dismiss manuals, but to establish screenwriting as a discipline worthy of sophisticated theoretical and creative inquiry beyond commercial imperatives.

Irish academic Liddy (2014) challenges the place of manuals in Irish screenwriting practice. She notes that new Irish writers are generally ambivalent about screenwriting manuals with some writers turning to manuals for guidance, and others deliberately ignore them (Liddy, 2014). Two quotes from Liddy's research highlight this divergence within Irish screenwriters. Margaret Corkery (an Irish screenwriter) initially relied on McKee (1999) and Syd Field (1979) to introduce her to the specifics of the craft. 'Yes, I read all the manuals. You must read them to study the form.' (Liddy, 2014, p.133). In contrast 'Ian Power (another Irish screenwriter) shares some ...scepticism. 'Screenwriting books are useful', Power admits, 'but ultimately dangerous because people treat them as prescriptions for films when they are only deconstructed observations of films.' (Liddy, 2014, p.133). This fundamental tension between manuals as essential learning tools versus potentially restrictive formulas reflects a broader debate within screenwriting discourse, (explored throughout this project) whether standardised approaches enhance or constrain creativity. This debate becomes particularly visible in the pedagogical sphere, where decisions about what and how to teach screenwriting directly shape emerging practitioners' understanding of the craft. The classroom thus becomes a critical site where academic ambivalence toward industrial norms is enacted.

## ***Teaching Screenwriting***

The teaching of screenwriting is another way in which academia can influence screenwriting practice (Nash, 2013, p.159). Yet, it must be noted that while the academic research above often problematises the screenwriting discourse, some academic screenwriting course reading lists default to familiar texts like McKee and Field. The manuals emphasise simple rules for screenwriting that are easy to teach and learn. Ashton & Conor (2016) addresses the issue of teaching, exploring the connections between screenwriting and higher education. One element of their exploration is ‘practitioner-academics’, who contribute to both industrial practice and theory around screenwriting (Ashton and Conor, 2016, p.100). ‘Academic practitioners now routinely teach creative writing courses but can write ‘how-to’ manuals or other textbooks, develop ‘how-to’ seminars or master classes, and offer their own script consultancy or development businesses’ (Ashton and Conor, 2016, p.101). This position blurs the line between dominant/alternative approaches to screenwriting within academia.

Academic discourse influences the practice of screenwriting through research *and* teaching. While it offers some alternative ideas for screenwriting, it often shapes practice by questioning the prevailing orthodoxy, as found in industry and the manuals (Ashton and Conor, 2016). Academic discourse questions this orthodoxy, offering alternative approaches. However, for Langford, any such dichotomy between manuals and academic criticism hinges on a quasi-Aristotelian formulaic approach versus a pseudo-Brechtian approach ‘in which the normative, hegemonic tendencies of the former (taken as a given) are challenged by the presumptively insurgent character of the latter’ (Langford, 2010, p.255). Given this, it is important to see the academic position not as offering a ‘solution’ to a failed conventional orthodoxy. The ‘critical preferences that govern much academic reception of narrative cinema ... are in their own way almost as unexamined as the Aristotelian principles they critique’ (Langford, 2010, p.253).

The academic domains' influence on screenwriting practice reveals unresolved tensions. Screenwriting studies have improved understanding of the screenplay, academia's relationship with screenwriting as it has been examined in literature to date is more complex than a simple binary between adopting orthodox and alternative approaches. The blurred distinctions between practitioner-academics and industry insiders, paired with the dominance of orthodox texts in teaching, reveal a domain where diverse voices coexist and compete. Langford (2010) critiques how academic alternatives carry their own unexamined assumptions. Any simple opposition between creativity and commerciality may be a false distinction that obscures as much as it reveals. Therefore, the strength of academic discourse is that it problematises these simple binaries and provides a space for critical reflection. These three domains together constitute the landscape within which screenwriting practice operates.

## **Conclusion**

Building on Bourdieu (1977), Schultz (2007) and Macdonald's (2013) foundational frameworks for the examination of screenwriting practice, this literature review has explored how the three selected domains of manuals, industry and academia reveal some of the ways they influence screenwriting practice, nevertheless, there is much still to examine and analyse in the forthcoming chapters. Manuals are important sources of information on the doxa. Embedded in industry and education, written for and used by writers, producers, and commissioners, manuals offer a set of 'rules' to help write a screenplay. The manuals repeat rules that overlap each other regarding universality, structure, conflict and character. These 'rules' shape an orthodoxy in simplistic, formulaic and negative ways (Conor, 2014b). Via research and teaching the practice is shaped by academic discourse. Academia generally influences the doxa by critiquing the manuals, arguing that manuals shape practice in 'ambiguous' and 'chaotic' ways (Ashton and Conor, 2016). Academic discourse opposes this,



offering alternative ‘artistic’ or experimental approaches. At the same time, industrial history and practice shape screenwriting practice. Key aspects at play include precarity, lack of authorial control and collaboration, (Conor, 2014b; Magnéli, 2015; O'Brien and Oakley, 2015; Taylor and Batty, 2016). Screenwriting stands caught between commerce and art, between creativity and craft. Shaped by commercial concerns with strict genre formulae it struggles to claim artistic legitimacy (Conor, 2014b). The industrial domain shapes the practice in a different way to manuals and academia. It does this from a different position in the process of filmmaking. Manuals and academia influence practice at earlier stages, through teaching and learning the craft and is formative. Industry influences it later, closer to production, through production decisions, notes, collaboration and is summative. However, this is not a sharp distinction. Industry feeds back into teaching and learning of craft. Likewise, manuals and academia feed into industrial practices. In screenwriting practice these positions are often blurred. Analysis of these domains therefore opens many possibilities and questions.

Building on Bourdieu’s and Macdonald’s analysis, these three domains reveal fundamental tensions within screenwriting practice between industrial requirements for correctness and artistic desires for complexity and experimentation, between orthodoxy and heterodoxy, between individual creativity and collective production demands. This research explores how these tensions are inherent to screenwriting practice but manifest differently across different national and cultural contexts.

However, this literature review reveals several gaps in current knowledge that this research seeks to address, firstly, though Macdonald’s work provides comprehensive analysis of UK screenwriting practice, no similar study has examined Irish screenwriting. Secondly, existing research has not explored how Ireland’s specific cultural and industrial context might create unique manifestations of screenwriting doxa. Thirdly, the relationship between international influences, particularly Hollywood orthodoxy and local Irish practice remains

unexplored. Lastly, the role of Irish cultural institutions and funding bodies in shaping screenwriting practice has not been systematically examined. Given these gaps, this research asks whether similar patterns exist in Irish screenwriting practice? How do Irish screenwriters navigate between Anglophone orthodoxy and local cultural expression? What role do Irish institutions play in either reinforcing or challenging established screenwriting doxa? These questions form the foundation for this study's investigation, which will extend Macdonald's work through detailed case study analysis of Irish screenwriting practice. The next step is to take these questions out into contemporary practice and interview those who directly influence the contemporary doxa screenwriters, academics, and industry players.

## **Chapter 3 Methodology**

### **Introduction**

Building on the literature review's examination of the three domains - manuals, industry and academia, this research aims to explore how these domains shape Irish screenwriting practice regarding the existence of a doxa of screenwriting. The literature review identified significant gaps in understanding how screenwriting operates within specific national contexts, particularly in Ireland where the relationship between Anglophone orthodoxy and local practice remains unexplored. This chapter outlines the methodological approach taken to address these gaps, explaining the research design, theoretical framework as a methodological tool, data collection and analysis methods, and strategies for ensuring rigour.

### **Research Design: Case Study Approach**

This project examines the doxa of Irish screenwriting via a qualitative case study, 'systematically gathering enough information about [the doxa] to effectively understand how it operates or functions' (Berg, 2001, p.225). The Irish film industry presents a compelling case for examining screenwriting doxa, as its development reflects the intersection of the local with the global industry.

Due to the complexity of a practice such as screenwriting, case study was chosen as the research strategy. Case study is the most appropriate method to address the research questions of this project as it is an ideal methodology for a holistic, in-depth investigation of a contemporary phenomenon like screenwriting practice (Feagin et al., 1991; Yin, 2018) This approach was appropriate for this project as the research involved a complex social phenomenon in a holistic real-world perspective. The case study works because it provides rich insights into a complex phenomenon. Case study accommodated a relativist epistemological

stance of this project. Doxa is a socially constructed phenomenon, therefore this project worked from the social constructivist position that there is no single reality but there are multiple realities and interpretations with multiple meanings, which are often observer dependent (Yin, 2018). Additionally, this project needed to examine a variety of units of analysis such as creative processes, practices, and environments and a potentially wide range of evidence such as documents, interviews, observations, artifacts; case study can accommodate this variety (Tellis, 1997; Yin, 2018).

From the range of evidence sources available within case study methodology such as documents, interviews, observations, and artefacts, this project prioritised semi-structured interviews as the primary method of data collection (Yin, 2018), supplemented by analysis of literature in the field of screenwriting. This combination was selected because interviews provide direct access to participant's lived experiences, implicit knowledge, and articulations (Yin, 2018) of belief systems that constitute screenwriting doxa. While doxa often operates below conscious awareness, in-depth interviews open up space for practitioners to reflect on and verbalise their normalised assumptions about screenwriting practice. Key literature sources, including screenwriting manuals and scholarly research, served a complimentary function. Together these sources enabled triangulation between what practitioners say about their practice and what screenwriting literature reveal about dominant academic and industry beliefs (Tellis, 1997; Yin, 2018).

Interviews as a method were particularly suited to this investigation of doxa for several reasons. First, semi-structured interviews allow for the flexibility needed to explore emerging themes, while maintaining focus on research questions about beliefs in practice (Yin, 2018). Second, the conversational nature of interviews enables the researcher to probe beneath surface level responses, pursuing the often-unspoken assumptions that characterise doxic thinking. Thirdly, interviews accommodate the complexity of screenwriting as both an individual

creative practice and a collaborative industrial process, allowing participants to discuss personal craft decisions alongside institutional and commercial pressures. The semi-structured format specifically was chosen because it balances the systematic data collection needed for cross-case analysis with the openness required to capture the nuanced, context dependent nature of practitioners' beliefs (Yin, 2018) about what constitutes 'good' screenwriting.

### **Theoretical Framework as Methodological Tool**

Schultz (1988) argues that the choice of a theory strongly influences how a project is designed and conducted (Schultz, 1988). The theoretical framework for this study serves a methodological function: it identifies where doxa becomes visible and accessible to study, and it provides criteria for designing the research approach. The frame of this study draws on Bourdieu's Field Theory. The concept of doxa emerged from his 1977 work *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, where he used the concept of doxa to describe a community's assumed and unquestioned rules or paradigms (Bourdieu, 1977, pp.159-171).

As established in the literature review, Macdonald in *The Poetics of Screenwriting* extends Bourdieu's concept of doxa to screenwriting (Macdonald, 2013). He identifies a doxa of screenwriting as one theoretical framework from which to explore what he calls the 'screen idea'. 'The imaginary of 'the screen idea' can be applied across research traditions, as well as at different levels of analysis. In production studies, the focus on practices and discourses necessarily talks of how the screen idea is negotiated and formed; in Film Studies the focus on individuals and their work talks of their relationship to others and the screen idea; in the study of the doxa and of art as practice, the focus is on the development process, and thus on the development of the screen idea' (Macdonald, 2013, p.6) Macdonald's identification of a doxa of screenwriting informed this project by providing methodological guidance on where and how to investigate screenwriting practice. His framework directed this research toward specific

sites of investigation by identifying that doxa manifests in three domains, manuals (where orthodoxy is codified), industry (where it is practiced), and academia (where it is taught and conceptualised). However, as Macdonald identifies, doxa is difficult, if not impossible, to quantify (Macdonald, 2013). The boundaries of doxa only become visible through the tension between orthodoxy and heterodoxy. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1977) and Macdonald's (2013) theoretical framework provided this research with a methodological lens for identifying where doxa becomes visible and accessible to study.

This theoretical framework shaped the research design in practical ways. It guided the sampling strategy by identifying the types of participants needed: those who teach and research screenwriting (academia), those who write and develop scripts (industry) and those who work with or produce screenwriting guidance (manuals). It informed the development of interview questions that could explore not just the explicit beliefs about screenwriting, but the taken-for-granted assumptions that characterise doxa. Finally, it provided analytical categories for understanding tensions between Anglophone orthodoxy and local practice, between commercial requirements and creative expression, and between codified rules and embodied craft knowledge. This theoretical framework thus shaped both the methodological design and the analytical approach of the study, establishing the parameters within which the research questions were formulated and pursued. The framework enabled the formulation of specific inquiries into Irish screenwriting practice.

## **Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to understand the doxa of contemporary screenwriting practice in Ireland. The central research question guiding study was: what constitutes the doxa of screenwriting in contemporary Irish practice, and how does the tension between orthodoxy manifest within an Irish context?

This central question was supported by several sub-questions:

1. How do Irish screenwriters learn and internalise screenwriting practices?
2. What role do Anglophone orthodoxies play in shaping Irish practice?
3. How do local cultural, institutional, and industrial factors influence Irish screenwriting practice?
4. To what extent does Irish screenwriting practice conform to or deviate from Anglophone norms?
5. What tensions exist between commercial requirements and creative expression in Irish screenwriting?

These research questions informed the development of interview questions that explored participants backgrounds, training, professional practices, views on screenwriting craft, and experiences working within the Irish industry context. Translating these questions into productive inquiry required deliberate participant selection.

### **Sampling Strategy**

Given the variety of potential data possible for this project, careful and purposeful sample selection of participants was important. Several principles guided this, firstly, given that generalisable probability sampling is not possible in a qualitative study, I chose non-probability sampling. Secondly, qualitative studies are purposive, seeking to understand or gain insight into a problem or phenomenon. Selection is therefore guided by the need for information rich cases, such as expert voices, documents, etc (Creswell and Creswell, 2017; Merriam and Tisdell, 2015).

The sample of participants was drawn from participants who are engaged with screenwriting work across any of the domains – working with manuals, in education, in industry and in academia. Potential participants were selected in advance based on their

proximity to the research topic and their experience as academics, or their screenwriting experience, or their knowledge of screenwriting practice from an industry perspective (e.g. commissioners, script editors, funders). As O'Brien (2019) notes '[b]ecause of its small-scale Irish workers are very available to researchers but these workers are very much in touch with the issues faced by their colleagues in the sector globally.' Another consideration was how many people to include in the sample. I opted for the criterion of saturation or informational redundancy grounded on the principle that qualitative research prioritises depth and richness of data over statistical representativeness (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Within this approach the answer to the question of 'how many' is reached when the researcher hears the same responses or sees the same themes emerge from the data (Creswell and Creswell, 2017; Merriam and Tisdell, 2015). With sampling principles established, formal ethical procedures were then undertaken.

### **Ethical Approval and Recruitment**

To gain ethical approval I followed the Tier 1 process through Maynooth University's Social Research Ethics Subcommittee (SRESC), as the study qualified as routine research with minimal ethical risk involving non-sensitive data collection from adults. I prepared and submitted my application through the Graduate Skills Ethics Module via the Research Information System (RIS). This included a comprehensive description of the research aims, methodology, recruitment and consent process, and data management procedures, along with a letter of support from my supervisors. The SRESC conducted a review of my application, and I received written notification of approval along with an official letter, which allowed me to proceed with the data collection, ensuring compliance with university ethical guidelines. Once I obtained ethical approval for my project, I began recruitment of participants.



The recruitment process involved multiple strategies to ensure comprehensive coverage across the three domains, manuals, industry and academia. I searched for relevant people via the internet and relevant websites such as IFTN (Irish Film and Television Network), Screen Ireland, IMDB, and university websites. This systematic approach helped identify figures across different domains of Irish screenwriting practice. The recruitment of potential participants for interviews took place through contact with participants directly through phone or email where participants were identified and located using publicly available sources.

I contacted 60 potential participants in total, of which 19 agreed to be interviewed and completed the interview process. The recruitment process proved challenging, with the majority of non-responders simply not replying to initial or follow up contact attempts. A small number of potential participants engaged initially, expressing interest and asking for more information, but subsequently ceased communication despite further contact attempts. Screen Ireland, as a key funding institution for Irish film, was contacted multiple times through both e-mail and telephone calls. However, these efforts ultimately proved unsuccessful, with communications going unanswered rather than being explicitly declined. This pattern of non-response, rather than outright refusal, was characteristic of the recruitment experience and reflects the practical difficulties of accessing busy industry professionals. While the final sample of 19 participants may initially appear small, this figure represents a significant achievement given the challenges encountered during recruitment and the limited availability of potential interviewees within the relatively small Irish film industry.

The research participants were then informed of the purpose of the study and asked to participate in 1-1.5-hour long interviews that would explore their views on the contemporary practice of screenwriting in Ireland. Interviews took place between April-September 2023. Each interview lasted 1-1.5 hours. All interviews took place via Microsoft Teams as this was most convenient for interviewees due to their work schedules. The interviews were recorded

on Teams and a transcription was generated via Teams. Although Teams did transcribe, there was considerable clean up required for each transcription as words were missed or misinterpreted. Following the meeting I reviewed each transcript in comparison to the video recording to amend any errors or misinterpretations.

The final sample achieved representation across all three domains, manuals, industry, and academia, with participants drawn from the broader field of Irish Film Studies, encompassing both those engaged with Irish cinema as a cultural or textual object and those focused specifically on screenwriting pedagogy and practice.

- Academics – 5 participants representing various education institutions and approaches to screenwriting pedagogy.
- Script Consultant – 1 participant bridging manuals, industry and academic perspectives
- Director – 1 participant offering insight into screenplay development and production
- Producers – 3 participants from different scales of production, from independent to larger commercial projects
- Screenwriters – 9 participants representing various career stages, from emerging to established professionals

This sample composition allowed for comprehensive exploration of how doxa manifests across different professional contexts within Irish screenwriting. The diversity of participants ensured multiple perspectives on the research questions maintaining focus on those directly engaged with screenwriting practice. The resulting cohort encompasses varied experience levels and professional contexts.

## **Participant Profiles**

To protect participant privacy and uphold ethical research standards, while providing necessary context, pseudonyms and generalised professional descriptions are used throughout in place of

participants' real names and identifying details. The participants represent a cross-section of Irish screenwriting practice (See Appendix).

***Academics (5 participants):***

These included university lecturers, senior lecturers, and professors with expertise in screenwriting, Film Studies, and creative practice, teaching across undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, short courses, and CPD workshops in both university and private college settings. Participants represented diverse career stages and professional journeys, from early-career lecturers to established professors, as well as practitioner-academics who had transitioned from industry into Film School teaching, reflecting varied institutional contexts and pedagogical approaches to screenwriting education.

***Industry Professionals (14 participants):***

This group encompassed screenwriters at various career stages (emerging to highly experienced), producers working across different scales of production, directors with screenwriting experience, and a script consultant who bridges academic and industry contexts. Their collective experience covers feature films, short films, and various genres within Irish and international markets. While the study's primary focus is on film screen production, many participants work across both film and television, and some interview data consequently reflects experience of writing for public service media and RTÉ. This participant composition ensured representation across the three domains of manuals, industry and academia, alongside maintaining the confidentiality necessary. With participants selected, the method of data collection required careful consideration.

## **Data Gathering**

This project used semi-structured interviews as these allow for a plan with flexibility. They support comparison of interview data as similar questions are asked of all participants. At its core an interview is simply a conversation, but a research interview aims to be systematic and purposeful (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015). It is a process focussed on the research questions of the project but breaks these down into sub-questions. Semi-structured interviews, as described by Merriam and Tisdell, are characterised by a blend of structure and flexibility. The interview guide contains a set of questions or topics to be explored, but the format allows the interviewer to respond to the direction of the participant's responses as appropriate. This means that while all participants were asked similar questions, supporting the comparability of data collection, there was room for the interviewer to pursue issues as they arose, resulting in more detailed or nuanced information. Another aspect of semi-structured interviews is that rather than following a fixed order or wording, the interviewer focuses on the research purpose, using a list of topics as a guide but allowing the conversation to develop naturally (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015). Interviews can take place one-to-one or in groups. Interviews are a research tool for exploring what is typically unseen. The interviewer asks questions to gather data about people's feelings, beliefs, thoughts, intentions and to ask questions in order to enter into a person's perspective (Creswell and Creswell, 2017; Merriam and Tisdell, 2015). This makes interviews particularly suitable for gathering data in qualitative case studies such as this project, which aims to gather information about the doxa of Irish screenwriting. As discussed in the literature review doxa refers to the underlying and unquestioned opinions, beliefs, and assumptions that are commonly held in a field. Doxa is where the socially constructed is seen as the natural order (Jensen, 2002). Interviews allow access to these opinions, beliefs and assumptions. They can be used for both intensive case study of a single case or to gather wider views on a topic or concept. Once interviews were completed, systematic analysis of the resulting data could begin.

## **Data Analysis**

I managed and organised the data by gathering a master data set that was stored in my NUI Maynooth OneDrive. I then worked manually on a copy of the data within OneDrive, breaking it down into smaller units of data for analysis using Thematic Analysis (TA) and the Constant Comparative Method (CCM). This involved coding the data, looking for patterns, categories and themes (Creswell and Creswell, 2017; Braun and Clarke, 2021). Thematic Analysis and the Constant Comparative Method (CCM) are complementary qualitative data analysis techniques useful for identifying patterns in data. The thematic analysis framework used draws on Braun and Clarke's (2021) reflexive approach, which treats theme development as an interpretive act shaped by the researcher, rather than simply a mechanical coding process. In this approach, themes are understood as patterns of shared meaning underpinned by a central concept or idea, rather than simply repeated topics or summaries of what participants said. Reflexivity is key to this process: the researcher actively shapes the analysis through their questions, assumptions, and interpretive choices, and analysis moves recursively between phases rather than following a strictly linear path (Braun and Clarke, 2021). Thematic analysis follows a structured, inductive process, where researchers code data and group codes into mutually exclusive categories then develop broader themes that address research questions. This moves systematically from descriptive coding to interpretive theme construction. CCM adds a dynamic element using continuous comparison, where each new data piece is compared against existing codes and themes, allowing researchers to refine, confirm or discard preliminary ideas iteratively. This keeps interpretations grounded in actual data. The two approaches were combined productively in this research: reflexive TA provided the interpretive framework and structural phases, while CCM operated as a comparative checking mechanism, helping to ensure that emerging themes were tested against the full data set rather than settled prematurely. When mismatches arose between a participant quote and an existing theme, these

were treated as prompts to refine the analysis. It is important also to note that CCM is used here as a technique within a thematic analysis framework, rather than as an indication of grounded theory methodology, as the overall design and intent of the study aligns with TA rather than theory building in the grounded theory tradition. When combined, TA and CCM provide a strong analytical framework. Thematic Analysis provides a strong structural framework, while CCM provides ongoing validation via constant comparison of the data, allowing for a flexible but rigorous approach (Creswell and Creswell, 2017; Braun and Clarke, 2021)

Qualitative research, such as this study, is dynamic and emergent. It builds inductively from working hypotheses and becomes more intensive as a study progresses. It is interpretive, as the researcher draws meaning from the data. While this interpretative characteristic is fundamental to qualitative research, it requires systematic approaches to ensure rigour and credibility. Research is not a linear process. Analysis and data collection ideally should happen together. With this in mind I began data analysis early in order to construct categories or themes and analyse them in tandem with data collection (Creswell and Creswell, 2017; Merriam and Tisdell, 2015). Data analysis is a daunting task where acceptance of ambiguity is necessary. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) recommend, the Constant Comparative Method which emerged from Grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 2017). This method's underlying principles inform its application.

### **Grounded theory and Constant Comparative Method**

Grounded theory (GT) was developed by Glaser and Strauss (2017). In this methodology theory emerges from or is grounded in data. When first devised, Grounded theory was revolutionary, as it challenged pre-existing claims of positivist research around the nature of rigour and the separation of data and analysis. What makes GT different is its focus on building

substantive theory from the specificity of data and it is particularly useful for understanding process. In GT the collection of data is guided by theoretical sampling. This is a process where data collection decisions are guided by emerging theory rather than predetermined sample sizes (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015). Data is analysed using the constant comparative method (CCM), a systematic process of comparing incidents, codes, and categories to identify patterns and relationships (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015). Collection of data and analysis happen together. Once data was begun to be collected it was grouped into categories, with the researcher looking for patterns. A category must be central, and it must appear regularly in the data. Hypotheses emerge from the data, but they are tentative. Since its initial establishment GT has evolved and is now used in many disciplines and philosophical approaches from Constructive to Postmodern (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015).

It is important to clarify, however, that this research did not employ pure grounded theory in the classical sense (Glaser and Strauss, 2017). A GT- lite, or partial approach was adopted, drawing on the analytical tools of GT, particularly the Constant Comparative Method, without adhering strictly to all of its defining requirements. Pure GT demands that the researcher approach the data without prior theoretical commitments, allowing theory to emerge inductively from the ground up. This research however utilised an existing theoretical orientation; Bourdieu's concepts of doxa, orthodoxy, and heterodoxy, which were brought to the study in advance of data collection and informed how the research questions were framed and how the field was conceptualised. This sits in tension with a strictly inductive grounded theory approach and requires acknowledgement. Cresswell and Cresswell (2017) note that grounded theory can sit alongside other approaches in a flexible way. This research draws on that more flexible framing. The rationale for this approach is that CCM was a useful and rigorous tool for the systematic analysis of interview data, enabling the identification of patterns and categories. This places the methodology closer to a Thematic Analysis (TA)

framework informed by CCM procedures, where an initial conceptual framework shapes the research questions but does not predetermine the findings. The themes that emerged were grounded in participant data and refined through comparative analysis rather than being imposed from theory alone. This hybrid approach is consistent with how GT and CCM are increasingly employed across qualitative research traditions, where the analytical method is adopted for its systematic rigour without committing to the full epistemological programme of classical grounded theory (Cresswell and Cresswell, 2017).

CCM and GT supported me in making sense of the data. I moved between description and interpretation. It was a useful process to help analyse and answer the research questions. I coded units of data using Quirkos coding software, (all data was stored locally on my laptop), looking for patterns, grouping them into themes and categories. I then moved through the data repeating the process, gradually coding and merging codes into a master list, looking for further patterns, themes, or categories (Creswell and Creswell, 2017; Merriam and Tisdell, 2015). Naming categories in CCM is intuitive but systematic. Categories can come from a number of sources, such as the researcher, the participants, or body of literature. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) recommend the first two sources, but Glaser and Strauss, (2017) advise against using borrowed classifications as this hinders the generation of new categories. This was a challenge for this project as the literature review identified several concepts in the Anglophone doxa. Categories should be exhaustive, exclusive and sensitive, accurately describing the data. Creswell and Creswell (2017) recommends starting with twenty-five to thirty categories initially which are then filtered down to five to six. This accurately describes how themes emerged from the transcribed interviews. Certain phrases and comments were repeated and became sub-themes. As the list of sub-themes grew certain overarching themes emerged under which the sub-themes were grouped together, these larger themes included The Learning Journey, Screenwriting Manuals, Rules of the Game, Irish Scripts, and Frustration with



Funders. These overarching themes formed the basis of chapters. Beyond identifying themes, establishing the trustworthiness of findings remained essential.

### **Ensuring Rigour and Validity**

As this project is a qualitative case study of the doxa of screenwriting in Ireland, ensuring validity and reliability was a primary goal. Validity and reliability are concepts for ensuring the credibility of qualitative research such as this project, particularly in case studies, where the researcher's interpretation is central (Creswell and Creswell, 2017; Merriam and Tisdell, 2015). Validity ensures findings accurately reflect participant's real experiences through strategies such as triangulation of multiple data sources, reflexivity around biases, participant verification, and rich contextual descriptions. Reliability, is focussed on consistent, transparent processes that others can follow, achieved through clear audit trails, standardised protocols, and peer review (Creswell and Creswell, 2017; Merriam and Tisdell, 2015).

Another principle was rigour, however, standards of rigour in qualitative research differ from quantitative. In fact, the question of what constitutes rigour in qualitative studies is contested and continually in flux (Creswell and Creswell, 2017; Glaser and Strauss, 2017). Constructivism argues that knowledge is socially constructed while post-modernism contests the existence of knowledge and truth (Glaser and Strauss, 2017). However, traditional concepts of validity and reliability still underpin qualitative research regardless of philosophical orientation. Researchers require a strategy to convince others that their findings are trustworthy.

Internal validity was established by triangulation of data, checking credibility of interpretations across participants and seeking peer feedback (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015) (Creswell and Creswell, 2017). I established validity through several strategies. I used triangulation of data to compare perspectives across different participant types and backgrounds. Member checking involved discussing interpretations of comments with

participants throughout interviews and afterward to clarify points and verify accuracy and credibility. Peer discussion with my supervisors provided an external perspective on emerging findings and my analytical approaches (Creswell and Creswell, 2017; Merriam and Tisdell, 2015).

Reliability was ensured by explaining and clarifying researcher assumptions. As researcher I established a master list in Quirkos to show how my findings and conclusions were established. I ensured reliability through transparent documentation of the research process. This involved maintaining detailed records of each step of the process, from initial plans to ethical approval, recruitment of participants, dates for interviews, recordings and transcription, and establishing an audit trail that tracked how findings and conclusions evolved and coalesced (Creswell and Creswell, 2017; Merriam and Tisdell, 2015).

Generalisability remains an open question in research such as this as it is much harder to establish in qualitative research and is not necessarily an objective. Some principles can help such as rich thick description of data and findings. Findings must be internally valid. As researcher I cannot make assumptions of equivalency across samples. Single cases cannot generalise to an entire population. Qualitative research is not generalisable and can only ever be non-probabilistic (Creswell and Creswell, 2017; Merriam and Tisdell, 2015). However, this does not invalidate its value. Through rigorous data collection and analysis, I arrived at working hypotheses. Patton (2002) suggests researchers can extrapolate from the data and make logical but modest speculations. As researcher I have sought to provide enough rich detail so that understanding of the practice of screenwriting in Ireland is deepened (Creswell and Creswell, 2017). In the end all I can do as researcher is provide the rationale for what I did and provide evidence of how I did it (Creswell and Creswell, 2017; Merriam and Tisdell, 2015; Patton, 2002). This transparency extends to acknowledging my own position within the research.

## **The Positionality of the Researcher**

Another consideration for this project were my own biases and assumptions as a researcher. Credibility depends on me as researcher and my intellectual rigour. Methodology does not ensure rigour, it is rooted in rigorous thinking (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015). Key principles underpinning the ethical credibility of research are do no harm and ensure informed consent. As researcher I endeavoured to treat participants as whole people. I sought and gained ethical approval in advance of my project. I ensured participants' privacy and avoided deception. I clearly explained the purpose of the study and the risks involved. I sought active and informed consent.

My dual position as both a creative practitioner and a teacher of screenwriting shaped this research from its earliest stages. This positionality influenced how I identified and approached potential participants, since my networks and knowledge of the Irish screenwriting community inevitably shaped who appeared visible and accessible. It also informed the theoretical frameworks utilised in this research, particularly the decision to engage with Bourdieu's concepts of doxa, orthodoxy, and heterodoxy, which resonated with tensions I had already experienced personally, between prescriptive screenwriting rules and creative freedom. This prior orientation created the potential for confirmation bias, where I might be predisposed to find evidence supporting pre-existing views, and required careful reflexive management.

In recognising the significance of my own experience to this research, it is worth acknowledging the autoethnographic aspect of my positionality. Autoethnography, as Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) define it; 'is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyse personal experience in order to understand cultural experience' (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, 2011, p.273). Autoethnography uses personal experience to illuminate broader cultural experience, treating the researcher's subjectivity not as a problem to be removed but as a positive analytical resource. While this project is not

formally autoethnographic in design, the autoethnographic influence is present in the way my own professional experience as a screenwriting educator has operated as a lens through which the research questions emerged and developed.

My role as a teacher of screenwriting is particularly relevant here and warrants further exploration. In teaching screenwriting at Further Education level I have worked directly with key screenwriting texts, the manuals and paradigms, that this research investigates. This classroom experience gave me a practitioner-level familiarity with how doxa operates not only in the industry but in education: how certain rules are transmitted as self-evident truths, how students internalise structural conventions before they have developed a critical vocabulary to question them, and how the educational context itself can function as a site for the reproduction of orthodoxy. Teaching screenwriting therefore places me inside the field of knowledge production this research examines, and my experience of navigating prescriptive frameworks in a pedagogical context directly informed my sensitivity to the tensions between orthodoxy and heterodoxy that emerged in the data.

During collection researcher/participant relationship was important. Interviews present ethical concerns. For the participant there are risks and benefits. There is a chance to be heard but they are revealing. Interviews may have long term affects, both negative and positive. As interviewer I did not act as a judge or therapist (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015). My positionality as a practitioner and educator brought particular implications for the conduct of interviews themselves. Shared professional knowledge risks creating an assumed consensus between interviewer and participant, where certain orthodoxies might go unquestioned or unchallenged (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015, pp.129-130). I was therefore careful to adopt an open an inquiring stance, probing assumptions rather than affirming them and remaining attentive to when my own familiarity with the field might be narrowing rather than opening the conversation.

Data analysis was another factor to consider methodologically and ethically. Analysis presents its own ethical considerations because interpretation is by necessity filtered through the researcher's perspective and experiences. This provides opportunities for the researcher to exclude data from view or overemphasise certain findings that confirm preexisting assumptions. Positionality was particularly important at the stage of theme development, where decisions about which patterns were significant and how participant statements were interpreted were inevitably shaped by my own values and experiences. To address such challenges, I used reflexive practices throughout the analytical process, regularly questioning how my biases and background might be influencing the interpretation of the data (Creswell and Creswell, 2017; Merriam and Tisdell, 2015; Patton, 2002).

My position, biases and assumptions were an important factor to reflect on during this research process. I am male, Irish and working class. I work as a teacher of Media Analysis and Screenwriting in Further Education. I am a lifelong film fan. My undergraduate studies were in Humanities and Philosophy. I am an amateur screenwriter and film industry outsider. I started this project because I was struck by the rigidity of ideas found in screenwriting manuals, no other form of creative writing was so prescriptive. But I am also interested in philosophical aesthetic questions of the 'good' in art. Why is a screenplay good? Who decides and why? I am frustrated with the lack of transparency in the Irish film industry. It appears to be a closed system to people from a working-class background. In terms of this research project that raises the question of how did I address or mitigate against my biases? I think it is difficult to completely overcome them. However, by being aware of them, and explicitly stating them, I was on alert to when and where they might influence the research process or findings. For example, while it was not a primary goal of the research, when participants discussed class barriers to entry to the industry, I was careful to distinguish between their own experiences and my own biases and assumptions. Also, when analysing views toward screenwriting manuals, I

worked hard to separate my personal critique of manuals, from participant's views to ensure that positions in support of manuals were fairly represented as well as critical viewpoints. This reflexive separation was made more challenging, and more necessary, by my experience as a screenwriting educator. Having taught these manuals, I held views about them that were formed through sustained professional engagement rather than abstract opinion, and this required particular vigilance in distinguishing my pedagogical frustrations from what participants were actually expressing. Through this careful reflexive practice of distinguishing between participant's perspectives and my own assumptions, the thematic analysis of interview data identified five themes that reveal how doxa, and the tension between orthodoxy and heterodoxy, operates within Irish screenwriting practice.

## **Overview of Findings Chapters**

Chapter 4: 'The Learning Journey' examines how Irish screenwriters acquire their knowledge and skills. This chapter explores the role of formal education, mentorships, self-directed learning, and how the Anglophone consensus shapes local practice.

Chapter 5: 'Screenwriting Manuals' explores the place of manuals in Irish screenwriting practice, questioning whether and how they influence screenwriters and screenwriting. A significant finding is that there is an ambivalent tension in how they are viewed by participants, between being essential to the practice, but disavowed by the industry.

Chapter 6: 'Rules of the Game' investigates the orthodox practices and conventions that shape Irish screenwriting, examining attitudes toward structure, character, conflict, and the tension between creativity and commerciality.

Chapter 7: 'Irish Scripts' explores questions of cultural identity and distinctiveness in Irish screenwriting, questioning whether and how local cultural elements show up in Irish screenwriting practice and the tension between the local and the global in Irish filmmaking.

Chapter 8: 'Frustration with Funders' examines the role of the industry and institutions, such as Screen Ireland, in shaping screenwriting practice and the tensions between policy, bureaucracy, commerciality and creativity.

## Chapter 4 The Learning Journey

### Introduction

As mentioned previously, the goal of this project is to examine an underexplored area of Irish creative practice, screenwriting, using the framework of doxa, orthodoxy and heterodoxy from Bourdieu (1977), extending previous research by Macdonald (2013) on UK screenwriting. This chapter examines the tension between orthodoxy and heterodoxy in the doxa around how screenwriting skills are acquired by screenwriters and how screenwriting is taught and learned.

Aspiring screenwriters in Ireland typically learn the craft through a combination of formal courses, industry-supported labs, workshops and ongoing self-driven practice, often with the support of professional mentors. Several options are available, for example, Trinity College Dublin (TCD), offers an M. Phil in Screen Studies that allows students to pursue either a creative or research-focussed pathway (Trinity College, 2025). University College Dublin (UCD) similarly offers an MA in Writing for Stage and Screen (2025), which integrates creative practice with critical reflection. Other institutes like the Institute of Art + Design, Dún Laoghaire (IADT) offer formal academic qualifications, such as their long running MA in Screenwriting, which focuses on both learning writing skills and on the professional aspects of screenwriting, such as receiving feedback that mirrors industry practice (from producers, directors, and other collaborators), and connecting with the wider industry outside of education (IADT, 2025). Pulse College, offers a short intensive course over five Saturdays, called ‘Writing for the Screen’ (Pulse College, 2025). This short course provides beginner and intermediate writers with practical writing exercises on script development, structures, formatting, pitching and industry networking. The National Talent Academy’s Greenlight Screenwriting Lab (2025) pairs emerging writers with successful industry mentors. Participants develop their scripts and gain industry experience of networking with producers. Storyhouse



Lab (2025b), supported by Screen Ireland, selects 10-12 emerging writers each year for an intensive week of mentoring with professional writers. The focus in that course is on both craft development and industry networking. The Irish Writer's Centre regularly offers short courses in Screenwriting (2022). Many aspiring screenwriters rely on local writers' groups for peer feedback and support, using books, sample scripts and regular practice to improve their skills. Much learning happens via workshops, mentorship and writing communities that are harder to capture, but support skill development and industry awareness (IADT, 2025; Irish Writers' Centre, 2022; Pulse College, 2025; Screen Ireland, 2025b).

This demonstrates how screenwriting education in Ireland is quite diverse, reflecting different pedagogical purposes. Universities like UCD and TCD examine screenwriting within a context of both creative skills, critical analysis and theory. Film Schools and technological universities like IADT prioritise practical industry skills taught by active industry professionals, preparing students for real world working environments. Outside of these settings, organisations like Screen Ireland, the National Talent Academy, The Irish Writer's Centre, and Pulse College, provide shorter upskilling courses for new writers trying to break into the industry. Understanding these distinctions is crucial for the subsequent analysis as screenwriting education in Ireland is shaped by the pedagogical frameworks adopted by such institutions (IADT, 2025; Irish Writers' Centre, 2022; Pulse College, 2025; Screen Ireland, 2025b; Trinity College, 2025).

Through analysis of interview data and institutional practices, three interconnected tensions have emerged that exposed the orthodox/heterodox tension at work in Irish screenwriting education. The first tension centres on the debate between practical, industry focussed training and academic approaches that emphasise analysis and critical reflection. Short courses, industry led workshops and institutions like IADT emphasise professional skills taught by active industry practitioners, while universities such as UCD and TCD integrate

creative practice with scholarly reflection, revealing competing ideas of what screenwriting education should achieve. The second tension revolves around pedagogical approaches, where structured, formula driven approaches that align with industry clash with artistic aspirations that prioritise creative voice. This divide reflects deeper tensions between screenwriting as a standardised craft versus screenwriting as artistic practice. The third tension is between formal education and creativity. Participants expressed anxiety about teaching orthodox rules might damage creative potential. These tensions reflect the struggle withing Irish screenwriting education to reconcile the tension between commercial viability and artistic authenticity. This fundamental contradiction in the doxa, between orthodox rules, and heterodox artistic creativity is the critical tension that is being examined in this research and demonstrates how doxa operates within the field.

The tensions analysed emerge around how participants discuss learning the craft, teaching the craft, and concerns that formal education might suppress creative originality, what participants often described as ‘killing creativity’ through over emphasis on rules and formulas. These tensions surface in how participants articulate competing positions, for example some defend industry aligned pedagogies that prioritise practical skills and genre conventions necessary for professional success, while others advocate for academic approaches that prioritise critical analysis, theoretical understanding, and creative experimentation over commercial viability. Screenwriting education in Ireland is therefore shaped by several tensions that reflect deeper disagreements about how the craft should be taught and learned.

Firstly, there is an ongoing debate between practical, industry focussed skills versus academic approaches that prioritise alternative approaches, led by analysis and theory. Secondly, teaching methods revealed divergent views among participants, with some favouring structured, formula led approaches that align with industry expectations, while others argue for novelty and experimentation. Thirdly, underneath these discussions, is another deeper concern,

namely that formal education, focussed on industry skills, might stifle creativity by encouraging safe, formulaic writing over original, experimental storytelling. Finally, these interconnected debates permeate participants' views across the data and, shaping how they consider the nature of the practice. This chapter examines these tensions systematically, firstly, exploring the debate between industry-focused training and academic approaches, secondly analysing disagreements about teaching methods (structured formulas versus experimental freedom), and thirdly examining participants anxieties that formal training might damage creative potential. These tensions reflect a fundamental divide between orthodox and heterodox approaches to screenwriting education that manifest most clearly in debates over implicit priorities within different training contexts.

### **First Tension: Practical Industry Training or Critical Education**

The tension inherent within the doxa, between orthodox, industry-aligned conventions and heterodox approaches, that prioritise artistic experimentation, becomes particularly evident when examining how participants describe their journey towards learning the craft of screenwriting. Throughout participant interviews, three distinct pathways to acquiring screenwriting skills emerged - formal Film School training, (such as Master's degrees in screenwriting), short courses and workshops, and self-taught learning through trial-and-error. However, these learning routes exist in tension with one another, reflecting the contested nature of screenwriting knowledge and practice.

There is a tension in how participants describe learning their craft. Learning is a diverse field, and aspiring screenwriters can take short courses, workshops, masterclasses, or more formal education routes such as Film School or higher education. Alternatively, they can learn via trial-and-error, teaching themselves along the way. Each of these routes is not exclusive, participants might do all or some, depending on their own personal preference. However, a

similar tension exists across all of these routes, as each learning route must engage with both the orthodox narrative rules (as described in the literature review) or the heterodox artistic rules and ‘avant-garde’ alternatives to the orthodoxy. It is in acknowledging the orthodox and heterodox approaches to screenwriting that the tension in the doxa becomes apparent and is reflected in how participants describe learning their craft. This tension, of the orthodox and heterodox, is a significant feature of the diverse ways that participants describe their learning journey.

As will be evidenced by data outlined in sections below, one of the main findings regarding learning the craft of screenwriting is that a tension does manifest as an orthodox/heterodox divide within the doxa of Irish screenwriting learning. This section will outline how Film School programmes, such as the Masters’ degree in IADT, and structured short courses, represent an orthodox approach to screenwriting education (IADT, 2025). They operate within established institutional boundaries, teaching formulaic rules and techniques that align closely with industry standards and expectations. Participants who pursued these formal routes described learning specific structural formulas, character development strategies and formatting conventions that align with industry practices. In contrast, trial-and-error learning typically embodies more heterodox principles, echoing romantic notions of the ‘self-taught artist’, who emerges naturally, without formal instruction. Participants who learned via this route often spoke of discovering their own voice through experimentation, rejection of prescribed formulas and following an intuitive approach to learning the craft, which emphasised personal expression over industry conventions.

This divide reflects the broader art versus commerce tension that permeates screenwriting doxa. The formal training pathway explicitly aligns with commercial imperatives, preparing writers to navigate industry expectations and goals. The trial-and-error approach champions artistic freedom and individual creativity.

The findings reveal this tension in the doxa is not merely theoretical but actively shapes how screenwriters consider their own position within the craft. The data demonstrates how these competing positions occupy space in the thinking of participants, representing opposing approaches they can choose, or not choose, but cannot ignore. They show how artistic aspirations and commercial expectations continually shape and influence screenwriters throughout their careers. The next three subsections will tackle each of these topics in turn. Firstly, exploring what the data shows in relation to formal training such as Film School training. Secondly, examining the data on short courses. Thirdly, exploring what participants say about trial-and-error learning. Film schools and universities represent the most formalised educational pathways into screenwriting.

