

‘To make you see’: Screenwriting, description and the ‘lens-based’ tradition

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Abstract

In this article I look at the descriptive writing in the screenplay, and link this to a tradition of ‘lens-based writing’, the precise visual description of phenomena observed through a lens for an audience unable to see what was described, which can be traced from the writing of Galileo and van Leeuwenhoek, through scientific and travel writing, to early fiction (with particular emphasis on Robinson Crusoe). I identify the most significant features of lens-based writing – the use of simple language and the separation of observation and deduction to communicate what has been seen through a simultaneous act of looking and framing, and show the similarities between this and screenwriting practice. I also make some observations about what this model can offer screenwriting research.

Keywords

lens-based writing

observation

screenplay

description

prosthetics

telescope

lens

optics

My task [...] is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel – it is, above all, to make you see. (Conrad 1897: xiv)

What is the relationship between looking through a lens and writing? What can this kind of writing tell us about writing for the screen? In this article I want to consider screenwriting as an attempt to reproduce a very specific kind of prosthetic visual perception, and look at how screenwriting may be differently understood by thinking of it as a lens-based-practice. I re-evaluate the impact of the lens and the need to record what was seen with it on the practice of descriptive writing with examples from Galileo's observations of the moon in 1610 to Darwin's *Voyage of the Beagle* in 1845 and speculate on this lens-based writing as one of the forces creating the modern novel.¹

What distinguishes the screenplay from other forms of dramatic writing is that it is always intended for a mediated form. Whatever is described will be seen and recorded through a lens, and the lens is inevitably at the centre of the practice. This description of C. C. Baxter's apartment in *The Apartment* (1960) written by Billy Wilder and I. A. L. Diamond shows quite how much the lens is implicitly present. The writing selects and frames specific detail exactly as a camera does. We are told where to look and what to see.

What used to be the upstairs parlor of a one-family house in the early 1900's has been chopped up into living room, bedroom, bathroom and kitchen. The wallpaper is faded, the carpets are threadbare, and the upholstered furniture could stand shampooing. There are lots of books, a record player, stacks of records, a television set (21 inches and 24 payments), unframed prints from the Museum of Modern Art (Picasso, Braque, Klee) tacked up on the walls. Only one lamp is lit, for mood, and a cha-cha record is spinning around on the phonograph. On the coffee table in front of the couch are a couple of cocktail glasses, a pitcher with some martini dregs, an almost empty bottle of vodka, a soup bowl with a few melting ice cubes at the bottom, some potato chips, an ashtray filled with cigar stubs and lipstick-stained cigarette butts, and a woman's handbag.

Mr. Kirkeby, a dapper, middle-aged man, stands in front of the mirror above the fake fireplace, buttoning up his vest. He does not notice that the buttons are out of alignment.

Everything described, from the state of the wallpaper to the decorations on the wall, indicates something about the place and what happens there. We are introduced to the character of C. C. Baxter and his rented-by-the-hour apartment through the traces left behind – which we observe and then deduce.

As Murray Pomerance has written ‘Characters onscreen are all strangers we must labour to identify. And in watching cinema, we become detectives ourselves, returning (or returning again) to the scene of the crime’ (2011). Whether we are considering the building where the eponymous apartment is situated, or the behaviour of characters within, we are shown simply but precisely described and observable phenomena, in which there is a clear separation of the observed and the deduced.

Here is an example of another film from 50 years later. *Black Swan* (2010, directed by Darren Aronofsky and written by Mark Heyman, Andres Heinz and John J. Maclaughlin):

1 A SPOTLIGHT slices black space. In its beam, a DANCER materializes. She is fair-skinned. Beautiful and pure. The maiden twirls on pointe, a smile on her face, light as air and carefree. She pauses, her face grows worried. Sensing someone watching. Scared, she peers into the darkness. She moves now, looking, growing more frantic. Then, a SINISTER MAN emerges out of the darkness behind her. She stumbles backwards, frightened. She tries to escape, twirling away, but he pursues. His true form is revealed, the demon ROTHBART.

He flings his open hand towards her, casting the spell. She wants to scream, but nothing comes out. She looks at her body, sensing something happening to her. Something terrifying. She spins, panicking, but it’s too

late. She disappears beneath the beast's cape. She emerges as the WHITE SWAN, the iconic protagonist of SWAN LAKE. CUT TO BLACK.

