

Scriptwriting Specialism Report

For this Major Project module, I am being graded on **my role as screenwriter** for 2 different projects. The first is *The Music of Erich Zann*, an adaptation of a 1922 short story by H.P. Lovecraft. In this first case, I was recruited by the producer overseeing the project to produce the script in accordance with predefined (though admittedly fairly loose) specifications (see *fig. 1*). The second project, titled *Clockworkers*, is a screenplay for an original animated work produced without oversight; this is exclusively my own work built from my own idea, and is not currently set to go into production. These distinctions are important to note because they impacted the demands that I had to consider during the writing process, and certain weaknesses in my professional and creative practice can be better observed as a consequence of the differing nature of the 2 projects.

When I was first recruited by the producer to serve as the screenwriter of *The Music of Erich Zann*, the completed film was intended to be a 10-minute part of an anthology of Lovecraft adaptations titled *Innsmouth*. The anthology series in question became a low priority for the producer fairly early during the pre-production phase, and did not have an especially significant impact on how I approached the project creatively.

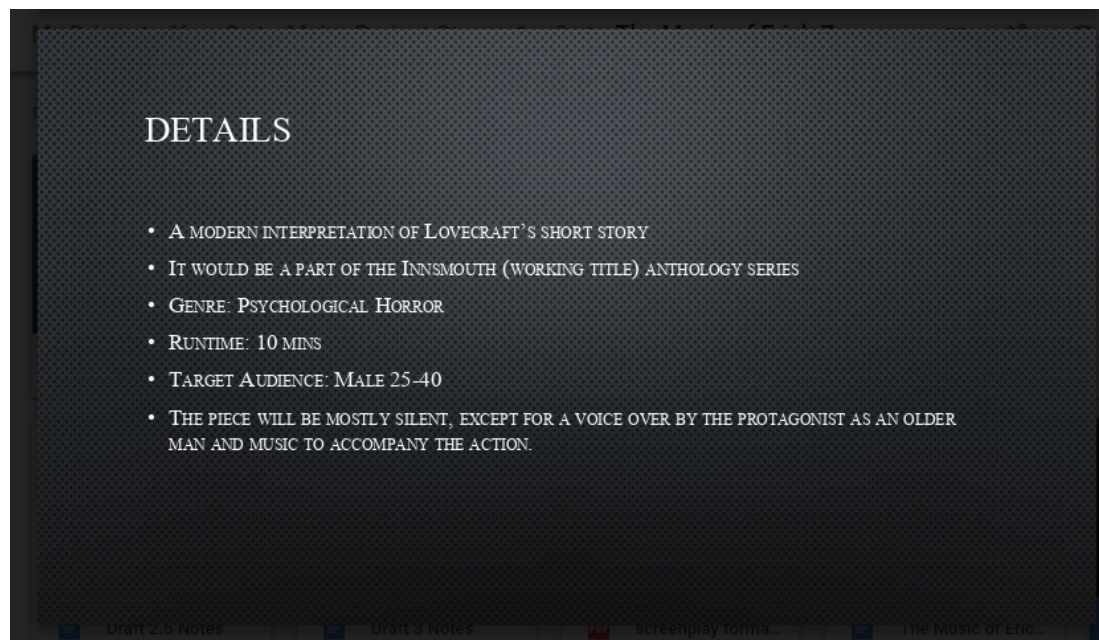


fig.1 - a screenshot of part of the Project Brief given to me by the producer/director immediately after my joining the production, outlining the specifications I was expected to which I was initially expected to conform.

Outside of the specifications outlined in *fig. 1*, I was given creative freedom from the outset to approach the narrative and thematic content of the script in whatever ways I was inclined to do so, though final decisions regarding the implementation of my work rested with the producer/director. The final draft of the script primarily represents my own interpretation of Lovecraft's source material, and includes revisions to the *fig. 1*'s details prompted by discussions between myself and the producer/director.

Defining the Narrative Model and Thematic Angle

Important to note when discussing the details of my creative practice is my undergraduate dissertation, much of which informed my reading of *The Music of Erich Zann* (Lovecraft, 1922) and my own intent that shaped this adaptation. The dissertation, titled *How useful is the application of Joseph Campbell's model of the Hero's Journey to the analysis and conception of narrative?*, examined the relationship between basic narrative structures and meaning, and represented an effort on my part to determine an essential framework to keep in mind when constructing or interpreting narrative. In place of Campbell's psychoanalytical archetypal model, I came to the following conclusion regarding what I believe to be the most basic structure that gives a narrative its shape and meaning:

"What matters then is the idea associated with each individual archetype by any given member of the audience, and how the binary conflict of protagonist vs. antagonist plays out and comes to be resolved... A narrative proposes Truth, either as something factually absolute or as the fallible conclusion of a flawed or limited discourse."