Participant's perceptions of Film School or higher education training are one place where the tension in the doxa is evident. As discussed above, formal training such as that found in Film School is not homogenous. However, as seen above, there is broad agreement on their dual approach. For example, both the UCD and TCD Masters' courses have a creative and a critical element, reflecting their context within a national university with its tradition of critical analysis. The IADT MA in Screenwriting course has a creative and critical element, its focus on the creative side probably reflects its origin, emerging out of an art college and vocational training setting, which emphasises industry training and craft skills. These courses reflect the tension between orthodox and heterodox, between art and commerce, that is central to the doxa of screenwriting. How participants describe their view of Film School training reflects this duality, this tension in the doxa. The data reveals that participants describe how formal study encouraged them to develop as (heterodox) 'artists' while simultaneously teaching them how to get funding and be (orthodox) commercially successful.

The complexity of this doxa-tension becomes apparent when examining how participants position formal screenwriting education. Formal training in screenwriting,

specifically the Master's degree (MA) in Screenwriting offered by institutions such as UCD, TCD, or IADT is perceived as one route to success as a screenwriter in Ireland by participants. Yet participants recognise that it serves as a place where an orthodox approach to screenwriting is inculcated. This dual function exemplifies the central doxa tension, where formal education operates as both orthodox industry preparation and heterodox artistic development.

This duality emerges clearly in participants' motivations for pursuing formal training. Emily argues that those who study for a Masters in Screenwriting are doing so because they want to be better screenwriters *and* because they wanted to get funded, 'so they work towards that'. For Ciara, the commercial benefits materialised when she 'got an agent'. These accounts demonstrate how learning the craft of screenwriting has an embedded duality, a tension, as it works toward artistic mastery *and* getting work in the industry. This positioning reveals the fundamental contradiction within the doxa, the same educational pathway that promises artistic development functions as orthodox industry gatekeeping.

The institutional design of these programmes reflects this doxa tension directly. For example, the underlying purpose of Ciara's MA course (that she teaches on) was explicitly 'gearing people to getting jobs in the soaps' and to 'write a saleable' script that would get 'attention' from industry. The goal was to leave the course with a 'calling card' (Ciara). A calling card is a script that would get a writer noticed in the industry. Yet paradoxically, this same commercial orientation coexists with artistic development imperatives. Emily articulates this contradiction precisely, explaining that studying an MA is about 'getting the writer that you are out of you' but, 'you also have to pass the course' and show that you have learned 'certain techniques' such as act structure, character, conflict, are the orthodox rules of the screenwriting doxa that must be internalised to achieve success and open doors into the industry. Emily's account exposes the doxa tension explicitly, the programme simultaneously promises to extract authentic artistic voice demanding conformity to industry orthodoxy.

This tension is evident in two example Masters' courses. UCD, for example, which is a university, offers an MA in Writing for Stage and Screen, and Film Schools and technological universities like IADT prioritise practical industry skills taught by active industry professionals, preparing students for real working environments. These different emphases are reflected in the prospectus of different Masters. For example, the prospectus for the UCD Writing for Stage & Screen notes:

The Writing for Stage and Screen MA offers you the opportunity to devote a considerable amount of time to write, evolve and reflect on your own creative practices. Today like never before, writers are moving between different media forms and this programme allows you to develop work across diverse platforms. As such, this MA seeks to equip writers with the tools and confidence to work between these forms. The School of English, Drama & Film offers unique insights to students through its deep involvement in the progress of Irish literary affairs (UCD, 2025).

The IADT prospectus notes:

Our course aims to inspire you to develop the art and craft of screenwriting and related ancillary skills to a high level. You will have already demonstrated an aptitude for writing (through your undergraduate studies or your portfolio work), and by the end of the course, you will have written a full-length feature script or a pilot episode of a television drama.

You will also acquire an in-depth knowledge and understanding of the craft of screenwriting and will have gained a clear understanding of the stages of writing from idea to final draft. You will quickly appreciate the opportunities that exist in the film and television industries, as well as matters relating to copyright and contracts.

Each year we invite established directors to workshop scenes from our Master Student's screenplays with a group of actors – in previous years Lenny Abrahamson, Neil Jordan,

Juanita Wilson, Jim Sheridan, Paddy Breathnach, Kirsten Sheridan, Ed Guiney, Neasa Hardiman and many other accomplished directors have dedicated their time and energy to these workshops. As the year comes to an end, we offer our students a chance to meet a number of Irish producers and production companies. Our alumni are best placed to assess the quality of our programme. Many are now professional screenwriters while others are working as film/television producers, as directors, as documentary makers, or work in script development (IADT, 2025).

Each of these promotional descriptions reflects their respective emphasis. For example, the UCD blurb reflects a more critical and literary focus. UCD offers writers a space to ‘reflect on creative practices’, and deep involvement in the ‘progress of Irish literary affairs’. There is clearly a strong emphasis on deep learning and reflexivity. UCD emphasises reflection and developing understanding of the creative field and its histories, whereas IADT focuses on professionalisation. The IADT blurb emphasises the ‘art and craft’ of screenwriting, offering to support writers to complete a ‘full length feature’. It offers links with industry through workshops with actors and established directors. Additionally, alumni are presented as successful exemplars as many are now industry professionals. These respective outlines reflect the different ways that Film Schools and universities emphasise different sides of doxa, reflecting the tension between orthodox and heterodox that sits across the learning of the craft. In universities and higher education generally, there’s more likely to be heterodox, critical perspectives via research and scholarship than in industry training.

The growing cultural capital attached to formal training further intensifies this doxa tension. It is worth considering that as they grow in popularity, having an MA may come to be perceived as a requirement for industry success. For example, Orla notes that the lack of formal training leaves her with a feeling of ‘imposter syndrome on a daily basis,’ because she ‘didn’t go to Film School’. Orla’s experience reveals how the orthodox lauding of formal credentials



can undermine the heterodox idea of the natural artistic talent. It creates implied pressure to conform among practitioners who learned through different pathways. This shows the growing complexity of the tension at the heart of the doxa around formal training. As formal education gains cultural authority, it challenges heterodox assumptions about innate artistic ability while simultaneously promising to nurture that very quality. Beyond degree programmes, alternative educational formats offer different points of entry.

### ***Short Courses***

Short courses represent another learning route for Irish screenwriters. According to participants, several of the 19 interviewed had engaged in short courses at some point in their careers. These courses, which range from weekend workshops, six-week evening classes, differ from MA programmes in several ways. They focus primarily on technical skills rather than critical analysis, they are typically taught by industry professionals rather than academics, and they emphasise immediate practical application over theoretical understanding. For example, Pulse College's 'Writing for the Screen' course runs over five Saturdays and covers formatting, basic structure and pitching skills (Pulse College, 2025). At first glance, how participants describe their interaction with short courses aligns with the simple rules of the orthodoxy, yet, there is a tension in how participants describe how they ignore what they have learned. Participants describe how they learn the basic rules but then discard them.

Short courses tend to align with the Anglophone consensus in that they focus on rules, in the form of formatting and structure. Unlike the example Master's in Screenwriting mentioned above, (which embodies the tension between developing the artist, teaching industry rules), short courses, (such as the course in Pulse college) often prioritise the orthodox rules. They are described by participants as 'formulaic' and focussed on act structure and the 'basics'. For example, Orla describes taking a short six-week course in Dublin which covered topics

like formatting and ‘what’s a slug line?’ or ‘when do you capitalise character names?’ Emily learned the craft via evening classes through Filmbase and short courses through Screen Ireland training but had ‘no formal training apart from college’. (The fact that short courses on ‘the basics’ and formatting were offered by Filmbase and Screen Ireland suggests that the orthodox rules are part of the Irish funding apparatus.) These short courses covered ‘all the different types of screenwriting’ like sequencing or three-act structure. For Orla, the basics are enough to learn because ‘screenwriting is not complicated at all’ ‘it’s very formulaic’ and ‘the rest you can Google really’.

That the craft of screenwriting is perceived as ‘not complicated’ demonstrates an orthodox view of screenwriting as formulaic and simple (Conor, 2014b). Amy believes that screenwriting ‘is fairly straightforward really’, though she took a short course early in her career. This shows how the Anglophone consensus has entered the doxa of Irish screenwriting, in how participants describe the apparent simplicity of the craft of screenwriting. Short course training appears much less critical about the orthodox rules than the master’s where heterodox artistic freedom sits in tension with orthodox rules. A reason for this difference may lie in the fact that one is training for industry, and one is typically a university education (focused on critical thinking, etc. rather than the labour market). Outside formal structures entirely, some writers developed their practice through direct experience.

### ***Trial-and-error Learning***

Learning via trial-and-error, is another route to learning screenwriting which also reflects the tension between orthodox and heterodox. However, it is more difficult to discern the tension in how participants, like Orla, describe learning via trial-and-error. Some learn their craft by going through a process of reading and writing scripts which appears more aligned with the heterodox

artistic side of the practice as it is more organic and experimental, less focussed on rules and formula, and more interested in finding a story.

For Orla ‘reading a lot of bad scripts, writing a lot of bad scripts is probably the best thing one can do’. She also found that reading good scripts, like *Three Billboards outside Ebbing Missouri* (McDonagh, 2017), was a learning tool. She learned her craft through the practice of writing ‘rather than books about scripts’. Orla argues that learning how to create a good story is a ‘personal thing’ so she recommends to ‘experiment and to just write’ this helps ‘create your own style and your own voice’.

Her alignment with the heterodox side of the tension is evident in the choices Orla makes about reading ‘good’ scripts. For example, it could be argued that *Three Billboards* is an example of a heterodox artistic script. While it was a successful film both critically and commercially, it was not a commercial blockbuster that followed the classical narrative rules, but rather an independent film with a modest \$12-15 million dollar budget co-financed by Film4 and Fox Searchlight, both known for funding high-quality, modest budget films rather than major studio blockbusters (Chiou, 2018; Fernelius, 2019; Film4, 2018; Murray, 2018). *Three Billboards outside Ebbing, Missouri* has many features of indie or arthouse filmmaking. For example, its complex and ambiguous morality, lack of clear boundaries between hero and villain, its unconventional narrative structure that avoids clear, or easy resolutions, and its dark tragi-comic tone. These are underscored by Martin McDonagh’s auteur style, and low-budget approach, that prioritises story over spectacle. Also, rather than following orthodox narrative formulas, the film subverts traditional storytelling, presenting morally challenging characters, and refusing easy narrative closure while exploring difficult themes of grief and injustice via a pessimistic lens. All these facets serve to indicate that Orla’s choice of this film as a ‘good’ script, suggests a heterodox preference.

Learning screenwriting through trial-and-error represents a more heterodox approach, characterised by experimentation rather than following established rules and formulas. This learning method is often key to developing any creative practice, but it was notably underrepresented among participants' explicit discussions of their learning journeys. The few participants who did discuss it, such as Orla, positioned it as a deliberate rejection of orthodox formulas in favour of discovering their authentic voice as writers. This minority perspective suggests that trial-and-error may be an indicator of heterodox artistic identity within screenwriting, a theme that requires further exploration in subsequent chapters. In practice, these learning modes rarely exist in isolation.

### *Artificial Distinctions*

It is important to note that it is somewhat arbitrary to conceptually separate these three approaches to learning screenwriting. These three modes of learning the craft; Film School, short courses, and trial-and-error are not alternatives to each other for screenwriters, but merely options on their learning journey. A writer may at one time take a short course, and at the same time learn through writing scripts and reading scripts or take an MA or perhaps aspire to take an MA in the hope of developing their craft and gaining industry success. However, what these three approaches to learning demonstrate is the orthodox/heterodox tension in the doxa of screenwriting. As described by participants, training has a dual aspect, it is both oriented towards industry and artistic expression. The curricula of courses like those in IADT or UCD attempt to develop a writer's artistic creativity and at the same time their readiness for industry. Participants absorb this tension, or duality in the doxa from the start of their learning journey. This foundational tension between artistic and commercial imperatives is not merely absorbed passively by students but is actively reproduced through the pedagogical methods employed in teaching screenwriting itself. This tension is not simply abstract but is actualised through

pedagogical choices that either reinforce industry orthodoxy or encourage artistic rule breaking.

### **Second tension: Pedagogy for Industry Rules or for Artistic Aspiration**

The doxa-tension between orthodox rules and heterodox breaking of rules, which is at the heart of learning Irish screenwriting, is evident in how screenwriting is taught. In the previous section, participants spoke about how they learned the craft, through either formal learning or trial-and-error. The next section analyses how doxa appears in how some participants describe teaching the practice of screenwriting. The participants described working in a teaching capacity across the various settings described previously. Some teach in university, Film School, some on short courses, workshops, or as consultants and mentors. The doxic tension that emerges here is between teaching the orthodox rules and teaching learners to break the rules. Participants argue that it is important to teach the orthodox basic ‘rules or orthodoxy of screenwriting before advancing beyond the rules. Respondents in their roles as teachers embody the tension between orthodoxy and heterodoxy by teaching the rules through a focus on formatting and structure, but at the same time breaking from these rules. They thereby transfer this tension to students by emphasising the importance of orthodox rules in their teaching then offering opportunities to deviate from them. This appears to create a confusing tension for students of screenwriting, they learn the ‘rules’ only to be told that they should then break them. Participants argue that when teaching, they must start with the basics like formatting and ‘rules’ before moving on to more advanced story development. Participants, like Sean, identified three stages in the teaching process: formatting, structure, and voice. Formatting refers to the technical presentation of the screenplay and elements such as industry standard layout, action description, dialogue formatting, and scene headings, that ensure scripts are readable and professional (Field, 1979). Structure encompasses the organisational

frameworks and narrative architectures that govern story progression, such as three-act paradigms, plot points, and character arcs (McKee, 1999). Voice represents the writer's distinctive artistic expression, namely their unique perspective, thematic preoccupations, stylistic choices and the personal vision that differentiates one writer's work from another's (Dancyger and Rush, 2002).

These three pedagogical stages reveal how the doxa's central tension operates in practice. Formatting and structure function as gatekeeping mechanisms that reinforce orthodox industry standards. Students must demonstrate mastery of conventional screenplay form and proven narrative patterns to gain legitimacy within the field. These elements embody what Bourdieu terms 'cultural capital', the technical competency that is required for entry into the professional sphere (Bourdieu, 1977, pp.159-171). However, 'voice' operates according to an opposing logic, one that privileges heterodox artistic expression and individual creative vision over standardised conventions. Here students are encouraged to challenge, subvert, or transcend the rules they have just learned, thus cultivating the originality that distinguishes commercially viable writers from truly distinctive artists (Dancyger and Rush, 2002). This pedagogical progression embodies the doxa's duality, it demands conformity as a prerequisite while simultaneously valorising nonconformity as an aspiration. The teaching process itself then becomes a site where the tension between industry readiness and artistic authenticity is not merely described but actively reproduced, requiring students to navigate contradictory imperatives that push them toward both compliance and innovation. Each of these three aspects will be explained in turn in the following sections. Formatting and structure come first as they represent the most basic technical competency in screenwriting pedagogy.

## *Formatting and Structure*

According to participants, formatting and structure are the foundation of screenwriting. They are akin to learning how to hold a violin and read notation for a musician, or how to hold a pencil for an artist. They come first in the sequence of training before anything approaching ‘art’ can be explored. The doxic tension becomes evident in how Irish screenwriting teachers teach the basic industry rules - orthodoxy, before they allow students to break the rules and find their own voice and move toward art - heterodoxy. These teaching practices expose a fundamental tension between orthodox and heterodox approaches to teaching, illuminating the underlying doxa that shapes Irish screenwriting. Formatting and structural conventions serve to reinforce established norms about narrative storytelling and represent the most overt layer of industry-determined rules. This apparent contradiction between adherence to formula and creative flexibility suggests a complex tension present in screenwriting education.

Amy describes how in the first semester of teaching she ‘front loads’ the basics of screenwriting and get the students to ‘put it into practice straight away’. For Emily, the basics like formatting are ‘a code’ and when a script is formatted correctly readers can ‘fly through it’ but when it is ‘not formatted you have to stop and see who’s this character’. Knowing this code is critical to being successful in the industry. This highlights the doxic nature of formatting rules, they are assumed to be key to success. As Emily argues ‘you cannot go out into industry with badly formatted scripts. Formatting to the industry standard is *the* very basic rule’. She notes if a script ‘is badly formatted, readers put them aside because they’re too hard to read’. She argues that correct formatting is core to success in the industry and that ‘you will not get in the door [of] Screen Ireland’ unless your script is correctly formatted. Emily argues that she must ‘teach them the basics, the ‘fundamentals’ so that then they can ‘go and break the rules, but do not break the formatting rules’. Amy, for example, notes that she keeps her teaching in university ‘as simple as possible’. This demonstrates the assumed importance of learning the

basics of formatting. Screenwriters can break the creative rules but not the formatting rules, which are beyond question. This reveals their doxic nature. Formatting is an orthodox baseline standard that cannot be deviated from, while the heterodox breaking of creative rules is permitted. Together these teaching practices reveal a tension between the orthodox and the heterodox elements within teaching, which in turn reveals the doxa at the heart of teaching Irish screenwriting. Formatting and structure represent a reinforcement of norms and unspoken assumptions about how stories are told. However, in training people to write screenplays in a certain way teachers are applying a very visible and overt set of rules that are determined by the industry.

A common theme that emerged from participants is that the screenplay is a technical document, like an architectural blueprint. For Sean, during his teaching of screenwriting ‘the first two or three sessions are always those technical kinds of things, just to get them done so that they so that I have the boxes ticked’. For Sean he must get the boring ‘technical stuff’ of script formatting out of the way early in their teaching and ‘get the hell out of the way’ so students can develop their writing. However, the tension at the centre of the doxa shows up again here, in how the screenplay is required to be an orthodox technical document, but at the same time it is required to be an artistic, heterodox document, that ‘has to read beautifully’, it must ‘flow’ and be ‘poetic’ (Sean). The script is caught between the artistic and the technical and the teachers are caught between trying to teach both aspects of the script. This again underscores the tension in the doxa of screenwriting between orthodox industry rules and heterodox artistic practice. This tension appears at the level of teaching the practice through the language participants use to describe how they teach students the craft. They teach the tension as such, they teach that the script is both a blueprint *and* poetry, it is both a craft document and a poetic document. For participants the script is always caught in this tension between art and craft. Participants articulate teaching and learning this tension explicitly: the



screenplay exists simultaneously as blueprint *and* poetry, as craft document *and* artistic expression. The script in their pedagogy, is perpetually caught between these two poles: as a tool for industry and object of creative art. This pedagogical approach reflects a sequential logic, students must first master the technical basics, the orthodox conventions of formatting and structure, before progressing to more advanced heterodox aspects of practice such as developing a distinctive personal voice.

### ***Find Your Own Voice***

The tension at the heart of the doxa of Irish screenwriting also shows up in the next aspect of teaching, where students are taught how to find their own ‘voice’. Once students have learned the orthodox rules of screenwriting, they are taught to find their ‘authentic’ artistic voice. An artist expresses an inner idea, a heterodox vision of the world that is unique to them (Banks, 2010; Dancyger and Rush, 2002; Engell, 1981). The opposite, a craftsperson, builds from a preexisting orthodox template, follows a model that is set down for them (Banks, 2010; Engell, 1981). This opens up an art versus craft binary as another facet of the orthodoxy – heterodoxy tension in the doxa. For example, Emily teaches that the most ‘important thing is helping people find their voice’. Emily encourages students to ‘record the world around them’ and ‘notice what really speaks to them from the world’. She teaches that ‘that’s generally what you should be making films about’. Here she prioritises teaching heterodoxy. However, Emily also teaches students to do the ‘work’ of research and to ‘develop their critical skills’ and look to the great works of cinema and observe who they are drawing from, be it ‘Ancient Greece, philosophy, art, history, poetry’, as a source for their creativity. However, this exploration often presents a challenge to students as it forces them beyond their capacities as rule followers and into the more challenging and ambiguous role of artistic rulebreakers, demanding from them creative risks that push beyond the safety of the orthodox conventions. Students are caught in a tension

here between being told that screenwriting has basic rules, but at the same time it is an artistic practice that requires deep engagement.

This is paradoxical, for example, Emily encourages her students to do the work of going deep into a project, but this is ‘really challenging for all writers’. For Emily, this is ‘why so many scripts are so mediocre’ because filmmakers don’t put in the time to undertake this difficult exploratory work, to move beyond formulaic adherence to structure and rules and instead engage in the difficult creative work of developing authentic voice and original vision. Emily argues that it requires significant effort to push beyond surface level creativity and engage in the deeper artistic exploration that distinctive screenwriting needs. She argues that student filmmakers will look at a film like Stanley Kubrick’s *The Shining* (Kubrick et al., 1980) and think they can make something similar, however, as Emily notes ‘if you look at Kubrick and who and what he was obsessed with, you know the film was only the final element of his journey through psychological thinking, philosophy, literature, paint.’ She teaches students to do ‘the research’ and ‘bring much larger depth to their motives’ regardless of whether they are writing a ‘slapstick comedy’ or a ‘horror’. Emily’s pedagogical approach here reveals the complexity of the doxa-tension. The orthodox dimension lies in her insistence that research must disappear, that the final screenplay should conform to industry expectations of seamless, invisible craft, where the effort behind it remains hidden. The heterodox dimension emerges in her requirement that students undertake deep exploratory work in the first place, engaging in artistic research and personal exploration that goes beyond formulaic screenwriting. Students must thus perform intensive creative labour (heterodox) while ensuring that the work they put in leaves no obvious trace in the finished product (orthodox). This reveals another facet of the doxa, the central contradiction between orthodox and heterodox approaches to creativity operates not as an either/or choice but as simultaneous, contradictory demands (Banks, 2010; Conor, 2014b). Students are encouraged to discover their own voice by recording their world,

but they are simultaneously encouraged to engage with canonical works of classical literature, philosophy, and master filmmakers like Kubrick. Here again the tension manifests, where discovering one's own voice (positioned as heterodox individualism) paradoxically requires immersion in culturally consecrated texts and filmmakers (orthodox cultural reproduction). This embodies another type of tension, where students believe they are finding their own voice, but are reproducing culturally valued forms of 'authentic' expression. The doxa thus appears contradictory, shaping creativity in subtle ways, caught in tension between genuine free self-expression and orthodox cultural reproduction. Emily's observation that 'so many scripts are mediocre' because writers 'don't put in the time' suggests that at least some students struggle to navigate the pedagogical paradox. Her critique implies that these students may fail to recognise or manage the tension between the deep exploratory work required (heterodox art) and the need for that work to seamlessly disappear into polished, industry ready form (orthodox craft). Rather than successfully inhabiting both positions of the contradiction, (doing the invisible artistic work while producing the visible professional product), for Emily these students may default to surface-level execution that satisfies neither the artistic nor the industrial requirements. Emily's assessment thus reveals how the contradictory demands of the doxa can become obstacles, when students cannot perceive or reconcile the tension, they risk producing work that is merely competent rather than distinctive.

This demonstrates the tension at the heart of the doxa, having learned the orthodox basics students must strive for heterodox artistic expression. For example, Amy encourages students to 'unlock their own stories and their own creative process'. For her 'it is really about finding their own voice and expressing that'. She finds that 'by the time they come out of the MA programme that they have a fairly decent sense of who they are as writers themselves, or who they may be, what they want to do'. At the centre of her teaching students to 'find their authentic voice' is a view that screenwriters need to have something to say and they should feel

compelled to write their story. Amy encourages students to ‘know their own perspective’ and help them find ‘their particular thing’. She helps students to identify and explore ‘their style’ and ‘then really try and develop it’. She wants students to find something ‘truthful’ and emphasises to students that they should ‘have something to say about life, the world, the universe, know, that is your perspective as the write.’ For Amy if you’re not ‘clear’ on your ‘intent’ as a writer and ‘why’ it is important to ‘it is much harder to make the choices you need to make in writing a screenplay’. She argues that ‘you have to really be certain of what your core narrative is ...your underlying purpose’. Again, this positions screenwriting as a heterodox artistic practice, where a screenwriter works from an inner voice, a conviction that they have something distinctive to say and a unique perspective to offer, as opposed to the orthodox rules around formatting and structure that were explored earlier. This is the heterodox side of the tension in the doxa, which contrasts with the previous examples of orthodox rules around formatting and structure. For teachers like Amy, they move through the orthodox toward the heterodox, but in practice these two are continually in tension.

Screenwriting pedagogy emphasises the development of artistic voice as a heterodox aspiration, but commercial imperatives continually reassert themselves as an orthodox force that shapes screenwriting practice. The position seems to be that for screenwriters discovering an artistic voice is only one heterodox part of learning to be a writer. For Amy, learning to be a professional writer additionally involves the orthodox concern for commercial viability, as she notes it ‘depends on where you see yourself in the marketplace as well’. It is a ‘very different ambition to want to write for soaps’ or for a ‘Hollywood action film’ that you just want to sell than it is to want to write a ‘small personal story’ that you will have ‘to kill yourself’ to get made. The former she frames as a craft or commercial orientation and therefore as an orthodox ambition, which contrasts with the heterodox ambition of wanting to write something personal and creative, but not necessarily commercially viable. As Amy notes these are very different

ambitions that are going to take ‘different methodologies’ and they illustrate the existence of the orthodox and heterodox, or doxa-tension in teachers’ accounts of the ambitions for their students. Learning the craft requires screenwriters to on the one hand know the basic rules of formatting and story structure but also transcend these rules and arrive at artistic excellence, inhabiting an industrial marketplace that constrains creativity. This highlights the sense of tension present in teaching the craft. After much discussion of rules and formatting then expansion into artistic voice, commercial imperatives return. This repeated return to commercial considerations, even after extensive exploration of artistic voice, reveals how the doxa-tension between orthodox market demands and heterodox creative aspirations remain a persistent feature of the doxa, one that teachers must continually navigate but cannot resolve.

Another example of this tension between orthodoxy/heterodoxy in creative voice, can be seen around participant views on the teaching of experimental film. For example, Emily notes that on the course she teaches, students are required to create an experimental art film, a dialogue free project, ‘so that they’re not just making traditional drama all the time’. However, this is only a minor part of the intent of the course. For Emily the ‘more experimental pushing the voice’ comes later in the course as she aims to ‘teach them to be authors.’ However, not all screenwriting teachers agree. Liam is more interested in teaching students how to write stories that ‘grab an audience’ rather than engaging in more ‘academic environments’ where they might be ‘really excited about very unusual structures and elaborate kind of intellectual European movies’. This reveals the repeated tension in the doxa of teaching Irish screenwriting, between a heterodox artistic view of screenwriting and an orthodox industry view of screenwriting. The experimental is a minor part of Emily’s course, as the primary purpose of the course, in her view, is industry recognition. As she notes, ‘the end goal is generally traditional drama’ so that they ‘get the notice in the industry’.

The role of formal screenwriting training reveals a paradoxical relationship with creative voice, simultaneously promoting and constraining individual expression depending on the institutional context. This reveals how formal training in a university or Film School setting sits between orthodoxy and heterodoxy. Training teaches the orthodox rules but encourages students to move beyond them, encouraging students to find their own creative voice. However, contrasting Ireland with America, Liam questions whether it is actually a 'hindrance to have your own voice', particularly in America, as the career model is very different. For Liam, there is a contrast between an Irish approach to screenwriting where writers 'come from theatre and other disciplines' to the approach in America 'where people go to Film School' and are amazing at all the 'structure and the manuals' but 'their scripts are really generic'. Formal training's emphasis on mastery of orthodox rules first, may help writers gain technical skills, but this comes at the cost of distinctive voice. As Liam suggests, this appears particularly acute in the American Film School system, where screenwriting education risks creating competent but homogenous writers. The Irish system upholds a more heterogenous approach to rules.

### **Learn the Rules to Break the Rules**

Fundamentally, this idea of teaching the 'industry standard' but 'unspoken' rules before writers can find their own style or voice is another facet of the tension at the heart of the doxa between orthodox rules and heterodox artistic exploration. The process of moving through three stages of learning screenwriting from learning formatting, to learning act structure, then finding creativity, shows how students move through a process or rite of passage into the tensions contained in the doxa. Screenwriters learn the basics and have their creativity constrained as a type of test to see how creative they can be within those restrictive rules. For Sean, this is part of the process. Learning the rules of screenwriting 'changes' students perhaps not 'in the direction of the rules' but it might change them 'in the direction of something to disregard'.

This means that they are required to know the orthodox rules before they can break them in a heterodox way. The rules give them something to work with or against once they begin to explore their own creative impulse but this tension between rules and creativity in teaching scriptwriting shows that there is a doxa in operation in how screenwriting is taught in Ireland. This doxa manifests most clearly in how educators position the relationship between mastering orthodox conventions and developing heterodox creative voice.

The pedagogical insistence on teaching ‘industry standard’ conventions reveals how orthodoxy functions as a necessary precursor to creative rebellion, even as teachers acknowledge that these standards are arbitrary. This idea of ‘industry standard’ and ‘unspoken rules’ like, formatting and ‘three-act structure’ demonstrates how the orthodox is reproduced within the practice. The language of the doxa forms the unspoken assumptions for thinking about screenwriting. This process of learning the ‘unspoken rules’ of screenwriting is likened by Sean to how artists like Kandinsky, Matisse, or Picasso first ‘really mastered’ the rules of ‘photographic realism’ before they went on and ‘evolved their own style’. While students do not like the ‘rules’, Sean argues that ‘even if they’re going to reject them’ and ‘write the indie script’, it is still worth learning the ‘rules’ even if you never use them. For Sean there is a value to ‘restricting’ students’ freedom when they are learning to write and ‘giving’ them all the rules because ‘it’s just an illusion anyway because there is so little freedom for screenwriters in the world of filmmaking, in the industry, that exercising not having much (freedom) is not a bad thing’. This teaching approach exposes a central feature of the doxa in Irish screenwriting education, that creative freedom can only emerge through initial submission to industry orthodoxy. Sean simultaneously reinforces and undermines the system by teaching students to master rules he acknowledges are arbitrary. This reveals how deeply embedded or naturalised industry assumptions have become in screenwriting education, even among educators who recognise their limitations. This paradoxical stance, teaching rules as essential, while declaring

them illusory, demonstrates how screenwriting teachers perpetuate the very orthodoxies they criticise. This reveals the doxa's power to shape teaching practice, even for those who recognise its constructed nature. Beyond these pedagogical contradictions lies a deeper anxiety about formal education itself.

### **Third Tension: Formal Rules - Education or Creativity**

The previous sections outlined the orthodox/heterodox tension in the doxa of Irish screenwriting between practical industry learning or critical academic learning and between teaching orthodox rules or encouraging students to find their heterodox artistic voice. However, what if learning the rules can kill creativity? This heterodox question focuses on the third tension across the doxa of learning Irish screenwriting. In terms of learning/teaching screenwriting, heterodox creativity and experimentation are in tension with orthodox screenwriting rules. What is interesting about this is that the participants who argued for the teaching of the rules/orthodoxy, also hold the exact opposite heterodox view at the same time, where they undermined rules as the very thing that stifles creativity. On one hand they argue that students must learn the rules, then they must break the rules, but also that learning the rules stifles creativity. This reveals a very paradoxical position and only goes to reinforce the sense of tension across the doxa. This may reflect the unique bind that screenwriters find themselves forced to negotiate, and which expresses the third tension of the doxa - they are heterodox artists within an orthodox industrial system that regards them as dispensable, replaceable hacks (Bloore, 2012).

Even though students are encouraged to learn the rules, at the same time slavish adherence to the rules is dangerous to creative success. This dilemma around rules killing creativity represents another tension in the doxa of Irish screenwriting. Amy, for example, wonders if teaching students the 'rules' of screenwriting is 'killing their creativity or nurturing



it?’ It is compared to what she calls; ‘Zookeepers’ Guilt’ where ‘they’re saving the race while imprisoning animals’. This heterodox view, centred on the idea of ‘Zookeepers’ Guilt’ (Learmonth, 2019) argues that studying screenwriting in a formal way can be detrimental to creativity. For example, Ciara recounts how during her MA in Screenwriting her tutor, a successful and awarding winning television writer was envious of students because after many years of writing ‘formula television, he didn’t know how to write anything creative [or] come up with new ideas, original ideas.’ Liam also questions the paradoxical nature of learning and following the ‘rules’ of screenwriting. He notes a paradoxical scenario ‘where [writers] follow all of the rules and the operation is a success, but the patient died. [Writers] can get too caught up in it all and then it becomes really technical and lifeless.’ Emily feels that following the ‘rules’ and ‘writing for structure is the death of all brilliance and creativity’. Emily recounts a story about a fellow student during her MA in Screenwriting who ‘wrote this script that hit all the rules, but it was boring as \*\*\*\*, but he got an A for that.’ For Emily, she observes this negative effect in her classroom, noting that early-stage students will take greater creative risks than later stage students and she wonders what ‘have we done that to them, have we stopped them taking risks?’ This creates a paradox for educators. The observation that early-stage students take more creative risks than advanced students demonstrates how the doxa operates via education. The progression from creative risk-taking to rule-following may reveal that the orthodox teaching methods systematically erode the naïve heterodox creative impulses that first drew students to screenwriting. This may indicate the doxa at its most insidious, how educators become trapped in perpetuating a system that they see as creatively destructive, yet feel compelled to continue as it represents the ‘correct’ (orthodox) way to teach screenwriting.

The idea of ‘Zookeepers’ Guilt’ presents an interesting and paradoxical dilemma for screenwriting educators and more broadly the education system. It asks whether beyond learning the basic technical formatting rules of screenwriting a student’s creativity might be

destroyed by learning orthodox rules of screenwriting. Sean wonders if students ‘might even be disadvantaged by the horrible formality that sometimes has to be covered in these screenwriting classes.’ He asks, ‘is a screenwriting programme useful for students beyond the basic rules, the technical rules?’. This exposes another interesting tension in the doxa. Teaching screenwriting must strike this ‘delicate balance’ between waking students up to the ‘fact that there’s a lot of craft [and] graft involved’ but not taking away from their ‘love of writing’ (Sean). The doxa of Irish screenwriting seems to hinge on this tension between craft/art, between orthodoxy/heterodoxy. This unresolved tension reveals the contradiction of the learning journey, teachers must both teach *and* undermine industry rules, training students in the orthodox conventions but simultaneously trying to preserve the creative spark in their students. Rather than being an anomaly, this paradox is a central feature of the learning journey and evidences the existence of a doxa in learning screenwriting where there is a constant push and pull between learning or teaching rules and breaking them.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has examined the fundamental tensions that shape how screenwriting is taught and learned in Ireland, revealing the complexity of the Irish screenwriting doxa. Through analysis of the participant data, three interconnected tensions have emerged that expose the orthodox/heterodox tension at work in Irish screenwriting education. The first tension centres on the debate between practical, industry focussed training and academic approaches that emphasise analysis and critical reflection. Short courses, industry led workshops and institutions like IADT emphasise professional skills taught by active industry practitioners, universities such as UCD and TCD integrate creative practice with scholarly reflection, opening up competing – orthodox and heterodox - ideas of what screenwriting education should achieve. The second tension revolves around pedagogical approaches, where structured,

formula driven approaches that align with industry, clash with artistic aspirations that prioritise creative voice. This orthodox/heterodox divide reflects deeper tensions between screenwriting as a standardised craft versus screenwriting as artistic practice. The third tension is between formal education and creativity as such. Participants expressed anxiety about where teaching orthodox rules might damage creative potential. These tensions reflect the struggle in the doxa to reconcile between commercial viability and artistic authenticity. This fundamental contradiction in the doxa, between orthodox rules and heterodox artistic creativity is the central tension that is being examined in this research. The next chapter will continue this examination, analysing whether participants' perspectives on screenwriting manuals demonstrate the same orthodox/heterodox tension in Irish screenwriting or whether they represent a more ambivalent position regarding the existence of a doxa.

## Chapter 5 Screenwriting Manuals

### Introduction

The previous chapter explored how the Irish doxa manifested in a tension around how practitioners think about learning the craft of screenwriting, whereas this chapter investigates how the tension in the Irish doxa between orthodoxy and heterodoxy materialises in relation to screenwriting manuals. As discussed in previous chapters this tension is ultimately a tension between the artistic and commercial sides of the practice. The doxa positions screenwriters between two competing imperatives: on the one hand, embracing a traditional, orthodox approach to screenwriting that favours industry-standard narrative structures and proven commercial formulas, on the other hand, adopting a more heterodox approach that challenges these established conventions and favours individual artistic expression.

Screenwriting manuals form a central part of the Anglophone doxa. This builds on the work of Macdonald (2013) who has argued that screenwriting manuals are a core element of the Anglophone orthodoxy on screenwriting. As noted in the literature review Macdonald set out to establish what is deemed ‘normal practice’ in screenwriting through a meta-analysis of screenwriting literature, such as manuals (Macdonald, 2004c; Macdonald, 2013). Using Bourdieu’s (1977) conceptual framework, he identifies and describes a *doxa* of screenwriting (Macdonald, 2004c; Macdonald, 2013). He argues that this doxa of screenwriting ‘defines and shapes’ what screenwriters do when they write (Macdonald, 2004c; Macdonald, 2013). For Macdonald, beliefs about the ‘good practice’ (doxa) of screenwriting are often ‘submerged and hidden’ in an individual’s practice (Macdonald, 2004c; Macdonald, 2013) and that manuals are one way in which the industry describes and reproduces the doxa on screenwriting. This chapter extends Macdonald’s analytical framework in two ways. First it applies the framework of doxa, and the orthodoxy/heterodoxy binary to the case of Irish

screenwriting, a distinct national cinema with its own institutional structures, funding imperatives, and relationship to dominant Anglophone screenwriting norms. Secondly, it moves beyond structural analysis of how manuals codify doxa to empirically investigate how Irish practitioners explicitly articulate their relationship to manuals in practice. Through analysis of the interview data, this chapter uncovers and theorises the ‘paradoxical space’ of screenwriting manuals in the Irish doxa, where manuals are pushed to the margins and outwardly negated by practitioners, yet fundamentally shape the conceptual language through which their screenwriting practice is understood and evaluated. This focus on practitioner discourse about manuals, rather than an analysis of manuals as texts or their institutional function, reveals how the tension between art and commerce is lived and negotiated by Irish screenwriters. In making explicit what is analytically inferable from Macdonald (2004c, 2013), this chapter contributes to screenwriting studies by documenting how the orthodox/heterodox tension manifests not only in field structures but in the conflicted ways practitioners described their craft. This paradoxical relationship between practitioners and manuals is further complicated by the inherent contradictions within screenwriting manuals themselves.

Screenwriting manuals themselves embody this tension. These texts are predominantly orthodox in nature, establishing rules, conventions, and normative practices for aspiring screenwriters, yet at the same time, they can include more heterodox approaches that challenge established orthodox rules and formula. This orthodoxy/heterodoxy framework provides a tool for understanding not only the existence of dominant practices of screenwriting, but the dynamic tension between conformity and resistance that is reflected in how participants on this study describe their engagement with screenwriting manuals.

Within the screenwriting field in Ireland, there is frequent reference to screenwriting manuals, with works by Syd Field, Robert McKee, Blake Snyder, and John Yorke often found on student reading lists across Film Schools, screenwriting Master’s degrees and

short courses. For example, a recent outline for a course offered by the Irish Writer's Centre refers to manuals by writers such as John Yorke, and Robert McKee (Hennigan, 2025). While the reading lists for the Masters in Screenwriting offered by University College Dublin, Dún Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology, and Trinity College Dublin, are not publicly available, the academic participants did frequently mention listing manuals on their own reading lists distributed to their students. Likewise, there is evidence of manuals playing a role in the work of Irish funding body, Screen Ireland. For example, Screen Ireland in 2024 supported the delivery of the six-month course 'The Rewrite Stuff', led by manual author Emmanuel Oberg, which explicitly builds on material from his manual, *Screenwriting Unchained* (Oberg, 2016), incorporating Oberg's 'Story-Type Method®' from his book into script development education for Irish writers. A goal of this course, according to its promotional materials, was for participants to have a 'project ready to go to market' (Oberg, 2024). Furthermore, Screen Ireland's funding guidelines reference standard manual-based concepts such as treatments, character arcs, and step outlines, as requirements for screenplay development (Screen Ireland, 2025a). The guidelines do not directly name manual authors such as McKee or Snyder directly, but their terminology aligns closely with approaches recommended in influential screenwriting manuals. Even though their mention is indirect, Screen Ireland appears to promote manual-based practices and occasionally promotes specific authors as part of its industry training, such as Oberg above (Screen Ireland, 2025a). This suggests that Screen Ireland endorses in some ways the use of manuals and the teachings of the manual writers. Further evidence of the normalisation and institutionalisation of manual orthodoxy can be found in the fact that university and college libraries nearly all carry standard screenwriting manuals. Thus, they represent an important indoctrination into screenwriting practice for learners. In effect, the manuals have become both an accessible gateway into learning screenwriting for students, a tool for academics to teach screenwriting with, and at the

same time they are criticised by more advanced screenwriting practitioners. Nonetheless, they sit at the heart of Irish screenwriting practice.

What this demonstrates is the wide reach of manuals, which extends beyond formal classrooms, into Ireland's professional film and television development landscape. As seen above, organisations like Screen Ireland, the Irish Writer's Centre, the Writer's Guild of Ireland, and regional film offices often host seminars, labs, or workshops where the insights of well-known manuals writers are utilised and showcased. For example, Robert McKee's 'Story Seminar' has been held in Ireland several times, drawing not just emerging writers but experienced screen professionals (Murphy, 2015). Similarly, labs and development schemes, like Storyhouse Lab (Screen Ireland, 2025b) often embed manual-derived frameworks into their structures, using tools like beat sheets, step outlines, and character arcs to guide participants on how to write a screenplay. Irish practitioners outwardly express dislike for them, but manuals and formula are an accepted 'lingua franca' between practitioners and funders.

Manuals act less as strict rules but more a type of shorthand, for example, a producer might reference 'the inciting incident' or 'the midpoint' as a concept, presuming everyone understands what these concepts mean. These concepts and ideas embody the type of taken-for-granted phrases that constitute a doxa for Bourdieu (1977). Participants reveal a dual attitude toward manuals, where they critique the rigidity of manual-based approaches, but nonetheless rely on their vocabulary or 'lingua franca' to describe key aspects of their practice. This ambivalence highlights why exploring participant attitudes to manuals is significant, as participants shift their position between endorsing, resisting, or adapting to the orthodoxy or heterodoxy found in screenwriting manuals.

The orthodoxy/heterodoxy theme materialises through several subthemes that were articulated by participants. They described their views on manuals through the following terms and themes: Bad manuals/Good manuals, Aristotle, Kinds of Writers, Ambivalence, and

Denial. There was some evidence of an implied perception among participants that there are good manuals and bad manuals. For participants, ‘good’ manuals are those that question the orthodoxy, that encourage writers to be wild, artistic and creative, to break the rules of structure, or focus on character rather than plot. ‘Bad’ manuals are those which are rule-bound and aligned with the industry and commerciality, for example manuals that are overtly prescriptive, that establish rules on when certain beats should happen in a screenplay, on what page a plot reversal should happen, on how to sell your script.

This simplistic good/bad manual binary is further complicated by participants’ views on Aristotelian ideas within screenwriting practice. Even as they critique manuals, they regard Aristotle’s *Poetics* as the first manual, his ideas on narrative such as catharsis, structure, and peripetia, as timeless, universal ‘rules’ and therefore outside of criticism. This reveals the doxic nature of the ideas expressed by participants. It is noteworthy that participants hold seemingly competing positions on manuals. For example, ideas from Aristotle’s *Poetics* are regarded as ‘good’ whereas more overtly commercial, contemporary manuals, (rooted in concepts from Aristotle), are perceived as ‘bad’. There is a negation of rules that come from contemporary manuals, yet there is certain amount of cultural capital to referencing a classical work such as the *Poetics* (Aristotle, 1997).

Participants’ perceptions of manuals are, therefore, connected to their sense of identity as writers: those who like rules and structure versus those who do not, which tend to align with the art/craft binary, where participants embody creative identities and regard craft rules and guidelines for other ‘beginner’ writers. This creates a contradiction in which participants work in an industry with structured, systematic requirements, while seeing themselves as above such constraints. Participants appear to resolve this tension by separating their ‘day job’ (writing scripts) from their ‘real’ creative identity. They perceive rules or guidelines as bureaucratic requirements rather than an actual part of their actual writing process. This positioning serves



to protect their self-identity, allowing them to feel creatively free and autonomous while working within a formula-based system they overtly claim to reject.

This ambivalence reveals a disconnect between participants' heterodox discourse about manuals and their orthodox function within their practice. At the level of explicit discourse, participants position manuals as flexible guidelines rather than prescriptive rules and claim they have negligible influence on their professional practice. Yet simultaneously, manuals are regarded as important texts for learning the craft and form the conceptual infrastructure through which the industry evaluates screenwriting. This tension between heterodox framing and orthodox function, between rhetorical dismissal and structural dependence, represents a paradox in how Irish screenwriters negotiate the manuals and their orthodoxy.