2 INT. NINA'S BEDROOM – MORNING 2 In the darkness, a pair of EYES. They belong to NINA, the same dancer. She lies awake in bed, thinking about her dream. The room looks like it hasn't been redecorated since she was a teenager. Stuffed animals. Dolls. Pink and frilly. The door opens, throwing LIGHT on her face. Nina looks towards the door and smiles softly at whoever opened it. Nina sits up and hangs her BARE FEET off the side of the bed. Like all ballerinas, she's beautiful and her feet are atrocious. Covered in corns, broken blisters and bunions. She arches them, doing her first extensions of the day.

In both scenes everything is observed. There are implied framings and close-ups, in order to see, for example, the level of damage to Nina's feet. There is a difference in style between the dream sequence with a more poetic and abstract use of language, and the more down to earth description in the second scene – but in both scenes almost all the information conveyed to the audience comes from what is seen and heard.

The one variation from the purely observed ('Like all ballerinas she's beautiful and her feet are atrocious') hints at a lifetime of observation and familiarity with the subject, and also creates a sense of intimacy with the reader.

The third example, from *The Greatest Muppet Movie of All Time* (2010) (released as *The Muppets*, directed by James Bonin and written by Jason Segel and Nicholas Stoller), uses a different technique. The screenplay reads more like a set of instructions than a piece of descriptive prose.

We see a flashback of the Muppet Show sign Dropping with Fozzie in the O. The O breaks off and hangs by one screw. It then smashes to the ground.

-Miss Piggy in the 'O' She's holding on for dear life and screaming.

-Sweet Ums in the 'O'. Or rather only the bottom half of Sweet Ums. The top half of him is off screen. The Muppet Show sign is dropping. There's no one in the 'O'. Suddenly the O catches fire and Gonzo in a Motorcycle FLIES THROUGH THE O. or rather tries to fly through the O he basically SMASHES right into the O. he and the rest of the Sign catches on fire. Several Muppets put him out with fire hose.

Though this film is a comedy, the screenplay is not itself comic – its purpose is not to entertain, but to describe what will be seen. It is both a list of shots and a set of instructions of events to be framed. The screenplay is engaging in an act of description, not in order to make the reader laugh but to list the images believed necessary to elicit laughter in the audience of the finished film. Although there is less evidence of implicit framing in this screenplay than in the other two examples, the lens is still implicitly ever-present. Without framing the Muppets could not come to life.

Steven Maras in *Screenwriting – History Theory and Practice* shows how early how-to manuals talk about the need for screenwriters to develop ‘a camera eye’ or a picturing eye. ‘The photoplay has a language of its own. The language of the camera’ (Maras 2009: 144).

If learning ‘the language of the camera’ was seen as necessary skill for the practice of screenwriting from the moment it became a distinct discipline, then it is productive, I think to examine how descriptive writing was transformed by the mediatization that came with the lens. Not only can we learn how a heuristics of lens-based writing were developed, we can also consider the changes in subjectivity that came with prosthetic vision and mediated prose. Screenwriting is a form whose essence is to indicate a visual experience in prose. How have others used prose to communicate what they had seen?

The following is an attempt to list what I think are the particularities of lens-based writing.

- Prosthetic: using telescopic or microscopic lenses to see further/in greater detail
- Historic: recording what has been seen for posterity or for others unable to see
- Analytic: describing things in a form which allows deductions to be made about the nature of the objects or phenomena observed
- Aesthetic: viewing and framing simultaneously
- Diachronic: observing how things change over time
- Scopophilic: frequently involves viewing without being seen

The lens changed the act of looking in two distinct ways – first, looking through a lens involves a simultaneous act of looking and framing – a mediatization occurs *at the moment of looking*. Second, looking at something through a lens involves, perhaps for the first time, a simultaneous presence at and remoteness from the action or object observed. Framing and point of view are implicit in all lens-based writing.

Once the observer is located in a different plane from what they look at they can be said to be both present and not present at what they are seeing. It is not just the act of looking that has been transformed, but the human relationship with the world around us. Things were seen that had not been seen before, from the surface of the moon to single-celled organisms or the inner structure of the natural world. Moreover familiar things could be seen from new angles – common objects looked strange and different when looked at through a lens. There was an enormous increase in the amount of visual information that could be taken from the world and a need for a different writing style that could record and communicate this information.