The "binary conflict of protagonist vs. antagonist" described here may be better described as a conflict between opposing ideas embodied by Thesis and Antithesis, at the climax of which some form of Synthesis is reached that makes clear the central thematic conceit of the narrative (Yorke, 2013). In a work of existential horror or "True Horror" (Gledhill, 2007), the discourse between Thesis and Antithesis that is the core of the narrative reaches no wholly adequate conclusion, and highlights an awareness of the futility of a search for an absolute existential Truth. *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick, 1980), which undeniably influenced my approach to writing this film, incorporates this variation on the binary archetypal structure.

We see this latter structure in Lovecraft's original version of *The Music of Erich Zann*, as the protagonist (a student of metaphysics; literally one who searches for a more complete understanding of the universe) is positioned as the Thesis confronted with a force or entity that defies human comprehension and can never be overcome. In my

own version, the metanarrative that underlies the protagonist (herein known as the Writer) is distinct because the protagonist is a student of English Literature, not Metaphysics or any similar subject. With this change, my interpretation comes to question the adequacy of the narrative form itself in guiding one to some semblance of existential understanding.

This decision stems from a desire to find an adequate thematic justification for the producer/director's desire to incorporate narration as a device. The framing device of my version of the story is retrospective: the Writer as an old man exercises his understanding of narrative form in an effort to make sense of his experiences, with little success. In more simple terms, he attempts to write his story so that it satisfies his existential anxieties:

THE WRITER (V.O.)

...My hope is that with this account I might better make some sense of that inexplicable time. (from Draft 4, Scene 1, Page 2)

So the Writer embodies at first the Thesis that the narrative is an adequate means of structuring a worldview that leads to some understanding of objective Truth. The Antithesis then is that existential anxiety, framed as something that the narrative is unequipped to fully explore and explain. As a consequence of this, the Synthesis at the climax is inadequate; no Truth is found, and the Writer is simply left repeating ad nauseam their efforts towards understanding. The Thesis is found to be lacking.

This combination of archetypal and thematic approaches developed as a response to the final prompt in *fig. 1*: the desire to prominently utilise voiceover in place of dialogue throughout the film. With this, the framing of the story as a retrospective account helped to ensure that the narration was not simply a gratuitous addition pointlessly evoking the source material, but rather a device that served a thematic function. Even after that decision had been revised and a more appropriate balance of voiceover and dialogue had become desirable to both myself and producer/director, this creative angle was retained.

Development: From Draft 1 to Draft 4

The first draft of the screenplay for *The Music of Erich Zann* is not massively distinct from Draft 4, at least with regard to the thematic and structural decisions outlined above. It was, however, written with a largely freeform creative approach, with many ideas taking shape during the writing process before they had been discussed or made the subject of nuanced consideration by either myself or the producer/director. The intent at the time was to treat Draft 1 as a flexible starting point that would come to be refined

over the course of successive iterations. From the start, the plan was to centralise reflective practice as an element of the script's development process.

Notes on the intentions and specific alterations of each draft can be found attached as *Appendices 1, 2 and 3*. The notes in question are the exact same ones provided as references to the producer/director by myself alongside each completed draft.

As outlined in *Appendix 1*, the focus of Draft 2 was an increased emphasis on having the film convey ideas visually, which meant in part that we would be downplaying and outright omitting portions of the voiceover. As an extension of this, certain scenes (such as the introduction of Zann in Scene 7) included longer exchanges of dialogue in contrast with the last point seen in *Fig. 1*. A number of helpful points for me to consider and reflect upon regarding my creative practice as a whole became apparent thanks to this shift in direction.

Firstly, this Draft helped to establish more firmly in my mind particular ways in which the format of a screenplay must distinguish itself from a work written in a more literary style, which is the format I am more used to reading. This meant scrutinising what was communicated in the narrated prose that evoked the source material, and pinpointing what could be communicated purely through the film's aesthetic and technical qualities. In Scene 4, for example, a section of voiceover was removed because it conveyed roughly the same information as its visual accompaniment: a moment wherein the Writer readjusts both a crooked painting and his own waning composure.