What emerges from the interviews is a pattern where participants express one position (manuals have no influence) while their broader discourse reveals something quite different. Through indirect references, implicit assumptions, and even in the way they frame their discussions, it becomes evident that participants cannot entirely ignore or disconnect from manuals. This suggests a much more nuanced and complex relationship with manuals than the participants directly and overtly account for. The analysis of these attitudes to manuals, summarised in the concepts of good/bad, identity, ambivalence and denial, which are analysed in further detail in this chapter, advances understanding of the role screenwriting manuals play in forming the doxa of Irish screenwriting. Each subtheme exposes another facet of the tension between orthodoxy and heterodoxy at the heart of the doxa. This tension is immediately visible in how participants categorise manuals as good or bad.

### **Bad manuals/Good Manuals**

In the Irish doxa some manuals come under criticism more than others. If the manual is perceived as too focussed on orthodox rules, it is criticised, but if a manual is experimental or

artistic then it is praised. For example, Robert McKee's *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting* (McKee, 1999) and Blake Snyder's *Save the Cat!* (Snyder, 2005) come under heavy criticism from participants. Ciara, for example does not like Robert McKee's work as it is too 'formulaic' and finds that 'Syd Field's is all very mathematical, it just feels too highly plotted, it doesn't work for me'. Orla finds manuals 'very restrictive'. For Liam, Blake Snyder's 'Beat Sheet' is 'somewhere to start' but it is 'very reductive'. Blake Snyder's 'Beat Sheet' is a popular screenwriting tool that breaks a story into fifteen beats. It was first developed by Snyder in his screenwriting manual, *Save the Cat!* 'The Beat Sheet' outlines the classic three-act structure into smaller steps, starting with an Opening Image and ending with a Final Image. The fifteen beats are:

1. Opening image
2. Theme Stated
3. Set-up
4. Catalyst
5. Debate
6. Break into Two
7. B story
8. Fun and Games
9. Midpoint
10. Bad Guys Close In
11. All is Lost
12. Dark Night of the Soul
13. Break into Three
14. Finale
15. Final Image

Each of these beats serves a function in the structure of a story and assists screenwriters in developing their idea. Snyder believes that this makes story structure much more practical for writers, providing a roadmap to avoid the problem of ‘boring’ middle acts. The Beat Sheet is widely used because its steps are easy to grasp and flexible, but tools such as the Beat Sheet come under criticism for being too commercial and formulaic (Conor, 2014a; Macdonald, 2004b; Snyder, 2005). This shows how manuals come under criticism by participants for being formulaic, or highly plotted and mathematical. Fundamentally, these manuals fail because they are reductive (Conor, 2014a). They restrict rather than expand, they are focussed on craft, on building something technical rather than creative expression.

However, such criticisms of manuals operate as more than just ‘aesthetic’ judgements, they also function as mechanisms of cultural distinction (Bourdieu, 1996, p.178; Grenfell, 2014, pp.114-125). By describing manuals as formulaic and basic, participants identify themselves as possessing ‘superior taste’ and creative sophistication. This creates a hierarchical binary where formula is associated with more novice writers while participants, who situate themselves as more advanced, are more discerning experienced professionals. These distinctions allow them to maintain an ‘artistic’ identity inside an increasingly standardised industry. To draw on Bourdieu, participants use their cultural capital to distinguish themselves from ‘lower’ forms of creativity. Their critique of manuals as basic and formulaic, for ‘learners’, helps participants signal their superior position in a hierarchy of artistic capital (Bourdieu, 1996, p.178; Grenfell, 2014, pp.114-125).

Other ‘good’ or ‘artistic’ experimental (heterodox) manuals come in for praise. What these manuals have in common is that they break away from traditional approaches and are perceived as more artistic and experimental. This is generally favoured by participants who demonstrates a preference for manuals that are artistic. This shows a heterodox approach in operation amongst participants. For example, participants, like Amy, praised Linda Aronson’s:

*The 21st-Century Screenplay: A Comprehensive Guide to Writing Tomorrow's Films* (Aronson, 2010), which examines 'multi-narrative' films where 'chronology [can] be chopped up much more'. Amy praised this book because it helps her 'to identify patterns' in 'multinarrative' and 'multicharacter' types of scripts. Amy also praises the work of Emmanuel Oberg and his book: *Screenwriting Unchained: Reclaim Your Creative Freedom and Master Story Structure* (Oberg, 2016). The blurb for this book offers to help 'storytellers eager to reach a wide audience at home and abroad without losing their creative freedom'. Yet despite this heterodox framing, promising writers' 'freedom' from constraint, Oberg's work functions orthodoxly within the Irish field, focussed on structural pattern mastery and promoted through official industry channels. In fact, Amy notes that 'a lot of Irish writers have done his course as it was 'heavily promoted' via Screen Skills Ireland. Through this same institutional pathway, Amy has taken courses with John Yorke (Yorke, 2013) via Screen Skills Ireland along with a 'bunch of those courses actually'. The institutional co-promotion of Oberg (who promises creative freedom) alongside Yorke (whose orthodox approach is explicit) reveals how apparently alternative practices are absorbed as variations within, rather than challenges to, the dominant doxa. What is significant in this is that participants champion manuals that position themselves as different, unconventional and rule breaking, yet what Amy's comments reveal is that these supposedly heterodox approaches have been absorbed into industry practice. She is unironically taking an industry promoted training course in 'unconventional' screenwriting techniques. This suggests that even rebellion is itself part of the doxa, rather than outside of it (Bourdieu, 1977, pp.159-171). This paradox is so embedded in the practice that transgression itself has become another formula to follow.

Several participants gravitated towards screenwriting manuals that promised alternatives to traditional narrative formulas, finding inspiration in approaches that emphasised visual storytelling, mythic structure, or unconventional practices. For James other 'good'

manual writers and ‘gurus’ like Bobette Buster, or Frank Daniels offer ‘a visual structure approach’ to screenwriting. Ciara recommended Chris Vogler’s *Hero’s Journey* (Vogler, 1992), as the language of ‘Belly of the Beast, turning points and call to adventure’ spoke to her more. This shows how heterodox concepts and language in some manuals are favoured by some participants. They praise manuals that break up narratives, or explore multiple characters perspectives, or approach screenwriting in a more visual or visceral way. All of these ideas lean towards the heterodox, away from the orthodox rules of structure, character, conflict, etc and toward a more creative exploration. However, the ‘containment’ of heterodox approaches becomes evident via their incorporation into manuals and screenwriting training norms. The purpose of a manual is to standardise a process and achieve predictable outcomes. The fact that a training course exists for supposedly ‘unconventional’ approaches further reinforces this containment. This transforms what was ‘avant-garde’, or rebellious, into another teachable, formulaic system to follow. Even so-called ‘alternative’ approaches, once they are absorbed into a manual, become another example of the orthodox system they claim to resist.

What emerges from participants is that they both valued manuals that were ‘good’ (heterodox) and rejected manuals that were bad (orthodox). The duality of this demonstrates that participants had an overall paradoxical position regarding orthodoxy (bad manuals) and heterodoxy (good manuals) that together comprises the Irish doxa on screenwriting manuals. One figure, however, occupies a unique position outside this binary judgement.

### **Aristotle**

Interestingly, outside of the good or bad manuals binary, Aristotle endures, for many participants, as the first and unquestionable, ‘screenwriting guru’. He appears immune from criticism for participants. This view suggests a continuity between ancient and modern rules of narrative. Participants expressed that many of the screenwriting theories espoused by the

manuals are timeless and universal, because they all just different viewpoints on the same Aristotelian patterns. In a fundamental way, we could argue that participants' general view of screenwriting is, in fact, Aristotelian. This appears to be a widely held orthodox view, and consequently, forms part of the orthodoxy around screenwriting.

In fact, many of the orthodox concepts found in manuals such as structure, character, conflict, and catharsis, are strongly rooted in Aristotle's *Poetics* (Aristotle, 1997; Brenes, 2017; Tierno, 2002). Beyond what participants value in the *Poetics*, their reverence for this particular classical text reveals something more significant about its relationship to the orthodoxy. Participants regard for the *Poetics* as the 'bible' of screenwriting suggests a fundamentalist approach, evident in the wider screenwriting literature, that positions Aristotelian concepts not merely as useful tools but as foundational, universal truths of drama. They are regarded as essential and non-negotiable elements without which narrative storytelling cannot exist (Aristotle, 1997; Brenes, 2017; Tierno, 2002). This represents a highly orthodox position and sits in tension with participants' previous rejection of formulaic approaches. This classical grounding serves a dual function, it legitimises participants' practice through historical authority, but at the same time allowing them to position themselves as sophisticated practitioners of their craft, who understand 'timeless' principles rather than mere commercial trends. This represents a notable irony, where participants dismiss contemporary manuals as reductive and formulaic, but at the same time embrace what is perhaps the most prescriptive text in dramatic theory. This appears to be a central part of the doxa - by grounding their practice in a classical text such as Aristotle's *Poetics* they position themselves as above modern commercial formulas. Speaking from *Poetics* becomes a way for participant to be both rebellious and positioned 'against' modern manuals, while at the same time being practically orthodox in their dramatic approaches.

It could be argued that the reason why Aristotle's *Poetics* is so highly regarded by participants is due to the influence of Robert McKee. McKee draws from Aristotle in his book *Story*, as he sees Aristotle's *Poetics* as the foundational text on dramatic structure and storytelling principles. McKee grounds much of his own theories and approach to screenwriting in Aristotle's *Poetics* (McKee, 1999). As McKee notes 'There's been no conspiracy to keep the secret truths of our art. In the twenty-three centuries since Aristotle wrote *The Poetics*, the "secrets" of story have been as public as the library down the street (McKee, 1999, p.5.)' This quote reveals McKee's view of Aristotle's *Poetics* as the ultimate source of storytelling wisdom, suggesting that all available knowledge on narrative craft has been publicly available since Aristotle. This elevates *Poetics* to canonical status, a foundational text that contains all necessary truths about screenwriting and dramatic storytelling. It also serves to position McKee as the contemporary interpreter of these ancient 'secrets' (McKee, 1999, p.5.). McKee attributes many of his dramatic concepts to the work of Aristotle, for example, three-act structure, catharsis, plot points, and genre (McKee, 1999). At its core, Aristotle's work provides McKee's theories serious academic weight, grounding them in a classical tradition that values analytic, scientific thinking about storytelling, narrative structure, and drama. It could be argued that many screenwriters and participants are likely to have become first engaged with the dramaturgy of Aristotle through McKee and other manual writers, rather than directly from Aristotle's *Poetics*. This adds a potential further layer of nuance to how participants describe good and bad manuals. However, a conclusive answer to this argument would require further research to trace the source of participants' first engagement with Aristotle and is beyond the scope of this project.

In his *Poetics* Aristotle analysed the nature of drama, in particular tragedy (Aristotle, 1997). In doing so he described certain features of drama that he regarded as necessary for drama to be effective. For example, he outlined that drama has a beginning, middle, end. This

is the core of the idea around three-act structure that dominates much of screenwriting practice. He established ideas around the importance of character, conflict and change, best explained through the idea of peripeteia or reversal of fortune, where a change to the expected outcome of events occurs as a necessary or probable consequence of what has preceded it (Aristotle, 1997, 1452a22-23). He described the idea of catharsis, where the audience experiences what has been interpreted as an emotional purgation through watching drama (Aristotle, 1997, 1449b27-28).

However, these ideas are widely regarded as ‘Neo-Aristotelian’ in the sense that they have been adopted and adapted by many manual writers such as Syd Field, Robert McKee, and Blake Snyder (Brenes, 2011). These ideas then form the basis of how screenwriters are encouraged to approach writing a screenplay. Because they belong to the past, to an ancient, classical age, they are somehow considered timeless and universal, carrying more weight than more contemporary ideas. They are wisdom of the ages being passed down by manuals to aspiring writers. In this way they become *doxa*, as they are so old they are seen as immune from critique (Bourdieu, 1977, pp.159-171; Grenfell, 2014, pp.114-125). They are tried and tested, so they *must* be right. The appeal to classical ideas functions as a form of intellectual vaccination, by invoking ‘universal’ principles, participants protect their favourite approaches from contemporary criticism. Participants appear to be referring to classical authorities such as Aristotle, to solve the problem of taking an anti-formula position but still using a formula. This demonstrates how appeals to ‘universal’ truths function as *doxa* in Bourdieu’s conceptual framework because they close down debate, saying certain principles are so foundational they cannot be changed (Bourdieu, 1977, pp.159-171; Grenfell, 2014, pp.114-125). This goes some way towards explaining why practitioners use appeals to universal principles, to navigate the tension between wanting artistic freedom and working within established systems and structures. By making some approaches seem ‘natural’ they situate them outside of any creative



choice they could have made. This reveals how claims of universality operate, by positioning certain principles as foundational, they become doxa, immune from any critique or criticism. Such universal principles come *before* all creative practice for Bourdieu (1977).

Aristotelian concepts significantly shape the way participants think about their practice. Neo-Aristotelian manuals are generally favoured by participants for several reasons. One is structure; Aristotle's model of beginning, middle, end provides a foundational structure (Aristotle, 1997, 1450b26-28). His concepts of unity of action, time and place resonate with screenplay formatting and concepts like 'show don't tell' (Zwicky, 2021). Aristotelian ideas like plot reversal (Aristotle, 1997, 1451a30-31) and recognition (Aristotle, 1997, 1452a29) create dramatic plot points for screenwriting. Aristotle's idea of the tragic protagonist who undergoes a change of fortune due to an error of judgement, or hamartia (Aristotle, 1997, 1453a10). For screenwriters these ideas have the value of time; they have endured since ancient times and can help legitimise screenwriting as a serious art form. His ideas are perceived as practical; they work across genres and are flexible to modern storytelling (Aristotle, 1997; McKee, 1999).

They are teachable, Aristotle's ideas on story are simple enough to be broken down in teachable parts and provide a common vocabulary for practitioners to discuss narrative structures. It is significant how participants treat these concepts not as one approach among many, but as fundamental doxa, truths of storytelling (Bourdieu, 1977, pp.159-171; Macdonald, 2013, p.10). They appear to internalise Aristotelian principles as natural laws, rather than cultural constructs.

Aristotelian ideas are clearly present in the way participants consider the manuals. For example, Sean argues that manuals provide 'a bridge' to older ideas like those found in Ancient Greece, and which are updated for a modern audience. For Sean, old ideas of the protagonist and the 'tragic hero' are still seen as useful in screenwriting practice. Aristotle, for example, is

perceived by participants to be the first screenwriting guru. For Sean, the ‘rules’ are found in Aristotle’s *Poetics*. As James says, ‘Aristotle’s *Poetics*, that’s probably the best manual’. Sean, drawing on Aristotle’s concept of the necessity clause’, argues that screenwriters must ‘work in the realm of necessity. The necessity clause, [is ] key, in the first ten pages you have to establish three things, you have to establish who you’re hero is, you have to establish that that person is capable of doing the job you need them to do, and then you need to give them the job to do.’ The necessity clause refers to Aristotle’s idea that events in a plot must follow one another either through necessity or probability (Aristotle, 1997, 1451a12-13). Events should be inevitable or likely. It is central to Aristotle’s’ view of effective storytelling and dramatic structure. Aristotle argues that this principle of necessary or probable connection is not merely a formal requirement but is intimately connected with the emotional impact of tragedy; it is the foundation upon which peripetia and anagnorisis achieve their effect (Aristotle, 1997, 1452a1-2) This is linked to Aristotle’s broader ideas of causation and the connected sequence of events that underlies his concept of plot unity (Aristotle, 1997, 1451a30-31). What emerges here is a contradiction; participants who dismiss contemporary manuals as formulaic at the same time enthusiastically appear to embrace highly prescriptive rules when they originate from classical sources like Aristotle’s *Poetics*. For example, Sean’s rigid application of ‘the necessity clause’ which demands specific elements within exact page counts, suggests a strongly formulaic approach to screenwriting. Also, the imperative words and phrases participants use: ‘must’ ‘have to’ ‘should be inevitable’, creates an orthodoxy that is as restrictive as any commercial manual, yet it remains immune from the critique they level at modern screenwriting manuals. This suggests that participants’ real objection is not to formula, as such, but to the cultural capital of its source. Aristotelian principles are legitimate precisely because they carry high cultural capital (Grenfell, 2014, pp.265-270) allowing participants to be simultaneously

formulaic and intellectually superior to those following mere ‘popular’ manuals such as *Save the Cat!* (Snyder, 2005).

Participants’ position on Aristotle strongly aligns with the literature on screenwriting manuals. As discussed in the literature review most of the manuals can be broadly defined as Neo-Aristotelian (Brenes, 2014; Brenes, 2017; Tierno, 2002). This is important as they draw on classical culture to defend their view that conventional screenplay rules are timeless and universal. For most screenwriting manuals dramatic theory begins with Aristotle’s *Poetics* (Koivumäki, 2016, p.43; Pope, 1998, p.xv). Manuals revel in the apparent simplicity of Aristotle, regularly repeating the mantra of three-act structure: beginning, middle, end (Ashton and Conor, 2016, p.129). ‘Classical dramaturgy as proposed by Aristotle – [establishes many] of [the] essential elements such as problem (conflict), cause and effect, turning points and closed ending’ (Koivumäki, 2016, p.43; Langford, 2010, p.251). They are *Neo-Aristotelian* because his ideas are regarded as useful but must be adapted to the needs of modern storytelling. This suggests a cultural hierarchy for participants whereby identical structural principles are valued differently depending on their origin. For example, Aristotle’s three-act structure is foundational and simple, but contemporary manuals offering the same framework as dismissed as formulaic. The classical source transforms prescriptive rules into ancient ‘secret’ wisdom, pure and untainted by commerciality. Modern manuals, despite drawing from Aristotle, become contaminated by their connection with capitalistic interests and mass appeal. This creates a convenient distinction, where participants can embrace highly structured approaches while maintaining their artistic identity. The Neo-Aristotelian label permits manuals to claim validity from classical association, but participants can simultaneously dismiss them as commercially motivated, only useful for novice or hack commercial writers.

This replicates the orthodoxy/heterodoxy binary of the doxa, where an industrial formulaic orthodoxy is framed in contrast to rebellious artistic heterodoxy. But this contains a

paradox: though participants might express interest in experimental heterodox approaches, their reverence for Aristotelian concepts effectively limits their vision of what is new or innovative. Participants' enthusiasm for so called 'rule-breaking' manuals may only represent subtle variations within an essentially Aristotelian framework. This suggests that participants' openness to any heterodox experimentation is always framed within a context of classical concepts about dramatic structure. Experimentation always takes place in conversation with the orthodox rules. This repeats the tension at the heart of the doxa, namely a constant tension between orthodox and heterodox ideas on screenwriting practice. This tension extends beyond manuals themselves to shape how writers understand their own identities.

### **Kinds of Writers**

The data reveals a fundamental paradox in how participants conceptualise their relationship with screenwriting manuals. Participants consistently position themselves as artistic (heterodox) creatives but at the same time voice a clear preference for conventional structural guidance and orthodox approaches. Some participants express the position that the use of or interest in manuals depends on personal writing style, and how the language of the manuals speaks to an individual writer's creative impulse. This can often contradict previous statements about creative identity, nevertheless, broadly speaking, there are two positions that describe types of writers: the craftsperson and the artist. One kind of screenwriter – the craftsperson – sees manuals in one way, through rules and structure (orthodox) and a second kind of writer – the artist – sees them in an alternate way, preferring to ignore rules and structures and figure it out for themselves (heterodox) and therefore reject the advice and rules of the manuals. However, participants do not typically describe *themselves* as orthodox, or mechanical. They tend to argue that some people, *other* people, like structure, but *they* prefer the artistic creative manuals. However, the data suggests that many participants do indicate a preference for

structure, scaffolding, maps, etc, and yet when asked directly about their preferred or recommended manuals they express a preference for the artistic, heterodox, manuals that speak to their creativity and emotions. This again exposes the underlying tension in the doxa and the way in which participants' thinking about manuals inhabits a paradoxical space. This gap between the participants' self-perception and their actual practice demonstrates a deeper contradiction in the Irish doxa. Participants appear to feel compelled to align themselves with romantic notions of genius and creativity, while at the same time their practical choices reveal a reliance on the conventional structures they claim to transcend. This suggests that the binary between craftsperson and artist may itself be a false construct that obscures the hybrid nature of screenwriting practice.

The distinction between 'craftsperson' and 'artist' represents more than just different approaches to writing, but deeper embedded beliefs among participants about the nature of creativity itself. The craftsperson may see the practice of screenwriting as a learnable skillset, where proficiency comes over time, through understanding rules and formula. For these types of writers, manuals provide blueprints to learning how to write a script. They have no problem with the orthodox, as they see rules not as constraints, but as tools that help them write. However, the artist style of writer works from a belief that creativity emerges from individual vision and intuition. This heterodox position on manuals, is more than just 'rebellious' but comes from a view that formula risks killing their creativity and their unique voice.

Radermecker and Loots (2025) provide a useful lens to consider the seemingly paradoxical 'logics' of artist and craftsperson. Even though their argument is focussed on how creative crafts practitioners face complex and often conflicting identity 'struggles and juggles' due to the hybrid nature of their work, Radermecker and Loots (2025) offer a useful examination of the artist versus craftsperson binary. They examine the complex relationship between artistic and commercial aspects within the creative arts field. They identify two

distinct field-specific logics – artistic logic and economic logic – that may clarify how Irish screenwriters negotiate a similar complexity. For Radermecker and Loots (2025) artistic logic is oriented toward a concept of ‘art for art’s sake, where ‘legitimacy’ is derived from established rules of art, but economic logic is driven by market forces, with value stemming from market value. Radermecker and Loots (2025) argue that creative craft practitioners work at the intersection of these ‘logics’, balancing creativity with the demands of the market. This provides a useful lens on how participants navigate these seemingly paradoxical logics in their own practice (Radermecker and Loots, 2025). Through this lens the apparent contradiction between participants’ practical use of orthodox rules and formula found in manuals and their stated preference for heterodox artistic freedom suggests that they are navigating these competing ‘logics’. They require orthodox rules to work within the industry and gain success yet keenly hold on to their heterodox artistic identity to resist becoming absorbed in an industrial machine. This tension reveals how writers must simultaneously inhabit both logics, drawing on the orthodox craft skills found in manuals, while striving to preserve their heterodox artistic authenticity. This creates the paradoxical and ambivalent relationship that is evident in the comments from participants, where they acknowledge that manuals are useful but for ‘others’, while disavowing manual influence on their own artistic identity.

The paradoxical position perhaps exposes a broader tension for participants. They express a need for both structure and freedom, tradition and innovation. Perhaps participants often express contradictory views because they are trying to reconcile two opposing creative ‘logics’ (Radermecker and Loots, 2025) For example, a participant might claim to reject formula as an artist but also describe using manual-based rules and formula as a craftsperson. This may not necessary be an inconsistency but evidence that creativity exists on a spectrum rather than a binary, as suggested by Radermecker and Loots (2025). This complexity suggests that participants’ attitudes to manuals, craft and art may be more nuanced than first appears.

The paradox around their identity may represent another facet of the tension in the doxa, one that struggles to reconcile the value of craft *and* artistic practice.

Ciara for example, describes how people approach writing differently. Some people are ‘hugely structured’ before they write anything but ‘others need to write to find out who their characters are’. She proposes that one approach is ‘more frustrating than the other as it takes you longer to get finished.’ Orla takes a similar view ‘So, it all depends on what kind of a writer you are. Some people, some writers are very structured in how they approach their craft. Some writers are very loose and kind of flowy. I think [manuals] have so much value. but only to a specific type of writer’. She essentially claims that manuals work for those who like a structured approach to their writing. There are a number of simplistic assumptions embedded in this; by describing the use of manuals as a personal preference, there is a sense that there is a binary between writers who like structure, and those who do not. This raises questions about whether writing styles are fixed ‘essential’ traits or whether they can be learned through practice and training. Additionally, this may overlook writers who might benefit from manuals, even if they do not normally gravitate toward structure, or those who might use formula and structure as a tool to develop more experimental heterodox work. There is a potential defensiveness there, too, where Orla distinguishes her ‘artistic’ practice from other types of writers who like rules.

Just as a writer’s sense of structure was shaped by their approach to manuals, participant’s feelings toward the themes and language used within a manual determined whether they felt drawn to or used a particular manual. Some manuals use visceral, embodied language, but others use technical, mathematical language. Participants’ preference for these types of language guided their use of manuals. These linguistic styles appear to create different relationships between participants and manuals. Visceral language invites writers to experience techniques intuitively, perhaps appealing to the senses, and feeling their way through the

writing process. More technical language aligns writers with the craftsperson side of the binary, encouraging writers to write in a systematic and methodical way. This choice of language suggests a deeper belief set about writing and creativity. Participants' preference for these types of language guided their use of manuals. Writers who responded to embodied metaphors often found technical manuals cold and alienating, whereas those who favoured systematic approaches found visceral approaches vague and unhelpful. The language participants used to describe the manuals often revealed where they positioned themselves in terms of the 'art' or 'craft' identity. There was a positioning of some manuals as basic or foundational and useful for those 'others' who needed this kind of learning. However, the participants typically aligned themselves through their language choices with more creative and unconventional manuals.

As mentioned previously, Ciara was drawn to Chris Vogler's *Hero's Journey* (Vogler, 1992), because the language of the manual spoke to her. 'You know, Belly of the Beast works way better than sort of turning points or the call to adventure'. For Ciara there is something more visceral and embodied about the language of 'belly' and 'beast'. Another (unnamed) book that Ciara found helpful 'used the roller coaster analogy, and like you have the roller coaster, it builds and builds and drops you off, but you can also find the ones that go around in circles'. However, in contrast Ciara found the work of Syd Field 'a different sort of brain to me, it's all very mathematical'. Ciara here exposes clearly the orthodox/heterodox binary, where the visceral, emotive language is aligned with the artist kind of writer, and a more heterodox view, whereas the mathematical, logical language is aligned with the craftsperson, the orthodox view. It shows her subtly identifying with the artistic, heterodox side of the binary, through her choice of manual. This is a common pattern, where participants' choice of manual indicates what kind of writer they view themselves as. Emily evidences another way in which this is subtly done. Emily recommends a book by Lindsay Sedgwick, an Irish manual writer and screenwriter, called *Write that Script* (Sedgwick, 2018). She describes it as being useful for beginners but



doesn't claim to use it herself. Emily notes that 'it's such a great book for the total beginner because she just lays it out so simply and so sweetly and there's loads of lovely quotes in it from different filmmakers and teaches you everything ... that you need to know.' In this way Emily implies, via this choice, that she is no longer a beginner and has advanced beyond the basics.

Through their discussion of types of writers – orthodox or heterodox, craftsperson or artist – participants expose the tension in the doxa around manuals, between those they think prefer structure and logic versus those that prefer creative freedom. This is a tension between writers' views on manuals based on what kind of writer they think *others* are and whether they favour structure or if they prefer to experiment and discover what they find. Participants' views on which manuals they prefer reflects this tension through the different types of language in the manuals – poetic and mathematical. But fundamentally their practice is still shaped by the doxa found in the manuals. Whether they choose the orthodox structured, traditional approach of McKee and Snyder or a more heterodox experimental approach like Aronson or Seger, whether they choose orthodox, mathematical language or heterodox poetic language, the point is that there is a tension between participants attitudes to the orthodox and heterodox in manuals.

This tension between orthodox and heterodoxy that participants navigate in their relationship with manuals reflects broader debates within creative industries scholarship about how cultural workers, such as screenwriters, retain their creative freedom within commercial constraints. For example, Banks (2010) argues that creative autonomy in cultural production exists as 'a kind of socially embedded, compromised or "negotiated" autonomy' (Banks, 2010, p.252.) where workers must constantly mediate between their artistic ideals and industrial imperatives. The paradox that participants express, claiming artistic freedom while simultaneously relying on structured formula, mirrors what Banks identifies as the fundamental

dual autonomy of cultural work. Banks argues that autonomy in creative labour operates simultaneously on two levels: it serves both as a ‘foundational normative principle for the artistic, creative, or aesthetic practices that underpin cultural work’ and as ‘a structural production precondition for effective capitalist cultural production’ (Banks, 2010, p.252.) Just as cultural workers more broadly cannot entirely abandon the conventions and constraints that make their work commercially viable, participants cannot fully reject the orthodox structures and conventions of manuals. The ambivalence participants express toward manuals reflects a wider sense among creative workers that survival within a creative industry requires inhabiting both logics simultaneously.

Brigid Conor’s research on screenwriting illuminates how this tension manifests as a struggle between craft and creativity. She notes that screenwriting is ‘routinely characterised as riven by the unassailable dichotomy between craft and creativity’ (Conor, 2014b, p.1.) The way that participants view themselves as artists rather than craftspeople, distancing themselves from ‘others’ who need basic structure, echoes the ‘hierarchies’ Conor identifies within screenwriting culture. Writers are often ‘framed as “hired hands or replaceable cogs”’ rather than autonomous auteurs (Conor, 2014b, p.3.) The resistance participants show to being associated with orthodox, mechanical approaches reflects what Conor describes as the persistent ideal of the artist possessing a ‘divine spark that separates off the artist from ordinary mortals’ (Conor, 2014b, p.51.), even as the reality of professional practice requires engagement with formulaic craft skills. Yet, Conor acknowledges that ‘there is not art without craft ... the two impulses cannot be separated out’ (Conor, 2014b, p.5.). This suggests that the binary participants construct between artistic and craftsperson identities may be less fixed than it first appears.

Similarly, participants’ ambivalent positioning, claiming artistic identity but acknowledging the practical necessity of formula and conventions, may reflect what Lee (2008)

identifies as a broader shift away in the industry from craft skill as ‘doing something well for its own sake’ toward a more precarious, commercially oriented creative practice. This context may help explain why participants might feel compelled to assert their heterodox artistic identity even while drawing on orthodox manuals techniques, in an industry where ‘craft skills ... are increasingly eroded’ (Lee, 2008, p.240.). Maintaining their artistic identity then becomes a way of asserting creative freedom beyond mere commercial imperatives. The ambivalence participants demonstrate around manuals emerges not simply as individual inconsistency but perhaps as symptomatic of wider structural tensions in a creative industry like filmmaking.

Understanding participants’ ambivalence toward manuals through this lens of ‘negotiated autonomy’ sets it in a wider context. Participants’ contradictory statements are not simply inconsistency, but evidence of the complex negotiation required to maintain both professional viability and artistic identity within the field of screenwriting. The ambivalence and defensiveness participants express when positioning themselves as artists rather than craftspeople, and their tendency to associate manual use with ‘others’ but downplaying their reliance on them, reveals what Banks describes as the ‘quotidian “struggle within” to try to mediate, manage or reconcile the varied opportunities and constraints of the art-commerce relation’ (Banks, 2010, p.262.) Rather than dismissing participants’ paradoxical relationships with manuals as inconsistent self-delusion, or professional insecurity, this view illuminates how their attitudes reflect a strategic negotiation between competing logics. Participants claiming heterodox artistic identity serves as what Banks terms ‘assertion of meaning beyond the commercial’ (Banks, 2010, p.262.). This suggests that participants’ ambivalence around manuals works not simply as a set of paradoxical beliefs but as a practical way through which they negotiate the tensions in their practice. They are caught somewhere between the logics of art and commerce. Participants are caught between following rules and formulas that enable professional success while protecting the artistic identity that provides their work with personal

meaning and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977, pp.159-171). This contradiction produces a pervasive uncertainty about the value of manual based instruction.

### **Ambivalence**

The tension in the doxa materialises in participants questioning whether manuals represent guidelines or rules. For participants, like Liam, manuals like Syd Field's (1979) or Blake Snyder's (2005) are useful for teaching but noted that 'they're not a cage'. Liam's view here reveals the issue underlying the guideline/rule distinction. Characterising manuals as guidelines rather than rules allows participants to preserve a sense of creative agency. They position themselves as artists who selectively draw upon structural tools, rather than merely 'hired hands' (Conor, 2014b, p.3.). Liam's 'cage' analogy suggests that participants view rigid adherence to manual conventions as fundamentally constraining their creative freedom. Yet this insistence that manuals function as guidelines rather than rules exists in tension with participants' simultaneous acknowledgement of their pragmatic necessity. This ambivalence reflects what Banks identifies as the need for cultural workers like screenwriters, to assert 'meaning beyond the commercial'. Participants must position manuals as flexible frameworks that enhance rather than determine their creative practice (Banks, 2010, p.262.). This allows them to maintain artistic identity and still access the orthodox manual conventions that enable commercial success.

All of this suggests an ambivalent message about manuals from professional writers and for aspiring or student writers. Practitioners who teach screenwriting use the manuals, but they appear to have an ambivalent view about them. For example, manuals form the basis of curricula and are considered formative and foundational, but at the same time, they are presented as guidelines rather than rules. Liam, for example, encourages new writers to 'go the library, read these books, take what you like and leave the rest'. Liam describes how he uses

Blake Snyder's the Beat Sheet<sup>2</sup> (BS2)<sup>4</sup> with students to help them break down their scripts, knowing that 'this is very reductive, but it's somewhere to start'. However, Liam expresses his own ambivalence about the manuals when he cautions against an overly slavish use of them. For Liam the danger of the manuals is that 'you can get too caught up in it all and then it becomes really technical and lifeless'. This demonstrates the ambivalence, whereby the typical manuals are engaged with, but are presented not as rules but as guidelines. And yet, at the same time these texts form the basis of course readings lists. This exposes another contradiction between what screenwriting educators do versus what they say. They say that manuals are guides rather than rules, but their practice entrenches the manuals as rules. Manuals are set reading on course curricula; they are taught by tutors and held in university libraries. This points to a type of cognitive dissonance in how participants consider the place of manuals. One explanation for this may lie in the distinction made earlier. Manuals are always for *others*, for beginners and students. Professional educators may include them on course curricula, but they have moved beyond them in their own practice. For example, Emily uses Robert McKee's book *Story: Substance, Style and the Principles of Screenwriting* (McKee, 1999) as a text, even though 'it gets a lot of flak'. She argues that there are 'still a lot of fundamentals in that book' for students who have had limited exposure to screenwriting. However, even though many participants spoke of the importance of manuals to screenwriting, other participants flagged that they generally ignored manuals. Their contrasting positions underscores the ambivalence of screenwriters to manuals.

This ambivalence toward screenwriting manuals reveals another facet of the tension in the doxa. It reflects the inherent contradiction between participant's aspirations toward artistic authenticity versus the commercial constraints of the industry. On the one hand,

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<sup>4</sup> Blake Snyder's Beat Sheet (BS2) is a screenwriting guideline structure from his book *Save the Cat!* It breaks down successful screenplays into 15 'beats' or moments that happen at key points in a screenplay.

screenwriters who embrace the manuals and learn the craft are working within what Bourdieu calls ‘the rules of the game’ (Bourdieu, 1977, pp.159-171; Grenfell, 2014, pp.114-125), the implicit understanding that success in a field of practice requires learning the established orthodox rules and formula. However, participants who reject manuals are asserting their artistic identity and positioning themselves in opposition to what they perceive as formulaic constraint. This resistance may reveal participants’ anxiety about screenwriting’s low cultural status, and perhaps a need to distance themselves from mere technical ‘hack’ writing and align *their* practice with more prestigious forms of artistic expression (Bloore, 2014). This ambivalence may suggest that screenwriting doxa is fundamentally unstable. Unlike older, more well-established artistic fields, with clearer boundaries of cultural capital, screenwriting inhabits an ambiguous space between creativity and industrial production, or as Radermecker and Loots (2025) define it, between ‘artistic logic’ and ‘commercial logic’. This contradictory position on manuals may reflect this wider uncertainty about the cultural value of screenwriting.

This uncertainty is evident in how participants say it is that it is best to ignore the manuals completely. The idea of avoiding manuals entirely suggests that creativity and rules of the craft are fundamentally opposed, rather than complementary approaches. However, this contains a paradox as participants argue that awareness of manuals can ‘kill creativity’ but at the same time this awareness suggests some knowledge of their principles. This ambivalent discussion around guidelines and rules further serves to demonstrate the doxa-tension. Participants’ views on the role of manuals in their practice shifts frequently. They move between seeing them as helpful rules, to only guidelines, to ignoring them entirely because they can kill creativity. This ambivalence is one more example of the tension at the heart of the Irish doxa of screenwriting.

This resonates with the discussion in a previous chapter on whether learning the rules negatively impacts on creativity. Orla notes: ‘I am very, very, very ashamed to say that I have never read any of them. I have started reading *Save the Cat!* (Snyder, 2005) and I threw it at the wall with frustration’. Orla feels that, for her, the manuals would have been ‘very restrictive’ and could have ‘discouraged’ her from pursuing a writing career. Orla’s point here suggests that she considers herself above the orthodox rules, claiming artistic freedom. What is revealing about this is how rejection of manual aligns with the artistic identity. Those, like Orla, who reject screenwriting manuals are presenting this as evidence of their creative superiority and heterodox artistic freedom, suggesting that they have transcended the need for such orthodox rules. Similarly, Peter avoids them but for different reasons ‘I know they would not have helped me at all and they would have confused me greatly, but that's the way I learned things. You know, I'm one of those people who buys a machine and throws away the manual and tries to figure out how to work it.’ However, this creates another fascinating contradiction within the orthodox/heterodox tension, as the very individuals who claim to reject manuals frequently cite the importance of Aristotle’s *Poetics* (Aristotle, 1997), and work within a highly formulaic industry structures. This suggests that their seeming heterodoxy merely masks a deeper orthodoxy. This again underscores how this tension between artistic and commercial, between orthodox and heterodox, is a key feature of Irish screenwriting doxa.

However, upon closer examination, there is a deeper question: is creativity inevitably heterodox, and orthodoxy formulaic and bland? This question goes to the heart of a potentially false binary within many creative fields. This is the assumption that creativity is inevitably heterodox, an assumption that reflects what could be called the ‘romantic ideology’ of artistic practice. As Banks argues, ‘[h]istorically, at least since the eighteenth century, autonomy in cultural production has been associated with freedom from the particular demands and constraints of the commercial world’ (Banks, 2010, pp.252-253) with the artist conceived

as ‘that special, self-regulating being and “free spirit” possessed of rare and precious gifts’ (Banks, 2010, p.253).

During the Romantic period, creativity came to be redefined as an original, individual expression grounded in imagination and emotion. This created a binary where art is not a mechanical skill that can be learned but a spontaneous, seemingly mystical activity - what the Romantics termed ‘genius’. A genius produces something fundamentally new. This Romantic view defined the creative imagination as the ultimate faculty, privileging the emotional and visionary artistic genius over the rational or conventional craftsman (Engell, 1981). Banks notes that the ‘artist was defined and became recognised as the antithesis to the rational and calculative subject of the modern age’ (Banks, 2010, p.253). Conor observes that ‘the notion of the “divine spark” that separates off the artist from ordinary mortals, which divides the genius from the journeyman ... echoes the introductory framing of the creativity/craft division traceable to Romantic notions of individual “genius”’ (Conor, 2014b, p.51.). This binary lingers in many artistic doxa such as screenwriting. However, this binary, as Radermecker and Loots (2025) noted earlier, obscures how creativity exists in between the artistic and craft logics and actually functions within established forms. Some examples of this include jazz musicians, who express themselves through mastery of orthodox musical rules, or poets who find creativity within the constraints of traditional poetic forms like sonnets, etc. Stokes (2005) argues that creativity often emerges from such constraints. She argues that creative breakthroughs often happen under conditions where freedom is balanced within established limitations or rules. The orthodox rules provide the shared language and tools for creativity, allowing for new expressions through the constraints of orthodox rules and forms. In screenwriting, a fear that orthodox rules ‘kill creativity’ may misunderstand their function.

Orthodox story forms and ideas may provide the foundations for creativity, where knowing them allows for screenwriters to deviate and create new work. Perhaps the real tension



is between different approaches to creative practice, between writers who innovate through use of established forms versus those who innovate through conscious rejection of any rules or orthodoxy. This may resonate with a deeper anxiety among participants about artistic identity and legitimacy. This anxiety may reflect a fear that to acknowledge that some aspects of their practice are teachable will diminish their artistic status within an industry that has traditionally devalued their contribution to the final film. As Conor notes, ‘theories of authorship and auteur theory as they have been applied to film theory have consistently worked ... to tie notions of creativity, innovation, and imagination in the production of screen works to the individual, masculine genius director’ (Conor, 2014b, p.53), leaving screenwriters in a precarious position where claiming teachable craft might further undermine their already marginal creative status. This precarity manifests in participants’ contradictory claims about manual’s influence on Irish practice.

## **Denial**

The tension between orthodoxy and heterodoxy appears again in how the manuals are viewed by participants as on the one hand marginal (heterodoxy) and on the other hand as embedded (orthodoxy) in the Irish industry. For example, Liam argues that manuals do not play a significant role in the Irish industry. There is clear reticence among participants to afford them any major significance even though, as noted earlier, they form the basis of training. When asked whether screenwriting manuals play any role in the Irish film industry, Liam notes: ‘Not at all, no, I don't think they play a role’. He elaborates; ‘I work with a lot of writers and really talented writers, and I think Irish screenwriters tend to be really crazy intelligent’. This positions the orthodoxy of using a manual against the heterodoxy of the creative intelligence of writers. Liam notes further that: ‘I don't know a single [screen]writer based in Ireland who will sit down, and you know, do a Beat Sheet or anything like that’. Liam describes how there

is an ‘aversion to anything as reductive’ as a screenwriting manual among industry professionals in Ireland. Liam’s dismissal of screenwriting manuals implies that, for him, there is a hierarchy of writers. By suggesting that talented writers transcend the need for manuals or guidance, Liam subtly says that manuals are tools only for those lacking innate creative intelligence or talent. This establishes a distinction between elites who have natural talent and a lower class of writers who need to rely on formulaic guides. This creates a binary of creativity: the naturally gifted (heterodox) artists versus (orthodox) manual hacks. This supports a hierarchy of screenwriters, where claiming not to need manuals becomes a mark of artistic legitimacy and intellectual superiority, which essentially gatekeeps who belongs to the ‘higher’ ranks of the screenwriting community. This may explain a reason why participants deny the influence of manuals in their own practice. To be seen to use manuals becomes an indication of your status as a beginner or lacking innate artistic talent.

In contrast to Liam, Sinead believes that the rules as described in screenwriting manuals are deeply embedded in an orthodox manner in parts of the Irish film industry. She notes: ‘I think it's like written in stone, it's like, you know, gospel within Screen Ireland’. Emily argues that scripts that follow the guidelines found in the manuals are ‘rewarded because they are easy to understand, they fit the formula, the audience will understand it’. Likewise, Sarah thinks ‘most people in the industry have read them but are they slavishly following the formula? No’. Again, here we see the creative tension in the doxa between the orthodox use of manuals and the heterodox denial or rejection of their use. The manuals have both a marginal *and* significant impact in constructing the Irish screenwriting doxa. This tension reveals the paradoxical position of manuals; they are dismissed as formulaic and superficial yet deeply integrated into industry practice. However, it is evident that manual language permeates the way in which participants conceptualise their practice, even though writers and industry professionals’ distance themselves from manuals and present themselves as working from personal creativity,

personal genius, and working outside the ‘rules’. This serves to position manuals as a subliminal infrastructure, outwardly denied but deeply rooted in practice. This denial suggests a desire to project an image of artistic authenticity while working within established industrial practices, echoing broader tensions in the doxa of Irish screenwriting. These contradictory attitudes toward manuals exemplify the tension within the Irish doxa.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has examined the ambivalent position of screenwriting manuals within the Irish screenwriting doxa. The analysis shows that manuals inhabit a paradoxical space, both embraced and rejected, which further supports the argument that there is a tension between orthodoxy and heterodoxy, between artistic and commercial imperatives, in Irish screenwriting practice. Building on Macdonald's (2013) work on the importance of screenwriting manuals in screenwriting doxa, this analysis demonstrates how manuals function in the Irish screenwriting doxa, they are outwardly denied but deeply entrenched as a ‘lingua franca’ within the practice.

Embedded within participant's views on manuals there is a clear ambivalence between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ manuals. This binary extends to how practitioners position their identity through their relationship with manuals. This is connected to their ideas about types of screenwriters as either rule-following or rule-breaking writers, as either craftsperson or artist. However, participants also adhere to a wider doxa, which views the ideas of Aristotle (as transmitted through manuals) as timeless and universal. This dissonance in their view, critiquing manuals yet, regarding Aristotle as the first manual, again exposes the contradictory sense of tension in the doxa.