From the seventeenth century on, one can trace how prose style changes as it adapts to this specific purpose in order to better realize what Eisenstein later called the ‘visual exposition of facts’.² Thomas Sprat’s *History of the Royal Society of London*, published in 1667, contains a manifesto for a different form of writing to record the observed. Sprat describes the policy of the Royal Society as to ‘reject all amplifications, digressions, and swellings of style’ and return to a ‘primitive purity’ ‘a close, naked, natural way of

speaking, positive expressions, clear senses, a native easiness, bringing all things as near the mathematical plainness as they can' and preferring 'the language of Artisans Countrymen and Merchants before that of Wits or Scholars' (1667). He criticizes previous forms for their 'vicious abundance of Phrase, this rick of Metaphors, this volubility of tongue' and for the '[...] many mists and uncertainties these specious tropes have brought on our Knowledge' (Sprat 1667: 113).

Scientist Robert Boyle describes his own practice as follows: (as advice to the screenwriter it still holds pretty good)

And as for the style of our Experimental Essays, [...] I have endeavour'd to write rather in a Philosophical than a Rhetorical strain, as desiring, that my Expressions should be rather clear and significant, than curiously adorn'd [...] where our Designe is only to inform Readers, not to delight or perswade them, Perspicuity ought to be esteem'd at least one of the best Qualifications of a style, and to affect needlesse Rhetorical Ornaments in setting down an Experiment, or explicating something Abstruse in Nature, were little lesse improper than it were... to paint the Eye-glasses of a Telescope, whose clearness is their Commendation, in which ev'n the most delightfull Colours cannot so much please the Eye as they would hinder the sight. (1661: 11–12)

Boyle's reference to the 'Eye-glasses of a Telescope, whose clearness is their commendation' is particularly telling about the role of the lens in transforming writing style and the importance of clarity between what is written and what is seen. But even before these heuristics for good practice in scientific description were developed, the stylistic traits they reference are evident in the very earliest example of lens-based writing.

The history of lens-based writing

It is hard to put a date on the invention of the lens, which was a secret technology with huge military application. David Hockney and Charles Falco have posited that artists like van Eyck were using curved mirrors by the fifteenth century (Hockney 2006). But we can identify the moment when lens-based writing began, with Galileo's *Sidereus Nuncius/The Starry Messenger* in which he published his observations of the moon through a telescope. Here he describes the moon seen through a telescope.

For greater clarity I distinguish two parts of this surface, a lighter and a darker; the lighter part seems to surround and to pervade the whole hemisphere, while the darker part discolours the moon's surface like a kind of cloud, and makes it appear covered with spots. Now those spots which are fairly dark and rather large are plain to everyone [...] these I shall call the 'large' or 'ancient' spots, distinguishing them from others that are smaller in size but so numerous as to occur all over the lunar surface [...].

The latter spots had never been seen by anyone before me. From

observations of these spots repeated many times I have been led to the opinion and conviction that the surface of the moon is not smooth, uniform, and precisely spherical as a great number of philosophers believe it [...] to be, but is uneven, rough, and full of cavities and prominences, being not unlike the face of the earth, relieved by chains of mountains and deep valleys. (Galilei 1610: n.p.)

Galileo uses prose to record change over time, just as a film camera does. He describes in meticulous detail what he observes before drawing his conclusions, and makes pains to separate pure observation from deduction and analysis. This text, the first piece of lens-based writing, is already developing a different way of describing what is seen.

In *The Eye of the Lynx*, David Freedberg's magnificent account of how the Society of the Lynx, the group of naturalists (of which Galileo was a member) used the new technology to undertake the pictorial representation of nature, Freedberg argues that the project necessitated – due to the use of lenses – a change to the vernacular. He remarks of the description of a bee seen through the microscope, which appears at the end of Stelluti's translation of Perius, 'It is written in the plainest and most direct vernacular. The facts are presented for what they are and not their antiquarian or panegyric implications' (Freedberg 2003: 189). Freedberg stresses that it is the need for a different kind of description, which demanded a different kind of writing. '[...] tradition and dogma stood in the way of the discovery of scientific truth. It was imperative to rely on observation and hypothesis' (Freedberg 2003: 192).