This analysis demonstrates how practitioners' relationship with screenwriting manuals is deeply ambivalent. Participants subtly express this ambivalence, regarding manuals as both essential learning tools *and* dispensable guidelines. This shows how manuals inhabit a

paradoxical position in the practice, where their role is outwardly denied yet covertly shapes the conceptual framework of screenwriting doxa. The view of the manuals in the doxa echoes the paradoxical view of short courses seen in a previous chapter, where screenwriters will read the books, play the game, adopt the orthodox rules, but will be critical of them, saying they do not have much influence on them.

The five sub-themes in this chapter - Good/Bad manuals, Aristotle, Kinds of Writers, Ambivalence, and Denial, further demonstrate how the orthodoxy/heterodoxy doxa-tension materialises in practical terms within the practice. Having examined how screenwriting manuals reproduce the tension in the doxa of Irish screenwriting, the next chapter explores the taken-for-granted assumptions participants make around the 'rules' of their practice and how this contributes to the tension in the doxa.

## **Chapter 6 Rules of the Game**

### **Introduction**

This chapter examines another feature of doxa: ‘rules of the game’ as described by Bourdieu (1977). In this chapter ‘the rules of the game’ refers to the universal characteristics that participants agreed make up a screenplay and that tended to include structure, the classic narrative form of three-acts, character arcs, psychological depth, change and conflict as central to drama, catharsis, engaging an audience, and how to break the rules. The tension between orthodox/heterodox that was evident in the discussion of manuals in the previous chapter is less evident in how practitioners describe the rules that guide their actual practice. Here the doxa aligns much more closely with the Anglophone orthodoxy as described in the academic and industrial (manuals) screenwriting literature (Aronson, 2010; Baker, 2015; Batty, 2016; Bordwell, 2006; Field, 2005; Macdonald, 2013; McKee, 1999; Snyder, 2005; Truby, 2008; Yorke, 2013) The rules of the game are much more reflective of the industrial orthodoxy of screenwriting. When asked about the rules of the game, participants were far more orthodox in their articulation of their practice.

These rules show up in how practitioners consider critical elements of their practice: structure, character, change/catharsis, and audience. In the previous chapters participants identified their practice with the heterodox artistic side of the binary tension between orthodox/heterodoxy, outwardly rejecting orthodox rules and formulas found in training and manuals. However, in this chapter, their actual practice reveals a more complex relationship with industry orthodoxy. Despite self-identification as artists who transcend such ‘formulaic’ constraints, participants demonstrate consistent adherence to fundamental principles of the orthodoxy around structure, character development and arcs, and strategies to engage audiences. This apparent contradiction between their stated heterodox artistic identity versus

their practical conformity to orthodox industry rules acts as a sort of sophisticated cognitive dissonance, where participants rationalise the contradiction between their artistic identity but at the same time adhere to the orthodox ‘rules of the game’ (Bourdieu, 1977, pp.159-171). Participants appear to rationalise rule-following as a strategic choice, rather than artistic compromise, viewing conformity with formulas and rules as professionalism rather than creative ‘selling out’. The doxa-tension emerges here through participants’ ability to outwardly hide their conformity as pragmatism. This industrial pragmatism acts as a strategy that helps to preserve their heterodox artistic identity while allowing participants to embrace commercial constraints and the ‘rules of the game’ (Bourdieu, 1977, pp.159-171).

The tension in the doxa is less immediately overt in how participants describe the rules of the game, however, the tension is still evident in how they protest the orthodox rules but ultimately acquiesce to them. This dynamic is reminiscent of, though not reducible to, what Michel Foucault called the ‘panopticon effect’ (Foucault, 1995, pp.144-164), considered here as an illustrative analogy rather than a sustained analytical framework. Writers appear to internalise and enforce rules upon themselves, becoming their own prison guards even when external surveillance from gatekeepers may be minimal or absent. They police their own adherence to conventions that the industry may not actually monitor or value. This further complicates any reading of the rules of the game as it suggests a self-sustaining system of control that governs participants’ adherence to rules of the game.

One example where the heterodox view is more explicit is around the importance of breaking the rules. Participants argued *for* the orthodox rules around structure, character, catharsis, etc, however, they also argue for the rules to be broken. Participants demonstrate a nuanced way of managing the contradiction between their heterodox artistic identity and their in-practice orthodoxy by viewing themselves as *selective* rule-breakers. Despite their ‘artistic’ rhetoric, participants consistently adhere to orthodox rules and structures. They rationalise this

compliance via appeals to authorities such as Aristotle, framing *Poetics* (Aristotle, 1997) as a timeless universal guide rather than a restrictive manual, somehow elevating their orthodoxy above any commerciality. This allows them to maintain conformity and artistic identity at the same time. This cognitive dissonance permits them to maintain the option of breaking the rules even if they rarely do.

This continues the discussion from the previous chapters about learning the rules to break the rules and demonstrates how learning shapes practice. In the doxa it is important to know the rules *before* practitioners can resist them. A sort of game is at play where writers pragmatically follow the orthodox rules but reserve the right to ignore the rules if they do not suit them. This shows how writers navigate a set of orthodox ‘rules’ by convincing themselves that they have the capacity to deviate from them, thereby reinforcing their identity as an artist. This maps in an interesting way onto the first sub-theme of structure. In their practice participants work within the structure of the rules but at the same time protest at the boundary such rules create. The most fundamental of these rules concerns screenplay structure itself.

## **Structure**

Screenplay structure is a core aspect of the orthodox ‘rules of the game’ for participants. The argument around structure can be broken down in the following way. Participants follow the orthodox rules because they perceive them as a route to success, as a path to being produced and funded by the industry. Consistency and coherency is perceived as one route to writing a ‘good’ screenplay. This is why structure is important, structure is logical and orthodox, and Aristotle is regarded as providing some of the best guidance on structure, his work is regarded as universal and timeless, this is why he is repeatedly referenced (Aristotle, 1997). Participants make careful use of language around their practice that reveals an underlying assumption. In contrast to the discussion around screenwriting manuals, participants now use the language of

craft to legitimate the focus on structure and lend it significance and seriousness, but at the same time they avoid using the language of formula and convention, preferring instead to use terms associated with disciplines such as architecture and maths. Participants distance themselves from prescriptive manuals, but they simultaneously embrace craftsperson terminology when discussing the rules of the game around building a screenplay. They use terms borrowed from skilled professionals, like architects, rather than the mechanical rule-following terms of tradesmen. Through this positioning they attempt to reconcile the paradoxical demands of being both pragmatic craftspeople *and* inspired artists. Participants justify following the orthodox rules on structure by framing them as practical tools rather than creative constraints. This pragmatic, practical approach allows them to view following the rules of the game as professionalism rather than compromising their artistic authenticity. Within this logic, Aristotle's classic three-act structure gains authority as timeless wisdom (and therefore *doxa*), which allows participants to follow such orthodox classical principles while maintaining their artistic identity.

The importance of structure is a significant theme in both the academic and industrial (manuals) screenwriting literature. Academic voices like Aronson (2010) and Batty (2016), alongside industry authorities such as Field (2005), McKee (1999) and Yorke (2013) consistently emphasise the importance of structure. For example, manual writer Robert McKee argues that there is a universal story structure that has been around since Aristotle's *Poetics* (McKee, 1999, p.7). In the manual discourse the screenplay is defined by its structure. That is why so many of the manuals emphasise this element of the writing. For example: 'In the three-act formula, *story* is more important than *texture*' (Sedgwick, 2018, p.82, italics in original). Or as Field notes: 'Structure is the foundation, the base, the blueprint of the screenplay ... "Screenplay is structure." If you don't know the basic structure of your story line, you're not really ready to start writing' (Field, 2005, p.144). By contrast, in academic literature structure



is a central point for critique, resistance and examination. Academic literature critically examines the concept of screenplay structure by interrogating the seemingly straightforward nature of orthodox rules, in particular the three-act structure, which though easily understood, ‘obscures a lot of detail’ (Nelmes, 2007, p.111). Scholars identify that most screenwriting manuals adopt a Neo-Aristotelian approach in their presentation of dramatic theory and narrative structure (Brenes, 2014) drawing on classical culture to position screenplay rules as universal and timeless (Ashton and Conor, 2016; Koivumäki, 2016; Pope, 1998). Some also argue that the structural rules found in manuals are ‘normative’ (Ashton and Conor, 2016; Macdonald, 2013). The academic literature often critiques how manuals create and reinforce a particular doxa by emphasising principles such as structure as universal and essential for writing a screenplay.

Participants broadly adhere to this orthodox view on the importance of structure. They have internalised this reverence of structure and absorbed its language. In the data from this study there is strong evidence to show that structure is seen as critical to writing a good script. For Ciara, a good writer will ‘come up with something that will hold together’. Sarah argues that a ‘fundamental understanding of beginning, middle, end’ is key for screenwriting. And Orla describes how story *begins* with structure and when she writes ‘the story itself, the plot itself, tends to be quite structured’. For Aine ‘you’ll notice that the films that succeed have a better structure, like I notice I watched *Despicable Me* (Coffin et al., 2010), I really, really liked it, it had a great structure. *Despicable Me 2* (Coffin, et al., 2013) didn’t work at all, and I realised it’s because the structure was all over the joint, ... the story was badly structured’. She notes that ‘when you look at films that way, you’ll start to see the ones [that] have a good structure. And ‘the ones that don’t work often, it’s structure, it’s nearly always the structure’. For Sinead, structure is key to telling a story and ‘the easiest way to do that in the first place is to try and write ninety pages and see if you do have, you know, three-acts’. All of these examples serve

to demonstrate how participants have internalised the orthodox language and thought around structure. They repeat ideas and concepts from manuals and literature such as McKee, Snyder, and Field.

Often participants describe screenwriting structure in a technical way, in the logical language of architecture, blueprints, mathematics, scaffolding, maps, and skeletons. This implies that a script is something built, something a craftsperson might work on in a workshop, or something with definable parts that can be taken apart and put back together. It is striking that these are all the language of construction, of making or taking something mechanical apart, of making a machine that will do things. This is very different from the language of artistic creation. As discussed earlier, a romantic ‘artist’ draws from a realm of pure inspiration in isolation from the base world of workshops and apprentices (Engell, 1981). The genius artist is *sui generis*, whereas a craftsperson learns a craft, they train, they are first an apprentice, then a master craftsperson.

The language participants use to describe their thinking on the rules of the game exposes a sense of taken-for-granted-ness (Bourdieu, 1977, pp.159-171). Though in other ways they might protest or resist the orthodox commercial rules, at the level of writing craft they internalise the sense that they are craftspeople rather than pure artists. Participants are essentially engaged in a balancing act of rejecting the orthodox rules of the game but at the same time are using orthodox structural rules. This apparent paradox is resolved through their use of the language of craft. This allows them to work within industrial rules without giving up their creative autonomy. This positioning attempts to sidestep the traditional art/commerce binary. By adopting the language of skilled trades, participants are neither ‘tortured artists’ above any commercial concerns, or formulaic factory drones. They exist in a middle ground, in the tension between technical rules and artistic expression, in the middle ground between artistic logic and economic logic (Radermecker and Loots, 2025).

For example, Maeve notes that structure underpins good storytelling. She notes that ‘when you realise there's a basic architecture underlying a technically adept story, one that lands because all audiences, whether they're conscious of it or not, are very literate in terms of how they process story, like there is a natural [act structure] that goes back to Aristotle, like there's a certain, you know, notion of a surprising but inevitable ending - that's satisfying’. Aoife notes: ‘I know that there's certain rules, like the rules of threes or the beginning like there's a certain mathematics to making something, and yes, that's a good blueprint’. Structure is described like a backbone, a skeleton to the finished script. For example, Aine notes: ‘I'm evangelical about doing outlines first, always, and also because if you have a structural problem and you've only come up against it in your script, you're sunk, like it's just a nightmare’. Orla describes how, before writing a script, she will write a ‘logline’ and then ‘500 to 700 words’ of plot in ‘broad terms’. Irene takes a similar approach, she will ‘write with a skeletal structure ... to get the backbone of the story and ... then I build this sort of scaffolding and then I develop the characters.’ In this way, structure is defined as the ‘bones’, the heart of a story idea. Common to all these ways of thinking about screenwriting; (blueprint, architecture, skeleton, map, or scaffolding) is the idea that structure is so significant that it is essential to develop it before writing. This aligns the idea of structure with the importance of knowing a craft skill. As discussed above a craftsperson *builds* something from parts. A cartographer maps a territory that already exists. A doctor fixes what is broken.

This structural language resonates with the previous discussion around the tension between craft and art in the last chapter and situates structure firmly in the realm of craft orthodox rules. Participants deliberately avoid terms like ‘formula’ or ‘template’, in favour of terms like ‘architecture’, ‘mathematics’, and ‘blueprint’, which is telling. These latter terms evoke connections to expertise, precision, and specialised knowledge, rather than mechanical or rote application of orthodox formulas found in manuals. This strategic use of language

allows participants to have it both ways, they can acknowledge the formulaic constraints of screenwriting, while positioning themselves with trades like architecture or mathematics. Architects are particularly interesting here as their work follows established principles and rules, but they have strong cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977, pp.159-171; Grenfell, 2014, p.265-270). They are viewed culturally as professionals, not factory workers or formulaic technicians. They are regarded as working within a form, but they can add flair and style to their craft. By connecting their work to professions such as this, participants are strengthening their creative authority within their field. This means that they are not just following manual templates but applying them in sophisticated and ‘artistic’ ways. The depth of structure’s influence becomes evident in its invisibility to practitioners.

### ***The Naturalisation of Structure***

Structure is so central to the doxa of screenwriting that even when writers overtly negate the use of structure they ultimately return to the need for structure. Participants accept that structure will emerge whether they are aware of it or not. Whether they work consciously from a skeletal structure, or ignore structure during writing, it will arrive anyway. Structure, they believe, imposes itself naturally. This suggests that, even if writers try to avoid structure at the start, they will revert to it, without any apparent effort. Participants’ thinking around structure is clearly doxa, it is so ‘naturalised’ that it is an unquestioned universal quality of screenwriting that emerges whether you impose it or not (Bourdieu, 1977, pp.159-171; Grenfell, 2014, pp.265-270).

This ‘naturalisation’ of structure is seen in many comments from participants. For example, Emily talks about ignoring structure and writing it all out ‘like one big vomit’ but she will then ‘impose structure’ afterwards. Ciara argues that you can ‘always add structure afterwards. Get your story down, then impose structure afterwards’. Sinead makes a similar

point: 'I would say to anyone, you know, worry about structure and all that after, but first and foremost, get your bloody story down'. Peter describes how he didn't know how to write a screenplay, noting that 'I'd never [learned] three-act structure, I didn't know any of the theories of structural stuff, I just wrote a lot of scenes and then me and [Jerry] sat and we reordered them'. For Peter 'structure looks after itself'. In this view structure arrives intuitively. As Peter notes: 'almost all my work is heavily character-based portraits and ... I just wanted to let them roam for a day. ... I didn't realise I've given it a structural thing with the sunrise-to-sunrise thing, there was a time element that was structuring it and that day in the life is such a common trope in Irish storytelling with, you know, especially *Ulysses* (Joyce, 1920)'.

This seeming 'naturalness' of structure is explained by participants as something emerging from our psychological makeup as human beings. Liam for example, argues that structure relates to the 'psychological rules in the human brain' that have been there since 'man sat around the fire, telling stories in prehistory'. This view is clearly doxic, with Liam suggesting that structure is a natural part of the way we think, a deep part of our humanity. As Emily notes: 'actually structure is something that we do anyway, naturally, even in storytelling' even when telling a simple anecdote about something that happened to us on holiday in Thailand it will have an 'inciting incident' and 'a call to action' and obstacles and a 'resolution' with either a 'tragic ending' or 'a hilarious ending', this is just how we 'tell each other stories'. Sarah holds a similar view: 'I want people to be really original and interesting and groundbreaking in their content, but all stories have a beginning, a middle and an end, like it doesn't make sense to me to reinvent structure'. Three-act structure is the paradigmatic shape for a screenplay (Ciara).

It is quite interesting to examine the language that participants use around the 'naturalness' of structure. Terms like 'natural' 'fundamental' 'psychological' 'human nature' were used often, as though it was 'a fact' that structure operates in this way. This is a very

strong example of the doxic nature of these ideas. Participants appear so immersed in this doxa around structure that they ‘essentialise’ and ‘universalise’ this idea in their practice and thereby construct a doxa. Bourdieu argues that doxa operates precisely through this process of naturalisation. Beliefs become so deeply internalised within a field that they are experienced not as socially constructed conventions but as self-evident truths about how things simply are (Bourdieu, 1977, pp.159-171). The participant findings evidence this dynamic within Irish screenwriting practice. When participants invoke structure as foundational, speaking of it as ‘universal’, essential, or simply ‘how storytelling works’, they demonstrate Bourdieu’s concept of doxa as the ‘universe of the undiscussed’ (Bourdieu, 1977, pp.159-171, p.168) Structure is not debated or justified it is the unquestioned ground upon which other craft discussions take place (Bourdieu, 1977, pp.159-171; Grenfell, 2014, pp.1-25). Participants rarely question or critique the naturalness of structure, taking it as precisely the kind of self-evident, ‘natural’ truth that marks doxic belief. This unquestioned acceptance gains additional force through its perceived connection to professional achievement.

### ***Structure = Success***

For many participants, adherence to the rules of structure is viewed as a route to success. What the previous discussion suggests is that participants regard an understanding and adherence to the craft of structure as central to being successful. Success can be read in several ways: finishing a script, getting funding to develop a script, and commercial success (having your script turned into a film). However, this research argues that fundamentally the central goal for most screenwriters is commercial success, having your script produced. This, however, may appear different depending on the writer’s preferred style or genre.

Writers are encouraged to build their script from the ground up so that they can arrive at a successful product. Structure brings a writer a step closer towards commercial success. For

example, Aine draws attention to this link between structure and commercial success. She notes: 'I think it's really worthwhile starting with structure, because structure will show you that you don't have an ending and if you don't have an ending, that's why you don't have, a finished script'. Likewise, Brian argues that structure can help fix a bad script with the 'kernel' of a good story and make it 'succeed commercially'. This view of structure is core to the Irish doxa of screenwriting. Knowing and adhering to structure results in a polished script and potentially commercial success. However, this exposes another tension - within the doxa, following screenplay structural rules is simultaneously positioned as essential *and* insufficient. For participants structure is regarded as both a requirement for success *and* no guarantee of success in getting your script produced. This is evident in how participants assessed the success of some filmmakers. Emily takes inspiration from the example of Lenny Abrahamson's works, such as *Room* (Abrahamson, 2016) and *Adam and Paul* (Abrahamson, 2004), and how he appears to ignore traditional structures and arrive at success:

[I]f you look at Lenny Abrahamson with something like *Room* or even *Adam and Paul*, he does not adhere to three-act structure and yet they were huge commercial hits, *Adam and Paul* wasn't a huge commercial hit, but *Room* was, [and] *Room* does not adhere, so Lenny has found a way to kind of be his own person and make something that really resonates.

Filmmakers like Lenny Abrahamson are seen as artistic and as heterodox as they are 'not overtly interested in structure, it's literally about a story and the characters' (Peter). This highlights the tension in the Irish screenwriting doxa and aligns with the heterodox/orthodox, art/commerce binary, where ignoring conventional structure becomes artistic authenticity. The view of Abrahamson's approach as being a 'pure story' about characters, positions this as artistic authenticity, as opposed to following commercially driven rules. This echoes the ambivalence among participants about the relationship between their creative identity and

commercial pragmatism. Participants must navigate these competing sides of their practice, which creates an internal battle where they champion heterodox artistic creativity but worry about commercial success. And yet, the relative scarcity of commercially successful heterodox films like Abrahamson's may have a dual function, where they become proof that this heterodox approach *can* work but reinforce the risky nature of pursuing artistic heterodox approaches. Nonetheless, some participants see Abrahamson's commercial and critical success as evidence of another way to approach screenwriting, a more artistic, heterodox practice that ignores the orthodox rules and still achieves success.

However, there is not much evidence that this heterodox approach to structure is highly regarded in the wider Irish industry. Peter, for example finds that the industry tries to impose orthodox structure upon his work, something he resists. He notes: 'you have to be willing to fight your corner if you think that something is finished because you'll get somebody who's more used to a three-act structure thing coming at it going like, 'I think if you did this, we can fix it' and you're going like, 'it doesn't need fixing''. This tension around whether structure leads to success or not highlights how embedded structure is within the doxa. It mirrors the art/craft binary. Peter, for example, finds 'it unhelpful to indulge in structural analysis before [he has] written anything as it is not a guarantee of success.' He notes that:

I think that structural analysis tools are great for just interrogating your work when you're at a certain stage, where maybe things aren't quite [working], [but] I think you can perfectly plan out the greatest three-act structure in the whole world and your story will still be shite.

This reinforces the tension between orthodox/heterodox approaches at the centre of the doxa. On one side of the binary, the screenwriting orthodoxy, exemplified by manuals and established practitioners, takes the position that structure *is* screenwriting and that following the rules of the game around structure is *the* way to build a script and arrive at something that is ready for



the industry. On the other side writers see heterodox, artistic filmmakers like Lenny Abrahamson make bold artistic choices and achieve commercial and critical success. This creates a paradox, where deviation from orthodoxy appears to validate alternative approaches to script structure, which suggests that the rules of the game may be more flexible than the orthodoxy maintains. This supports a broader sense of tension in the Irish doxa around commerce and art. Irish filmmakers appear concerned with discovering the formula for both commercial *and* critical success, or to put it more clearly, commercial success *through* critical success. The heterodox approach thus becomes not merely an artistic statement but a commercial strategy within the industry, a potential way to work outside the traditional art/commerce binary. In the context of the Irish doxa heterodox artistic approaches like Abrahamson's become an 'orthodoxy, a way to achieve commercial success *through* artistic critical success.

Though there is a reverence to the 'naturalness' of structure, there is also a resistance to structure. The analysis of how participants frame their thinking about structure in screenwriting further supports the position that tension between heterodox artistic logic and orthodox economic logic is a defining feature of the doxa of Irish screenwriting when participants consider the rules of the game. Whether consciously or unconsciously, structure frames participant's thinking around their creative process, leaving screenwriters to navigate a binary between adhering to or resisting established norms such as structure, or character. Character development represents another site where orthodox principles meet individual practice.

## **Character**

Even though participants typically embrace orthodox screenwriting rules around character development (a central principle found in industry manuals), their positions on this concept reveal much nuance and variation that suggests both adherence and resistance to the

conventional rules. Participants typically repeat the orthodox importance of character found in screenwriting manuals. Character, however, has many facets, which are revealed in the multiple ways participants describe their importance. Many manuals, for example, argue that character arcs are critical (Batty, 2011; Truby, 2008). Most manuals argue that characters must go on a journey of self-discovery (Vogler, 1992; Yorke, 2013). They must have a character arc where they change from how they were in the beginning to the end. There also appears to be a preference among participants for 'character studies' over plot in Irish screenwriting. For some participants, character is more important than plot, whereas for others plot emerges out of character. This variety of positions, from strict adherence to character arc orthodoxy, to more complex nuanced views where character supersedes or generates plot, demonstrates how participants embody the tension in the doxa. However, their general agreement on the centrality of character to screenwriting shows their acceptance of a significant feature of the orthodox rules of the game.

Like structure, character is where the orthodoxy/heterodoxy tension does not at first appear obvious in participants' discourse around rules of the game, but closer analysis reveals more nuance. There is an orthodox position among participants that a good script needs 'a fantastic character' (Amy). Characters are central to scripts (as opposed to, for example, non-human events and phenomenon) and characters must 'do' something. For example, the main character requires a compelling goal and to be actively shaping the events of the script (Field, 2005; Sedgwick, 2018). However, there is a more artistic heterodox position that believes that the writer has little control over their characters and has to 'get out of the way' and 'let the character speak' (Peter). Participants, such as Peter believe that characters take on a life of their own and writers have got to believe completely in who their characters are and just follow the character around for ninety minutes. Though the tension appears subtle, it is still there, it is a

tension between a view of character that actively shapes a plot, creating a story, and another view of character which ignores plot and is more about a character study.

Like structure, the orthodoxy implies that character is so important to screenwriting it almost goes without saying, it is taken-for-granted, a universal truth (Bourdieu, 1977, pp.159-171; Grenfell, 2014, pp.1-25). This preference for character over plot repeats a familiar universalising move to that examined in the discussion of structure. Character functions here as an eternal, stable category that precedes other elements of the writing process. It is the background from which culturally specific plots *naturally* emerge. This emphasis resonates with classical conceptions of the centrality of character drawn from works such as Aristotle's *Poetics* (Aristotle, 1997), Joseph Campbell's 'Hero's Journey' (Campbell, 2008), and Vladimir Propp's 'Character Archetypes' (Propp, 1968). In the *Poetics*, Aristotle defines character as a core element of tragedy, ranking it second in importance after plot (Aristotle, 1997, 1450a). Character for Aristotle is the agent through which moral choices are revealed (Aristotle, 1997, 1450a). For Campbell, the hero is central to his universal theory of monomyth, with the archetypal hero going on a journey that transforms him, through stages of departure, initiation, battle, and return. For Campbell this monomyth is a universal aspect of human psychology and narrative (Campbell, 2008). Vladimir Propp in his *Morphology of the Folktale*, conceptualises characters within functional roles (hero, villain, dispatcher) whose actions shape the narrative (Propp, 1968). This reinforces character as orthodoxy because it claims to come from a timeless, cross-cultural human essence rather than emerge from a particular culture at a particular time. When participants assert that they 'create a character and follow them around for ninety minutes' they implicitly invoke this universal orthodoxy on the centrality of character. However, what participants regard as 'Aristotelian' orthodoxy may in fact be a selective and partial reading of the *Poetics*, mediated through manual writers such as McKee (and others), rather than through direct engagement with Aristotle's text.

There is further nuance in participants' position on character. In a similar manner to how participants described their preferences for certain manuals depending on whether they were more technical or visceral, the language participants' use around the topic of character often appears more visceral. In fact, character is privileged as so important that a good character is more important than a good plot. For Orla, 'I'd rather sit in a cinema for two hours, watch a brilliant actor dissect a frog, rather than watch a terrible, convoluted plot that hits all the beats but is absolutely formulaic and boring'. Participants believe in the autonomous life of their characters in order to write something that an audience cares about, suggests a lingering 'romantic' impulse, a heterodox artistic view of character (seemingly) opposite to a mechanical plot-driven or orthodox approach (Engell, 1981). The use of such visceral, psychological depth, suggests a heterodox artistic approach. It is not just that emotional investment makes writing more artistic in some way, but that this way of believing in the autonomy of a character is the opposite of structured or technical 'craft' approaches. This emotive, visceral language makes the character superior to the plot, superior to the structure. That is why it is heterodox, it reveals participants' underlying resistance to orthodox mechanical approaches where character simply serves the plot. A heterodox position emerges here in the way participants described the living, breathing autonomy of their characters. This is further evidence of the tension between the art/craft binary, where through their view of character participants privilege character interiority over external structure.

The language around character reveals the implicit importance of psychology in character development. Participants appear to borrow from psychological theories in character creation strategies. Characters, in the orthodoxy, should have psychological depth, back stories that explain their actions and motivations so that audiences feel something for them. This is stated in many screenwriting manuals (Field, 2005; McKee, 1999; Truby, 2008), which often highlight the need for psychological depth. For example, Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of

human needs is often cited (Ashton and Conor, 2016, p.129). One participant, Eric, appears to draw on figures from psychology, like Freud, Adler, Jung as well as the idea of ‘parent-child relationship’ to give depth to his characters and their relationships. The borrowing of language from psychological theory, similar to the earlier use of classical literature (Aristotle, 1997) and mathematical and architectural language, may serve to give legitimacy to screenwriting practice for participants by associating with culturally important disciplines. Participants use this terminology not just as a creative strategy but as something that lends their work more professionalism. This use of psychological theory then has a dual purpose, in a Bordieuan sense, strengthening screenwriting as a ‘profession’ with depth and academic rigour, elevating its status within the industry and wider culture (Bourdieu, 1977, pp.159-171; Grenfell, 2014, pp1-25).

Character depth plays a role in successfully connecting with an audience. For Aoife ‘you need characters that are engaging, that an audience cares about’. Finn believes that audiences identify most with characters. Ciara believes that writers have to create characters that the audience cares about, ‘we might not like them, but we have to care about them’. She notes further that if an audience cares for a character ‘they will forgive a lot’. They speak about character in a more emotive way in comparison to structure, which they talked about in very mechanical and dispassionate terms. This shift in language use reveals something significant in how participants consider the importance of character and audience. Participants’ discussion of character in terms of emotional investment and forgiveness suggests that they view characterisation as not merely a technical feature of their practice, but one that requires empathy and psychological insight. The repeated emphasis on audience ‘caring’ and ‘forgiving a lot’ implies that participants view character as a primary way to engage an audience and build emotional depth in their script. This emphasis on the emotional and psychological aspects of character suggests that participants regard character as a rule in screenwriting, and therefore

doxa. This also reflects in a subtle way the tension in doxa between art/craft, with character depth connected to a more creative, heterodox position, that prioritises artistic depth over technical craft and structure. However, creating characters that audiences care about raises questions about how those characters must evolve and transform in the script, which leads to consideration of the next theme: change and catharsis. This principle of transformation occupies a distinct position within the Irish doxa.

### ***Change and Catharsis***

The centrality of change and catharsis is closely connected with the concept of character. There is less evidence of the orthodox/heterodox tension here, instead the concepts of change and catharsis reflect the orthodox side of the tension. Participant' views on change and catharsis mirror the orthodoxy as found in the most popular screenwriting manuals. For example, the leading screenwriting manuals, regard change and catharsis as central drivers of both character development journey and audience engagement (Field, 1979; McKee, 1999; Snyder, 2005). These are typically structured via escalating obstacles, transformation, and emotional climax that resolves inner and outer conflict. Snyder's Beat Sheet regards catharsis as the climactic moment where the hero is transformed after an 'All is Lost' moment near the end of the third act, with audiences undergoing an emotional pay-off by witnessing the character's change arc (Snyder, 2005). Likewise, McKee recommends putting characters under escalating complications until they are transformed by the pressure of their choices, which leads to a moment of catharsis (McKee, 1999). Syd Field places character transformation at the centre of his three-act structure, with the central character undergoing challenge and growth which forces them to change. Seeing this change leads to a feeling of catharsis for the audience (Field, 1979). Yorke (2013) regards change and catharsis as central to screenwriting. Yorke regards change as key to narrative, with character transformation the goal which leads them to self-

understanding (Yorke, 2013). These leading manuals collectively regard change not as merely a desirable element of screenwriting, but fundamental to audience engagement. They collectively suggest that change and catharsis are a significant feature of the orthodoxy.

Character and change are seen by participants as interconnected and having deep psychological roots. A character's 'narrative wound' and character change are central to plot. A narrative wound is a past trauma that a character has experienced which shapes their character and actions. A clear example of this is Bruce Wayne/Batman in the Batman franchise (Nolan et al., 2005). The murder of Bruce Wayne's parents by criminals provides the motivation for his drive for justice. He would not have become Batman without this 'narrative wound'. This concept of the narrative wound is often described as a character's 'ghost' (Weiland, 2023). John Truby defines it as 'an event from the past that still haunts the hero in the present ... an open wound that is the source of the hero's more or psychological weakness' (Truby, 2008, p.48.). It is the thing in a character's past that shapes their present. This is represented in most manuals, which argue that character arcs are critical (Batty, 2011; Truby, 2008; Weiland, 2023) and that characters must go on a journey of self-discovery. They must have a character arc where they change from how they were in the beginning to the end. Connected to this is the concept of 'rising action' where the drama intensifies as the story progresses toward a major climactic event where everything changes for the character (Macdonald, 2013, p.49).

It is impossible to discuss change/catharsis without talking about conflict. And it is impossible to talk about these without reference to Aristotle again. These three concepts, change, catharsis, conflict are interconnected and linked to the orthodox idea of rising action that builds toward a climax creating dramatic tension (Aristotle, 1997, 1452a1-20). For example, these concepts are interconnected for Ciara. She notes 'writers can use foreshadowing to suggest that a change is coming for a character'. The audience will sense that a change is coming 'and when it comes, we feel a huge sense of catharsis'. For Ciara 'that's the journey'

but ‘characters have to be capable of change, whether they change or not’. For Sean character change is built into plot. He asks: ‘is there going to be a point of peripeteia, reversal, recognition as you move from act one into act three?’ However, for Amy character change cannot be forced, ‘it has to be organic’ and ‘come incrementally’. In a script ‘something must have happened, it must be a specific reversal or whatever, but something needs to change’ (James). For Peter ‘scenes that come up have got to be super entertaining and they either have to bring [characters] a little bit lower or give them a little bit more hope, and, you know, give yourself fun with turnarounds.’

Other participants echo this emphasis on dramatic consequence and emotional intensity: Eric argues that there should be ‘consequences’ for characters actions. A good screenplay for Dara ‘raises the adrenaline, is cathartic’. Peripeteia is a concept which originates from Aristotle’s *Poetics*, where it is defined as a reversal or the action into its opposite, occurring as a necessary or probable consequence of preceding events, (Aristotle, 1997, 1452a22-29). The language of Aristotle clearly underpins much of this. There is a view, outlined above, that a good screenplay is ‘cathartic’. Peripeteia is a concept in narrative theory which originates from Aristotle’s *Poetics* (Aristotle, 1997). Aristotle’s concepts of peripeteia and catharsis sit on opposite sides of a dramatic divide (Myers, 1949; Rorty, 1992; Tierno, 2002). Peripeteia is within narrative, it is something that happens to a fictional character in the drama. However, catharsis sits outside the drama, it is an experience for an audience member watching the drama. It is outside of the drama itself. It means a sudden reversal or turning point in the plot. It is a moment when a character’s fate turns in a new direction, most often moving a character from good fortune to bad (Aristotle, 1997, 1452a). Catharsis is introduced by Aristotle in his definition of tragedy, where tragedy is described as effecting through pity and fear what has been interpreted as the purification or purgation of such emotions in the audience



(Aristotle, 1997, 1449b27-28). It refers to a purging or purification of emotions by an audience when they watch drama, in particular tragedy.

The concepts of peripeteia and catharsis have deep roots in Aristotle's *Poetics*. However, their influence on screenwriting can be traced to Aristotle via McKee, who often draws on Aristotle to provide a historical foundation for his ideas around 'universal' and 'natural' aspects to story that sidestep any critique (McKee, 1999). In a similar way to the discussion around structure, by linking ideas of character, change, catharsis and conflict to ancient Greek history (Aristotle), McKee attempts to move it beyond critique for participants. In this way it becomes doxa, before and outside of any critical examination. It belongs to humanity's deep past, and is not just one idea among many, but an idea that predates any thinking about screenwriting. Similar to structure, it prefaces all thinking about character and catharsis. Participants have clearly absorbed and internalised this language set and present it as a rule of the game writers must follow. These internalised principles extend to how screenwriters conceptualise their relationship with audiences.

### **Engaging an Audience**

Participants revealed predominantly orthodox views when discussing the rules on audience engagement, echoing the orthodoxy and established rules, norms and conventions. This suggests that participants have internalised a set of conventional expectations. The final and perhaps most important example of this is the rule of the game: 'don't be boring', which is something Liam describes being told by a script consultant and former commissioner for RTÉ as the 'one rule in screenwriting'. In practical terms this concept of 'don't be boring' centres on the importance of engaging and entertaining an audience. The rule here is that first and foremost a script must read well, it must be engaging for its first reader. For example, Orla argues that a good script must be a 'page turner', a good script is like a 'good melody, and if it

feels good, if it makes your brain waves feel good, that's good writing'. A good script evokes an 'emotion'. The idea here is that your script must be a 'page turner' and the story has to be visual and 'read on the page' (Ciara). For Orla a *good* script 'grabs an audience' and brings them on an 'emotional journey'. Brian notes that 'good pace and structure show respect to your audience', you can't 'put your reader to sleep'. For participants like Sarah, writers must consider their audience, and ask themselves 'what am I trying to communicate? What emotions do I want to produce in my audience? And the number one thing you want them to feel is engaged'. Other participants take a similar view, according to Aine you need to 'get your audience pulled in'; or as Sarah notes, audiences 'end up disengaging from the story because they're not hoping or fearing not participating emotionally'; and as Ciara warns, 'you can't abuse your readers or your viewers'. For Brian 'you need to have that big event happening [in your story] within the first few minutes just to keep audiences interested because audiences are very clever they just want to be entertained, and you can't be wasting their time either'.

This emphasis on avoiding boredom and maintaining constant audience engagement through pace, structure, and emotional engagement represents a strongly orthodox position. All this repeats much of the language of the manuals and shows how these rules of the game really emerge out of the screenwriting discourse. For example, many of the screenwriting manuals say that a script has to grab a reader's attention in the first ten pages (Field, 1979; Snyder, 2005; Truby, 2008). Participants' collective advocacy for these audience engagement rules reveals their absorption of the conventional screenwriting rules and shows how participants have internalised the screenwriting orthodoxy found in manuals and industry.

Only Liam seemed to represent the heterodox position in his suggestion of abandoning the orthodox conventions, arguing that 'if you don't have an 'individual, novel, kind of crazy

wild creativity' in your script then 'there's no point to it, you're just writing NCIS <sup>5</sup> episodes'. This call for 'crazy wild creativity' is the only notable exception among otherwise orthodox views. However, Liam's dismissive reference to NCIS episodes reveals the tension in the doxa. He reveals a subtle artistic snobbery that views formulaic television procedurals like NCIS as the antithesis of true creativity. Through this Liam speaks to the doxa-tension between 'true' artistic expression and commercially successful formula. This heterodox position suggests that Liam views adherence to conventional screenwriting rules as something that produces entertainment rather than art. His implication that writing for conventional TV has no point reveals again the underlying tension between art and commerce. Liam's view, revealed via a throwaway remark, represents not merely a technical disagreement with the idea of audience engagement, but a more fundamental disagreement with an industry value system that for Liam favours proven formulas over 'crazy wild creativity' that breaks the conventional rules. This resistance to convention forms a recurring pattern among participant' responses.

### **Break the Rules**

Participants demonstrate a complex, often contradictory relationship with conventional screenwriting rules. They simultaneously embrace and resist the orthodox conventions as they navigate between the competing demands of a commercial industry and a creative practice. Ciara, for example, recounts a story of a fellow student at college who 'basically sat down and he'd buy all the books ... reduced them to about four foolscap pages and then he'd find a story to fit, [but] they were awful because ... the character was paper thin. No, it just didn't work'. In contrast Emily feels it is totally up to a writer to choose to break the rules but 'it's hard to be

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<sup>5</sup> NCIS is a weekly military police procedural American television series which centres on special agents in the Naval Criminal Investigative Service. The original series began in 2003 but has since had a number of spin-offs set in other US cities. Each week they solve a new crime KANG, C. 2014. CBS's success with NCIS shows TV's staying power despite online video. *The Washington Post*, NA-NA, MARSH, C. 2023. For These TV Procedurals, the Formula Still Works. *The New York Times (Digital Edition)*, NA-NA..

Lars von Trier'. For Sean writers should first follow the rules, then 'within the confines of those regulations' you can 'really push the envelope'. This tension about knowing the rules in order to break the rules, suggests one way in which Irish practitioners protest/resist the orthodox rules. They are aware of the rules as rules but try to push beyond them. In some sense the rules are there to learn then discard. Writers learn them so they can move beyond them. As Sean notes 'you move past the technical and into the expressive'. This suggest that participants are not simply rejecting orthodoxy in favour of heterodoxy, instead they are working both sides, navigating between industry formulas and established conventions but at the same time allowing themselves space for creative expression. This suggests a tactical engagement with the orthodoxy, with participants using the conventional structures as a foundation for heterodox experimentation. This allows them to work within industry requirements while also pushing creative boundaries. Rather than positioning themselves in either orthodox or heterodox camps, participants reveal a sophisticated strategic engagement with screenwriting practice. They treat conventional structures not as rigid constraints, but as tools or frameworks that can be used, subverted, or transcended. This nuanced position allows writers to externally maintain their credibility within a commercial industry, while internally holding space for artistic innovation and expression. This resonates with Radermecker and Loots (2025) argument about how the orthodox/heterodox or art/craft binary is not a fixed opposition by a dynamic field where practitioners blend artistic and craft identities. Yet participants' adherence to rules reveals a troubling disconnect between compliance and reward.

### **A Screenwriting 'Panopticon'**

However, there is an undercutting irony that despite all their effort to play by the rules of the game, some participants question whether producers and funders actually recognise or value 'the rules of the game'. Like Foucault's concept of 'disciplinary power' and Jeremy Bentham's

‘Panopticon’, some screenwriters actively police themselves according to rules and conventions that gatekeepers like funders and producers do not really enforce. Foucault showed how modern society controls people not by eliminating rules, but by teaching people to internalise norms and police themselves. He used Bentham’s concept of the Panopticon prison as a metaphor for modern life, where the possibility of being seen leads people to police themselves and internalise the rules (Foucault, 1995, pp.144-164). As Foucault notes: ‘the major effect of the Panopticon: [is] to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its actions; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary; That this architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers. (Foucault, 1995, p.147). ‘This ‘disciplinary power’ means rules do not disappear but become embedded in everyday behaviour and self-understanding, thus becoming doxa. For example, Orla finds that producers are not really interested in the mechanics of script and are more interested in whether the market currently wants ‘this type of story’. As Orla notes: ‘every single producer I’ve ever spoken to ... will not give a flying you-know-what about whether the inciting incident happens on the bottom of page twelve. What they care about is saleability’. In Orla’s experience a producer does not really notice or care about the rules of script structure. What they care about is commerciality. This must elicit a sense of deep frustration for participants with producers and funders. Screenwriters spend considerable time and energy learning and practicing the rules only to have funders ignore their efforts. For participants they are in a sort of screenwriting ‘Panopticon’, (drawn on analogically rather than as a sustained analytical framework), which means they are stuck in a paradoxical cycle where they cannot abandon the rules as they believe

the industry sees and follows them, but industry gatekeepers do not care about or maybe even know of the rules. This idea reframes the orthodox rules as a self-surveillance system rather than one that is externally controlled. In this scenario writers become their own prison guards, enforcing conventions on their practice that are perhaps irrelevant to those who greenlight projects. The implications of this self-policing extend across the broader landscape of Irish screenwriting practice.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has examined the theme of ‘rules of the game’. In comparison with the previous chapter there is evidently much less of the orthodox/heterodox tension around the rules of the game. This chapter demonstrates how embedded the Anglophone orthodox rules are in the Irish doxa. Participants repeat the rules as mantras that they hope will lead to (commercial) success. Even though the tension in the doxa is less pronounced in the rules of the game it is still subtly evident in how practitioners navigate the orthodox rules. These findings contribute to screenwriting scholarship by empirically demonstrating that orthodox conventions around structure, character, and catharsis function as deeply internalised doxa (Macdonald, 2013). The orthodox rules participants invoke, such as three-act structure, rising and falling action, character consequences, and emotional catharsis, reflect the persistent influence of Aristotle’s dramatic principles on contemporary Irish screenwriting practice. As discussed earlier, the screenwriting orthodoxy is fundamentally Neo-Aristotelian in nature (Brenes, 2011; Tierno, 2002), and the interview data confirms how deeply these classical principles have been absorbed into screenwriting discourse in Ireland, often without practitioners explicitly recognising the origins of these ideas. However, the findings also reveal nuance that complicates a purely orthodox account. Even participants who champion classical rules framed them as strategic choices rather than timeless aesthetic truths, reserving what Conor (2014b)

identifies as creative autonomy within constrained conditions. This aligns with Bank's (2010) observation that creative workers navigate orthodoxy not through rejection but through selective use or deployment. The minority heterodox voices in the data, such as those who advocate breaking rules, echo scholarship and manuals (Aronson, 2010; Murphy, 2007) that push for more heterodox approaches, but they remain marginal. Ultimately these findings suggest orthodox screenwriting conventions remain deeply embedded in Irish practice, even as practitioners conceptualise rules as conventions to be known and strategically deployed rather than either blindly followed or boldly rejected. Writers know the rules as rules but reserve the right to use or ignore them. Having established how screenwriting manuals shape and transmit these rules within the doxa, the following chapter examines how this tension plays out in a specific national context: Ireland.

## Chapter 7 Irish Scripts

### Introduction

This chapter investigates how the doxa-tension between orthodoxy and heterodoxy materialises regarding Irish screenwriting, revealing the specific complexities that emerge when writers navigate between local and global filmmaking norms. Unlike previous chapters where the tension primarily concerned embracing or resisting Hollywood-derived conventions, this chapter demonstrates how Irish screenwriters negotiate multiple, sometimes competing orthodoxies: the Anglophone narrative conventions, an emerging set of Irish thematic and stylistic conventions, and the commercial imperatives of global cinema (O'Brien and Canning, 2020).