The lens created a paradigm shift. Before a bee can be examined through the lens it is like all other bees; without the prosthesis it is impossible to separate lore, observations, metaphor or myth. As classicist and beekeeper B. G. Whitfield, observed in ‘Virgil and the bees: A study in ancient apicultural lore’:

Ancient writers on bees did not mind borrowing, and, mostly, they did not bother to acknowledge their debt [...]. A case in point is provided by the statement that in a wind bees ballast themselves by means of tiny pebbles. This is actually a misapprehension founded on observation, perhaps of heavy loads of pollen [...]. Pliny the elder is the Roman example of the bee encyclopaedist [...]. There is no arrangement, no plan-just a medley of bee-knowledge culled from many fields [...]. (Whitfield 1956: 112)

Through the lens, an individual bee can be observed and described, and because of this precise observation it becomes possible to disentangle the skein of truth, myth and error which Whitfield describes. But that is dependent on precise and accurate description with a premium on clarity. Through examination of the bee’s appearance and physical structure, clearer and more accurate deductions can be made about what the bee is doing, what it is carrying, what it is eating. Through a lens it can be definitively determined, for example, that a bee does not carry tiny pebbles. We could say that the lens helps distinguish information from cultural noise, and a new kind of descriptive writing was needed which could help that distinction to be made more easily.

The lens problematized the seen and the known. The previously familiar could no longer be taken for granted when observed through the prosthetic vision of the lens. But historically the lens had been considered a construction whose main aim was not to aid, but to deceive the eye; lenses were initially associated with deception and magic rather than truth.³ As Stuart Clark describes in *Vanities of the Eye: Seeing and Early Modern Culture* (2007) the lens and its new applications made the nature of seeing and what was seen uncertain. As Yvonne Gaspar says, in her review of Clark's book, at this period '[...] the act of looking was perceived by viewers as almost never straightforward, and rarely to be trusted' (2008). Those making observations about events, cultures or places that could only be known through the lens, whether scientist, explorer or spy, needed a language which could convey what had been seen without rhetoric or assumption.

The task was to communicate the visible. By implication though lens-based writing involved deductions about the not-visible through what was manifested in the visible. It became crucial to be able to separate the facts of what had been observed from the deductions that had been made from them, and distinguish observation from the tangle of received wisdoms and assumptions in the mass of literature. A shift occurred from the general to the specific. Some of the most influential of the lens-based writers, like Dutch tradesman and scientist, 'the father of microbiology' Antonie van Leeuwenhoek and later the Swedish scientist Carl Linnaeus were unable to use the high-flown descriptive style of the literary world. Far from being a handicap, their vernacular style equipped them perfectly to describe what they saw with precision and clarity, uncluttered by

rhetoric. Clifford Dobell, a microbiologist who reassessed Leeuwenhoek's discoveries in the 1920s commented:

[van Leeuwenhoek] always presents his results in a way which, despite the imperfections of his language and his lack of scientific education, is a model for all other workers. He never confuses his facts with his speculations. When recording facts he invariably says 'I have observed [...]', but when giving his interpretations he prefaces them with 'but I imagine [...]' or 'I figure to myself [...]' Few scientific workers – or so it seems to me – have had so clear a conception of the boundary between observation and theory, fact and fancy, the concrete and the abstract.

(1960: 71)

Leeuwenhoek turned the microscope on the previously familiar and showed how unfamiliar it could be. His early letters to the Royal Society looked at 'air, blood, milk, bones, brain, spittle, cuticula, sweat, fat, tears, optic nerve, the sap of some plants, sugar, salt, trees, wine, muscle fibres, [...], cotton, and little animals in rain-, well-, sea-, and snow-water, also in water wherein pepper had lain infused'. He looked into his mouth, at his blood and at his semen (taking pains incidentally to reassure the Royal Society that 'what I investigate is only what, without sinfully defiling myself, remains as a residue after conjugal coitus'). Leeuwenhoek reported how in his own words:

I then most always saw, with great wonder, that in the said matter there were many very little living animalcules, very prettily a-moving. The biggest sort [...] had a very strong and swift motion, and shot through the water (or spittle) like a pike does through the water. The second sort [...] oft-times spun round like a top [...] and these were far more in number. (1683: 568)

In the mouth of an old man, Leeuwenhoek found

[...] an unbelievably great company of living animalcules, a-swimming more nimbly than any I had ever seen up to this time. The biggest sort [...] bent their body into curves in going forwards [...]. Moreover, the other animalcules were in such enormous numbers, that all the water [...] seemed to be alive. (1683: 569)

These creatures only visible through the lens and distinguished by how they move recall another kind of animal: Leeuwenhoek's animalcules, like the Muppets, could only be observed as living creatures when seen through a lens.

Remote viewing: Lens and travel writing

There was a huge expansion of travel writing as navigation became easier and safer. More places could be scrutinized through the new technologies and these new techniques allowed the reader to feel they too were embarking on the journey. The telescope and microscope were necessary for every serious venture. Linnaeus for example lists both a telescope and a microscope in his inventory for his Lapland Journey and the telescope and microscope Charles Darwin took on the *Beagle* can still be seen at Down House, Darwin's home in Great Britain for over 40 years. Some journeys were only made to look through a lens. Cook's first journey to Tahiti in 1769 was to observe the Transit of Venus through a telescope, and thus calculate the scale of the solar system.

A tradition of lens-based writing developed. To look at just one genealogy, Georg Forster who accompanied Cook on his second voyage published a best-selling account: *A Voyage Round the World in his Britannic Majesty's Sloop Resolution, Commanded by Capt. James Cook*. Forster on his return to Germany communicated with Lichtenberg and travelled with Alexander von Humboldt who Darwin called 'the greatest scientific traveller who ever lived' (1887: 247). An extract from von Humboldt's *Personal Narrative of Travels to the Equinoctial Regions of the New Continent* shows the increasing sophistication of lens-based writing and the combination of observation with a growing use of technical terms, which further increase precision.

Mr. von Buch has examined with a powerful lens the species we brought. He has discovered, that each crystal of pyroxene, enveloped in the earthy mass, is separated from it by fissures parallel to the sides of the crystal.

These fissures seem to be the effect of a contraction, which the mass or basis of the mandelstein has undergone [...]. (Humboldt 1818: 283)

This is condensed information that combines observation with classification, languages of geology and botany were also products of the lens. Von Humboldt's seven volumes were given to Darwin by John Steven Henslow,⁴ Professor of Botany at Cambridge to take with him on the *Beagle*. This beautiful piece of description from Darwin's record of the voyage shows how lens-based writing had come of age.

Several times when the ship has been some miles off the mouth of the Plata, and at other times when off the shores of Northern Patagonia, we have been surrounded by insects. One evening, when we were about ten miles from the Bay of San Blas, vast numbers of butterflies, in bands or flocks of countless myriads, extended as far as the eye could range. Even by the aid of a telescope it was not possible to see a space free from butterflies. The seamen cried out 'it was snowing butterflies,' and such in fact was the appearance. (Darwin 1839: 204)

Darwin is recording what has been seen and enabling it to be imagined visually by those readers who will never make the journey he has made. He invokes the telescope as an objective confirmation of the extraordinary phenomenon he has seen. It is an appeal to the instrument as scientific observer and guarantee of truth – even the telescope could not find 'a space free from butterflies'.

The lens and the novel

Lens-based writing ends up recording not just what is seen through the lens but the changes that occurred in how people perceived themselves, once the lens made it possible to watch and record without participating and to observe remotely detail and difference in both the far away and the extremely close. One can make a good case for the lens, at least as much as the printing press as being the technological breakthrough that brought about the novel. Printing meant that texts could be easily reproduced and made available. Lens-based writing brought together the acts of viewing, framing and writing, and gave a material reality to both the subjectivity of the viewer and the objectivity of what is viewed. With the lens comes the introduction of a notion of ‘point of view’.

Ian Watt’s seminal study in literary sociology, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* identifies Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) as the first novel in English. He defines the primary criterion of this new literary form as ‘truth to individual experience’ and identifies the new empiricism as a key factor in the rise of the novel. But empiricism itself can be seen as a response to the enhanced observation and the accompanying uncertainty about perception that came with the lens. In the mid-1600s, British philosopher John Locke, widely considered the first of the English empiricists and author of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* was a medical student and friend of polymath and philosopher Robert Hooke (author of the best-selling *Micrographia*) a professional user of the new technology.