What makes the Irish context distinct is that participants simultaneously naturalise and resist Irish storytelling traditions. They champion Ireland's literary heritage and invoke distinctly Irish elements such as rural settings, traumatic pasts, particular forms of dialogue and humour, and especially a tragi-comic tonal sensibility, as authentic and valuable, positioning these as an artistic orthodoxy grounded in national cultural capital. Yet they also critique these same elements as clichéd, limiting, or commercially unviable, particularly when they perceive Irish films as repetitive or parochial. In these moments participants appeal to what they frame as 'universal' storytelling principles, often synonymous with Hollywood/Anglophone conventions, thereby invoking commercial orthodoxy as a counter to local insularity.

Understanding this dynamic requires recognising how Irish screenwriting operates within a nested relationship to Anglophone norms (Noonan, 2024). The Irish context does not exist in isolation from global screenwriting conventions, rather it represents a local version of that broader framework, shaped by Ireland's specific position as a small national cinema with limited domestic market scale and high dependence on international coproduction and



distribution (O'Brien and Canning, 2020). Consequently, Irish screenwriters must navigate not only the general tension between art and commerce, between craft rules and creative freedom, but a distinctly Irish version of that tension, shaped by questions of cultural authenticity, national representation, and market positioning.

What counts as orthodox or heterodox thus becomes more complex. Embracing Irish thematic conventions can represent both artistic orthodoxy *and* commercial risk taking, while invoking 'universal' story telling principles can represent both commercial necessity and artistic escape from parochial limitations. This chapter therefore examines how participants construct and contest an emerging Irish screenwriting orthodoxy while simultaneously positioning that orthodoxy in relation to the Anglophone industrial norms that govern their commercial viability.

This reveals a double movement in the Irish screenwriting field: the crystallisation of an emerging Irish orthodoxy grounded in thematic preoccupations, stylistic preferences, and industry expectations specific to Ireland, existing in tension with both global commercial norms and with practitioners own resistance to becoming 'too Irish'. Rather than a simple inversion, what emerges is a complex negotiation whereby Irish writers must balance competing imperatives: honouring Irish cultural specificity as local artistic orthodoxy, avoiding Irish clichés through resistance to local conventions, and meeting market demands as global commercial orthodoxy.

Critically this negotiation reveals that orthodoxy and heterodoxy are not fixed positions but shift depending on context. What counts as orthodox in one moment, Irish literary traditions, can be repositioned as something to resist in another, rejecting parochial Irishness in favour of universal themes. This chapter therefore complicates the orthodoxy/heterodoxy binary by showing how it operates differently when screenwriters work within a small national cinema navigating between cultural authenticity and commercial viability, between local

distinctiveness and global reach. Importantly, the chapter demonstrates how this Irish screenwriting doxa is being actively constructed through participants' discourse rather than emerging naturally. Through repeated articulation and collective agreement, participants are engaged in defining and legitimising what counts as distinctively Irish screenwriting practice, a process that reveals how orthodoxy gains authority even when multiple orthodoxies exist in tension with one another.

The analysis has three sections: firstly, exploring how participants articulated Irish thematic and stylistic conventions as an emerging orthodoxy; second: how they resist these conventions by critiquing Irish genre conventions as clichéd or limiting; and third, how they invoke Hollywood global norms as an alternative to Irish parochialism, thereby revealing the paradoxical ways local and global orthodoxies structure Irish screenwriting practice.

### **Framing the 'Irish' in Irish Screenwriting**

It is crucial to preface this examination of 'Irish scripts', acknowledging that any discussion of 'Irishness' here is problematic. The idea of a national cinema implies a singular cultural narrative, but this is highly contested. Gillespie (2009), for example, argues against any such monolithic national Irish 'script', emphasising instead the complexity and diversity of Irish identity and by extension Irish film. It is also critical to place the forthcoming discussion in the context of what has been said before about Irish scripts and narrative. Many of the themes examined in this chapter: Tragi-comic, Ireland's Literary Legacy, Storytellers, Irish and Universal, Genre Trends and Formulaic Repetition, have been addressed in previous research and scholarship. For example, Barton (2019) and Rockett (2020), both identify a continuation of Ireland's historic literary and storytelling tradition in contemporary filmmaking. O'Brien and Canning (2020) argue that Irish films often blend the global with the local, which allows filmmakers to tell stories that resonate nationally and internationally. Thematically, Carlsten

(2015) argues that Irish films often explore themes such as loss and grief, set against a backdrop of national traumas. Rockett argues that there is thread running from Irish literary tradition to Irish cinema (Rockett, 2020). What each of these previous studies highlights is the complex undercurrents that shape Irish storytelling, how they have evolved and continue to evolve. This dynamic complexity is echoed in the forthcoming ways that participants describe their views on what defines an 'Irish script' and the doxa of Irish screenwriting.

The analysis reveals four subthemes through which participants expose the tension in the Irish screenwriting doxa. It demonstrates how participants negotiate the tension between orthodoxy and heterodoxy, showing how an Irish screenwriting doxa is emerging and solidifying in contemporary practice. The first theme relates to tone; participants assert that Irish scripts are tonally specific: they are tragi-comic. This suggests that this tragi-comic sensibility, blending tragedy and comedy rather than adhering to pure genre conventions, is emerging as an accepted norm for Irish screenwriting. The second theme examines how the Irish storytelling heritage and literary legacy functions as a legitimising foundation for practice, with participants invoking this tradition as a strong influence on Irish scripts. Thirdly, the theme centres on the tension between local authenticity and global marketability. This reveals how participants pragmatically negotiate between being distinctly Irish but at the same time reaching a wider audience. There is clear awareness among participants that they should respond to the globalisation of filmmaking and are quite pragmatic about it. The last theme explores the tension between zeitgeist awareness and creative originality. This tension between responding to what is commercially successful versus avoiding formulaic repetition that stifles creativity, mirrors the broader orthodoxy heterodoxy dynamic discussed in previous chapters, but operates with particular intensity in the Irish context as the small market size heightens anxieties about both commercial viability and cultural distinctiveness.

Participants' engagement with these themes demonstrates how the tension in the Irish screenwriting doxa is being actively established and negotiated. The doxa here reveals itself as actively constructed rather than naturally occurring. Rather than merely commenting on established patterns, participants are engaged in a process of defining and legitimising what counts as distinctively Irish screenwriting practice while simultaneously positioning the practice in relation to Anglophone norms. Participants are not just making neutral statements and observations, they are perpetuating, negotiating and challenging how Irish screenwriting should balance local cultural specificity with global commercial demands, a negotiation that reveals orthodoxy and heterodoxy operating on multiple, sometimes competing levels. This process reveals how orthodoxy gains legitimacy through repeated expression and collective agreement, even when orthodoxies themselves exist in tension with one another, tensions such as Irish thematic conventions versus Anglophone industrial rules, cultural authenticity versus commercial viability, emerging local norms versus established global formulas, and between industrial rules and individual creative aspirations. A frequently mentioned marker of Irish specificity concerns tonal registers.

### **Tragi-comic**

One of the main characteristics of an Irish script, according to participants, is tone. For participants, Irish scripts are either tragic or comic, funny or bleak, but more often, and crucially, both simultaneously. When participants characterise Irish scripts as distinctively 'wacky or sad', they are invoking a tragi-comic sensibility that represents a departure from classical Aristotelian orthodoxy, where tragedy and comedy function as separate, distinct genres with different structural logics and emotional effects. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle defines tragedy and comedy as distinct forms of imitation with opposing subjects and emotional effects (Aristotle, 1997, 1449a32-36; 1449b24-25). The blending of tragedy and comedy, often within

the same scene, character, or tonal register has deep roots in Irish literary and theatrical tradition, from Synge's darkly comic peasant dramas to Beckett's tragicomic existentialism (Greene, 2004; Harrington, 2004; McDonald, 2004) to McDonagh's violent humour (Barton, 2019).

This tragi-comic approach, while heterodox in comparison to Aristotelian genre categories, has itself become an orthodox convention within Irish screenwriting. Participants naturalise this blend as distinctively and authentically Irish, citing Ireland's literary heritage as evidence that mixing the comic and tragic is 'the Irish way' of storytelling. What emerges, therefore, is a local orthodoxy grounded in what was originally a heterodox challenge to classical dramatic categories. Irish screenwriters position the tragi-comic not as a deliberate stylistic choice or rule breaking innovation, but as a cultural inheritance, something that comes naturally from being Irish and working within Irish storytelling traditions.

This reveals how doxa operates at multiple levels simultaneously. The tragi-comic blend may be heterodox relative to Aristotelian purity and Hollywood genre conventions, where comedies and dramas remain largely or mostly separate, yet it functions as orthodox within the Irish context, where practitioners treat it as the naturalised norm for scripts. Participants are not consciously resisting classical categories; they have internalised the blend so thoroughly through exposure to Irish literary and theatrical traditions that it appears self-evident, doxic rather than chosen. The Irish literary tradition thus serves not to challenge orthodoxy completely, but to establish a culturally specific orthodoxy that coexists in tension with Anglophone genre conventions.

Fernández (2006) asserts that whereas Aristotelian poetics establishes a clear boundary between tragedy and comedy, which has shaped much of Western dramatic theory, Irish literature and theatre, has frequently resisted or complicated this binary. He argues that this can be seen in the work of Sean O'Casey, Edward Millington Synge, Samuel Beckett and many

more, where they expose the interconnection between humour and sorrow in Irish life and history (Fernández, 2006) For example, Sean O’Casey’s Dublin Trilogy: *The Shadow of a Gunman* (1923), *Juno and the Paycock* (1924), and the *Plough and the Stars* (1926), are widely regarded as exemplars of the blending of the tragic and comic in Irish theatre. As scholar of Irish theatre Ronan McDonald notes ‘we have a longstanding critical orthodoxy [that the Dublin trilogy] are tragi-comic tales of families and communities destroyed by political violence’ (McDonald, 2004, p.9). Samuel Beckett’s plays, influenced by the Abbey Theatre tradition, contributed to the establishment of this ‘countertradition’ of blending tragedy and comedy. Harrington notes that ‘Beckett is known to have been a regular attendee at the Abbey with classmates from Trinity. He remembered seeing revivals of the work of J. M. Synge, and he told his biographer James Knowlson that he was influenced by Synge’s mix of pathos and humour, by a tragi-comic vision and by the distinctive theatrical language’ (Harrington, 2004, p.108.) Beckett’s works are characterised by dark humour and absurdist comedy that challenged conventional realism in Irish drama (Harrington, 2004, p.108.). Tom Murphy’s plays such as *Famine* (1969) ‘dramatize the smaller tragedies, the tragi-comedies, the dramas of the grotesque’ (Greene, 2004, p.204.). Taking all of this collectively there appears to be an established convention in Irish drama that blends tragedy and comedy.

Strong evidence for this tragi-comic tonal preference in Irish scripts emerged from the participant interviews. For Aoife, ‘I don’t know why, [or] where it’s coming to mind, but melancholy is coming to my mind, it can be comedy, it can be drama, it can be documentary, it can be anything, animation but it usually has ... a melancholy or horrendous element’. Dara notices a darkly comic tone in Irish filmmaking and finds that he has ‘picked up on it without realising it’. Dara notes: ‘my sister and I went to see the *Cripple of Inishmaan* (McDonagh, 1998) and she came away saying ‘god, Irish stuff is really dark, isn’t it?’” For Dara a sense of ‘bleakness, does shape what we do, ... I don’t think we can pull back from that cause it’s the

identity of what we're about, ...this goes back to the legacy of hundreds of years in terms of the psyche ...from partitioning from British'. Dara use phrases like 'weight of history', 'weight of begrudgery', 'sullenness or despair', 'longing', 'wistfulness', 'humour and pathos' with a 'glimmer of redemption' to describe Irish scripts. Sinead also finds that in her experience of going to film festivals, like Galway Film Fleadh, the films she encounters are very bleak and melancholy. She notes that 'I go to Galway all the time and I sit through a lot of fucking dark, bleak Screen Ireland funded focus shorts that are very heavy and I always wanted, sitting in the audience to watch something light and funny'. The evidence suggests that participants are identifying a specific feature of Irish scripts, the blending of tragic and comic elements within a single narrative. Whereas the classical categories of tragedy and comedy derive from Aristotelian orthodoxy, the Irish approach appears to resist the traditional separation of these two modes of drama. Dara's descriptions of 'humour and pathos' together, and Aoife's observation that scripts 'can be comedy, it can be drama' but maintain a tone of 'melancholy', along with the repeated emphasis on 'darkly comic' tones all point to a practice that refuses to choose between tragedy and comedy. The participant evidence demonstrates how thoroughly this tragi-comic sensibility has been internalised within Irish screenwriting practice. What was once heterodox relative to classical dramatic categories now functions as local orthodoxy, grounded in Ireland's literary and theatrical heritage yet existing in tension with Hollywood's clearer genre boundaries. This reveals how orthodoxy operates differently across cultural contexts. What counts as authentic and expected within Irish screenwriting may simultaneously represent resistance to Anglophone conventions. This dynamic becomes even more complex when examining how participants invoke Ireland's broader literary legacy to legitimise their screenwriting practice. When asked to identify films that exemplify distinctively Irish storytelling, participants reveal how this tragi-comic tradition manifests in contemporary

cinema, drawing explicit connections between literary heritage and current screenwriting practice.

For participants films such as *Adam and Paul* (Abrahamson, 2004) and *Banshees of Inisherin* (McDonagh et al., 2023)<sup>6</sup> capture these tragi-comic elements of the ‘Irish script’. For Emily, *Adam and Paul* (Abrahamson, 2004) has humour, the story is universal, it has echoes of Beckett with the tramps, Laurel and Hardy, Charlie Chaplin, with ‘the slapstick comedy element of it, and then it’s truly heart breaking because it is about the descent into drug addiction.’ Regarding, Martin McDonagh’s *Banshees* Emily notes ‘if somebody says to me that Martin McDonagh’s film is just exaggeration, a stage Irish cartoon version, it is deliberately so, but it’s also based in absolute truths, ... that dark side of us’. For Ciara *Banshees* ‘gets away with it because it’s actually funny mostly and dark and *Banshees* is pure Irish.’ For Aoife the script for *Banshees* is ‘one of the best things. I remember reading that screenplay and going, ‘oh my god, this is so refreshing’, I’m reading something that I haven’t, I don’t think I’ve ever read anything like that before’. The participants’ observations here suggest that Irish screenwriting is distinctively heterodox. For example, Aoife’s reaction to McDonagh’s script for *Banshees*, as something ‘refreshing’ and unique reinforces a view that Irish scripts are heterodox in comparison to non-Irish scripts. This apparent distinctiveness appears to be what participants consider particularly Irish in screenwriting practice.

For Aoife, *Banshees* ‘was clever, which is the main thing and I think clever is always such a joy to read’. For Sinead *Banshees* ‘could have been completely hit or miss,’ but ‘it just hit a moment’. She continued, ‘it just got this momentum, it’s almost a bit like the emperor’s new clothes, you know, which happens a lot, with these kind of things and especially in a film like that where it can make you feel stupid, ... it can make an audience people go, ‘I didn’t really, didn’t really love it, like I didn’t really get it’. Despite Sinead’s scepticism about the

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<sup>6</sup> As it is so frequently discussed the film *The Banshees of Inisherin* (McDonagh, 2022) will be abbreviated to *Banshees*.



film's reception, her suggestion that it operates like 'the emperor's new clothes', both participants ultimately regard *Banshees* as successfully embodying the tragi-comic tone. This demonstrates how contemporary exemplars function to support emerging conventions, even when individual practitioners express ambivalence about the film's quality or reception, its commercial and critical success establishes it as a reference point that validates and naturalises the tonal approach it represents. What matters analytically is that participants consistently invoke *Banshees* as embodying the tragi-comic tone, using its commercial and critical success to validate this approach as both authentically Irish and internationally viable.

The participants' identification of *Banshees* as exemplifying the tragi-comic tone demonstrates how they are actively constructing a tonal orthodoxy within Irish screenwriting practice. Their responses reveal their acceptance of this as a defining feature of Irish scripts. For example, Emily's defence of McDonagh's 'deliberate' exaggeration and Ciara's assertion that *Banshees* is 'pure Irish' suggest they view this tragi-comic tone as authentically 'Irish'. This process of collective expression is exactly how doxa works. Through repeated use of what Macdonald (2013) calls phrases and 'wise sayings', the tragi-comic tone is becoming established as an orthodox expectation for Irish scripts. This shows how participants are active players in the establishment and legitimising of a doxa of Irish screenwriting. This demonstrates how Irish screenwriting doxa emerges from the tension between orthodox and heterodox. What is heterodox outside of Ireland, the blending of tragedy and comedy, is an emerging orthodoxy within the Irish screenwriting field. This complicates the orthodox/heterodox binary in Irish screenwriting practice.

The participants' admiration for *Banshees* tonal complexity as 'pure Irish' exemplifies this dynamic. MacDonagh's approach, which might be regarded as heterodox and unconventional in Hollywood, is here considered authentically Irish. This reveals how orthodoxy and heterodoxy are not simply fixed categories, but relational positions that shift

depending on context. The Irish screenwriting doxa is established through this tension where what is heterodox in Anglophone screenwriting becomes an accepted norm in Irish practice. This allows Irish practitioners to resist Hollywood's genre orthodoxy, its separation of comedy and drama into distinct genres with clear tonal registers, by positioning the tragi-comic blend as culturally specific and artistically superior, thereby establishing their own national orthodoxy, grounded in Irish literary and theatrical heritage rather than commercial convention.

Another example that reinforces participants' view of the tragi-comic blend as a normative style in Irish screenwriting is Lenny Abrahamson's film *Garage* (Abrahamson, 2007). For Luke: 'that's a great outlier film, [*Garage*] I know it's a bit of a Marmite for some people, it is the kind of proof that sometimes it's the sum of the parts. I think it's quite an interesting, funny, bleak'. Luke's characterisation of *Garage* as both 'funny' and 'bleak' reinforces the tragi-comic as the naturalised Irish norm. The film is exemplary precisely because it embodies this tonal blend.

All of the examples above highlight a significant feature of the doxa of Irish screenwriting, the stylistic blending of melancholy/comedy. The darkly comic or the sad and melancholy is regarded as an orthodoxy by participants. They repeat this as core to Irish scripts without much critique or resistance. The examples above highlight how participants consider the blending of tragedy and comedy as a defining characteristic of Irish screenwriting. Rather than viewing this as a problem, or rule to be resisted, participants see this tonal combination as accepted orthodoxy. They regard it as a fundamental and authentic feature of Irish scripts without critique, suggesting that this tragi-comic tone has crystallised into a key part of the Irish screenwriting doxa.

Even though the films mentioned straddle the tension between tragedy and comedy, another thematic preoccupation that emerged from the data was the purely poetic or tragic story. The significance of this lies in how participants frame such stories as both distinctly Irish and

universally appealing, revealing another layer of the orthodoxy/heterodoxy tension within Irish screenwriting doxa. Whereas the tragi-comic blend positions Irish screenwriting as heterodox relative to Anglophone genre conventions, purely tragic or poetic films are positioned as orthodox within global art cinema traditions while simultaneously being claimed as distinctively Irish by participants through association with Ireland's literary heritage. This dual framing allows participants to invoke both cultural specificity (Irish literary tradition) and universal legitimacy (art cinema) as validation for work that might otherwise be dismissed as uncommercial or inaccessible.

A much-discussed example of this tonal style was the film *An Cailín Ciúin* (Bairéad et al., 2022)<sup>7</sup>. As Brian notes: 'at the moment I think everyone is trying to find out the next *ACC* because from a producer's point of view it was such a success, it was an adaptation of a book of a very, very small book and the producer and the director who worked very closely together, and were able to produce a fantastic screenplay, and obviously the more commercially successful a project is after it's made, it becomes easier to convince, you know, the next person'. For Brian *ACC* was a 'fantastic screenplay' because it had universal themes of family values, isolation, loneliness and loss. In this way it fits within the paradigm of sad Irish stories. This apparent contradiction, where 'universal' themes are taken to constitute specifically 'Irish' storytelling reveals how participants negotiate the tension between orthodox commercial expectations (universal appeal) and heterodox Irish authenticity (local specificity). For Brian, finding the magic element of what made it such a great success may be impossible. One reading of this is that participants, like producer/writer Brian, spend a lot of time trying to work out the formula for success, but at the same time resisting formulas as lacking in creativity. This highlights the tension within the doxa, and how participants embody this tension. They outwardly resist formula in favour of creativity, but inwardly they look for the next formula for

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<sup>7</sup> As it is so frequently discussed the film *An Cailín Ciúin* (Bairéad, 2022) will be abbreviated to *ACC*.

success. This negotiation shows how the Irish screenwriting doxa operates through repeated paradoxes. Participants feel required to embrace universal themes to guarantee commercial viability while not losing the local specificity that authenticates their work as distinctly Irish. This tension is embodied in Brian's position, where he seeks orthodox success but resists orthodox formulas. This illustrates how the orthodox/heterodox tension forces practitioners to navigate between opposing impulses. These competing impulses connect to broader cultural inheritances that shape Irish screenwriting.

### **Ireland's Literary Legacy**

Participants suggest that the Irish doxa is dominated by this tension between the tragi-comic because it aspires to be a *serious* artistic cinema, though participants themselves reveal ambivalence about this orthodoxy, suggesting a complex negotiation between artistic and commercial impulses. The implication of this is that to be artistic is to deal with serious non-commercial themes. For participants, this orthodoxy impacts on the scripts they write. Sarah, for example, describes an interaction with a 'really brilliant filmmaker' that surprised her, 'what he said was like, 'I gave [the character] a dead kid cause there's nothing more dramatic than that' and I was like 'you can tell me a very boring story about somebody with a dead kid', and I sometimes joke that those are kind of a type of European film, which is basically a man, walks around feeling his feelings like you know, ... it's just pointing a camera at somebody who is in a very intense situation and actually that doesn't sustain for very long'. Sinead makes a similar observation, arguing that Irish film output is 'still very snobbish' and 'when something commercial comes, there is almost that apologetic kind of thing, you know'. Dara notices a preference for the 'self-indulgent' arty and 'elitist' in Irish scripts. Participants' views here point to much more nuance in the doxa. While the dominant Irish orthodoxy appears to favour serious tragi-comic, non-commercial themes as truly artistic, some participants like Dara,

challenge this dominance by questioning whether literary seriousness should be valued above commercial accessibility and audience engagement. This resistance to what Dara characterises as pretentious or inaccessible approaches suggests a heterodox position in the Irish doxa, one that favours commerciality and entertainment. This is almost the opposite of the doxa outside Ireland, where the heterodox is more experimental and artistic, while the orthodoxy is commercial and accessible. This inversion means that within Irish screenwriting practice, creating commercial genre work that aims to be entertaining is in the heterodox position, in opposition to an established ‘artistic’ orthodoxy. This Irish inversion shows how orthodoxy and heterodoxy are determined by context, and not simply universally fixed categories. The orthodox or dominant position varies significantly depending on the particular dynamics of a national or regional screenwriting practice.

This suggests that for participants, Irish script orthodoxy aligns with a ‘literary’ approach to filmmaking where Irish filmmakers cannot just write a ‘pot-boiler’ genre film, it has to be artistic, it has to say something (Liam), though participants themselves express ambivalence toward this artistic orthodoxy, but at the same time acknowledge its dominance within the Irish field.

All of this points to an established orthodoxy in the Irish doxa that draws from the national literary heritage in filmmaking. It suggests a view among participants that the Irish industry does not take film seriously as a medium on its own terms but, need it to emulate literature in order to take it seriously. For Sinead this may be because our storytelling on screen is still rooted to our literary history. She notes: ‘I do think we are still pinned with the country of scholars and our Oscar Wilde and our W.B Yeats. ‘I do think it comes back from us trying to be overly artistic sometimes with our films’. Sinead adds that ‘we do need to be very like Sally Rooney’s writing now’ which is very telling here. Sinead is showing how writers internalise the doxa around what is successful. Currently, scripts inspired by literary fiction

novels are perceived as commercially viable within the Irish field, and Sinead positions this trend as something writers should emulate to achieve success. It is interesting that she uses the collective ‘we’, when perhaps what she means is ‘I’ need to write more like Sally Rooney. This creates a distance between herself and what might otherwise appear as personal ambition, framing market responsiveness as collective professional necessity rather than individual strategic choice.

It could further be argued that Sally Rooney’s work represents another iteration of the serious, artistic tradition. For participants Rooney’s work represents how this ‘artistic’ literary style has become identified as authentically Irish. Her focus on emotional complexity, trauma, and themes of self-destruction, Catholic guilt, and damaged relationships (Alfárez Mendía, 2023) embodies the characteristics participants associated with distinctively Irish storytelling, such as the blend of serious literary ambition with culturally specific thematic preoccupations. Sinead’s invocation of Rooney as an exemplar demonstrates how this literary approach has crystallised into a normative reference point, establishing what counts as both artistically legitimate and commercially viable within the contemporary Irish field. Yet this normativity exists in tension with the ambivalence participants express about ‘arty’ or pretentious styles. Rooney has become a template screenwriters feel compelled to emulate even as they critique the very orthodoxy she represents.

The apparent contradiction between participants’ criticism of the Irish artistic orthodoxy alongside their internalisation of it reveals the struggle practitioners have in navigating the tension in the doxa. Sinead’s use of the collective ‘we’ when discussing the need to emulate Sally Rooney provides her with some psychological distance from what she might privately consider as a limiting template. In this way she acknowledges the orthodoxy while deflecting her own responsibility for following it. This rhetorical move demonstrates how participants negotiate the tension between working within an orthodoxy but also resist its

influence and retain their autonomy. This ambivalence suggests that even when they criticise the ‘artistic’ orthodoxy, they are always working within its shadow and influence.

An orthodoxy emerges here, in which Irish screenwriting is viewed by many participants, such as Sinead, Sarah, Liam, and Dara, as literary, snobbish, self-indulgent, arty and elitist, with their resistance revealing how deeply embedded artistic legitimization has become within Irish screenwriting. As discussed earlier, this echoes the historic ambivalent relationship between the Irish State and cinema. As Barton notes, from its inception, Ireland has had a troubled relationship with cinema, with a sense of tension embedded from the very beginning. This Irish Free State initially viewed cinema as a threat to morality and national identity (Barton, 2004; O’Connell, 2010) leading to inconsistent development of Irish film in the twentieth century (Liddy, 2020, p.77). Despite this ambivalent distrust of cinema as foreign interference, the Irish Film Board was eventually established in the 1980s, marking the emergence of a national film industry (Barton, 2004; O’Connell, 2010). Out of this ambivalence came a drive to validate film as art by linking it with literary heritage.

This positioning resonates with the early history of cinema and was not just an Irish phenomenon. As Janet Staiger in her article, ‘The Politics of Film Canons’ notes one of the goals of early filmmakers was proving that cinema was art. Another aim of early cinema was to appeal to the spending power of the middle classes and get them to spend money on cinema in the same way they were spending money on theatre, novels, music and art. As Staiger notes: ‘The apparently value-free discussion of what film-as-art can be was related to a self-interest and an economic gain’ (Staiger, 1985, p.5). This pattern reveals how claims for artistic legitimacy have long been a feature of cultural debates. The tension between commercial imperatives and artistic aspirations then is not a modern anomaly, but a dynamic of cinema itself, one that continues to shape the doxa of screenwriting.

The continuation of this ambivalence is evident in a perception among participants that within the Irish cultural landscape, film is viewed as the lesser child of the arts, so it has to work harder to be literary. Ireland's historic ambivalent relationship with film may thus have shaped the Irish doxa. An indigenous industry was slow to develop, as it lacked financial, intellectual or cultural investment in the new creative medium (Crosson, 2003; McLoone, 1994). This ambivalence toward cinema continues to shape the doxa of screenwriting practice. Part of the legacy of the 'moral corrosiveness' of cinema has meant that Irish film has sought to attain legitimacy by drawing from Irish literary heritage. This raises an interesting point about the ideological status of film in Ireland, and the incorporation of it in the arts and literary traditions of Ireland.

This historical context illuminates how the Irish screenwriting doxa has inverted the traditional orthodox commercial versus heterodox artistic binary. Ireland's apparent need to legitimise cinema through association with its literary heritage has made artistic, literary style the dominant orthodoxy within the Irish doxa, rather than the heterodox position they typically occupy in the Anglophone screenwriting doxa. This inversion explains participants' strange resistance to what they perceive as a restrictive artistic orthodoxy. They find themselves advocating for commerciality as a heterodox challenge to the dominant 'arty' expectations. This positions the Irish screenwriting doxa as different from other screenwriting contexts where commercial imperatives typically dominate. Participants locate this distinctiveness partly in broader cultural narratives about Irish identity.

### **Storytellers**

Participants consistently invoke Ireland's storytelling heritage as a foundation for screenwriting practice. However, they often use quite generic terms and phrases which lack real distinctiveness and are found in many other national cinemas. This suggests that Irish artistic



orthodoxy may define itself primarily through opposition to Anglophone commercial norms rather than true articulation of genuinely distinctive Irish qualities. The invocation of Irish storytelling tradition functions as symbolic capital, a way of claiming cultural authenticity and artistic legitimacy, rather than as a precise description of unique stylistic or thematic characteristics. Nonetheless, the participants suggest that they have a sense of the 'Irish' as authentic storytellers. There is a view among participants that the uniqueness of Irish scripts rests on a sense of artistic authenticity, a 'gift for the gab'. For Ciara 'we're good storytellers'. Emily recounts a quote from Jack Nicholson when he was making *The Departed*, "'that God gave the Italians the music and the Irish the word'", and it's true, there's one thing we do well, it's telling stories, it's talking, and translating that into scripts, is our challenge'. For Liam Irish scripts are more authentic and 'much more personal'. For him 'it's much more about the voice and the authenticity'. For Liam, Irish scripts are artistic, they are not just 'knocking out pot boilers'. This use of broad, generic terms such as 'authenticity' and 'voice' suggests that the Irish artistic orthodoxy operates as a way to oppose a perceived Anglophone commercial orthodoxy. This is not just an Irish phenomenon, there is scholarship that recognises regional or national cinemas as attempting to be more 'authentic' compared to films from dominant cultural centres (Fleming and Ruby, 2020; Hereniko, 2019; Newsinger, 2009). This suggests that national authenticity is often intertwined with ideas of cultural resistance, local voice, and distinct identity in opposition to commercial pressures that often compromise cultural specificity. Liam's overt rejection of 'pot boilers' exemplifies how this works. By positioning himself against commercial Anglophone orthodoxy the message is clear, here in Ireland scripts are more authentic, more artistic, than just writing for a commercial formulaic genre. Understood in this way, the Irish orthodoxy works as protection against Anglophone commerciality. This suggests that the Irish orthodoxy inversion may be less about genuinely heterodox practices and more about a defensive position that allows local culture to maintain

artistic authenticity within a globalised industry. On this reading the Irish artistic orthodoxy may simply represent a form of classic cultural nationalism (Murray, 1993).

For Sean, there is something in the combination of our ‘cultural experience’ like our ‘strong oral tradition’ that has shaped the doxa of how we tell stories on screen. For Liam, this means that Irish screenwriters gravitate toward the tragi-comic because when they try to do straight genre ‘it just comes out a bit funny when it's not meant to be funny’. For Liam, ‘we seem to struggle with certain genres if we play them straight. Like an Irish gangster story that's played straight without any kind of humour is tricky to pull off’. Participants say that Irish screenwriters are more successful at ‘stuff that's not taking itself too seriously, like if you're gonna do a crime story the lads are like botching a post office robbery rather than planning an elaborate bank robbery. There's that kind of inability to take ourselves seriously, which gets in the way of straight genre’. For Ciara Irish screenwriters’ approach to scripts may ‘hold us back’. One aspect that she thinks could do this is that Irish writers like to tell ‘Shaggy dog stories’ or ‘we like to laugh at ourselves’. This reflects the orthodox view of Irish scripts, according to participants the combination of Irish literary history and a strong oral tradition have shaped how Irish people tell stories on screen.

However, deeper analysis reveals a complex interplay of identity, cultural traditions, and industry awareness. Participants perception of distinctly Irish storytelling tendencies, such as the tragi-comic mode and self-deprecation, reveals the paradoxical way which the national artistic orthodoxy constructs legitimacy. It does this through claims of a unique cultural style, but at the same time participants express frustration and struggle with the limiting nature of this style. The way in which participants describe the uniqueness of Irish scripts within a storytelling tradition suggests a narrative of continuity and authenticity which serves to distinguish Irish scripts within a global film landscape. Furthermore, by linking Irish screenwriting to storytelling heritage participants consider themselves and Irish filmmaking as

artistic rather than merely commercial. This echoes the consistent tension between art and commerce in the doxa. This further serves to elevate the unique status of Irish scripts and screenwriters. This move by participants may represent an implicit effort to secure a distinct Irish voice in an increasingly globalised film industry. All of this serves to indicate that what appears on the surface of what participants say masks a deeper tension between identity and industry.

Buried in their artistic vision of Irish scripts, participants seem keenly aware of the shifting nature of their role within a global industry. This global awareness is significant as the Irish film industry has evolved from a focus on local industry toward more globally ambitious aims (O'Brien and Canning, 2020). Within this space, Irish screenwriting doxa occupies an ambivalent position, drawing on national storytelling heritage but at the same time navigating tensions between local particularity and universal appeal. The paradox in these accounts, where national authenticity is both celebrated and resisted, exposes another facet of the tension in the Irish screenwriting doxa. Participants like Liam and Ciara express both acceptance of the orthodox style *and* frustration with its limitations. This suggests that the national artistic orthodoxy constrains as much as it legitimises. Participants recognition that Irish approaches might 'hold us back' reveals this underlying tension in the doxa. This suggests that the orthodoxy inversion within a national field, such as Ireland's, may create its own forms of artistic values, but at the same time become restrictive for practitioners working within the practice and spark a heterodox reaction. This reaction takes the form of calls for broader commercial and global appeal.

### **Irish and Universal**

A counter-position to the national artistic orthodoxy in the screenwriting doxa emerged from the interview data. This manifests in participants, like Ciara, expressing a view, that Irish

screenwriters can no longer be ‘self-indulgent’, arty and ‘elitist’. Instead, Irish films need to be Irish *and* reach beyond an Irish audience and be universal. For Liam the problem with Irish screenplays is that they are ‘very parochial’. He blames this on an ‘island mentality’ where we are just telling stories to ourselves’. This awareness of the global landscape represents a shift away from what participants said about the thematic ‘Irishness’ of stories (darkly comic/melancholy). In the previous discussion participants argued for an authentic sense of Irishness, rooted in tonal styles, and storytelling. However, they now paradoxically negate this view, arguing that Irish writers need to think beyond the parochial confines of the island. This represents the shifting nature of doxa, where participants’ positions on screenwriting move, depending on the context, or question asked.

This growing awareness of the need to reach beyond the local to a global audience aligns Irish filmmakers with the commercially driven orthodoxy of Anglophone screen industries, while simultaneously representing a heterodox challenge to the dominant Irish artistic orthodoxy centred on culturally specific, nationally addressed cinema. O'Brien and Canning (2020) identify this orientation toward international and transnational markets as a defining structural shift in contemporary Irish filmmaking, driven by increased reliance on co-productions, streaming platforms, and global distribution partnerships. They argue that Irish cinema now operates within conditions where global reach is not an exception but a necessity, fundamentally reshaping what counts as legitimate practice in the field. This includes diaspora-oriented films such as *Brooklyn* (Crowley, 2015) and internationally legible, period dramas *Black '47* (Daly, 2018), and genre films (horror, animation, romantic comedy) designed to travel beyond Irish audiences.

Participants’ pragmatism reflects this broader trend: they acknowledge global market considerations as strategic imperatives rather than artistic compromises. However, within the Irish context specifically, this commercial orientation functions as heterodox resistance to what

they perceive as the limitations of parochial, self-indulgent ‘arty’ styles. The paradox is that participants position themselves as heterodox, challenging Irish artistic insularity by aligning with what is orthodox at the global level (commercial viability *and* market logic). This reveals how orthodoxy and heterodoxy operate relationally: what is heterodox within the Irish national context can simultaneously represent orthodoxy within the international commercial field.

This is seen in how Liam argues that Irish screenwriters have to move beyond this island mentality for pragmatic reasons, because ‘RTÉ’s not gonna be able to employ people anymore’. Sean agrees and notes that: ‘we are on an island, and I think that absolutely has an impact on the kind of cultural projects [we produce]. We have a problem because we’re on an island ... there is a way that the Irish film is perceived abroad, the Irish film comes with connotations’. Liam argues that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century scripts need to be authentically Irish but reach a global audience because ‘the industry has changed entirely and we can’t be making things for ourselves anymore, because that means we’ll have to make it on the cheap’. This shows a clear awareness of the commercial side of the business. As Liam notes: ‘we just, we can’t afford to be making stuff for an Irish audience anymore, it’s something we have to do, we have to learn how to tell stories to an international audience’. For Liam Irish filmmakers must avoid trying to be ‘self-consciously’ Irish. ‘It’s worse, trying to create an Irish voice, people should just tell their stories’ (Liam). This reveals another nuance in the paradoxical Irish doxa, between maintaining cultural specificity and international accessibility, reflecting wider trends. As O’Brien and Canning note: ‘the relationship between Ireland and cinema is marked by contradictions and paradoxes; between the commercial and cultural, the global and the local, the national and the transnational’ (O’Brien and Canning, 2020, p.2.). This highlights the challenge participants have in navigating a contradictory, inverted Irish doxa. In this inversion commercial imperatives becomes the heterodox position. Participants are caught in this tension, struggling to resolve the fundamental tension between an Anglophone doxa that heavily shapes

their thinking on screenwriting, while working within an Irish industry that is dominated by an orthodox artistic style.

Participants, such as Liam, appear keenly aware that their scripts must now reach beyond just an Irish audience if they wish to be successful in a globalised film industry. This is seen as influencing funding decisions. For example, Aine wrote a script that was rejected by Screen Ireland as ‘they said it won’t travel because it’s too Irish’. Liam argues that ‘we’re gonna have to be selling ourselves to Amazon and Apple and Netflix and Disney.’ For Liam screenwriters need to ‘think local and [act] global. For James, we are already moving in the right direction, with films like ‘*[The] Lobster* (Lanthimos et al., 2015) or, you know, *Banshees* and all those different things, we seem to move away from maybe telling purely Irish stories’. This awareness of the industrial shift from the local to the global by participants, reflects their intuitive understanding of how Irish cinema is now positioning itself in the international filmmaking landscape (O'Brien and Canning, 2020). This policy emphasis is clear in Screen Ireland’s funding guidelines:

Screen Ireland supports the pursuit of high-quality audiovisual works. We are committed to funding projects of increased value to the Irish and International market, which represent our identity, creativity and storytelling strength in a clear, powerful and authentic way (Screen Ireland, 2025a).

This quote represents how the Irish industry focuses on productions that work in an Irish *and* international market, which represent an authentic creative Irish identity rooted in our storytelling traditions. Participant’s responses echo this delicate tightrope-walk that the Irish film industry is navigating between cultural authenticity and the global marketplace (O'Brien and Canning, 2020).

The interview data demonstrates how participants pragmatically acknowledge that the contemporary Irish field requires commercial viability alongside cultural authenticity (O'Brien

and Canning, 2020). Their comments focus on cost and financing rather than purely creative or thematic concerns, demonstrating how commercial imperatives, what would be orthodox within Anglophone screen industries, must be incorporated into Irish practice to increase viability. However, this creates a practical challenge participants must navigate, they are required to champion Irish authenticity (to satisfy national funding bodies, cultural legitimacy, and local artistic orthodoxy) while simultaneously accepting that ‘universal’ often means adapting to conventional Anglophone screenplay rules (to secure financing and distribution). Participants navigate this not by choosing one position over another, but by attempting to satisfy both competing orthodoxies, revealing how the Irish screenwriting doxa operates as a site of ongoing negotiation between local and global imperatives (O'Brien and Canning, 2020).

The doxa, as represented through the voices of participants, encompasses this tension between the local and the universal. This local/universal tension reveals how participants actively construct the doxa by simultaneously asserting cultural authenticity while at the same time feeling they must be attuned to Anglophone commercial conventions. Participants appear keenly aware of the need to appeal to both a local and global audience and are responding accordingly. This clearly demonstrates their acquiescence to the orthodoxy that commercial imperatives must be considered. As seen before, participants talk up their creative identity, but ultimately submit to commercial requirements, playing both sides of the game. This contradiction exemplifies how the Irish screenwriting doxa operates through ambivalence. Participants must perform cultural authenticity while secretly embracing formulaic approaches that gain them international success. One film that represents a case study for participants in how to successfully achieve this ‘playing both sides’ was *An Cailín Ciúin (ACC)* (Bairéad et al., 2022). The case of *ACC* on this reading becomes an example, not of staying true to Irishness, but of how the Irish doxa enables participants to reconcile the tension between the local and the universal.

This shift away from an ‘island mentality’ encourages filmmakers to create content that appeals beyond their local context. For many participants, *ACC* exemplifies this balance: it remains distinctly Irish yet possesses universal themes that they believe could resonate anywhere. Its power lies in its ability to bridge cultural divides. For participants, such as Brian, ‘*An Cailín Ciúin* while being Irish, is also universal, it has universal themes of family values, isolation, loneliness and loss’ and ‘everyone comes away from watching that film taking something away that they find personally resonating. I wouldn’t be encouraging any writer to write anything that’s just Irish because you need a certain level of universality for it to be to be appealing’. Aine also feels that *ACC* is both Irish and universal. However, it reaches universality through specificity for Aine. She notes: ‘for example in *ACC* when he puts the Kimberley or Mikado biscuit on the table, like that’s specificity’. This appears to contradict comments from participants such as Liam earlier, that we cannot write for a solely Irish audience anymore. However, for Aine, *ACC* is universal precisely *because* it is so culturally specific. This represents another tension in the doxa. For Emily, ‘it’s not the greatest film ever made, but it’s so authentic and truthful, and it spoke truth to people at a time when maybe they’d had enough of being bombarded with violence. So, you could sense [it was] uniquely Irish, but it could be set anywhere in the world and it would still have a poignancy’. What underpins participants’ framing here is an assumption deeply rooted in screenwriting orthodoxy, that ‘story’ is fundamentally universal and that audiences regardless of culture or history share the same psychological responses to narrative, emotion, and character (Campbell, 2008; McKee, 1999). This position aligns with the classical orthodoxy discussed in Chapter 6, where principles of drama are naturalised as transhistorical and transcultural, applicable to all human experience. By claiming that cultural specificity produces universality, participants reconcile two apparently contradictory imperatives: they can honour Irish authenticity (satisfying local artistic orthodoxy) while simultaneously accessing global audiences (satisfying commercial



orthodoxy), because the underlying assumption is that deeply truthful cultural specificity will resonate universally. This allows them to frame commercial success not as compromise with formula but as validation that authentic Irish storytelling naturally aligns with universal human experience.

However, participants' celebration of *ACCs* 'universality' fully represents rather than obscures a fundamental orthodoxy at work. What participants described as 'universal' themes likely derives as much from the film's adherence to familiar narrative structures such as three-acts, characters arcs and development that align with Anglophone screenplay orthodoxy as from its cultural specificity. The film's success may derive not from some sense of uniquely Irish specificity but more from its use of formulaic elements that global audiences understand and expect such as structure and narrative simplicity. *ACC* demonstrates this adherence through its use of conventional three-act structure. Cáit's move from her neglectful home to the Kinsella's establishes the narrative premise (Act 1). Her gradual bonding with the couple and discovery of their deceased son in the middle intensifies the emotional dimension of the story (Act 2), while her family reclaiming her and final emotional choice provides narrative resolution (Act 3). Though the film presents this structure subtly through atmosphere and observation, the underlying architecture remains rooted in orthodox screenplay conventions (Bairéad et al., 2022).

Rather than revealing a contradiction, this demonstrates how the Irish doxa operates in practice, participants can champion cultural authenticity in content (themes, settings, character types, dialogue) while simultaneously utilising orthodox formal conventions (structure, pacing, character arcs) that ensure their wider legibility. Cultural specificity and formulaic structure are not contradictory but complementary, the former provides distinctiveness and authenticity, the latter provides accessibility and commercial viability. This suggests that 'universality' in participants' discourse operates on two levels - it describes both the emotional resonance of

culturally specific content and the familiarity of orthodox narrative form. The success of films like *ACC* depends precisely on this duality. It is sufficiently Irish to claim cultural authenticity and funding legitimacy and sufficiently formulaic to satisfy international distribution and audience expectations.