At the heart of the novel are two forms of relationship to the world which can be directly related to the lens: observed behaviour of the individual in society and the simultaneous presence and absence of a narrator who observes without participation. In this context, it is worth considering the place of the telescope in Watt's candidate for the first novel in English. The 'perspective' or 'prospective glass' (Defoe uses both terms) first makes an appearance when Crusoe is rescued by the Portuguese ship:

With all the sail I could make, I found I should not be able to come in their way, but that they would be gone by before I could make any signal to them: but after I had crowded to the utmost, and began to despair, they, it seems, saw by the help of their glasses that it was some European boat [...]. (Defoe 1719: 36)

It is the perspective glass that distinguishes him and to which he owes his survival. When that ship is shipwrecked Crusoe makes two trips to the ship to take essentials from the wreckage. Defoe's list of what Crusoe takes on his second visit makes a direct link between writing and looking.

[...] Pens, Ink, and Paper, several Parcels in the Captain's, Mate's, Gunner's, and Carpenter's keeping, three or four Compasses, some Mathematical Instruments, Dials, Perspectives, Charts, and Books of Navigation, all which I huddel'd together, whether I might want them or no; also I found three very good Bibles

which came to me in my Cargo from England, and [...] several other Books, all which I carefully secu'd. (1719: 74)

The raw materials for writing, 'Pens Ink and Paper' are juxtaposed with compasses and charts, tools of measurement and analysis and 'perspectives'. Crusoe collects the tools of media and mediatization, they separate him from the island, and they eventually enable him to escape. Crusoe soon comes to the conclusion that it is necessary to carry a lens with him all the time, and with it his relationship with his surroundings is transformed.

Looking out to Sea, I thought I saw a Boat upon the Sea, at a great Distance; this was so remote, that I could not tell what to make of it; though I look'd at it till my Eyes were not able to hold to look any longer; whether it was a Boat, or not, I do not know; but as I descended from the Hill, I could see no more of it, so I gave it over; only I resolv'd to go no more out without a Prospective Glass in my Pocket. (Defoe 1719: 194)

Robinson is henceforth equipped with his prosthetic vision throughout the narrative. It is through the perspective glass that he sees Friday for the first time. How Defoe describes this involves a particular kind of seeing which seems to have stepped straight out of a screenplay.⁵

[...] standing so however that my Head did not appear above the Hill, so that they could not perceive me by any Means; here I observ'd by the help of my Perspective Glass, that they were no less than Thirty in Number, that they had a

Fire kindled, that they had had Meat dress'd. How they had cook'd it, that I knew not, or what it was; but they were all Dancing in I know not how many barbarous Gestures and Figures, their own Way, round the Fire. While I was thus looking on them, I perceived by my Perspective, two miserable Wretches dragg'd from the Boats, where it seems they were laid by, and were now brought out for the Slaughter. I perceived one of them immediately fell, being knock'd down, I suppose with a Club or Wooden Sword, for that was their way, and two or three others were at work immediately cutting him open for their Cookery, while the other Victim was left standing by himself, till they should be ready for him.
(Defoe 1719: 238)

This could be a scene from a horror film. There is a scopophilic (or telescopophilic) pleasure in being powerless to intervene in the remote horrors observed through the lens. It is as if action viewed through the lens has fewer consequences than the same action seen directly. We take pleasure in seeing danger without being threatened by it.

In that very Moment this poor Wretch seeing himself a little at Liberty, Nature inspir'd him with Hopes of Life, and he started away from them, and ran with incredible Swiftnes along the Sands directly towards me, I mean towards that part of the Coast, where my Habitation was. (Defoe 1719: 239)

This could be called the first point-of-view shot. Contained in Crusoe's confusion between 'me' and '[...] that part of the Coast, where my Habitation was' are all kinds of

complex ideas about point of view, identity and the frame which have preoccupied film studies. The telescope creates a confusion between where the 'I' and the 'eye' are located. The observing eye and the physical body can exist in distinct places.

I was dreadfully frightened (that I must acknowledge) when I perceived him to run my way, and especially when, as I thought, I saw him pursued by the whole body; [...] I found that he outstripped them exceedingly in running, and gained ground of them; so that if he could but hold it for half an hour, I saw easily he would fairly get away from them all. (Defoe 1719: 239)

Crusoe's identity on the island is inseparable from the lens and the lens in turn gives him dominion over the island and keeps him separate and distinct from it, with more in common with those other beings with prosthetic vision who will ultimately rescue him.

It is through the lens that his identity as colonist is formed, and in the lens that he first glimpses his companion. Crusoe, like the audience of the novel, is both present at and remote from the events he describes – looking at them from another vantage point through his own lens and as the potential subject of another observer's lens, who, like him, belongs elsewhere – in Europe.

A few years after *Robinson Crusoe*, and often seen as a direct response to it, *Gulliver's Travels* is entirely dependent on the conceit of a world perceived through the lens. The first two parts of the novel satirize humans by looking on them as if they were seen

through a microscope and telescope, before (in the country of Laputa) satirizing those ‘who do the looking’. Lemuel Gulliver, incidentally, like Crusoe, carries a perspective glass with him all the time.

Robinson Crusoe is a work of realism, *Gulliver’s Travels* a work of fantasy. The lens as a means of observation and defamiliarization has a significant place in both. Soviet theorist Viktor Shklovsky wrote:

The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar’, to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. ([1917] 1965: 12)

What can screenwriters and students of screenwriting learn about our discipline in the light of this prehistory? Precise descriptive skills are clearly necessary for a screenwriter and screenwriters can clearly benefit from reading how some of the greatest observers in human history have described phenomena seen through lenses. Sprat’s precepts to shun ‘vicious abundance of Phrase’, or ‘needlesse Rhetorical Ornaments’ are good rules for screenwriters, too. But it seems to me there is something more significant at stake.

Screenwriting and lens-based writing are in a sense each the inverse of the other. Screenwriting describes something imagined that will be recorded and projected through

a lens, to be seen eventually by a film audience. Lens-based writing records something that has already been framed and viewed to be imagined by a subsequent reader. Both use writing to communicate between the world perceived through the lens and the world of the audience. Conceptually, at least, the lens plus writing equals a camera. A camera does not distinguish between the act of viewing and recording and it is useful, I think, to consider lens-based writing as a fundamental adjunct to the lens, part of the same system of viewing, recording and transmission. It is only when what has been seen is recorded in a form through which it can be communicated to others that the act of remote vision is complete. The writing forms part of the prosthesis, since it is how the experience is shared with others. The text in lens-based writing needs, like the film in a camera, to record as precisely as possible what the prosthetic eye has seen.

The relationship between events – real or imagined – seen and framed through a lens, and the text which attempts to record and convey them is a complicated one, and it may be fairly said that there is a difference between describing observed phenomena and imagining or recalling them. But considering the similarities between these two forms of lens-based writing can help us to understand the process of screenwriting in a different way. Seeing is not a neutral act much as the lens may offer the illusion of detachment. James Elkins notes in *The Object Stares Back*

Seeing is like hunting and like dreaming, and even like falling in love. It is entangled in the passions – jealousy, violence, possessiveness; and it is soaked in

affect – in pleasure and displeasure, and in pain. Ultimately, seeing alters the thing that is seen and transforms the seer. Seeing is metamorphosis, not mechanism. (1996: 11–12)

Screenwriting is distinguished from other forms of writing by this immanent presence of the lens. All writers of fiction imagine and recall. Only the screenwriter recalls for future recording by and projection through a lens.

Screenwriting, like other forms of lens-based writing, needs to negotiate the boundary between the verbal and the visual, and to communicate how objects and behaviour that exist in three dimensions are depicted in two. A lens-based approach can allow us to understand differently the relationship between the world imagined and the world described and the role of language in reproducing each in the mind of a reader or audience. If we accept this genealogy then studying how writers have negotiated the representation of the world perceived through a lens has much to offer screenwriting research.

Vivien Sobchack has written:

For the filmmaker the world whether real, drawn or constructed in any other fashion is experienced *through* the camera. It is seen and *felt* at the *end of the lens*

or more precisely at the lens-world junction. The terminus of the filmmaker's intentional extension into the world. (1991: 175–76) *Italics original*

The affective power of cinema is dependent on an experience, which takes place at that 'lens-world junction'. Screenplays do not just tell stories. Because they are on the way to becoming films, they are *avant-textes*, not just of a given narrative, but of that narrative in that medium. Screenwriting and lens-based writing are, in a sense, each the inverse of the other. Both involve prose as the means of communication across that boundary.