However, rather than perceive *ACC* as formulaic and conventional, participants, ground their concept of universality in claims about biological and psychological evolution arguing that each new story is building on or using these ‘universal’ story patterns. As Sinead notes: ‘since I was four, I was such an avid reader and watching things and cinema, and so I think I just burned my brain myself with the pattern’. For example, Ciara talks about ‘the universality of emotions’ in stories and how ‘if you look at a number of your scripts, you’ll find that you’ve got something similar’ – that there is a ‘kind of emotion’ that defines what it means to be ‘human’. Liam holds to this sense of there being a universal repetition to stories, noting: ‘it’s exactly the same story over and over again. And there’s nothing wrong with that, you know what I mean?’ Liam argues that this universal aspect to stories is firmly rooted in our shared psychology.

As discussed in Chapter 6, this naturalisation of storytelling conventions as universal human characteristics represents the very process through which orthodox screenwriting principles become doxic. What participants describe as universal psychological roots, innate patterns hardwired through evolution, actually reflects their internalisation of orthodox screenwriting conventions (three-act structure, character arcs, emotional catharsis) that have become so taken-for-granted they appear biological rather than culturally constructed or historically specific. This matches closely with Bourdieu’s conception of doxa as beliefs that become so unquestioned they appear as the natural order of things (Bourdieu, 1977, pp.159-171; Grenfell, 2014, pp.1-25). By framing conventional, Aristotelian-derived narrative structures as evolutionary adaptations or psychological universals, participants naturalise what

are in fact contingent, culturally dominant conventions, making them immune to critique or alternatives. The same process operates here in relation to ‘Irish’ universality: participants can claim that cultural specificity produces universal resonance because they assume the underlying structures, the formal conventions that ensure international legibility, reflect timeless human psychology rather than learned, orthodox narrative patterns.

However, for participants the universal psychological roots of story define the structural way we tell stories. Emily believes that ‘structure is something that we do anyway, naturally in storytelling’. Sean sees a continuity between what the Greeks did to what Hollywood is doing now in terms of storytelling. Sean argues that films like *Banshees* are culturally Irish within a Greek tragic narrative pattern. For Amy screenwriting theory repeats the same patterns. When participants invoke the idea of ‘universality’ they may simply be unconsciously referring to the familiar structural conventions of three-acts, character arc, and narrative beats, that have become codified through the Anglophone screenwriting orthodoxy rather than innate human biology or psychology.

Unpacking this further reveals a striking pattern, as participants express ambivalence about or even disdain for the ‘Irishness’ of stories, they also demonstrate considerably more reverence when discussing ‘universal’ themes, as though a single storytelling model exists that applies to all cultures and peoples. This asymmetry demonstrates the taken-for-granted nature of participants’ assumptions about underlying narrative structures. Sean considers the question of a universal psychological root underpinning how we tell stories and wonders whether, ‘without essentialising anything’ whether humans possess ‘shared experiences that transcend time and place’. He notes that ‘the story of brother kills brother is evident in so many cultures because it has some kind of universal essence’. However, this claim, despite Sean’s caveat, is fundamentally essentialist, collapsing cultural diversity into a singular monoculture and thereby revealing the doxic nature of the ‘universal story’ concept. Sean's attempt to avoid

essentialism while simultaneously arguing for transhistorical, transcultural narrative patterns demonstrates how deeply naturalised these orthodox assumptions have become: even when participants recognise the problematic nature of universalising claims, they cannot fully escape the framework.

Participants position on the ‘universal’ nature of storytelling patterns clearly aligns the Irish doxa closely with the conventional, neo-Aristotelian doxa. Brian exemplifies this when he argues that there should not be an ‘ultimate Irish story or Irish screenplay’ he argues that ‘we need our screenplays to be as universally appealing as possible’. For Brian Irish screenwriters need to write screenplays that producers in Ireland, or the UK or LA would be able to ‘see someone they recognise in’. He warns that ‘if you're writing something that's excessively Irish that probably won't get very far because it's gonna be lacking universality’.

Participants thus articulate their requirement that Irish film simultaneously retain Irish identity while transcending national boundaries to appeal universally. They reconcile this apparent tension through the essentialising logic discussed above; Irish cultural specificity can produce universality because underlying narrative patterns are assumed to be timeless and biologically rooted (Campbell, 2008; McKee, 1999). In this view, the local *becomes* universal precisely because all humans are ultimately the same, sharing psychological structures that respond to identical story patterns regardless of cultural context.

This essentialising assumption allows participants to collapse what might otherwise appear as contradictory positions. They can champion Irish cultural authenticity while simultaneously accepting commercial demands for international appeal, because the underlying belief is that authentic Irish specificity will naturally resonate with global audiences through shared human psychology. Irish authenticity is thus framed as inherently possessing commercial viability, eliminating the tension between cultural specificity and market demands.

This resolution obscures whose ‘universality’ is actually being invoked. Drawing on (McLoone, 1994) analysis of Hollywood’s colonisation of Irish cinematic imagination, we might interpret participants’ appeals to universal storytelling as reflecting the subsequent naturalisation of dominant Hollywood narrative conventions, specific commercial formulas presented as timeless human psychology, rather than genuinely transcultural narrative structures. However, beyond debates over universality, participants navigate pressures toward genre conformity.

### **Genre Trends and Formulaic Repetition**

The tension between following genre trends and resisting formulaic repetition (*zeitgeist*) operates as another site of doxa within Irish screenwriting practice, with participants again negotiating between the contradictory positions of artistic authenticity and commercial formula. There is evidence from participants to show that Irish screenwriters are ‘tapping into a [what they describe as a] *zeitgeist*’, though what they identify are more accurately genre trends and commercial patterns that dominate the industry for a period of time. These trends function not only as external commercial pressures, but as locally internalised orthodoxies within Irish screenwriting. These become the taken-for-granted beliefs about what is culturally accepted or valued in the Irish industry. Some of the current orthodoxies have been discussed above: the tragi-comic, literary legacy, storytelling, and universality.

For participants, the doxa around genre trends is shaped by multiple competing influences such as, ‘what’s going on in Netflix’, ‘the festival circuit’, ‘indie horrors’, ‘gangster films’ (Liam). James notes that genres that are successful become the model for others to emulate. He notes that ‘people for years, all wanted to make *Love/Hate* (Caffrey, 2010) again and again and again’. James’s tone here reveals the contradictory position participants must

navigate. They simultaneously criticise writing to industry formulas, like gangland dramas, but at the same time pragmatically recognising the commercial necessity of doing so.

Participants identified patterns and cycles in Irish screenwriting that emerged not from collective agreement but from market conditions and funding availability. Peter noticed this pattern in recent years: ‘there was a lot of gangland that I found sometimes a little bit not my cup of tea’. Emily noted that when she first started making films a dominant pattern was ‘cappuccino comedies’ set around café culture in Dublin which ‘came from [TV series] *Bachelor’s Walk* (Holmes et al., 2003)’. As Sean notes, ‘you do see kind of general zeitgeists appearing in the industry’, certain ‘cycles of activity’. Sean cites the example of a recent Irish script filmed in West Kerry which was made ‘largely because of circumstances being right, there was money there to be available for it, they had a good idea for a story involving female protagonists, and a traditional Irish kind of plot line running through it’. This suggests that what might appear as creative orthodoxy (repeated themes and patterns) often reflects pragmatic response to funding structures and market opportunities rather than aesthetic consensus.

Timing is therefore crucial in how a doxa establishes what counts as legitimate practice. James argues that, the Neil Jordan film, *The Crying Game* (Jordan, 2006), came out at the ‘perfect moment in the history of western society’ and ‘if it came out ten years later, I think it would have been a different film, and so it’s funny that things that are entirely out of your control that might make things work or not work’. Participants’ understanding of these cultural moments reveals how the doxa operates through *seemingly* obvious cultural trends that are actually constructed by industry and practitioners through a negotiation of shared beliefs about cultural value. These cultural values are constantly being negotiated and contested within the field, revealing a contradictory aspect of any doxa: no one has a plan, no one is in control.

Participants actively construct the orthodoxies they claim to passively follow (Bourdieu, 1977, pp.159-171).

However, the doxa around genre trends is not a monolith. For James there is always space for a script that runs ‘contrary to the current zeitgeist’. Yet for Aoife ‘it’s kind of hot at the moment to talk about a certain issue or topic or have a female do something [but] they can’t tell you that, they don’t tell you that, but you see [these trends], if you go for funding or you try to get something made’. Aoife’s observation about implicit funding priorities helps explain Sean’s earlier example of the West Kerry film: it was made ‘largely because of circumstances being right’ - including ‘female protagonists’ and a ‘traditional Irish kind of plot line’ - precisely the elements Aoife identifies as currently favoured by funders, even when not explicitly stated as criteria. Aoife’s observation reveals how participants navigate the contradictory tensions in the doxa. Participants must appear to pursue artistic authenticity while at the same time pragmatically aligning with these implicit funding trends. Speaking about the film, Aoife notes ‘it was a good Irish strong voice in film, and it felt really, really good last year, like it just felt like we were putting out some decent stuff’.

However, one problematic aspect of these genre trends is that the industry only accepts that something is good if it has been endorsed by Hollywood. Emily notes that ‘John Carney’s *Once* (Carney et al., 2007) had been turned down by every distributor in the world, until a guy from Sundance’ saw its value. Orla finds it sad that a filmmaker like Martin McDonagh ‘had to have a career abroad for years before he could make a really good Irish movie’.

Genre trends clearly connect to the concept of doxa. These trends represent the process by which certain practices crystallise into taken-for-granted norms, as particular themes, formats or approaches gain traction through successful films and funding decisions, they gradually become naturalised as what works or what Irish cinema *does*, moving from individual choices to field-wide assumptions about legitimate practice. These trends can shift from

conventions to orthodoxy within the doxa, where certain types of films become dominant and writers pursue similar approaches. While conventions remain recognisable patterns that practitioners may choose to follow or resist, orthodoxy represents a hard set of beliefs about the proper or natural way to make films. This is how genre expectations are created within Irish screenwriting. What may begin as pragmatic response to funding opportunities or market success (writing what gets made) becomes normalised as artistic choice (writing what feels authentically Irish or creatively valid). However, the doxa is not monolithic and many participants were highly critical of any move to work to formulas and argued for a more heterodox view of genre trends.

However, the converse of following genre trends is frustration with repetition of successful formulas. This apparent opposition is itself revealing, genre trends are inherently repetitive, but participants distinguish between organic trend-following and formula repetition. This represents the tension in the Irish doxa between an artistic orthodoxy and commercial heterodoxy. For Orla there is too much repetition in the scripts that get made in Ireland. She notes: ‘what gets funded domestically or what gets off the ground domestically tends to always be the same thing, it’s always gangster stories, it’s always a sad man looking at a landscape or it’s comedies’. For participants like Orla, what could make Irish scripts better is if writers had more freedom ‘to make the films that we actually want to make, rather than focusing on the films that will play nice at 9pm on RTE’. There is frustration here with feeling compelled to write to a formula, demonstrating how participants both criticise formulaic approaches (artistic orthodoxy) while acknowledging their commercial necessity (commercial heterodoxy). Liam argues against formula, noting that new writers have been exposed to a lot of ‘overly formulaic stuff’ on platforms like Netflix where you can ‘see miles down the road’ where the writers are ‘saving the cat’ or ‘stealing tension from Act Two’ which can be ‘crass and awful’. This clearly embodies the contradictions in the Irish doxa. Participants must maintain that formulaic scripts



represent artistic compromise, while recognising that these same scripts achieve commercial success.

Some writers really struggle with this tension. It is difficult to navigate the Irish doxa's contradictory nature if writers resist working to established conventions. Being forced to write to formula is seen as artistically detrimental. Ciara shared the story of a writer 'who refused to conform to the formula and he's not writing anymore'. In fact, Ciara says that among the writers she started her career with, 'very few of them are actually still writing'. For Ciara working to such formula can have a damaging effect on writers, leaving them unable to 'come up with new ideas, original ideas', as the pressure to conform to industry orthodoxies stifles creativity. Ciara recalls that during her early training they 'were coming up with these mad things' but such experimentation was discouraged. And yet in order to get funded, Ciara acknowledges that she must adhere to the formula, demonstrating the challenging contradiction participants face between maintaining artistic integrity while accepting commercial necessity. This tension, between resisting formula as artistically limiting and accepting it as professionally necessary, mirrors the broader orthodoxy/heterodoxy dynamic discussed throughout this thesis, operating here with particular intensity due to Irish writers positioning between national artistic expectations and international commercial demands.

For participants Irish screenwriting often appears inherently formulaic. Sinead finds that 'here in Ireland, yeah, you're bound to the three-acts, you know you're bound to break into act two and, and it's all so formulaic'. So, whereas tapping into genre trends creates waves of success it has a negative side where writers feel they must write to a formula. This embodies the central tension in the doxa between creative authenticity and commercial viability. The participants' commentary on formula reveals a deeper level of value judgement that reflects broader tensions in the doxa of Irish filmmaking. Formulaic writing is often positioned in opposition to artistic authenticity. This positions formula as a negative term, overly aligned

with commerciality and a lack of creativity. However, this value-setting is not neutral and clearly reflects the tension in the doxa, between the homogenising requirements of an industry versus cultural creativity.

This further reveals the Irish doxa's internal contradictions. Participants champion artistic authenticity as the orthodoxy while secretly acknowledging that commercial formula represents the path to actual industry success. And yet, for participants, the film industry appears to reward scripts that conform to established narrative and genre conventions. This leaves screenwriters caught in a dichotomy, creating pressure on them to adapt to formula in order to achieve success. This exposes how the doxa operates through contradiction, where creative originality is a marker of artistic orthodoxy, but formulaic writing represents the heterodox concession to commercial demands that paradoxically leads to industry recognition. In this way, the tension between genre trends and formulaic repetition reveals the complex negotiations Irish screenwriters must make within a contradictory doxa that simultaneously champions originality while rewarding commercial conformity. These contradictions permeate how Irish scripts are conceptualised and valued.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has examined the contradictory tension in the complex Irish doxa around Irish scripts. The analysis shows that participants must navigate challenging contradictions when discussing Irish scripts, caught between maintaining artistic orthodoxy while acknowledging commercial heterodoxy. This tension emerged through an examination of four subthemes, tragi-comic, literary and storytelling legacy, local and universal, and genre trends and formulaic repetition. Building off several studies, which explore similar themes, from Gillespie (2009), O'Brien and Canning (2020), Barton (2019), and Rockett (2020) this analysis demonstrates

how Irish scripts are conceptualised by participants in the Irish screenwriting doxa displaying a complex spectrum of positions, from the orthodox to the heterodox.

Embedded within participant's views on Irish scripts is the complexity of this locally specific doxa, where the traditional orthodox heterodox binary takes on a distinctive configuration. In the complex Irish doxa artistic authenticity often appears as the orthodoxy with commercial pragmatism as the heterodoxy. This contradiction extends into how participants consider the uniqueness of Irish scripts and is connected to previous discussions around the tension between art and commerce that sits at the heart of the doxa.

The doxa of Irish screenwriting is expressed in participants' view of themselves as natural storytellers, drawing authenticity from Irish cultural history and literature. Irish literary history shapes how they think about screenwriting, often gravitating toward tragi-comic themes borrowed from Joyce, Beckett, etc. This approach reveals how participants maintain orthodoxy by aligning with Irish artistic authenticity, while at the same time considering international commercial imperatives.

For participants Irish scripts inhabit a contradiction between humour and introspection. Certain films such as *Adam and Paul* (Abrahamson, 2004) exemplify these elements, as does Martin McDonagh's *Banshees*, which continues the tradition of darkly comic storytelling. Irish screenwriting doxa thereby seeks to do two things at once - to align with a tradition of artistic cinema (orthodox), while at the same time chasing international commercial success (heterodox). O'Brien and Canning (2020) observe a similar dynamic in contemporary Irish cinema, arguing that international success often requires combining culturally distinctive content with narrative forms that global audiences recognise. Participants discourse suggests this tension is felt acutely as they must balance cultural authenticity with global legibility.

For participants *ACC*, as an exemplary Irish film, demonstrates this balance: it remains distinctly Irish yet possesses universal themes that could resonate anywhere. But these

exemplar films establish a zeitgeist, a cultural moment that shapes the doxa of scriptwriting and screenwriters in Ireland describe a struggle with this repetition and formulaic expectations leaving them frustrated.

The four subthemes in this chapter: tragi-comic, literary and storytelling legacy, local and universal, and genre trends and formulaic repetition, further demonstrate how the orthodoxy/heterodoxy tension materialises within the doxa. Through the voices of participants, the doxa emerges as defined by contradiction. Participants are not neutral in this, they actively engage with the doxa, reinforcing, and contesting the established norms around Irish scripts, as they navigate the paradoxical complexity of the doxa of Irish screenwriting. The next chapter will continue this examination of the paradoxes through the topic of frustrations with funders. This will further explore the contradictory nature of the doxa, as participants express strongly held artistic views, only to abandon them in the face of commercial pragmatism.

## Chapter 8 Frustration with Funders

### Introduction

The previous chapter explored the doxa-tension around how practitioners and educators consider the distinctive features of Irish scripts. This chapter investigates how the doxa-tension between orthodoxy and heterodoxy materialises in relation to practitioner's frustration with funders. As discussed in previous chapters this tension is ultimately a tension between the artistic and the commercial sides of screenwriting practice. Rather than simply accepting established industry norms, participants find themselves caught between conforming to orthodox screenwriting conventions versus pursuing more heterodox, experimental artistic approaches that challenge these conventions. This chapter further explores this tension, examining how participants describe the frustrating experience of seeking funding. In Ireland, various funding schemes exist for screenwriters, typically through national bodies like Screen Ireland, or through company-led-initiatives, such as Banjoman Films, (Tabbarra, 2025), for the development of screenplays. This funding process is defined by often contradictory demands, bureaucratic rules, and requirements that shape their practice in vague and paradoxical ways, particularly around the national funding body, Screen Ireland<sup>8</sup>, that has schemes such as, Spotlight, Screenplay Development Loans and Irish Feature Film Development Loans (Screen Ireland, 2025a).

The frustrations with funders found among participants echo Miège and Garnham's account of the complex dynamics between commerce, art, and production. The Miège and Garnham (1979) framework helps explain these frustrations: they identify a number of features of creative production (that screenwriters resist), such as the tendency of cultural

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<sup>8</sup> It is important to note that I sought to interview a representative of Screen Ireland on multiple occasions during the data collection phase. However, after multiple emails and phone calls I received no response.

industries to rely on formulas and genres to reduce risk, the increasing influence of producers and funders in shaping cultural products, and the fundamental tension between novelty and predictability. While not using the concept of ‘doxa’, Miège and Garnham (1979) identify similar tensions in cultural production, particularly how artists resist the involvement of producers, even though producers have come to play an increasingly significant role in shaping cultural products like scripts and films. They identify how funders try to balance novelty with the reliable, by relying on proven formats such as established genres, successful formulas, and recognisable narrative structures to mitigate risks. The concept of doxa extends this analysis by revealing how these tensions become naturalised as unspoken assumptions within Irish screenwriting practice, shaping what practitioners perceive as possible or legitimate without conscious reflection.

This chapter examines the doxic-tension between art and commerce, analysing how, for participants, Screen Ireland (Fís Éireann) is both too commercial *and* not commercial enough. However, this research, reveals an additional layer of nuance, where participants simultaneously critique Screen Ireland for being too focused on commercial viability while also criticising it for not being commercial enough to secure global market success. This chapter examines a series of connected themes; art versus commerce, genre, bureaucracy, insider/outside dynamics that determine who has access to funding networks and decision-makers, and how despite frustrations, participants feel lucky to have access to state funding through Screen Ireland. Through these interconnected themes, the film funding apparatus emerges as another area where the tension in the doxa of screenwriting materialises as participants voice often contradictory positions on either embracing or resisting artistic or commercial imperatives. Having examined the tensions around how the doxa is learned and taught, how the rules are embedded in the practice of screenwriting, and the unique aspects of the Irish doxa in previous chapters, this chapter examines how the reality of seeking funding

or not is experienced by participants. Through this analysis the chapter advances understanding of the tension between orthodoxy and heterodoxy at the centre of the doxa of Irish screenwriting practice by demonstrating how the funding process operates as a site of tension that requires participants to navigate often contradictory positions. The most fundamental of these tensions concerns the relationship between artistic and commercial imperatives.

### **Art vs Commerce**

The first place where the tension in the doxa of screenwriting appears is between art and commerce. As noted in the introduction and literature review, Screen Ireland dominates the funding of Irish screenwriting and is therefore central to this tension. Screen Ireland is the Irish state agency that is responsible for funding and supporting Ireland's film, television, and animation industries (Flynn, 2019). It was renamed from the Irish Film Board in 2018 and continues to be a main funding body for Irish film and television. Screen Ireland provides funding support for development, production, and distribution (Noonan, 2024). Its schemes include Screenplay Development Loans for experienced writers and Irish Feature Film Development Loans for producers, along with television drama development funding. The wording and criteria of these schemes spell out specific expectations regarding story structure and narrative conventions (Screen Ireland, 2025a). According to participants, this dominance heavily influences the type of films that get made in Ireland and creates frustration among screenwriters. These frustrations emerged from participants, often in emotive ways, where they described a strong sense of the power imbalance between them as screenwriters and the state agency with its bureaucratic forms and processes.

A significant frustration centres on a perception that Screen Ireland requires writers to compromise their creative intentions in favour of commercial considerations. For Orla ‘only one particular style of film (artistic) gets through.’ This creates frustration for those seeking

funding from Screen Ireland. If a writer receives funding from Screen Ireland, there is a fear that they must make significant compromises to their creative intentions as the script has the originality drained from it to appeal to a commercial Irish and a global audience. As Ciara notes: 'you're going to get your hands tied, it's like ... too many chefs'. This fear exposes the familiar tension in the doxa between art and commerce. Participants fear that their creative expression, as found in their script, will be fundamentally altered to meet the needs of the funding apparatus and its regard for commercial imperatives.

Brian is a writer-producer who assesses scripts for his own small production company. This fear may be more than just the perception, as it is confirmed by Brian. For Brian when assessing scripts for potential development by his production company, he is looking for something that is 'familiar, yet unique' and it is also 'commercially viable'. This echoes a quote from Blake Snyder's manual *Save the Cat!* - 'give me the same thing, only different' (Snyder, 2005).) Brian's position here potentially reveals how the orthodox rules of screenwriting manuals have become embedded in the Irish funding system. He simultaneously holds the orthodox position of seeking familiar, proven elements, while maintaining a heterodox stance, demanding artistic originality. This contradiction exemplifies how the doxa operates through seemingly incompatible positions that participants must navigate. The fact that Brian, as a producer making funding decisions for his own production company, uses language that echoes that found in manuals, suggests that these orthodox texts have become part of Irish industry practices. This shows how the tension in the doxa is reinforced through the industry gatekeeping process.

Orla tells a similar story about the dominance of commercial imperatives in funding decisions. She observes that 'they're all looking for something that they can guarantee they can sell and resell.' For Finn 'amazing' scripts are rejected because they will cost too much to make'. This clearly exposes the tension in the doxa of screenwriting between artistic originality



and commerciality, showing how participants are caught between writing a script that is familiar enough to meet proven formulas yet original enough to stand out in a crowded marketplace. It highlights how an ‘excellent’ script is no guarantee of success in an industrial system that prioritises budget over creative ambition, though this must be balanced against the practical reality that creative ambition requires adequate resources to be realised. This may be particularly pertinent to a smaller industry like Ireland, which strives to carve out a national film identity with limited resources. The experiences the participants articulate further demonstrate how the art/commerce tension is embedded in the Irish doxa.

The perceived dominance of commerciality over creativity in the Irish doxa may be due to the increased prominence of producers. Liam argues that everything in ‘Ireland, is controlled by producers, because it's producers that sit on the board of Screen Ireland, it's producers who kind of make the decisions and so that everything is kind of seen from a producer's point of view’. This perceived move from creative-led to producer-led decision making is particularly significant for understanding how the art/commerce tension manifests in the Irish screenwriting doxa. As producers have gained industry power and influence, they have increasingly shaped how artistic merit is evaluated (Gomery, 2017; Price, 2013). This has further embedded commercial considerations into what participants experience as creative decision making. The dominance of producers in Screen Ireland is traced by Eric who notes that ‘back in the 90s, early 2000s [Screen Ireland] were more willing to take scripts or submissions directly from screenwriters, [but] somewhere around the early 2000, mid 2000s they seem to have shifted to production companies only’. For Aine, this has created a situation where there is no dedicated funding for screenwriting that is encouraging the writing of feature scripts. To secure funding, writers must have a producer attached. The screenwriter is on their own and must first convince a producer to support their script. That is ‘probably the hardest step’ (Brian).

A narrative emerges from the way that screenwriters tell the story, which is that there is a big obstacle (funders), but smaller obstacles and gatekeepers (producers), who block their way. In this narrative the screenwriters view themselves as the heroes. This echoes a significant aspect of screenwriting narrative doxa: obstacles. For example, Syd Field, one of the earliest modern manuals writers, is emphatic about the importance of obstacles in screenwriting, in order to create dramatic conflict. For Field the task of overcoming obstacles is what drives the script forward (Field, 2005). Significantly, this positioning allows participants to view themselves as the creative heroes fighting against commercial villains (producers and funders). This further reinforces the art/commerce binary tension that characterises the doxa. Through their internalisation of this dramatic-obstacle structure from screenwriting theory, participants construct a narrative where artistic authenticity is constantly fighting commercial forces. This both justifies participants' struggles and validates their artistic identity. In describing their interaction with funders, participants have internalised this dramatic 'obstacle' concept into their identity as screenwriters. When participants fail to secure funding, they can draw upon an Anglophone dominant orthodoxy and blame a 'commercial' industry that does not recognise their 'true art'. Participants' position on the art/commerce tension thus demonstrates a recurring dynamic in which participants view themselves as authentic artists characterising the 'industry' as global, commercial and formulaic, seeking creativity but only within established conventions. In this way they can play both sides of the doxa, they can shift position from the Anglophone doxa to the Irish doxa, depending on the context.

Participants believe that commercial considerations heavily shape Screen Ireland's decision making and therefore the Irish doxa. However, Screen Ireland's approach reveals a more complex negotiation of the art/commerce tension than participants acknowledge. Participants characterise Screen Ireland as overwhelmingly commercial in its decision-making,

yet their own accounts paradoxically reveal an organisation that funds low-budget, character-driven narratives rather than the commercially oriented genres such a label would suggest.

For example, Luke regards Screen Ireland as '*uber* commercial, leaving him feeling compelled to 'conform' by writing formulaic scripts that follow proven commercial templates, noting 'it's a bit more aggressive because it's a commodity, it's more money, it has to sell, they have to make some kind of return it's a product'. For Brian there is a perception that '[budget] does put a limitation on the kind of stories that could be told'. Similarly, screenwriters, like Eric, feel they 'need to cut every corner possible, to squeeze every cent possible to convince the funders to give me this.' On a small Irish budget 'you are probably more successfully going to tell a smaller character driven, plot driven as opposed to, you know, action driven story' (Brian). These accounts reveal a fundamental tension: Screen Ireland is simultaneously characterised as '*uber* commercial' while operating within constrained budgets that favour character driven stories over commercially popular genres like action films. This suggests participants operate with a narrow definition of commerciality that equates it primarily with high budget, mainstream genre filmmaking rather than recognising the commercial logic underlying low budget production strategies. The tension thus reveals how participants' binary framework of art versus commerce struggles to take account of Screen Ireland's position, which must balance financial constraints, cultural mandate, and market realities.

However, rather than representing contradictory impulses, both characteristics could stem from the same commercial logic - constrained budgets necessitate lower cost, character driven productions, which are less expensive than action, science fiction, or fantasy genres. The preference for low-budget, character driven stories allows the agency to fund more projects while supporting the kind of intimate, character-focused artistic films that participants often define as authentically Irish (Noonan, 2024; O'Brien and Canning, 2020). Yet this approach is critiqued as commercially compromising by participants. This demonstrates how Screen

Ireland is a microcosm of a broader tension within the doxa, embodying contradictions that participants struggle to reconcile with a binary understanding of art versus commerce.

Participants do sometimes acknowledge that the high cost of making a film means that commerce must by necessity shape creative decisions. Equally, participants' own position (as screenwriters, producers, educators) orients them toward commercial pragmatism, even though they outwardly express a preference for artistic authenticity. For example, they make generalised claims about what film is, as an 'industrial art' as though it is a 'fact' when it represents just a perspective that is informed by their relationship to and experiences within that sector. For example, James concedes that film is the 'most industrial art, it is an art form that is most closely related to industry and that is for good or bad. Sometimes bad because it can stifle creativity but there is also a value to having to think about an audience or having to think about speaking beyond your navel'. For James, film funding decisions are often based around considerations other than the creative, such as 'weather or money'. Brian takes a view that funders 'very much see a screenplay or a script or a project as a commercial entity.' From Brian's perspective 'it's nice to take projects on that you're creatively and emotionally attached to but as producer that can't be your primary concern, you really have to be able to tangibly see where the audience is for it and where, it's gonna go in the market, how you're going to get out into the market and how successful it's going to be commercially.' For Brian 'commercial viability and audience viability would be a massive consideration.' The 'way that money' is 'out there' like tax incentives and funding schemes does 'tend to drive the kind of projects picked up by Irish production companies'. Scripts are often retooled so they can be made on a 'lower budget'. All of this acknowledges the tension at the heart of the doxa. Participants perceive the dual nature, the tension in film as both industrial product and art.

Participants must learn to work within this industrial process and balance their artistic intentions with commercial realities. The industrial-artistic hybridity of film clearly shapes how

screenwriters think about their craft. Ultimately, James and Brian navigate between the publicly acceptable artistic positions and privately held commercial pragmatism. This reveals how their professional roles require them to hold seemingly contradictory positions within the doxa. They are immersed in the doxa but perceive the tensions inherent in this doxa.

However, within this tension there are others who lean towards the more artistic side of the industry while remaining necessarily immersed in the same doxa that shapes commercial practitioners. For some participants like Irene, creativity will always take priority over money. She describes talking to a producer: ‘in Galway a few weeks ago, he was funny because he was like, ‘I’m not interested whether it’s a good film or a bad film, right, I’m interested in whether or not I’m going to make money’’. For Irene, money is her least concern: ‘I was like, no, not the person for me because I want somebody who is interested in producing good stuff, not so much about the money part’. Yet despite these artistic priorities, Irene’s participation in the industry requires engagement with its commercial orthodoxy, she must still pitch to producers, seek funding, and work within established industry structures, regardless of her personal creative philosophy. However, this position is reductive, as many producers successfully create films that are both creatively engaging and commercially viable. Moreover, screenwriters can more easily prioritise artistic concerns over financial ones because they are not risking capital in the production process, unlike producers who bear the financial responsibility. This highlights a tension between the intentions of screenwriters and producers which is at the heart of the doxa: screenwriters publicly express a desire to create art while simultaneously arguing that producers and funders only want to make money. This view allows screenwriters to maintain artistic orthodoxy within Irish cinema discourse while acknowledging commercial realities they cannot escape, effectively enabling them to preserve their creative identity and cultural capital as ‘artists’ even as they participate in fundamentally commercial processes. This dual position thus becomes a strategic navigation within the doxa.

However, this strategic navigation is hard to achieve. For example, Luke ‘knows people’ who have gone through development with Screen Ireland and ended up having their project pushed through a commercially focussed ‘absolutely terrible’ Irish film ‘template’. Participants perceive funders as averse to risk, revealing how they regard funders as commercially orthodox in opposition to their own artistic authenticity. Most significantly, participants are highly critical of producers and commercialisation of film but are nonetheless still engaging with them and involved in screenwriting. This frames Screen Ireland and producers as the scary ‘Other’ against which screenwriters form their identities. It echoes the previous discussion around the performance of a screenwriter identity, whereby screenwriters are the rebellious, artistic underdogs, caught within a commercial system that they struggle to resist. This perceived antagonism extends to concerns about how gatekeepers evaluate projects through risk aversion.

### **Aversion to Risk**

Participants suggest that the small scale of the Irish funding landscape may actually encourage risk-averse gatekeeping. From their perspective, experimenting with risky, unproven projects or people has a larger impact in Ireland as any loss may represent a significant loss of available resources. Noonan, for example, argues that the limited scale of the funding landscape compels Screen Ireland to operate cautiously and strategically (Noonan, 2024).

For participants, part of their frustration with funders like Screen Ireland has to do with their perceived aversion to risk. This means aversion to breaking with convention and being creative and experimental. The particular Irishness of the Irish doxa is that the business of filmmaking is small and financially vulnerable (Noonan, 2024). However, as an English-speaking nation, Ireland has access to the UK funders such as BBC and Film 4, often in combination with Screen Ireland funding, as well as EU funding streams (BBC-Film, 2026;

Europe, 2026; Film4, 2026). This raises questions about whether funding constraints fully explained the limitations participants describe, or whether their funding discourse may serve other functions within the doxa, perhaps allowing participants to attribute rejection to systemic barriers rather than engaging with questions of creative execution. However, business interests are perceived as key to funders, and commercially ‘safe’ films are typically perceived to be non-artistic ones. This perception aligns with broader industry discourse around creative risk (Lee, 2008).

Participants, like Brian, understand that funders and producers are risk averse because they are ‘accountable’ to someone else. As Brian notes: ‘the funders have to be able to go to the people who they work for ... and say, yeah, I gave the money to this person because of this, this and this.’ For Brian, the same is true for producers, they have to do ‘due diligence for every project’ and every decision to fund must be for ‘very solid reasons, not just – he’s a friend of mine, I wanna make a movie for him’. For Sean, funders are perceived as ‘risk averse’ and follow the ‘formula’ of what was successful before, like a book or a proven intellectual property. For Emily, lots of great scripts do not get funded, but many ‘mediocre’ scripts do get funded. This, according to Emily, is because funders are ‘very wary about taking risks’. Emily suggests that the reason why Irish funders like Screen Ireland are so risk averse may be because the Irish film industry is such a small industry and there is only ‘a small pool of money’.

This perception aligns with broader industry research of screen agencies. Noonan found that ‘the risk to the agency themselves should not be underestimated’ (Noonan, 2024, p.32.). She notes that senior staff in screen agencies such as Screen Ireland, must expend significant energy ‘interpreting and pre-empting politicians’ understanding of value – both the public value of screen content and the public value of the agency itself’ (Noonan, 2024). This political accountability creates additional layers of risk aversion beyond purely financial considerations. The structural constraints of the Irish industry add to these pressures. Noonan quotes from one

film industry executive who is noted as observing, ‘The problem that we have in Ireland is we have a limited budget and they’re trying to tick the boxes on a lot of things’ (Noonan, 2024). Unlike private funders, Screen Ireland cannot simply ‘focus on people in the mainstream – really big stuff’ but must balance multiple competing demands with finite resources (Noonan, 2024). It is worth noting that Screen Ireland declined multiple requests for interview during this research, which may suggest a broader institutional caution about public engagement and reluctance to provide statements that could be scrutinised or attributed to the organisation.

Participants point to specific examples of how failed projects create risk aversion within Screen Ireland. Sinead recalls how Screen Ireland ‘put money into’ the comedy *Damo and Ivor* (Coll and Quirke, 2018), which ‘was [a] huge risk for them’ that ‘didn’t pay off’. From Sinead’s perspective, this failure had long term consequences, meaning funders ‘stepped away from comedy then for quite a while’, suggesting that ‘they’re afraid to take risks’. This example demonstrates how individual project failures in a small funding context can reshape institutional approaches to entire genres, thus reinforcing a cycle of risk aversion that participants experience and criticise.

Taking a risk is expensive, and ‘you need to make a loss to take a lot of risks to get one or two good films’ (Emily). Participants construct a narrative that as a small industry Ireland cannot absorb failures. This is felt as a limiting preference for ‘safe’ projects based on templates and genres that worked before. However, participants attribute failure primarily to systemic risk aversion and commercial pressures, rather than considering that rejection might also reflect issues with the scripts themselves. This framing potentially overlooks how creative execution contributes to outcomes, placing the burden of explanation entirely on institutional conservatism or lack of ‘artistic’ vision. This perspective may keep the Irish industry in a perpetual vicious cycle where commercial viability is prioritised over artistic risk-taking, possibly constraining the Irish industry’s development.



The question of whether commercial viability and artistic risk-taking can be successfully balanced reveals another layer of tension within the Irish doxa. As discussed previously, the recent film *An Cailín Ciúin (ACC)* (Bairéad et al., 2022) was frequently mentioned by participants as an example of a ‘terrific’ or ideal Irish-funded film. The Irish doxa is characterised by a tension between art and commerce, with commerce always succeeding and art always striving. *ACC* appears to pose a challenge to this conceptualisation of the doxa in that, it *perpetuates* the doxa. In other words, it is the exception that is used by both screenwriters (to show that artistic, small films can be successful) and funders (let’s reproduce the success of *ACC* with other similar projects). In this way *ACC* straddles both sides of the tension in the doxa. It was both commercially successful *and* artistically successful. The reasons cited for its success, are clearly seen by Brian; it ‘managed to do both’ by being ‘both really fruitful culturally, and a specific, great story, great film that also succeeded in the marketplace’. For Amy, it understood its ‘identity’ and ‘cut its cloth to ... a low budget film’. It was commercially successful *because* it was made on a small budget. However, *ACC*, even though it was ‘extremely successful, globally successful’ is regarded as a ‘rarity that a film made at that level purely in Ireland, produced in Ireland, with purely Irish money, and it's rare enough for something like that to travel internationally, certainly globally, and break into the biggest markets around the world’ (Brian).

However, this success may have unintended consequences, as Brian notes that *ACC* has possibly ‘set a template for what success, as an Irish produced international film’ can achieve. As Brian notes: ‘at the moment I think everyone is trying to find the next *ACC* because it was, from a producer's point of view it was, it was such a success.’ The irony here is notable, a film that initially appeared to offer novelty through its use of Irish language, even as its narrative structures followed relatively conventional patterns, now risks becoming the very formula that subsequent projects will attempt to emulate. This template may get applied to other projects,

but, for Brian, it will ‘take a bit of time for the funding bodies and other producers to realise what *is* the golden ticket ... what is that magic element that *ACC* had’. It may be impossible to find, maybe it was just that ‘all the stars aligned ... and it all just came together’ (Brian). This could fall under the category of ‘working the system, trying to find the best formula’.

The contradiction is evident here, as participants simultaneously celebrate the film’s authentic, ‘stars aligned’, non-formulaic qualities as they actively seek to systematise and emulate those very qualities. The ‘magic element’ they seek to reproduce may be precisely its resistance to being reproduced. This dynamic reflects participants’ frustrations with how funders respond to success, rather than supporting diverse approaches, funders may fixate on replicating exceptional outcomes. For Aine, this pattern is problematic and argues that *ACC* was just an anomaly. She notes:

my issue with screenwriting in Ireland, I mean they'll go around and tell you, oh my god, screenwriting, film, it's great, look we've got *ACC*, and we did this, that and the other, and it's amazing, as if they weren't anomalies.

Aine’s critique here implies that its very exceptionality undermines the idea of formulae and reproducibility that funders pursue, leading to frustration when anomalous successes are treated as replicable models rather than one-off achievements.

Meanwhile, *Small Things Like These* (Mielants, 2024), demonstrates that the *ACC* template was in fact replicated: both films are adaptations of Claire Keegan novels, both centre on intimate, character-driven narratives exploring Irish historical trauma through sparse, restrained storytelling. Stephanie McBride notes that such success is ‘a bit like the overnight success that takes 30 years to come’ (McBride 2025), suggesting these achievements result from sustained industry development rather than anomaly. This reveals how participants frame outcomes as unrepeatable while overlooking the repeatable patterns underlying them,

demonstrating the doxa at work as they navigate between celebrating uniqueness and resisting formulaic responses.

It seems that *ACC* has created a new template for success that may drive funding decisions into the future and Irish cinema will probably see more films in this mould. *ACC* may come to represent a milestone in Irish cinema. It was a commercial success, breaking box-office records for an Irish language film, and also secured global distribution, even though its Oscar nomination further raised its commercial profile (Crosson, 2024). Artistically, the film was praised for its visual storytelling, cultural authenticity and performances, as noted by Crosson: ‘the impressive cinematic approach taken by director Colm Bairéad—characterised by restrained pacing, superb casting, and a willingness to allow the sophisticated visual compositions to communicate content and meaning rather than relying on dialogue for explication—was critical to the film’s achievement’ (Crosson, 2024, p.48.)’. The film’s reception demonstrates how participants must negotiate contradictory positions. They praise its box office success, but they insist that this commercial success was incidental to its primary artistic achievements.

There is evidently a strong tension in the Irish doxa between the artistic and commercial imperatives. Funders and producers are risk averse and follow the ‘formula’ of what was successful before. Perhaps the reason why Irish funders like Screen Ireland are so risk averse may be because Ireland is such a small industry (Noonan, 2024). The small scale of the Irish industry intensifies the challenges participants face. They grapple with their desire for creative expression while navigating commercial imperatives and limited funding opportunities. Industry funders often make decisions based on ‘what’s hot right now’ and ‘what has worked recently’ and follow the zeitgeist (Crosson, 2024; O’Connell, 2025). In this context, films like *ACC* represent rare ‘unicorns’, exceptional cases where artistic authenticity and commercial success coalesce. However, as participants note, treating such anomalies as replicable templates

reflects funders' struggle to balance supporting creative expression with achieving commercial viability in a resource constrained industry environment. Yet in the Irish context, 'following the zeitgeist' is complicated by the fact that the dominant funding model favours artistic authenticity over commercial trends. This creates a situation where following a zeitgeist means *appearing* to reject following a zeitgeist. This paradox becomes especially acute when considering how genre functions within Irish funding structures.

## Genre

Within the Irish screenwriting doxa, genre occupies a paradoxical position. Genre normally functions as a commercial organising principle, aligned with orthodox industry practice (Prammaggiore and Wallis, 2020). However, in the Irish context, participants position genre work as resisting dominant institutional preferences in favour of artistic, culturally specific projects. This creates a situation where commercial genre conventions become a site of heterodox challenge against an orthodoxy that privileges artistic imperatives.

Genre typically refers to categories, styles, or themes in films which in turn set up audience expectations. Some familiar genres include the comedy, tragedy, or action film. 'A genre refers to a group of films that share a set of narrative, stylistic, and thematic characteristics or conventions. While not every film in a given genre will exhibit all of the genres conventions, every film in a given genre will exhibit at least some of them' (Prammaggiore and Wallis, 2020). Genres play a dual role in the film industry, both as a tool for industrial practice and a tool for consumer navigation. In terms of the industry, genre functions as an organisational framework that helps to streamline filmmaking processes (Laetz and Lopes, 2008; Prammaggiore and Wallis, 2020). It does this using formulas and models based on pre-existing films that have worked in the past. In this way it is a risk management tool that helps creators and producers to target work, presuming that what consumers liked

before they should like again. These established genres thus shape the film industry by creating a shared language between creators. Over time genres have become more complex and embedded in the film industry.

However, the conventional understanding of genre as commercially oriented orthodoxy, encounters a paradoxical challenge within Irish screenwriting practice. Within screenwriting discourse more broadly, genre represents a fundamental orthodoxy. Screenwriting manuals and pedagogical frameworks consistently emphasise genre conventions as essential to commercially viable storytelling (Field, 1979; McKee, 1999; Yorke, 2013). Yet participants assert that Irish funding bodies, such as Screen Ireland, demonstrate a preference for arthouse style drama over commercially oriented genre films. This has been noted in earlier scholarship on Irish cinema, with Macdougall (2009) observing that IFB (now Screen Ireland) funding priorities historically favoured projects focussed on ‘literary adaptations’, ‘historical epics’, and auteur-driven projects rather than commercially oriented genre productions (Macdougall, 2009, p.39). This preference may stem from the small scale of the Irish industry and challenging distribution landscape, where genre films, despite their international commercial viability, are perceived as too risky given limited budgets and market access. As Noonan (2024) argues, Ireland operates as a structurally small screen producing nation where it is challenging to recoup the costs of a feature film domestically, which pushes Screen Ireland to prioritise projects that will work internationally through co-production and festival networks, rather than through domestic box-office returns. When genre projects are supported, they tend to be lower-budget examples, (such as horror films based on Irish folklore), which can be exported into internationally markets that favour genre cinema. This reflects agencies’ need to manage risk within budget constraints rather than a wholesale embrace of commercially oriented genre production (Noonan, 2024). Historical analysis suggests that Irish funders have preferred art-cinema inflected drama and auteur-driven projects as paradigmatic forms of Irish cinema, while

popular genre films have remained more peripheral in the national cinematic landscape (Barton, 2004). This creates an inversion of traditional industry hierarchies, positioning artistic legitimacy as the orthodoxy with commercial genre as the heterodoxy. Where international contexts might privilege genre films for their marketability, the Irish doxa appears to elevate the serious drama's artistic style to orthodox status. This inversion of the traditional binary leaves participants navigating between competing orthodoxies. Participants must navigate between adhering to Irish artistic orthodoxy through drama while at the same time limiting wider commercial appeal by avoiding genre. The result of this is a distinctively Irish doxa where what appears commercially viable (genre filmmaking) becomes heterodoxy, and what appears artistically authentic (arthouse drama) becomes orthodoxy.

It is important to note that though genre may normally refer to recognisable film categories such as horror or comedy (Laetz and Lopes, 2008; Prammaggiore and Wallis, 2020), when participants refer to genre, they are opposing what they regard as 'commercial' genres like horror, comedy, or action, to serious drama, which for them is not really a 'genre' but an arthouse style. This distinction reveals the underlying logic of the complex Irish doxa. By positioning drama as transcending mere 'genre' status, participants elevate it to a higher artistic status that aligns with an orthodox Irish film culture that privileges an 'arty' style (Dara). In this framework, drama is connected to artistic authenticity whereas explicitly commercial genres are relegated to heterodox status. Genre comes then to mean 'commercial' and is viewed as formulaic, market driven, and not 'artistic'. This reinforces the complex nature of doxa by showing how participants actively construct boundaries between orthodoxy and heterodoxy.

In terms of audiences, genre provides a navigational tool for consumers to figure out what to watch, based on genres they enjoyed in the past. If for example, they liked a western or a drama they might presume that they know what to expect from those types of genres and consume them again. Interestingly industry and consumers are linked together in a sort of

feedback loop, where consumer preferences feedback into the industrial system so that successful genres shape and influence what gets made in the future. Prammaggiore and Wallis note that genre definitions are constantly changing, constantly in flux (Prammaggiore and Wallis, 2020). This has interesting implications for tension in the doxa. As part of the doxa, genre is more than just a type or classification, it provides a cultural framework that shapes social discourse around films and filmmaking, but this is always shifting, always moving. However, the framework of genre operates differently within the Irish doxa, where the flux of genre definition interacts with an inverted doxa that privileges artistic authenticity over commercial formulas.

The role of genre is particularly evident when examining how successful films influence future film templates in the Irish industry. Rather than establishing genre templates in the conventional sense, with specific imagery, narrative patterns, and symbols, successful Irish films like *ACC* become proof of concept models for the kind of artistic filmmaking that aligns with Irish funding orthodoxy. What works becomes a template for new productions, though these templates emphasise thematic and tonal elements rather than establishing genre conventions. This is clear for participants, where there is a perceived funding preference for a certain kind of story or approach. For Orla ‘it’s always gangster stories [or] it’s always a sad man looking at a landscape or it’s comedies.’ Film styles that have been successful in the past become templates that can limit what gets funded and made in the future. These patterns reflect the reproduction of specific storytelling approaches that have achieved dominance within Irish funding priorities.

This reveals the fundamental contradiction participants must navigate. Whereas international film industries use genre as a commercial risk-management tool to guarantee marketability through familiar formulas (Francemone et al., 2023; Shahid and Islam, 2023), the Irish industry appears to reject this commercial logic. The issue of genre thus represents

another example of the inverted priorities in the Irish doxa. A view emerges from the data that genre is a negative word in the doxa of Irish screenwriting. For participants like Liam, this is because straightforward genre scripts are not ‘rewarded’ by funders in Ireland. This position inverts the traditional industry relationship where genre films are typically preferred due to their proven commercial viability (Francemone et al., 2023; Shahid and Islam, 2023). Liam argues that: ‘if you went to Screen Ireland with like a genre, [like] heist, they're not gonna look at you’. There is a perception that Screen Ireland prefers ‘heavy’ dramas rather than ‘something light and funny’ as evidenced by Sinead who describes going to Galway Film Fleadh and sitting through ‘dark, bleak, Screen Ireland funded shorts that are very heavy’. There is a view among participants, like Sinead, that there is a ‘trend right now in Ireland’ for ‘grounded drama’ and ‘adaptations of books’ and ‘everything else has kind of become almost considered dirty’. For Aoife, Screen Ireland prefers drama rather than other genres such as comedy or documentary. This apparent rejection of commercial genre logic creates a contradiction in the Irish doxa. Participants find themselves caught between acknowledging the commercial value of genre films but conforming to Irish funder preferences that view such commercial imperatives as heterodox. The result is a distinctly Irish iteration of the doxa-tension where what usually guarantees market success everywhere else, actually limits funding opportunities in Ireland.

Another suggested reason for this preference for drama over other genres like comedy is noted by Aine who feels that ‘nobody wants to fund a comedy because they all want to fund something deeper, as if comedy can’t be deep and meaningful’. Eric believes that funders ‘are scared of anything even slightly like going off in a different direction’ referring to scripts that deviate from conventional artistic orthodoxy rather than conventional genre formulas. These participants’ observations reveal how the Irish doxa creates its own localised forms of creative constraint. Artistic orthodoxy becomes as limiting as commercial orthodoxy might be in other contexts.



The elevation of ‘grounded drama’ within the Irish doxa has reached such orthodox status that it transcends genre categorisation entirely. In fact, there is a view that drama is no longer even seen as a ‘genre’ itself. Everything else is genre; fantasy, comedy, science fiction, etc, but for Eric it is ‘weird that drama is no longer considered genre, even though by definition that's what drama is, it's like genre, it's the dramatic genre, you know.’ While Eric frames this as straightforward, it is worth noting that whether drama constitutes a genre remains debated in film scholarship, as genres are typically identified through codes, conventions, and iconography, whereas drama is often positioned as a type in opposition to comedy (Prammaggiore and Wallis, 2020). For Eric this is all very ‘short sighted’ and suggests a certain myopic view of what an Irish film can be. Fundamentally, there is a perception that funders in Ireland are often ‘trying to be overly artistic sometimes with our films’ (Sinead). This positioning of drama as transcending genre status demonstrates how artistic legitimacy operates as orthodoxy in the Irish doxa and creates a fundamental contradiction in how participants understand the relationship between art and commerce with the Irish industry. Looked at more closely this tension between genre and drama is really a tension between art and commerce. It suggests a perception in the data that funders, such as Screen Ireland, are too aligned with the artistic side of the practice.

However, one genre that is seen as having ‘commercial viability’ is horror. Producer Brian describes how a horror project came ‘onto their slate’ and though ‘this is not necessarily up [their] street’ ‘it just screamed commercial success’ and ‘it's going along nicely as a result of the fact that everyone who reads it sees its commercial viability.’ This reveals how participants navigate the tensions between artistic preference and commercial considerations in the Irish doxa. Horror is well established as commercially viable because it can be made very cheaply, much like drama (Noonan, 2024) this makes it compatible with the budget constraints of small-scale, intimate production. Rather than simply opposing art to genre, the

case of horror suggests that certain genres can be accommodated within Irish funding priorities if they work within constrained economic parameters (Noonan, 2024).

Within the Irish doxa, small budget arthouse films appear to participants as more commercially fundable than larger budget genre films like action or fantasy. The exception to this perceived pattern is horror, if it can be made on a small budget. This may reflect participants' intuitive understanding of the current economic priorities of the Irish film industry. Participants believe that low budget, arthouse Irish films garner much better international festival success (Crosson, 2024; Noonan, 2024) and critical acclaim and are possibly more of a financial 'safe' bet than other genre films that require bigger budgets to compete internationally (Crosson, 2024; Noonan, 2024). Horror thus represents a strategic accommodation rather than exception to this, when it operates within low-budget parameters. Films such as *The Hole in the Ground* (Cronin, 2019) exemplify this approach: low budget Irish films that used contained environments and Irish cultural elements as a basis for contemporary horror while maintaining critical credibility and Irish specificity. (Monahan, 2025; Noonan, 2024; Tracy, 2025). Even films like *You are Not My Mother* (Dolan, 2021), which had limited box office reach, demonstrate how horror can function as small, intimate drama within Irish production constraints.

This creates a dynamic where the apparent artistic Irish orthodoxy of intimate, contained storytelling aligns with commercial pragmatism around budget constraints. What emerges then is not a simple art versus commerce opposition. What is evident is a more complex dynamic where artistic and commercial viability converge around specific industry production constraints. This convergence is further reinforced by the institutional funding preferences for arthouse 'grounded dramas' over genre films, which are typically viewed as commercially oriented. Genre productions have typically occupied a marginal position in Irish cinema, with its preference for dramas that deal with political, or social issues (Barton, 2019).

This institutional preference for grounded drama over genre thus constitutes a defining contradiction within the Irish doxa, where funding structures play a significant role in shaping what is deemed artistically legitimate and culturally valued. This convergence exposes how the doxa keeps returning to the tension between art and commerce through different pathways. As creators, screenwriters want to be creative but are caught within an industrial filmmaking system that places significant constraints on that creativity. They write within this doxa and feel they must respond to it, compromising and moulding their practice around it, based on how they perceive its expectations.

Within this framework, compromise becomes another feature of the Irish screenwriting doxa. Participants experience this compromise not simply as artistic vision versus commercial demands, but as navigating contradictory industry expectations of an artistic orthodoxy that simultaneously serves commercial imperatives. Irish screenwriters perceive this tension, feel their originality is being compromised by funders and their vision being stifled, but ultimately, they will compromise their vision to get funding. This is seen in how the perceived preference for contained dramas over other large-scale genres leads screenwriters to modify their practice. Participants feel they need to adjust to what they think is in demand. This reveals how the artistic orthodoxy operates as a form of creative constraint that participants experience as both enabling and limiting. The tension is not simply between art and commerce, but between different ideas of what constitutes legitimate artistic practice within commercial constraints.

Writers wish to follow a creative impulse but may self-censor and choose not to as they deem their story not to have viability within the orthodoxy. They are caught in the paradoxical tension of the doxa. For example, Eric describes how he has gotten into the ‘good habit’ of keeping his scripts ‘self-contained’ in ‘just one room’ like a ‘stage play’ but regards the need for this habit as ‘unfortunate that you feel like you have to’. Eric’s frustration reveals how budget constraints become internalised as creative principles, revealing how economic

limitations transform into orthodoxy. This impacts on the stories that get told, as writers self-censor their work in an effort to align themselves with what may get funding. For Orla, this leads Irish screenwriters to write ‘small stories’ because they know that the funding is not there for ‘thinking big’ so scripts are ‘already censored’ before they are chosen. However, as Eric’s reference to contained environments suggests, this constraint is not unique to drama, but horror, comedy and science-fiction films can equally operate within these parameters (Monahan, 2025; Noonan, 2024; Tracy, 2025). This is demonstrated by horror films like *You are Not My Mother* (Dolan, 2021), *The Hole in the Ground* (Cronin, 2019), *Vivarium* (Finnegan, 2019), as well as the comedy *Extra Ordinary* (Ahern and Loughman, 2019).

What perhaps emerges then is not a genre hierarchy, but a production orthodoxy that favours containment and intimacy across different storytelling genres. Eric expresses frustration with this limiting preference noting that ‘I don’t like the idea that there is nothing dramatic about a character facing impossible odds’ because ‘any genre can be a vehicle for emotion, feeling and drama, and tension’ in fact ‘that’s storytelling’. Eric’s comments here reveal how participants struggle against the orthodoxy while simultaneously operating within its constraints.

This paradox is also seen in another tension in the doxa around Screen Ireland - art *over* commerce. Whereas some participants regard Screen Ireland as *uber* commercial, some participants simultaneously hold a counter view that Screen Ireland has not been interested in the ‘commercial side of the business’ at all and are only recently starting to see its importance after years of focussing on the ‘literary or the respective respectable side’, supporting ‘beautiful, small, dark films’ like Lenny’s [Abrahamson] *Garage* (Abrahamson, 2007) (Sinead). This ability to hold contradictory views demonstrates how participants attempt to navigate the complex Irish doxa. They position themselves as either champions of artistic

integrity against evil commercial pressures, or as pragmatists frustrated by excessive artistic orthodoxy, depending on which context they find themselves or what question is being asked.

This artistic preference is seen by some participants, such as Sinead, as something ‘very snobbish’, arguing that Screen Ireland are somewhat apologetic about putting out commercial, genre films like comedies, almost like we are embarrassed and say oh look at us ‘we did make that comedy.’ This marks another tension in the doxa of Irish screenwriting. Whereas many participants view Screen Ireland as ‘*uber* commercial’, others perceive them as overly invested in the artistic orthodoxy. There is a perception among participants, such as Sinead, that Screen Ireland films put audiences off because they are often dark, heavy stories about topics like abortion and suicide. Whereas light, ‘humorous’ stories that ‘give you a lift’ are few and far between. Participants, such as Sinead, perceive that Screen Ireland are actively looking for ‘darker films’ like Lenny Abrahamson’s *Garage* (Abrahamson, 2007) There is a view that the success of certain dark dramas like *Calvary* (McDonagh, 2014) or *Adam and Paul* (Abrahamson, 2004) have become a template for funding. These contradictory perceptions, where Screen Ireland is both too commercial and not commercial enough, reveal how participants struggle to navigate the complex Irish doxa. On the one hand they claim artistic authenticity when critiquing commercial pressures, but on the other advocate for commercial viability when challenging artistic orthodoxy.

Regardless of which side, art/commerce, participants emphasise, this contradictory tension between art and commerce is fundamental to the doxa of Irish screenwriting. However, the inverted nature of the Irish doxa suggest that this is not simply a traditional art/commerce binary, but a more complex dynamic between art and commerce, creating multiple contradictory positions that participants must navigate. As Emily notes: ‘there is always a conflict between the art and the business, and you know, for me, filmmaking is an art, but it’s also the way I make a living, and it’s the way [Screen Ireland and production companies] will

make a living, [but] how do [Screen Ireland and production companies] do that and be unique?’ Emily’s comment captures the contradiction inherent in the Irish doxa. Participants must uphold artistic orthodoxy while acknowledging commercial imperatives. This tension is a constant feature of the doxa, rather than a resolvable conflict.

However, the dominance of Screen Ireland comes to shape the wider funding landscape. Orla notes that: ‘I read a lot of Irish scripts. What saddens me is that we fall into the trap of it being tailored towards a specific institution [Screen Ireland]’. This has strong implications for what gets funded and made. There is a sense that because production companies are seeking funding from Screen Ireland this influences production companies’ decisions on which scripts to produce. As Sinead notes: ‘all the kind of production that would be relying on Screen Ireland for funding would be like ... you know, are we gonna get money for this’? For Eric, producers are ‘trying to play the game’, guessing what it is that Screen Ireland think they want. This reveals how the artistic orthodoxy of the Irish doxa operates as a form of institutional power, shaping creative decisions through their speculative anticipation of what Screen Ireland’s funding preferences will be rather than explicit commercial imperatives. Beyond content preferences, the funding system also exerts influence through its administrative structures.

## **Bureaucracy**

Within the Irish screenwriting doxa, bureaucracy emerges as important place where the nature of the Irish doxa becomes particularly evident. Participants view themselves as artistic practitioners being subjected to commercial bureaucratic demands, but the reality reveals a more complex dynamic where artistic orthodoxy must be performed and legitimised *through* commercial bureaucratic processes. The tension in the doxa that emerges here is one between artistic practice and bureaucratic administrative requirements.

Participants describe significant frustration with the bureaucratic process of applying for funding from Screen Ireland, and other funders. To prove themselves, participants feel they must go through a trial by ‘box-ticking’. Screen Ireland’s application process requires extensive script materials tailored to different funding stages and schemes. For initial screenplay development applicants must submit loglines, a short synopsis (one page), detailed treatments (minimum ten pages), or a longer synopsis (two to three pages) with script samples of up to twenty to thirty pages. Applications require short, character descriptions, including character arcs, writer and director notes explaining story motivation and challenges, and evidence of rights ownership. Later development stages require the latest screenplay draft, loglines, synopsis, character arcs, writer, producer, and director notes, script editor notes, and development budgets. Production applications require full detailed screenplays, proof of screenwriter agreements, and evidence of Irish writer involvement. All materials must be uploaded via an online portal, with incomplete or non-compliant submissions, such as those exceeding page limits, deemed ineligible (Screen Ireland, 2025a).

This bureaucratic requirement creates a fundamental tension or contradiction where participants must demonstrate commercial viability through formulaic processes simultaneously maintaining their artistic identity. Participants like Aine, express repeated frustration with having to fill out forms and tick boxes to submit their work. The process requires applicants to compartmentalise their creative work across multiple prescribed formats and categories at each funding stage (Screen Ireland, 2025a). Writers and producers have learned and absorbed that they need to work to this formula to get funding for a project. They have learned to simply accept the process, so Screen Ireland are not given a reason to say no.

Participants position these necessary administrative processes as damaging to their creative work. Participants perceive that they ‘suffer’ for the sake of their art that emerges through these processes. This positioning as ‘suffering for art’ reinforces the Irish doxa, where

commercial engagement is viewed as a necessary compromise rather than a valid part of the practice. They see any form of ‘business’ as ‘bad’ and perceive themselves as somehow victims of this bureaucracy. Paradoxically, this victimhood narrative itself becomes part of the orthodox artistic discourse. Resistance to commercial processes validates artistic authenticity. This anti-bureaucratic stance reveals the Irish doxa’s internal contradiction. Participants view bureaucracy as anti-artistic and stifling to creativity, but they simultaneously depend on these very processes for validation and funding. This view is very one-sided, as there is no real acknowledgement among participants that they are being subsidised for their work. This participant blind spot demonstrates how the inverted nature of the Irish doxa works. The doxa’s power lies precisely in its invisibility, and by constructing bureaucratic processes as ‘suffering’ rather than a necessary support, participants maintain their artistic identity while obscuring their dependence of the very commercial structures they claim to resist.

A repeated phrase in the data was ‘ticking those boxes’ when participants speak about working with Screen Ireland. This criticism of bureaucratic constraints reflects the broader tension between artistic autonomy and institutional requirements that characterises film industries internationally. Participants position themselves as creative artists constrained by administrative processes (O’Connor, 2016), reinforcing a familiar narrative of art versus commerce where bureaucracy represents the intrusion of institutional and commercial logics into creative work (Banks, 2010; Conor, 2014b; Radermecker and Loots, 2025). For participants, such as Sinead, bureaucratic interference is seen as killing the ‘creative spark’ of the original idea. This reveals how participants draw on established understandings of artistic identity, where authentic creativity is threatened by formulaic institutional demands, even as they navigate the specific funding landscape of Irish funding and production.

For Aine, applying for and securing funding with Screen Ireland is seen as a challenging ordeal where you will be ‘interviewed ‘till the cows come home’ after putting ‘at least a full



weekend into putting the documentation together’. And after that they will (probably) not even read the script. For Aine, the ‘hoops writers must jump through’ in applying for funding is seen as ‘time-consuming bullshit’. Screenwriters feel they must tweak their applications to suit different bodies and application processes where some forms require 150 words while others require 250, and there might be funding to film in Donegal, so the script needs to include “Donegal tweed’ (Aine). For Aine, this ‘crap’ requires effort and time and then applicants might not even get the money. Aine’s frustration reflects a broader tension within cultural policy where artists must translate their creative work into the language of metrics, inputs, outputs, and administrative categories to secure funding (O’Connor, 2016). This requirement to talk the talk and tick the boxes positions bureaucratic requirements as obstacles to authentic creative expression, forcing artists to objectify cultural meaning within existing administrative routines and procedures. As O’Connor (2016) argues, this creates a situation where the very language artists must adopt to reach the negotiating table becomes a trap leaving little space to discuss the actual values and aspirations of their cultural work. Rather than supporting creativity, such demands risk strip-mining creative energy from projects, narrowing artistic focus to fit product market cycles and metric-based evidence requirements (O’Connor, 2016). This can diminish the creative energy in a project.

For example, Luke, who described himself as an ‘experimental director’, explained that because of his background he had never gone to Screen Ireland for funding before. However, for his current project he is working with a producer who is helping him to ‘shape [his scripts] up’ in a more conventional way. Luke’s positioning reveals the complexity of the doxa. Luke’s experimental background represents authentic artistic orthodoxy, yet the commercial necessity of shaping his ideas to meet Screen Ireland’s processes places him in a position of compromise. However, for Luke the process of securing funding is seen as frustratingly protracted and at the end of the process writers might not be successful. Luke notes that: ‘generally speaking it could

be a four-year process you know, three years of development then you apply again for production, but [they] might not give it to you, they could decline at any point during the [process]'. This is perceived as degrading to indie filmmakers, like Luke, who have created 'unconventional' work. Luke questions whether applying to Screen Ireland is a 'waste of time'. This questioning illustrates how participants experience cognitive dissonance between their artistic identity and the reality of engaging with bureaucratic commercial 'box-ticking' processes.

Beyond the administrative burden of applications for participants, they believe that the Irish funding system now demands performative commercial skills that further frustrate the artistic creativity of practitioners. For participants the script is no longer enough for securing funding. As well as writing a great script and application, screenwriters are required to prepare and deliver a killer pitch for their project. This is another time and energy consuming burden that adds another bureaucratic process from the perspective of screenwriters. This increasing intrusion of commercial requirements, from written applications, to live pitching, increases the sense of frustration amongst participants. They are increasingly required to learn commercial practices that are opposed to their artistic identity.

Pitching is a concept that emerges from the Hollywood film industry and screenwriting manuals. Most of the major screenwriting manual authors offer advice on pitching a script (McKee, 1999; Snyder, 2005; Yorke, 2013). They broadly agree on the common features of a successful pitch. It should be clear, concise and focussed on the key story beats such as plot, main characters and the unique selling feature of the script. For example, authors like McKee, Snyder, and Yorke, recommend starting with a compelling elevator pitch (usually under a minute) before expanding this into a longer version that covers critical plot points, emotional drama, and why the writer felt compelled to write this script. Manuals emphasise the importance of visual supports for a pitch, such as pitch decks and mood boards, to convey the

tone and narrative beats. They encourage delivering the pitch with confidence and tailoring the pitch to a specific audience.

Pitching is increasingly becoming a necessary skill for screenwriters if they want to sell their work to producers and funders such as Screen Ireland. For example, in their Development Funding Guidelines, Screen Ireland mention the importance of pitching. They note '[i]t is essential to be able to describe your story in one or two sentences. Think along the lines of an elevator pitch' (Screen Ireland, 2025a). Pitching clearly aligns with the commercial side of the art/commerce binary and adds another layer of work for screenwriters; one they may not feel qualified to achieve. As Aine notes: if you want to hire somebody who's really good at pitch decks, hire a graphic designer, if you want a good screenplay, hire a screenwriter'.

This resistance to pitching reveals a tension for participants. The word 'pitching is seen as a 'business thing', something alien to the creative process (James). Participants position themselves as artists whose authentic creative work is threatened by commercial imperatives like pitching. This reflects a conventional understanding of the art versus commerce binary, where commercial skills are seen as incompatible with artistic identity and creative authenticity (Banks, 2010; Conor, 2014b). However, for some pitching has become *the* dominant task for screenwriters. The script is an 'afterthought, a blank to be filled in later' (Aine). The script is just a necessary evil. The fact that pitching appears to eclipse scriptwriting itself demonstrates the tension participant's face between their identities as creative artists and the commercial realities of securing funding and industry support. They must engage in commercial practices they view as antithetical to their artistic work while maintaining their sense of creative authenticity.

When participants describe the script as becoming secondary to the pitch, they reveal the cognitive dissonance at the heart of the Irish doxa. Aine argues that this focus on pitching and bureaucracy leads to poor quality films and shorts being made, as evidenced in 'any film

festival'. All of this suggests that in order to be successful as a screenwriter in Ireland there is a perception that you must jump over many 'hurdles', find a producer, get coproduction, submit an application for funding, have it greenlit, however, it could all 'fall at the last hurdle' (Eric). These endless obstacles force participants into a contradictory position where they must master commercial processes they publicly criticise. Rather than simply challenging commercial orthodoxy, these criticisms may actually reinforce the Irish artistic orthodoxy that positions 'pure' artistic work as legitimate and commercial accommodation as a 'dirty' word, something corrupting to their practice.

However, participants perceive they have no choice but learn to accept this bureaucratic process even though adhering to the process is no guarantee of success. As Amy points out writers 'can get all the way through development loan to being greenlit for production and have the plug pulled'. Writers, like Aine, describe how they feel they 'need to put it all together, have a team, a producer, a director. Then they must write ten-page outlines and fill forms. This jumping through hoops is seen as destroying the creative process. Writers just want to write, but the application is reductive:

boiling something down to something very reducible, like why this, why now? I mean, you can't just go, here's a script, you know they'll go, ohh, what's your team? Who's the director? Who's the producer? You need to put it all together. (Aine)

Notably, assembling teams and pitching projects typically falls within the producer's remit, suggesting that writers' frustration may stem partly from role confusion within the Irish industry, where writers find themselves undertaking work that would traditionally be performed by producers seeking out and commissioning writers.

However, this work is seen as matter of course and aligns with the mythology around 'development hell'. Batty et al. (2018) define 'development hell' as a situation where a film

project is stalled endlessly in pre-production and never gets the ‘green light’. This can happen when there is disagreement in the process between those in the production hierarchy. Writers often find themselves caught up in this process as they lack creative control and may feel they must say yes to endless rewrites. However, this idea functions as a type of mythic narrative where the writer sees themselves as the plucky underdog struggling to survive in a corporate industrial system. Within the Irish doxa, this mythology takes on particular significance. Participants invoke the ideas of ‘development hell’ not just to describe the industry obstacles they face, but to legitimise their artistic identity against perceived commercial interference. Much of how participants describe their frustrations with funding bureaucracy aligns with this idea of development hell. For example, Aine spent ‘eight working days’ honing and delivering her pitch. Her frustration with this process is the fact that it would have only taken ten minutes to read the actual script she was pitching. Screenwriters like Amy have scripts that are at ‘various stages of almost-ness’ but they often ‘hit a wall’. This continual state of ‘almost-ness’ may function as both a frustration and a badge of honour in the doxa, as it provides evidence of commercial obstacles that legitimise the practitioner’s artistic identity. The ‘development hell’ narrative thus serves two purposes, explaining personal funding failures while reinforcing the view that true artistic work exists in opposition to commercial bureaucratic processes.

Ultimately, the process of submitting a script to Screen Ireland is perceived as painful, onerous, and time consuming because the goalposts keep moving. For Aine, in previous years a script was enough for the submission, whereas now a treatment, a pitch, and other bureaucratic forms are required. One of the reasons for this change is some people are good at filling out application forms and grant applications but do not deliver on what they promised in terms of script quality. For Orla another change to the process is the inclusion of requirements for detailed character arcs and character relationships. The increasing emphasis on treatments, pitches, and detailed character development requirements aligns the Irish

funding process more closely with the Anglophone doxa where treatments and pitches are now standard requirements. This shift reveals the tension participants experience as Irish funding processes adopt practices they associate with Anglophone commercial industry norms, requiring them to develop skills in pitching and structural outlining that they view as distinct from, or even opposed to, the creative work of scriptwriting itself.

This administrative application process is perceived as taking a significant amount of time and energy, demanding considerable effort to (go through in order to (potentially) secure funding. It is seen as challenging just to submit a script to Screen Ireland as you must go through a ‘bizarre portal to even get your application in’ (Sinead). Writers end up questioning the point of applying. For example, Sinead notes: ‘there’s no point in putting that in, if I don’t change this, that and the other case, they’re not gonna go for that’. Having to go by ‘their *rules*’ is seen as ‘creatively narrowing’ when ‘you have to keep thinking what the funders will think, instead of ok, Mary from Lucan is gonna shit herself laughing at that scene, do you know what I mean?’ Sinead’s contrast between funder expectations and authentic audience engagement encapsulates the contradiction of the Irish doxa. Participants feel compelled to perform commercial orthodoxy, but their artistic identity is built on rejecting it. This contradiction extends to how practitioners understand their position within the industry itself.

### **Insiders/Outsiders**

Participants further expose the tension in the doxa through the concept of insiders and outsiders within the Irish screenwriting industry and funding networks. This represents a way that the Irish doxa maintains and reproduces itself. This binary functions not simply as an objective description of industry access, but as an active element of doxa construction. Who feels on the inside or outside of the industry and its funding structures defines who has authority within the field and which voices carry most weight in determining and shaping orthodox practice. As

discussed above, participants perceive that Screen Ireland has a ‘strict process’ around funding decisions (Luke). This creates a view that Screen Ireland is a closed shop to outsiders; and the perception emerges that there are insiders and outsiders. This aligns with Conor who argues that screenwriting ‘is a profession that is accessible to very few and is circumscribed and delimited in many ways’ (Conor, 2014b, p.3). Ciara, for example notes that she felt ‘there was no way in’ to the Irish industry. The sense that filmmaking is a closed shop to outsiders is indicated by the phrase ‘a doorway is missing’ (Irene). The insider/outsider dynamic is a significant feature of Bourdieu’s broader field theory. It reveals how the doxa operates through mechanisms of symbolic capital and field positioning (Bourdieu, 1977, pp.159-171). Those who are ‘insiders’ possess authority to define what is legitimate Irish screenwriting practice, whereas ‘outsiders’ find their views excluded from shaping doxa. This binary then is not merely about access to funding, but about access to the power to shape the orthodoxy.

As a small filmmaking industry Ireland lends itself to being perceived as a closed shop. In fact, what the participants say about the networked and exclusionary nature of screen industries has been documented previously (Barton and Murphy, 2022; Liddy, 2017; O’Brien, 2014). As O’Brien notes, ‘the networks mediating [media] employment are a source of stability and decreasing uncertainty for some, they are an informal source of exclusion for others. Within media production, networks generally favour individuals with high levels of social and cultural capital’ (O’Brien, 2014, p.1208.) Lee (2008) also highlights how this structural barrier operates from the very beginning of careers, noting that the industry model creates ‘the media equivalent of the pupil system for lawyers – only kids with well-off parents and good contacts need apply’ (Lee, 2008, p.43).

This reality informs how participants perceive and interact with industry professionals and funders. For example, Orla argues that ‘In Ireland it’s reasonably cliquey, we’ve only got a small number of big producers here and if you don’t have stuff that interests [them], you’re not

gonna get in'. Another problem for participants is that there is one dominant player in terms of funding - Screen Ireland. As Orla notes: 'you can't get a film made in Ireland without having international money involved. And you can't get off the ground unless you start with Screen Ireland, it seems'. This represents a bottleneck for participants, as Screen Ireland is the route to international funding, writers cannot avoid going through them.

The barriers to entry into the industry and the lack of support for screenwriting lead some screenwriters to give up on seeking funding. 'I gave up submitting' was one of the starkest conclusions that came up during the interview with Ciara. For her this was due to the constantly changing nature of the rules for funding. Orla described the situation in terms that suggest a strategic choice: 'that [game] wasn't worth playing anymore.' This perception appears to have negative consequences. For example, Ciara feels that a whole generation of stories may have been lost. Ciara describes knowing writers who kept having their work 'turned down'. This led to her moving away from screenwriting.

So, there's a whole generation of stories that probably got turned down. That might have been something new. I've had this discussion with people ... writers in their sixties, seventies ... we moved into other mediums, I moved into books. We all got fed up.  
(Ciara)

Emily describes the sense of exclusion, the draining process of seeking funding, applying, being shortlisted, going for interviews, then being told 'no, it's just we didn't go that way with you'. This led to them stopping applying as they just couldn't 'do this anymore'. Aine describes 'the amount of energy she wastes on seeking funding, when she 'could be spending all that time writing something'. So, she stopped, and 'doesn't pitch anything anymore'. This feeling of exclusion, of there being no doorway into the industry, exposes another taken-for-granted aspect of the doxa - not everybody can make it. This experience of attrition is not unique to Ireland. As Conor notes, reports indicate that 'the majority of screenplays for both film and



television continue to be written by a very small group of, mainly older, white men, and in some cases diversity is in fact declining' (Conor, 2014b, pp.12-13.). The structural features of the industry itself thus create what Conor calls 'insurmountable barriers to fair and equal access' (Conor, 2014b, p.111).

Within the Irish context this taken-for-granted exclusion functions as an element of doxa because it operates at the level of unquestioned truth that shapes participant behaviour and self-perception. The belief that 'not everybody can make it' has become naturalised by participants. They have learned to accept attrition as inevitable. This naturalisation is precisely what makes this doxa, it shapes practice without being explicitly examined or challenged. This exclusionary dynamic reveals the contradictory nature of the Irish doxa. While participants uphold artistic integrity as the dominant value, the industry and funding mechanisms that gatekeep this value simultaneously create barriers that exclude potentially new artistic voices. The doxa thus contains an internal tension - participants position artistic concerns as central to their identities and resistance to commercial pressures, yet the gatekeeping that maintains this positioning may itself limit artistic diversity (Conor, 2014b).

There is a clear perception among participants that breaking in is deeply challenging and there are many hurdles to overcome. However, though there is clearly frustration with the funding apparatus, there is a sense among participants that the Irish industry is lucky to have state funding. This produces a complex emotional response that tempers criticism with appreciation.

### **Lucky to Have It**

The tension in the doxa shows up further in how participants feel frustrated with Screen Ireland, but at the same time feel lucky to have it. This contradiction reveals how participants navigate between criticism and gratitude. They simultaneously challenge *and* legitimate the funding

orthodoxy that dominates and shapes Irish screenwriting practice. Regardless of the many frustrations and complaints of Screen Ireland, participants, such as Amy, acknowledged that as a country we are ‘extremely lucky’ to have it. There is an acceptance that they do their best but ‘as a body they are overworked, [and] oversubscribed’ (Maeve). Amy notes that ‘I’m really glad that [we have] Screen Ireland, I mean, it’s brilliant to have it’. For some, such as Maeve, Screen Ireland is supportive and gave them their start in the industry. Maeve notes that getting a loan from Screen Ireland ‘was the start of it for me because I knew they had this loan that would fund you for six months to write your first draft and a set of revisions, that’s what they were offering, and if your film gets made, you pay the money back, if it doesn’t, you’ve had the opportunity to create something finished, and so I went to Screen Ireland with a list of ideas’.

Emily believes that there are ‘some really good people’ working in Screen Ireland, ‘who do really know their stuff’. But those ‘at the top’ still dictate what kind of films should be funded. There is acknowledgement that there is a strong body of expertise in Screen Ireland. Though the feedback provided by script editors and producers is rooted in their subjective opinion, Sarah argues that in their experience ‘those were smart, intelligent, educated opinions you know that I was hearing, these were not idiots’. Regarding knowledge of screenwriting in the industry, Sarah argues that ‘it’s completely different now’ and that ‘there’s almost nobody working in the industry who isn’t trained and educated in story’ and this is reason why we are seeing ‘this beautiful flowering of Irish cinema and TV’.

Participants distinguish between the funding model as a process and the people working within it. This distinction may allow participants to maintain contradictory positions. They criticise institutional funding decisions while affirming their own creative identity. Such contradictions are not evidence of confused thinking but rather demonstrate how participants negotiate the tensions in the Irish screenwriting doxa. As with the broader art/commerce tensions, participants hold seemingly incompatible views simultaneously, they are frustrated,

yet grateful, critical yet supportive. This reveals how the doxa operates through contradiction and paradox, rather than a coherent consensus. The doxa appears confused because participants hold paradoxical and contradictory positions.

For Emily, things have improved in the funding landscape in recent years, as many ‘amazing films’ have come out in the last ten years, ones that are ‘riskier, slightly edgier’. Sinead sees change happening through an international influence, which she views as a corrective to domestic orthodoxy rather than a threat to it. This perspective reinforces participants sense of being ‘lucky to have’ Screen Ireland but simultaneously believing it requires external pressure for things to change. For Sinead this will help change things because there is ‘this core bunch of Irish people who are brainwashed, programmed to go, that's not what Screen Ireland wants, that's not what Screen Ireland wants, so it's trying, I think it's trying to get the script editors who are recommended by Screen Ireland, to think outside the box a little bit as well’.

Though there is much frustration with Screen Ireland among participants, there is an acknowledgement from some, such as James, that state organisations ‘have a responsibility to culturally fund but not make mad decisions, so they have to base their decisions to some extent on the markets’. They cannot waste public money on projects that do not have an audience. For James, state funding agencies like Screen Ireland must consider many other factors, they have to be aware of the market, ‘but also to listen for new voices’ and be the ‘funder of last resort’ and ‘by and large’ they have done a good job. James’s view here reveals the contradictory demands placed on Screen Ireland. It must simultaneously fulfil cultural obligations *and* commercial imperatives, it must act as champion of ‘new voices’ *and* pragmatically manage public money (Noonan, 2024). His acceptance that Screen Ireland must ‘base their decisions to some extent on markets’ suggests a pragmatic acknowledgment of commercial imperatives. Yet this sits uncomfortably alongside expectations that the agency

should function as ‘funder of last resort’, supporting culturally important projects that the commercial market would reject.

The market is not always the only thing that guides funding decisions. For James, great scripts that sit outside the current zeitgeist for what’s in fashion can find a way to get funded. Sinead likewise acknowledges that we are lucky as we are ‘probably one of the only countries in the world who have access to public money to make film’, though this perception overstates Ireland’s uniqueness, as public film funding is fairly standard across Europe. Emily acknowledges that there are positive things happening with Screen Ireland funding, good films being made, and it is unfair to ‘demonise’ Screen Ireland. Nevertheless, Emily, questions whether ‘the level of involvement they [Screen Ireland] have over scripts is a good thing’.

James acknowledges that it is very easy to criticise a national funding agency like Screen Ireland. They don’t ‘always make the right decisions’ but they’re only human and ‘the best filmmakers make some dodgy films’. However, he argues that as a nation our output has been ‘pretty good over the last decade’ (James). All these examples add up to the complex and contradictory ways that participants perceive the role of Screen Ireland in their practice. These contradictions are not merely individual inconsistencies but features of the Irish screenwriting doxa. Participants must hold seemingly paradoxical perspectives because Screen Ireland operates at an intersection of competing orthodoxies. Domestically, it upholds artistic authenticity as the orthodox position, but internationally, it must navigate commercial expectations. The ‘lucky to have it’ view then reflects participants’ recognition that Screen Ireland enables their artistic practice while simultaneously constraining it. It creates the very conditions of possibility for Irish screenwriting, but at the same time defines the boundaries of what counts as fundable Irish cinema. These contradictory pressures accumulate into a complex set of professional challenges.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the doxa of Irish screenwriting involves a further set of tensions around funding, centred on Screen Ireland's role as the dominant funding body. These tensions are felt as frustrations by participants as Screen Ireland shapes the types of films that get made. According to participants they do this in a several ways: prioritising artistic and cultural authenticity over commercially viable projects, using bureaucratic forms of 'box ticking' to filter and gatekeep participants, and prioritising certain successful genres, particularly arthouse drama, over most commercially oriented genres. This prioritisation reveals the distinctive character of the Irish doxa, where artistic concerns are orthodox and commercial imperatives heterodoxy. Due to this, participants must navigate contradictory demands, seeking commercial viability while conforming to artistic orthodoxy.

The path to securing funding is filled with frustration and challenges for participants. These frustrations stem not from a simple art versus commerce binary, but from complex contradictions inherent to the Irish context. In the Irish doxa artistic legitimacy is orthodox, yet commercial success remains necessary, cultural specificity is valued but international appeal is required, and participants feel simultaneously grateful for *and* constrained by institutional support. Nevertheless, the presence of funders like Screen Ireland remains a vital, but contentious facet of the Irish screenwriting doxa.

Screen Ireland is *the* dominant player in the funding landscape of Irish filmmaking (Noonan, 2024). This dominance heavily influences the type of films that get made in Ireland and therefore the doxa of screenwriting by establishing and maintaining an orthodoxy that privileges drama over genre, cultural authenticity over commercial formula, and literary heritage over market trends, shaping what kinds of stories are deemed fundable and legitimate. Through its funding decisions, script development processes, and gatekeeping mechanisms, Screen Ireland actively constructs the boundaries of what counts as legitimate Irish

screenwriting. Participants must negotiate these boundaries while holding contradictory positions. They criticise institutional orthodoxy but at the same time seek their funding, and challenge artistic orthodoxy while conforming to its conventions. The doxa thus operates not through a coherent consensus but through these productive tensions and contradictions. On this analysis Screen Ireland becomes a critical location where these tensions materialise which may explain why there appears to be so much frustration with Screen Ireland among participants.

Film, as both an art and part of an industrial system, leaves screenwriting caught in the centre of a paradox. In the Irish context, this paradox takes on a distinctive form. Rather than screenwriters struggling against commercial orthodoxy to preserve their artistic integrity, they navigate a distinctive Irish hierarchy where participants feel perceive that artistic concerns dominate over commercial imperatives. This configuration is a particular feature of the Irish screenwriting doxa. Participants must simultaneously uphold artistic orthodoxy *and* pragmatically acknowledge commercial orthodoxy, be grateful to have Screen Ireland *but* are frustrated by its constraints. Having examined how the doxa-tension manifests in relation to funding, the next discussion chapter synthesises the key findings from across all previous chapters, exploring their broader implications for understanding Irish screenwriting practice through the theoretical framework of doxa.

## **Chapter 9 Discussion**

### **Introduction**

This chapter synthesises and interprets the key findings outlined in the previous chapters. The research reveals that the doxa of Irish screenwriting is fundamentally structured by a tension between orthodoxy and heterodoxy, between commercial imperatives and artistic aspirations, between adherence to craft rules and creative experimentation. This tension manifests across five interconnected thematic domains: the learning journey, attitudes towards screenwriting manuals, relationships to structural rules, conceptions of distinctly Irish scripts, and frustrations with funding bodies.

This chapter begins by briefly summarising these five thematic domains before examining how Irish screenwriting practice both aligns with and diverges from the Anglophone screenwriting doxa as documented in existing scholarship (Macdonald, 2013). It then presents this research's theoretical contributions, particularly the reconceptualization of how the orthodox/heterodox tension itself constitutes doxa in Irish screenwriting. The chapter also addresses unexpected findings that emerged from the research, particularly the intensity of frustration with institutional funding structures. Beyond theoretical contributions, the research has significant implications for cultural policy and practice, revealing how current structures orient Irish screenwriting toward particular approaches and away from others, with consequences for the range of stories that receive funding and support. The chapter then addresses the study's limitations, including researcher positionality, sample representativeness, and methodological challenges of studying doxa. Finally, it outlines practical implications and directions for future research, demonstrating how this study contributes to understanding Irish screenwriting as a significant field of cultural production while offering insights potentially applicable to creative practice more broadly.

Despite extensive scholarship on Irish film, addressing themes such as national identity, conflict and history, and gender and identity politics, (Barton, 2004; McLoone, 1994; O'Brien, 2019; Rockett, 1994), the study of Irish screenwriting remains largely unrepresented in academic research. Liddy's 2014 study involving interviews with six first time screenwriters about the craft of screenwriting represents a rare exception (Liddy, 2014). This gap is particularly significant given that the screenplay predates and fundamentally shapes the finished film, however, it has been historically viewed as merely a tool or blueprint for film production (Koivumäki, 2016; Langford, 2010; Macdonald, 2004b). The wider film industry has similarly tended to view screenwriting through a negative lens, positioning it as market driven writing rather than as an artistic practice, a perspective that has obscured the importance of the screenplay and allowed for its guiding principles and assumptions to be taken-for-granted (Langford, 2010). By focusing on screenwriting practice and practitioners' voices rather than textual analysis of finished films or broad policy examination, this study addresses a significant gap in Irish film scholarship.

### **Research Aims and Questions**

This study addresses this gap through a qualitative case study examining 19 participants perspectives on contemporary Irish screenwriting practice. This research employs a theoretical approach first developed by Bourdieu (1977) and subsequently applied to UK screenwriting by Macdonald (2013), utilising the framework of doxa, orthodoxy, and heterodoxy as an analytical tool. The core research question guiding this investigation was: what is the doxa of Irish screenwriting? Doxa refers to the implicit, subconscious, or internalised beliefs that shape a field of practice. As Bourdieu notes 'what is essential goes without saying because it comes without saying' (Bourdieu, 1977, pp.159-171, p.167), representing the taken-for-granted assumptions within a field that appear part of the natural order (Deer, 2014, pp.114-125).



Within screenwriting practice, orthodoxy typically aligns with adherence to rules, conventions, classical structure, and commercially viable storytelling approaches found in manuals and educational settings, while heterodoxy manifests through creativity, art, rule-breaking, experimentation, and the privileging of the artist over the craftsperson (Banks, 2010; Batty et al., 2017; Conor, 2014b; Macdonald, 2013; Moreno, 2014).