This iterative and complex relationship between the world and the way it is viewed, framed and communicated can be seen for example in how Adam Hochschild (whose book *King Leopold's Ghost* (1998) shows how Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* was a piece of observation as well as a piece of fiction and that 'virtually *everything* in *Heart of Darkness* is based on things and people Conrad saw directly or heard about') writes about the role of the imagined lens in his own work.

When I'm writing, I find it very helpful in thinking about trying to keep the idea of scenes in my mind all the time, to think as if I were a filmmaker and that I'm constantly making the decision about when I'm sort of panning the camera across the landscape in a very sweeping way and when I'm zeroing in for a close up on somebody or something or some episode. (Hochschild 2002: 45)

The lens is always present in his practice. He writes not with a *Camera-stylo* (as critic Alexandre Astruc termed the auteur's use of camera-as-pen) but a *Stylo-camera* (Astruc 1968).

This is similar to the screenwriting maxim 'Write what you see', which Terry Rossio on the wordplayer website attributes to American screenwriter and director Lawrence Kasdan (*The Big Chill* (1983), *Accidental Tourist* (1988)), with an interesting gloss:

By this, I believe, he means to write what you see as if the finished movie is playing in front of you. Moment by moment transcribe those events, and you won't go far wrong, stylistically, in making the film 'happen' in the reader's mind's eye. (Rossio 2011)

So Rossio, like the early manuals cited by Maras, stresses that the screenwriter should aspire to an already-mediated kind of writing, a transcribing of the film to be realized from the text. The screenwriter uses the descriptive language of lens-based writing to frame their story, which like the animalcules of Leeuwenhoek cannot be perceived without the lens.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty has written:

[...] motion pictures are often conceived as the visual and sonic representation, the closest possible reproduction of a drama which literature could evoke only in words and which the movie is lucky enough to be able to photograph [...]. That

does not mean, however, that the movies are fated to let us see and hear what we would see and hear if we were present at the events being related; [...]. A movie is not thought; it is perceived. (1964: 57–58)

The vast majority of screenwriting theory has concentrated on structural questions or on the relationship between the script and the finished film. What has been less explored is how the screenwriter can attempt to suggest that sense of film as something perceived, rather than thought, and represent the visual world and how we experience it in all its passion and intensity.

Writing for the screen means describing something that will be mediated – photographed through one lens and projected through another. The better the writing incorporates that notion of this mediation through filming and projection, the more it becomes the distinct and medium-specific practice of screenwriting – writing which strives to suggest the complicated phenomenological pleasures and particularities of a cinematic experience which will occur on a screen. The images the screenwriter attempts to summon into being have this in common with the images described by the scientists, travellers and early novelists I have referenced in this article. They do not exist in the world, but in the world perceived through a lens.

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Comment [1]: THIS WAS THE ORIGINAL TITLE BECAUSE IT WS ABOUT SPERM IT HAD A LATIN TITLE . I’VE CHECKED AND THAT’S HOW EVERYONE SEEMS TO REFERENCE THE ARTICLE.

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Notes

¹ I was inspired by a paper given by Professor Robert Hampson at the inaugural London Screenwriting Research Seminar in which he spoke about Conrad's relationship with the cinema and in particular his original screenplay *Gaspar the Strong Man*, the manuscript of which is in the Beinecke Library at Yale University, in which Hampson reminded his

audience that Conrad used lenses a great deal in the course of his work as a master mariner.

² Eisenstein refers to ‘the visual exposition of the facts’, and insists that the screenplay as such is not important and that sometimes ‘the purely literary arrangement of the words in a script means more than the meticulous recording of facial expressions by the writer’ (Eisenstein 1988c: 135, quoted in Maras 2009: 34).

³ Giambattista Della Porta, the Italian who headed the Society of the Lynx, was an author of a 1558 book on magic that has a chapter concentrated particularly on optical illusions.

⁴See van Whye, John Humboldt’s *Personal Narrative* and its influence on Darwin available at http://darwin-online.org.uk/EditorialIntroductions/Chancellor_Humboldt.html

⁵ When the book was adapted for the screen by Luis Bunuel this entire section was filmed more or less directly from the novel.