This binary opposition between orthodoxy and heterodoxy defines the field of screenwriting practice. Critically this tension between orthodox and heterodox positions is fundamentally doxic, with the art/commerce binary representing the taken-for-granted framework within which screenwriting practice is conceived and discussed. Through thematic analysis of interviews with the 19 participants who intersect with screenwriting practice in Ireland, this research examined the taken-for-granted assumptions that shape Irish screenwriting. This discussion chapter summarises and analyses the key findings from the thematic analysis, examining how this fundamental tension manifests across multiple domains of screenwriting practice in Ireland, before considering these findings within the broader context of screenwriting scholarship and Irish cultural analysis and then addressing the study's limitations and implications for future research and practice.

### **Summary of Key Findings**

The findings chapters above revealed that the tension between orthodoxy and heterodoxy in Irish screenwriting practice manifests across five interconnected thematic domains. These themes trace a doxic narrative, from participants' initial artistic aspiration to become a screenwriter through to the practical realities of working within an industrial creative practice. Each theme illuminates different aspects of the doxa, while repeatedly revealing the fundamental tension between artistic and commercial imperatives that shapes Irish screenwriting practice.

This research examined Irish screenwriting practice across five thematic domains. Examination of the learning journey revealed tensions between formal orthodox education and informal heterodox experimentation. Attitudes towards screenwriting manuals showed a paradoxical relationship where manuals were consciously rejected, yet their concepts remained deeply embedded in practice. Discussions of ‘rules of the game’ demonstrated near universal alignment with wider industrial orthodox conventions regarding narrative structure, character development, and audience engagement. Understandings of distinctly Irish screenwriting revealed a tragi-comic mood and tension between local authenticity and universal appeal, constrained by pressure to replicate successful formulas. Finally, institutional funding structures, particularly Screen Ireland, generated significant frustration, as the body was perceived paradoxically as simultaneously too commercial, too bureaucratic, and too artistic, reflecting its position between low-budget art-house cinema and commercial viability. These domains collectively reveal how the orthodox/heterodox tension permeates Irish screenwriting practice at multiple levels.

## **Analysis**

Having identified five thematic domains that reveal an orthodox/heterodox tension in Irish screenwriting practice, this section examines how these findings relate to existing screenwriting scholarship. Understanding where Irish practice aligns with or diverges from Anglophone patterns helps to identify what is specifically Irish about the doxa, and what reflects broader structures of screenwriting as a field of cultural production. This comparative analysis reveals whether the tensions identified are unique to Ireland or manifestations of wider dynamics within screenwriting practice globally.

The findings from this study reveal both significant alignment with and divergence from the screenwriting doxa as documented in existing scholarship (Batty, 2016; Langford,

2010; Macdonald, 2013). In many ways Irish screenwriting practice operates according to the same fundamental rules and assumptions that structure screenwriting globally, particularly regarding the core rules of the craft. This alignment is most obvious in the chapter on rules of the game, where participants express adherence to principles that constitute what might be termed an Anglophone orthodox consensus on screenwriting practice.

Irish screenwriters play the game by conventional rules. The findings demonstrate widespread acceptance of the importance of structure, character development, conflict, and change as foundational elements of effective screenwriting in Ireland. These principles align closely with what screenwriting scholarship has identified as the Neo-Aristotelian consensus that dominates contemporary screenwriting discourse (Brenes, 2011; Brenes, 2017; Macdonald, 2013; McKee, 1999; Tierno, 2002). This consensus, rooted in classical dramatic theory, but mediated through 20th century Hollywood practice and codified in screenwriting manuals, emphasises features such as three-act structure, character arcs, dramatic conflict, catharsis, and narrative causality, as essential components of successful screenplays. The broad agreement among the participants on these principles suggests that Irish screenwriting practice is embedded within this Anglophone orthodoxy, significantly shaped by the same assumptions about narrative form and dramatic construction that structure screenwriting practice globally.

The tension between art and commerce that emerged as central to the Irish screenwriting doxa also aligns with scholarship on creative labour in international industries (Bourdieu, 1996, p.142; Banks, 2010; Conor, 2014b; Lee, 2008; Macdonald, 2013; Radermecker and Loots, 2025). Research on creative workers across various disciplines has frequently identified this tension as a defining feature of cultural production under contemporary conditions. Banks (2010) and Conor (2014c) explore how artistic identity is constructed within the dominant structures of commerce and industry, revealing how creative practitioners must continually negotiate between artistic self-expression and market

imperatives. Similarly, Radermecker and Loots (2025) outline how creative professionals actively juggle between what they term ‘artistic logic’ (innovation and aesthetic value) and ‘commercial logic’ (market viability and entrepreneurship), demonstrating how these are rarely mutually exclusive, but continually negotiated by creative practitioners. That this tension operates as doxa within Irish screenwriting practice, as the naturalised, taken-for-granted framework within which all discourse and practice occurs, represents the specific contribution of this research.

The Irish screenwriting doxa reflects this same fundamental tension, with participants articulating awareness of the necessity to balance artistic authenticity with commercial viability. The finding that screenwriters must ‘find their voice while knowing what sells’ echoes the dynamics identified in scholarship on creative labour. This suggests that the orthodox/heterodox tension in Irish screenwriting is not unique to Ireland but represents a manifestation of broader structural tensions inherent in cultural production within capitalist systems. The art/craft binary identified in scholarship by Banks (2010), Conor (2014c) and Lee (2008) resonates with the Irish findings as participants negotiate between positioning themselves as artists (aligned with heterodox values of creativity and innovation) and as craftspeople (aligned with orthodox values of technical skill and commercial viability).

Romantic notions of creativity as described by Abrams (1971) and Engell (1981) and challenged by Banks (2010) remained implicitly evident in how Irish participants conceived of their creativity and authorship through the lens of the ‘artist’. The heterodox position’s emphasis on artistic voice, originality, and resistance to formula reflects the enduring cultural power of romantic conceptions of the artist as individual creator whose work emerges from mystical, personal inspiration rather than adherence to rules. This romantic ideal continues to shape the doxa around understandings of creative practice, legitimising both heterodox resistance to commercial pressures and anxieties about the potentially damaging effects of

orthodox craft principles. The concern among participants about ‘Zookeeper's Guilt’, the fear that following rules might kill creativity, exemplifies how romantic conceptions of artistic practice appear embedded in contemporary Irish screenwriting doxa, despite the highly collaborative and industrial nature of film production.

While Irish screenwriting practice aligns with Anglophone orthodoxy in many ways, the findings also revealed significant divergence, particularly regarding the role of screenwriting manuals. Manuals have been identified in scholarship as primary vehicles for transmitting and codifying orthodox principles, forming a core component of screenwriting education. (Conor, 2014a; Langford, 2010; Lee, 2001; Macdonald, 2004b; Macdonald, 2013). If Irish screenwriters reject or dismiss manuals, yet still demonstrate adherence to orthodox craft principles, this raises important questions about how doxa is transmitted and naturalised in the Irish context.

However, in the Irish context, manuals barely registered as significant during participant interviews. Participants were aware of prominent manuals such as *Save the Cat!* (Snyder, 2005), and *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting* (McKee, 1999), but consistently dismissed them as of minor importance to Irish screenwriting practice. This dismissal represents a unique divergence from patterns documented in screenwriting scholarship (Conor, 2014a; Langford, 2010; Lee, 2001; Macdonald, 2013). The findings suggests that Irish screenwriters position themselves at a distance, via a ‘posture of denial’ (Bourdieu, 1977, pp.159-171; Grenfell, 2014, pp.265-270), from the most explicitly orthodox texts of screenwriting culture, claiming autonomy from the formulaic prescriptions that manuals represent.

Yet this conscious rejection of manuals operates paradoxically, as the analysis reveals that the language and concepts derived from manuals are deeply embedded in Irish screenwriting discourse. Participants articulated their understanding of screenwriting using

precisely the vocabulary and conceptual frameworks that manuals codify - structure, drama, conflict, character arcs, catharsis, change. This paradox reveals how doxa functions at multiple levels simultaneously, at the conscious, articulated level, participants distanced themselves from manuals, positioning this distance as evidence of their artistic sophistication and resistance to formulaic thinking. However, at a deeper, more doxic level, the conceptual language that manuals employ has been thoroughly internalised, shaping how Irish screenwriters think about and discuss their practice, regardless of whether they have directly engaged with manual texts.

This finding suggests that the transmission of screenwriting doxa operates through multiple routes. Beyond the explicit engagement with manual texts, the orthodox principles that manuals codify, circulate through film education, professional development contexts, script feedback and development processes, as well as exposure to completed films themselves (Bordwell, 2006; Price, 2013). Irish screenwriters absorb these principles through participation in screenwriting culture more broadly conceived. This means that manual derived terms and concepts become naturalised as simply ‘how screenwriting works’, rather than as learned conventions from specific sources. The fact that participants could articulate orthodox screenwriting principles while claiming minimal engagement with manuals demonstrates how successfully these principles have been naturalised within the doxa, appearing as self-evident truths rather than as conventional rules transmitted through educational texts. However, this naturalisation process does not preclude local variation; examining how Irish practitioners apply these principles reveals distinctly Irish inflections of the wider orthodoxy.

## **Contributions**

One of the most significant findings of this research concerns how the Irish screenwriting doxa diverges from Anglophone consensus in distinctly Irish stylistic preferences and production

priorities. While Irish screenwriting aligns with the Anglophone orthodoxy regarding fundamental craft principles, the boundaries of orthodoxy and heterodoxy are challenged and contested when participants discuss Irish scripts specifically and the institutional context of funding and production. In these domains specific local characteristics emerge in the doxa, with artistic and arthouse sensibilities occupying a more central position while commercial genre work becomes marginalised or heterodox. Participants' description of distinctly Irish screenwriting, with its emphasis on small-scale, artistically ambitious dramas in the tragicomic tradition, reveals how local cultural contexts shape creative practice.

Similarly, in the domain of funding, Screen Ireland's perceived preference for small scale grounded arthouse dramas over commercial genre films reflects and reinforces this localised hierarchy. While participants criticised Screen Ireland from many angles, the combined effect of their criticisms reveals a perceived institutional context in which artistic merit and cultural authenticity carry more importance than commercial viability. This represents a significant divergence from screenwriting industries in larger contexts such as the United States or United Kingdom where commercial viability typically functions as the primary criterion for project selection and development (Murphy, 2024; O'Brien and Canning, 2020). Murphy (2024) argues the Ireland's screen policy uniquely supports projects based on cultural merit rather than simply commercial potential. It does this through two mechanisms: Screen Ireland's mandate to fund projects expressing Irish culture, history, and way of life, and the Section 481 (tax incentive) which has an 'either or both' clause which allows projects to qualify for funding through either cultural value or industry benefits, like quality employment. This cultural test, however, is deliberately broad, designed in part to attract inward investment productions rather than to function as a purely artistic-based filter (Brodie, 2024; O'Brien, 2025, pp. 176-192). The Section 481 mechanism therefore serves a dual purpose, supporting indigenous cultural expression while simultaneously operating as an instrument of commercial

industrial policy. This framework distinguishes Ireland's film funding model from the UK system, which is more overtly commercial in focus (Murphy, 2024). In Ireland the availability of public funding creates space for a different set of priorities allowing projects to be greenlit based on artistic merit, cultural significance, or potential for critical recognition rather than solely on commercial potential.

This complexity can be understood as distinctly Irish in several respects; first it reflects Ireland's position in a globalised cinema economy as a small nation that faces challenges competing with Hollywood or other major film industries in producing high budget commercial genre films. As Crosson (2024), Noonan (2024), and O' Brien and Canning (2020), explore in their work on Irish cinema's position within transnational film industries, Irish filmmakers and institutions must negotiate a complex relationship between local cultural expression and global market demands. The strategic focus on small scale but artistically ambitious films represents a pragmatic response to these constraints, carving out a niche in which Irish film can compete globally through cultural prestige rather than commercial scale (Noonan, 2024).

The weight of Ireland's literary tradition, with its widely recognised achievements in fiction, poetry, and drama, creates expectations and aspirations for Irish screenwriting that privilege artistic depth and literary quality over commercial entertainment. As noted previously in Chapter 7 on Irish Scripts, scholarship by Alférez Mendía (2023); Barton (2019) Grene (2004); Harrington (2004); and McDonald (2004) suggests a line of influence from Ireland's theatrical and literary traditions to contemporary Irish filmmaking. The tragi-comic mode that participants identified as characteristic of Irish scripts has deep roots in Irish dramatic and literary tradition. McLuhan's concept of the 'rearview mirror' suggests that new media forms initially draw on previous media for content and meaning (McLuhan, 2001). The shadow of Beckett hangs over films such as *Banshees* (McDonagh et al., 2023), *Garage* (Abrahamson, 2007), and *Adam and Paul* (Abrahamson, 2004), while Joyce and other literary figures



influence the small epiphanies and moments of revelation in films such as *An Cailín Ciúin* (Bairéad et al., 2022) and *Garage* (Abrahamson, 2007). Many Irish scripts would function effectively as short stories and indeed *ACC* was adapted from Claire Keegan's literary novella *Foster* (Keegan, 2022).

### **Between Boston and Berlin: Ireland's Liminal Position**

The findings also illuminate Ireland's complex position between competing models of cinema, caught between what McLoone (1994) characterised as 'Boston and Berlin', between commercial Hollywood entertainment and European arthouse tradition. This tension between American commercial cinema and European artistic cinema structures much of the Irish screenwriting doxa, creating what might be understood as a kind of cultural and aesthetic liminality. Irish screenwriting is influenced by European arthouse auteur cinema in its literary aspirations and postmodern sensibilities, while simultaneously striving to achieve the commercial and industrial success associated with Hollywood cinema. This produces a paradoxical duality, with Irish screenwriting unable to settle on a single mode that it can claim as distinctly its own.

Richard Kearney's examination of Irish cultural identity in his work *Transitions* (Kearney, 1988) offers illuminating insights into this tension at the core of the Irish screenwriting doxa. Kearney writes about late modernities' Irish experience as exemplified by *transition*, as essentially conflictual, as being in transit between two worlds and divided between opposing allegiances. He describes how James Joyce characterised his own work as inhabiting a sort of liminal space between 'twosome twiminds' (Kearney, 1988, p.14). This conceptual frame resonates powerfully with the tensions identified in Irish screenwriting practice. The doxa of Irish screenwriting, as voiced by participants, represents clearly this kind of liminal space, caught between artistic and commercial imperatives, between European and

American models, between literary heritage and cinematic innovation, between local authenticity and global appeal.

Kearney argues that Irish culture ‘is best conceived as a complex web of interweaving narratives which refuse the facticity of a homogeneous totality’ (Kearney, 1988, p.17). He suggests that Irish culture resists ‘the uniformity of a closed system’ and that ‘this very plurality is perhaps our greatest asset, something to be celebrated rather than censored’ (Kearney, 1988, p.16). This framing offers a potentially productive way to understand the orthodox/heterodox tension in Irish screenwriting, not as a problem to be resolved but as a generative condition that defines Irish practice. The research findings demonstrate that this inability to settle definitively on either orthodox commercial approaches or heterodox artistic approaches, the perpetual negotiation between these positions, constitutes the distinctive character of Irish screenwriting rather than representing a failure to achieve a coherent identity. This research pinpoints this generative tension through the specific conceptual framework of doxa, with participant testimony providing clear evidence of how the orthodox/heterodox negotiation structures Irish screenwriting practice.

However, there are limitations in this positive reading of tension. While Kearney may be hyperbolic in praising resistance to uniformity as an uncomplicated positive feature, his framework may help illuminate why the orthodox/heterodox tension operates so powerfully in Irish screenwriting. The tension is not incidental or secondary to Irish practice but may be fundamental to it, reflecting deeper structures of Irish cultural experience and identity that would require further exploration. As Kearney notes ‘a central problem facing modern Irish culture is how to mediate between the images of past and future, how to avoid the petrification of tradition and the alienation of modernity; how in short to obviate the extremes of either a reactionary Re-evangelisation or a multi-national Los-Angelesisation of society’ (Kearney, 1988, p.16). This observation applies directly to Irish screenwriting, which, since Kearney

wrote this observation in the late 1980s, has attempted to negotiate between tradition (literary heritage, local cultural specificity) and modernity (international market demands, commercial imperatives), avoiding both conservative parochialism and complete assimilation to global commercial formulas.

### **Tensions as Doxa: A Theoretical Contribution**

Perhaps the most significant theoretical contribution of this research lies in its philosophical reconsideration of the relationship between doxa, orthodoxy, and heterodoxy. This research makes a significant theoretical contribution by reconceptualising the relationship between doxa, orthodoxy, and heterodoxy in creative practice. The findings suggest that within Irish screenwriting, the tension between orthodoxy and heterodoxy is itself the doxic assumption, rather than orthodoxy and heterodoxy emerging as responses to a disrupted doxa. This represents a nuanced reading of Bourdieu's original formulation and offers new insights into how doxa operates conceptually as well as how it is operationalised in creative fields structured by art/commerce binaries.

In Bourdieu's theoretical framework, doxa represents the undiscussed and undisputed assumptions within a field of practice, the taken-for-granted beliefs that appear natural and universal (Bourdieu, 1977, pp.159-171). Orthodoxy and heterodoxy emerge only after doxa has been disrupted and revealed as arbitrary, once the apparently natural assumptions have been exposed as contingent constructions. Orthodoxy represents the attempt to restore and defend these assumptions once their arbitrary nature has been revealed, while heterodoxy represents the challenge to these assumptions through competing beliefs (Bourdieu, 1977, pp.159-171; Grenfell, 2014, pp.265-270). The findings suggest that within Irish screenwriting, the tension between orthodoxy and heterodoxy is a doxic assumption. Rather than orthodoxy and heterodoxy emerging as responses to the revelation of a prior doxa, the binary tension between

these positions represents what is taken-for-granted. The fundamental opposition between commercial/artistic, orthodox/heterodox, formula/creativity is not secondary to Irish screenwriting practice but is intrinsic to it. This tension is what participants cannot conceive beyond. It forms the framework within which all the discussion on screenwriting inevitably takes place.

Across the thematic findings, evidence consistently demonstrates that discourse surrounding screenwriting collapses back into this binary tension. When participants discuss the learning journey they frame it in terms of formal rules versus intuitive exploration, academic training versus trial and error. When they discuss creative development, they speak of finding their voice versus knowing what sells, learning rules in order to break rules, avoiding the ‘Zookeepers’ Guilt’ of letting craft kill creativity. When they discuss Irish scripts and funding, they articulate frustrations about being caught between artistic ambitions and commercial pressures, between local authenticity and international viability. In each domain the art/commerce binary structures how screenwriting is fundamentally conceptualised and discussed.

This represents the doxa of Irish screenwriting: the taken-for-granted assumptions that screenwriting practice exists within. Participants struggled to articulate positions outside this framework. There is no third option, no alternative conceptualisation of Irish screenwriting that escapes the orthodox/heterodox, art/commerce binary. Even attempts to transcend or navigate between these positions ultimately reinforce the binary itself as the very act of seeking balance between art and commerce presupposes the fundamental opposition between them.

This theoretical position builds upon but adds nuance to previous applications of Bourdieu’s concepts to media praxis. Schultz (2007) study of journalism and Macdonald’s (2013) examination of UK screenwriting both identify and examine orthodox and heterodox positions within their respective fields. The current research suggests that in Irish screenwriting

the tension between commercial and artistic imperatives is itself the thing that is taken-for-granted. This subtle distinction matters because it reconceptualises where the naturalisation occurs. It is not that commercial approaches, or artistic approaches, individually appear natural, rather the perpetual tension between them appears natural and unavoidable, simply how screenwriting is and *must* be.

Within an industrial capitalist system this tension between art and commerce is perceived not as incidental to creative practice but constitutive of it (Banks, 2010; Bourdieu, 1993, pp.38-39; Bourdieu, 1996, p.142; Conor, 2014b; Lee, 2008). Creative practices in capitalist industries necessarily involve negotiation between aesthetic values and market values, between creative autonomy and commercial constraint. Perhaps screenwriting practice cannot think outside this tension because the conditions of cultural production perceive this tension as a structural given. This constitutes the doxa of Irish screenwriting, a doxa that shapes the boundaries of what is thinkable within the field, making it almost impossible to conceive of positions outside the framework of art versus commerce.

This subtle nuance has implications beyond the Irish context, potentially offering insights applicable to screenwriting practices internationally and to creative labour more broadly if the art/commerce tension constitutes doxa, rather than representing competing responses to doxa. The practical implication is that attempts to resolve this tension, to achieve perfect synthesis of artistic and commercial values, to transcend the art/commerce binary, may be conceptually misguided. The tension may be permanent and productive rather than temporary and problematic. A feature of the system rather than a bug to be fixed.

## **Unexpected Findings**

Several unexpected findings emerged from this research. The strength of frustration with Screen Ireland as a theme was unexpected, emerging as a very strong discussion point across

multiple interviews. As discussed in Chapter 8, participants articulated detailed and often passionate criticisms of Screen Ireland funding processes, decision making criteria, and institutional decisions. One possible explanation for this finding could be selection bias, with those most frustrated being more willing to participate in research examining Irish screenwriting practice. However, the participant group included screenwriters at various career stages with different levels of industry engagement, suggesting this frustration extends beyond those wholly excluded from funding structures. Nevertheless, this finding warrants careful consideration as a potential limitation of this study.

The screenwriting consultant interviewed for this study took a much more pragmatic view of Screen Ireland, acknowledging flaws in the funding system while maintaining that Irish screenwriters are fortunate to have access to public funding. This more measured perspective contrasts with the stronger criticisms articulated by other participants, suggesting that proximity to and integration within industry structures may shape attitudes toward institutional funding.

### **Limitations of the Study**

As with all research, this study has limitations that must be acknowledged, as recognising these weaknesses is crucial for understanding the scope and generalisability of the findings (Cresswell, 1998; Merriam and Tisdell, 2015). Three key limitations require particular attention, researcher positionality and bias, representativeness, and the inherent methodological challenges of studying doxa.

#### ***Researcher Positionality and Bias***

The first significant limitation concerns my own position and potential biases toward screenwriting (Cresswell, 1998; Merriam and Tisdell, 2015). This research emerged from dual

professional identities as both a creative writer and a teacher of screenwriting. My creative practice includes writing short stories, poetry, novella, and scripts while the teaching role involves instructing students in screenwriting craft. Both of these positions necessarily shape how screenwriting is understood and what questions appear significant to investigate. As both practitioner and teacher, I approach screenwriting as a learned craft requiring technical skill, but one that should enable rather than constrain creative expression. The initial motivation for this research grew from personal examination of screenwriting manuals and their prescriptive rules. Finding these texts simultaneously helpful and limiting, both as a creative practitioner and as a teacher established a particular orientation toward the research problem before data collection began. This prior positioning creates potential for confirmation biases where I might be predisposed to find evidence supporting preexisting views about the tensions between rules and creativity, orthodoxy and creative freedom.

Qualitative research, particularly research involving interviews and thematic analysis, requires interpretation at every stage (Cresswell, 1998; Merriam and Tisdell, 2015). The researchers' values, experiences, and theoretical perspective, inevitably influence which themes are identified as significant, how participant statements are understood, and which patterns are emphasised in analysis. While efforts were made to 'bracket' (Husserl, 1989; Husserl, 2002) this positionality and to ground interpretations in participant statements rather than imposing predetermined frameworks, complete objectivity remains impossible in interpretive research such as this. The researcher's position as both practitioner and educator, while providing valuable insight or knowledge, also creates blind spots and assumptions that may have shaped the research in ways that are challenging for me to fully recognise (Cresswell, 1998; Merriam and Tisdell, 2015).

## *Representativeness*

The second limitation concerned the small scale of the study and the representativeness of the participant cohort. This study conducted interviews with 19 participants who intersect with screenwriting practice in Ireland, including screenwriters, producers, directors, academics, teachers, and consultants. While this represents a substantial data set for qualitative case study research, questions remain about whether the sample adequately captures the full diversity of perspectives within Irish screenwriting practice.

The challenge of securing willing participants shaped the final cohort. The researcher reached out to over 60 potential interviewees based on their proximity to screenwriting practice, ultimately securing 19 participants. Those who agreed to participate may differ systematically from those who declined or did not respond. Participants who felt marginalised, frustrated, or critical of current structures may have been more motivated to participate than those who felt satisfied or successful within existing systems. This potential selection bias could shape the findings toward greater emphasis on tensions, frustrations, and conflicts than might emerge from a sample including more voices of those well integrated into and satisfied with Irish screenwriting funding structures.

The finding regarding frustrations with Screen Ireland illustrates this concern. The strength of criticism directed towards Screen Ireland raises questions about whether the participant cohort disproportionately consisted of outsiders rather than insiders, those who felt excluded from, rather than supported by funding structures. The absence of Screen Ireland representatives from the study also represents a significant gap. Despite multiple attempts to secure participation from Screen Ireland, no representative agreed to participate in interviews. This absence means the institutional perspective on funding decisions, development priorities, and relationships with screenwriters remains underrepresented in this data. Including Screen Ireland's perspective might have provided important context for understanding how funding



criteria are established, what considerations shape selection decisions, and how institutional representatives perceive their relationships with the screenwriting community. This absence raises questions about institutional transparency and accountability, particularly given Screen Ireland's role as a publicly funded body shaping Irish screenwriting practice.

More broadly the sample may not adequately represent the full spectrum of Irish screenwriting practice. The study focused primarily on those working in narrative fiction film, with less attention to other forms such as documentary, television, animation, or digital media. The experiences and perspectives of screenwriters working in these other domains might reveal different patterns and tensions than those identified in this research. Additionally, the geographic concentration of the Irish film industry in Dublin and the study's access to participants primarily through industry networks may mean that the perspectives from screenwriters working outside these central networks are underrepresented.

### ***Methodological Challenges of Studying Doxa***

The third key limitation concerns the inherent methodological challenges involved in studying doxa itself. As Bourdieu (1977) conceptualised it, doxa operates at the level of taken-for-granted assumptions, the implicit beliefs that go without saying precisely because they cannot be said. This creates a fundamental methodological paradox: how can research reveal what is taken-for-granted when the very act of research and articulation transforms doxa into something conscious and explicit?

The challenge can be framed in this way: if doxa represents assumptions so deeply embedded that they appear natural and unremarkable, how can interview based research access these assumptions? The moment participants articulate beliefs or describe practices; those beliefs and practices move from the unconscious doxa to conscious discourse. Participants in interviews necessarily reflect on and articulate views that in everyday practice might operate

at a pre-reflexive level. The research context itself could transform doxa, making visible what normally remains invisible. This methodological challenge means that what this research captures may be better characterised as the articulated semi-conscious aspects of the screenwriting doxa rather than its deepest, most thoroughly naturalised assumptions. The findings reveal what participants can and do say about screenwriting practice when prompted to reflect on it but may not fully access the most fundamental assumptions that structure practice without ever being consciously acknowledged. Some aspects of doxa may operate at such a deep level that they remain beyond the reach of interview based, qualitative research. Furthermore, the scale of dealing with doxa presents challenges for establishing clear boundaries around the research. Doxa encompasses all the taken-for-granted views about a practice, representing a potentially vast and amorphous object of study. This research addressed this challenge by focusing on specific thematic domains, such as the learning journey, screenwriting manuals, rules of the game, Irish scripts, and frustrations with funders. These themes emerged through the analysis as significant places where the orthodox/heterodox tension manifested. However, many other potential themes and dimensions of screenwriting doxa necessarily had to be excluded to maintain focus and keep the project at a manageable size. Other themes that emerged from the data, included the challenges of becoming a writer, questions of authorship, and the necessity for screenwriters to be ‘jacks of all trades’, but these fell outside the scope of this study.

The research also faced limitations in terms of time. This case study captures Irish screenwriting practice at a particular historical moment, during the period when the interviews were conducted. Doxa is not static but evolves over time and responds to changing material conditions, institutional structures, and cultural contexts. The findings thus represent a snapshot of Irish screenwriting doxa at this particular time, which may not reflect earlier screenwriting practice or predict future developments. Changes in funding structures, educational

institutions, global market conditions, or technological advancements in film production and distribution could all reshape the doxa in ways this research cannot anticipate.

Despite these limitations, the research makes unique and valuable contributions to understanding Irish screenwriting practice and to developing conceptual approaches for studying creative practice through the lens of doxa (Bourdieu, 1977, pp.159-171). Acknowledging these limitations helps to properly contextualise the findings and suggest directions for future research that might address these gaps and constraints.

## **Recommendations**

### ***Theoretical Contributions***

This research makes several important contributions to Irish screenwriting scholarship and to the broader study of creative practice. First, it addresses a notable gap in academic research on Irish screenwriting. As mentioned previously, Irish film has been the subject of extensive scholarly attention across multiple dimensions, including national cinema, sexuality and gender, cultural memory, narrative strategies, industry trends and policy, but the practice of Irish screenwriting remains largely underexplored. This research contributes to filling this gap by providing a systematic examination of the assumptions, tensions, and structures, that shape Irish screenwriting as a practice.

This research also offers novel insights into an underrepresented area of film studies, demonstrating how screenwriting practice in a small national cinema context differs from and aligns with international patterns. The finding that what constitutes orthodoxy and heterodoxy in Irish screenwriting doxa is challenged and contested in certain domains, with the Irish doxa privileging artistic and arthouse values over commercial imperatives in ways that distinguish it from larger commercial film industries, represents a contribution to understanding how

national context shapes national cinema. This has implications for understanding other smaller national cinemas and how they navigate relationships between local cultural expression and global market forces (Murphy, 2024; Noonan, 2024; O'Brien and Canning, 2020).

Theoretically, the research demonstrates the utility of Bourdieu's concept of doxa as an analytical tool for examining creative practice (Bourdieu, 1977, pp.159-171). While Bourdieu's work has been widely influential across social sciences and humanities (Grenfell, 2014, pp.1-25), and while doxa has been applied to other media practices including journalism (Schultz, 2007) and UK screenwriting (Macdonald, 2013), this research extends these applications in new directions. The theoretical proposition that the tension between orthodoxy and heterodoxy itself constitutes doxa, rather than these positions emerging as responses to revealed doxa, represents a nuanced reading of Bourdieu position. This reconsideration of where the naturalisation occurs, has potential applications beyond screenwriting to other creative practices where art/commerce tensions structure the field.

The study's interdisciplinary approach also represents another contribution to media studies. By bringing together education, arts practice, philosophy, and film studies, the research demonstrates how conceptual frameworks from different disciplines can be productively combined to generate fresh perspectives on cultural production of media. This interdisciplinary fusion offers models for future research that seeks to understand creative practices through multiple theoretical lenses rather than remaining within single disciplinary boundaries.

### ***Practical Implications***

Beyond theoretical contributions, this research has practical implications for understanding and potentially transforming Irish screenwriting practice and film production. Following Bourdieu's (1977) model, by making visible the assumptions and tensions that structure Irish screenwriting, the research creates possibilities for critical reflection and deliberate

intervention. Awareness of how doxa operates, what assumptions go unquestioned, and what tensions define practice can enable practitioners, educators, and institutions to make more informed and intentional choices.

This research raises awareness about the taken-for-granted positions that shape the funding and selection of scripts that progress to production. The move from script to production, from written blueprint to released film, represents a crucial but underexplored dimension of Irish and global film studies. As the screenplay is acknowledged as the blueprint for film production, the document that begins the production process and determines what types of stories get told, it deserves much more critical attention than it has historically received. Understanding how doxa shapes which scripts are regarded as fundable, producible, and valuable has implications for the diversity and range of stories that appear on Irish screens.

For funding bodies such as Screen Ireland, this research offers insights into how their policies and practices are perceived by screenwriters and other industry practitioners. The frustrations articulated by participants, while potentially representing particular individuals' perspectives, rather than universal views, nevertheless highlight areas where greater transparency, clearer communication and more explicit articulation of funding criteria might improve relationships between institutions and practitioners. Understanding that the doxa creates contradictory paradoxical pressures, pushing screenwriters toward both artistic authenticity *and* commercial viability, toward both local specificity *and* universal appeal, might enable funding bodies to more thoughtfully navigate these tensions and support screenwriters in managing them.

For screenwriting education, the findings have implications for teaching practice and curriculum design. The tension between academic approaches that tend toward heterodox artistic values, and industry expectations that often favour orthodox commercial principles, creates challenges for educators preparing students for professional screenwriting careers.

Awareness of this tension and explicit discussion of it might better prepare emerging screenwriters to navigate the contradictory demands they will face. Rather than positioning academic training and industry practice as opposed, educators might help students develop skills to work productively within the tension, understanding it as a permanent feature of creative practice under contemporary conditions rather than as a problem that individual talent or skill can resolve.

For practitioners, this research offers frameworks for understanding their own experiences and frustrations. The recognition that tensions between artistic aspirations and commercial pressures are structural features of screenwriting practice rather than personal failures or individual shortcomings might provide some relief from the frustrations that participants described. Understanding these tensions as doxic, as built into the very structure of screenwriting as a practice, might enable more realistic expectations and more strategic navigation of contradictory demands. It might also foster solidarity and collective approaches to addressing structural issues rather than experiencing these tensions as isolated individual struggles.

The research also has implications for debates about cultural policy and support for Irish cinema. The finding that Irish screenwriting doxa privileges small-scale, artistically ambitious dramas over commercial genre films reflects strategic choices about how Irish cinema positions itself internationally (Noonan, 2024). Making these choices explicit and subjecting them to critical examination will enable more deliberate cultural policy discussions about what kinds of stories Irish public funding should support, how to balance cultural and economic imperatives, and how to create space for diverse approaches to Irish screenwriting and filmmaking. The research claims that current structures, whether intentionally or not, orient Irish screenwriting practice toward particular approaches and away from others. Awareness of

these shaping effects creates possibilities for expanding the range of what counts as valuable Irish screen stories.

### ***Directions for Future Research***

This project opens multiple potential rich and important avenues for future research. Several themes that emerged from the data, that could not be explored within the scope of this project, would benefit from further research, such as the challenges of becoming a writer, questions of authorship, and the necessity for screenwriters to be ‘jacks of all trades’.

The challenges participants described in becoming writers, often articulated as ‘I always wanted to be a writer but’ requires research examining barriers to entry into screenwriting and how aspiring screenwriters navigate obstacles such as class, education, gender, geography, and network access. Understanding who gets to become a screenwriter in Ireland and what systemic factors enable or prevent access to the profession has implications for diversity and inclusion in Irish film.

Questions of authorship and collaboration represent another potentially rich area for future research. Participants voiced tensions with directors and debates about who constitutes the author of the finished film, engaging with longstanding debates about auteur theory and creative ownership in collaborative media (Caughie, 1981; Gaut, 1999; Gerstner and Staiger, 2002; Sellors, 2011; Staiger, 2013). Further research examining how Irish screenwriters understand and negotiate their authorship role in relation to directors and producers and other collaborators will contribute to understanding the social and creative dynamics of Irish film production. This could include examination of how different models of collaborative practice shape creative outcomes and how Irish screenwriters advocate for their vision within the Irish production system.

The finding that many Irish screenwriters feel that they must be ‘jacks of all trades’, combining screenwriting with teaching, consulting, producing, directing, and other activities to earn a living, is also worth further study. Research examining the economic precarity of Irish screenwriting careers, strategies for managing portfolio careers across multiple roles, and how this economic context shapes Irish creative practice will contribute to understanding creative labour conditions in Ireland. This should include comparative research examining how screenwriting career patterns in Ireland differ from those in larger markets or countries with different funding models.

The move from script to production represents another crucial area for future research. How and why is one script selected for the development and production while others are rejected? What criteria operates in the selection processes, and how do they vary across different funding sources, production companies, and market contexts? The lack of transparency around decision making that participants identified suggests the value of research to make these processes more visible and accountable. This should include analysis of funded versus unfunded scripts, more interviews with development executives and producers about selection criteria, and examination of how Irish scripts change through development processes.

Further research should also investigate the doxa of screenwriting practice not exhaustively covered in this study, including across non-fiction genres such as documentary, television, animation, and in digital media. Each of these forms of scriptwriting may have distinct doxa, with different tensions and assumptions than those identified here in narrative fiction film screenwriting. Comparative research across these different domains could reveal how genre and medium shape creative practice and what dimensions of doxa carry across contexts versus those specific to particular forms.

Another productive direction for future research, which contributes to the sub-field of philosophy and film, is to examine the theme of ‘rules of the game’ in screenwriting through



the lens of Michel Foucault's concept of the 'Panopticon' (Foucault, 1995, pp.144-164). Foucault's Panopticon describes how surveillance creates self-discipline, where individuals internalise authority and regulate their own behaviour without direct coercion. In his work *Discipline and Punish* Foucault (1977), argues that the power of the Panopticon lies not in constant actual surveillance but in the *possibility* of being watched, which causes subjects to internalise disciplinary norms and monitor themselves. Applied to Irish screenwriting practice, this framework could illuminate how screenwriters internalise the rules of the game around: structure, character arcs, conflict, change, not through external enforcement through but through anticipation of evaluation. As participants described in the findings above, they often self-regulate their creative choices based on imagined readers, such as script consultants, development executives, funding bodies, producers, and audiences. The panoptic concept operates through these multiple perspectives, such as educational institutions that teach orthodox principles, development processes that assess scripts against established criteria, funding applications that require demonstration of commercial viability or artistic merit according to institutional definitions.

Self-surveillance may be particularly acute in a small, densely networked industry such as Ireland's (O'Brien, 2019), where screenwriters know their work will be evaluated by a limited number of gatekeepers with whom they may have repeated interactions. Internalisation of rules becomes a strategy for navigating this surveillance, pre-emptively conforming to perceived expectations to increase chances of success. Yet this self-discipline operates largely unconsciously, experienced not as an external constraint but as craft knowledge, simply 'knowing' how to write a 'good' screenplay. Further research examining screenwriting through this lens could investigate how 'Panoptic' self-regulation shapes creative choices, how screenwriters anticipate and respond to imagined evaluation, and how power operates through self-regulation rather than overt censorship. This could include analysis of how feedback and

development processes function as disciplinary processes, how educational institutions transmit not just craft skills but modes of self-surveillance, and how the possibility of funding or production opportunities creates conditions for self-regulation. Such research could complement the Bourdieu analysis utilised in this research by examining how doxa operates as internalised disciplinary mechanisms that shape practice from within, further demonstrating the value of philosophical approaches to screenwriting and creative industries research.

Comparative research examining screenwriting doxa in other small national cinemas will also help to distinguish what is specifically Irish about the patterns identified here from what might be common to small cinemas generally. Comparing Irish screenwriting practice with Scottish, Welsh, Danish, or New Zealand screenwriting (Brown, 2011; Farley et al., 2009; Joyce, 2015; McElroy, 2016; Redvall, 2013), for instance, might reveal whether the contested boundaries of heterodoxy that privilege artistic over commercial imperatives are particular to Ireland or common to small nations navigating relationships with larger film markets. Such comparative research has not been undertaken to date, and further scholarship examining screenwriting practices across small national cinemas is needed to support these nations in competing effectively within global film markets.

Longitudinal research tracking how Irish screenwriting doxa evolves over time could also provide valuable insights into how cultural and material changes reshape creative practice. Changes in funding models, educational institutions, distribution platforms, international co-production arrangements, or broader cultural changes might all influence what doxic assumption's structure Irish screenwriting in the future. Periodic reassessment of the doxa will document these changes and examine what factors drive doxa shifts or changes.

Finally research that tests whether raising awareness of doxa enables transformation of practice will have both theoretical and practical value for the Irish film industry. If making doxic assumptions explicit creates possibilities for questioning and revising them as Bourdieu

suggests (Bourdieu, 1977, pp.159-171; Deer, 2014, pp.114-125), then research designed to test this proposition through workshops, education interventions, or institutional and policy changes could establish whether and how consciousness of doxa translates into changed practice. Such research would need to navigate the paradox that awareness of doxa transforms it, perhaps creating new forms of doxa rather than escaping doxic thinking altogether.

## Conclusion

This research has advanced understanding of the doxa of Irish screenwriting, examining the taken-for-granted assumptions that structure screenwriting practice in Ireland and makes several important contributions. It addresses a significant conceptual and empirical gap in scholarship on Irish screenwriting, providing systematic examination of an important but neglected area of Irish film studies with implications for understanding screenwriting practices in small national cinemas internationally. It offers theoretical reconsideration of Bourdieu's concepts, proposing that the tension between orthodoxy and heterodoxy itself constitutes doxa in Irish screenwriting, rather than these positions emerging as responses to revealed doxa. It provides methodological models for studying creative practice through the lens of doxa, demonstrating the value of this approach for making visible normally implicit assumptions.

The research also illuminates dimensions of the practice of Irish screenwriting, revealing how doxa shapes which scripts receive funding, what types of stories get told, how screenwriters navigate contradictory demands, and what frustrations and tensions define screenwriters working conditions. For example, at the time of writing, Screen Ireland announced the 12 screenwriters selected for its 'Spotlight: Irish Myths and Legends' scheme from 350 applications (Screen Ireland, 2026). The announcement exemplifies the doxic patterns identified in this research: the privileging of Irish cultural heritage and literary tradition, the institutional gatekeeping that shapes which stories receive developmental support, and the emphasis on artistic authenticity within prescribed parameters. The scheme's focus on mythology and cultural heritage over commercial genre forms also precisely reflects the distinctly Irish inflection of screenwriting doxa that participants consistently identified, demonstrating how institutional structures continue to naturalise particular approaches to storytelling as self-evidently appropriate for Irish screenwriting. By making these structures visible the research creates possibilities for critical reflection and deliberate intervention.

This research demonstrates that the tension between artistic aspiration and commercial reality is fundamental in Irish screenwriting practice under contemporary conditions, captured in Kearney's notion of Irish culture as perpetually 'in transit between two worlds', as inhabiting a liminal space between 'twosome twiminds' (Kearney, 1988, p.14). Rather than seeking to resolve this tension, the practical task becomes navigation: developing capacities to work with contradictions, creating structures that support practitioners in managing these persistent tensions, and fostering solidarity by recognising that these struggles are collective and structural rather than individual and persona.

Building on work by Bourdieu (1977), Schultz (2007), and Macdonald (2013), this research has made visible what normally remains invisible and articulated what usually goes without saying. In doing so it has created space for questioning, for imagining alternatives, for recognising that what appears natural is in fact constructed and therefore potentially open to reimagining (Bourdieu, 1977, pp.159-171; Deer, 2014, pp.114-125). Whether awareness of doxa actually enables the transformation of practice, or whether such awareness simply generates new forms of doxa that operate at deeper levels, remains an open question. However, bringing consciousness to unconscious structures, making explicit what operates implicitly, represents a starting point for any practice that needs to be reflexive and self-aware, rather than simply reproduce existing patterns and structures.

The doxa of Irish screenwriting will continue to evolve, shaped by changing material conditions, institutional structures, technological advances, and cultural currents. This research captures a particular moment in that ongoing evolution, offering a snapshot of how Irish screenwriting is understood by a selection of participants who intersect with the practice. Future researchers will be able to examine how the doxa has changed, what new tensions have emerged, what assumptions have been questioned or naturalised. For now, this study

establishes a foundation for understanding the doxa of Irish screenwriting within which Irish screenwriters work.

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## Appendix: Participant Overview

*\* All names are pseudonyms used to protect participant anonymity.*

| No. | Pseudonym* | Gender | Primary Role(s)                                     | Career Stage |
|-----|------------|--------|-----------------------------------------------------|--------------|
| 1   | Ciara      | F      | Writer, Screenwriter, Producer, Tutor               | Established  |
| 2   | Liam       | M      | Screenwriter, Academic, Script Consultant           | Established  |
| 3   | Orla       | F      | Screenwriter, Director, Producer, Script Consultant | Emerging     |
| 4   | Sarah      | F      | Screenwriter, Tutor, Consultant                     | Established  |
| 5   | Brian      | M      | Writer, Producer, Script Consultant                 | Established  |
| 6   | Amy        | F      | Screenwriter, Director, Actress, Lecturer           | Established  |
| 7   | James      | M      | Filmmaker, Educator                                 | Established  |
| 8   | Emily      | F      | Producer, Director, Writer                          | Established  |
| 9   | Finn       | M      | Independent Producer                                | Established  |
| 10  | Peter      | M      | Actor, Writer                                       | Established  |
| 11  | Irene      | F      | Playwright, Screenwriter                            | Emerging     |
| 12  | Maeve      | F      | Screenwriter                                        | Emerging     |
| 13  | Sinead     | F      | Writer, Actress                                     | Established  |
| 14  | Eric       | M      | Screenwriter, Filmmaker, Podcaster                  | Emerging     |
| 15  | Dara       | M      | Lecturer, Screenwriter, Researcher                  | Emerging     |
| 16  | Aine       | F      | Screenwriter                                        | Established  |
| 17  | Aoife      | F      | Producer                                            | Emerging     |
| 18  | Luke       | M      | Filmmaker, Archivist                                | Emerging     |
| 19  | Sean       | M      | Academic, Lecturer                                  | Established  |

*Career Stage key: Established = substantial body of produced/credited work; Emerging = developing career; fewer produced credits.*