As a secondary benefit, it should also be noted that this helped in pinpointing which elements of the voiceover were repetitive, wholly redundant or overly direct (see, for example, the second note on Scene 4 in *Appendix 1*), which, when changed, helped with the flow of the piece. For both these reasons, revising the early drafts of scripts with this focus on improved visual storytelling in mind will likely become a standard element of my creative practice in future.

Appendices 2 and 3 outline similar modes of reflective practice apparent in the development of Drafts 2.5, 3 and finally 4. The purpose of Draft 2.5 was primarily to reduce the density of the script's action text, which in Drafts 1 and 2 had a long-winded novelistic quality intended to evoke a clearer idea of the film's intended atmosphere. From Draft 2.5 onwards, the action text is much more concise, and more straightforwardly descriptive in its outline of the narrative beats, so as to place the responsibility of better dictating and conveying mood on the producer/director, cinematographer and editor.

As I work on more screenplays going forward, my intention is to adopt this more concise style of action text as my standard mode of writing, only utilising a more atmospheric mode when specifically requested to by those with creative oversight. This is more in-

keeping with my understanding of what is expected from a professional screenplay, and is less likely to seem like an imposition upon any creative vision that those other than myself may be bringing to the project.

In Draft 3, outlined in *Appendix 2*, we see the result of a successful effort being made to reconcile diverging creative ideas that arose between myself and the producer/director. To be more specific, this refers to the inclusion of a dream sequence, which was requested by the producer/director but which I initially felt did not serve an appropriate thematic and/or narrative function and only seemed to drive the plot to a momentary standstill. The producer/director's suggestion was to have the sequence take place either within or in place of the elliptical montage in Scene 9, which I felt was necessary so as to portray visually that the Writer had, by the climax, been present at the Threshold Hotel for an extended period of time.

The production process for this screenplay being as heavily-collaborative as it was, and with the producer/director possessing creative oversight, a level of compromise was reached and the dream sequence was broken up into 3 moments that punctuate specific points in the film, namely in Scenes 5, 9 and briefly in 10. Scene 5 marks the onset of the Writer's awareness of Zann; Scene 9 uses it to depict his escalating obsession with Zann; and Scene 10 quickly draws a parallel between the dream and Zann's death. In the case of Scene 9, the dream sequence was intended to be intercut with the aforementioned elliptical montage so as to not sacrifice that element of the narrative.

Referring separately to *Appendix 2's* brief notes on Draft 2.5, a second case of collaborative discussion aiding the development and quality of the screenplay is seen in the editor's contribution of a small correction to Scene 6. These 2 cases helped to establish in me a preference for a model of creative practice that favours open and level-headed collaborative discussion. Developing ideas and refining what was already there was something I found easier when I was taking suggestions and bouncing my own thoughts off of others. By contrast, the comparatively less developed screenplay for *Clockworkers* was produced without this discussion-heavy approach, and I personally found this to be a slower process and one that was not conducive to producing the best possible script. Going forward, I am keen to make discussion and collaboration more central to how I approach the writing process.

The notes on Draft 4 (see *Appendix 3*) open with an outline of how I perceived the narrative acts/sequences of my screenplay for *The Music of Erich Zann* to be arranged, which is a point of consideration that greatly informed the most significant changes apparent in Draft 4. To clarify, this breakdown treats the Acts as being defined by their narrative focus: Act 1 is the Prologue in which the older Writer begins his narration; Act 2 sees the young Writer entering and being led through the Hotel; Act 3 sees the

Writer's interactions be centred on the Hotel; Act 4 is characterised by the Writer's shift in focus from the Hotel to Zann; Act 5 is the climax; and Act 6 is the Epilogue, in which the old Writer discards his work and begins anew.

What this extra layer of compartmentalised structural awareness meant in the development of Draft 4 was that it was easier to pinpoint stretches of the narrative that were insubstantial, and the result of this is the addition of Scenes labelled 5A, 5B, 5C and 9A. These scenes are placed within the 2 central portions of the film, what I refer to as Acts 3 and 4. On top of this, Scenes 5 and 9 are significantly different. The result of these substantial alterations is a screenplay that is much more narratively sound; the audience gets a better sense of the wrongness of the Hotel in Act 3, and better understand the root of the Writer's fixation on Zann in Act 4 as a consequence. They also mean that the film seems less like it's simply trying to bridge the gap between Acts 2 and 5 too quickly, and this allows for a slower, more creeping, and more effective buildup to the climax.

Like with the previous drafts, there's a point to consider that I learned from the process of writing Draft 4: a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between a film's structural components and their goals is valuable to have. By ensuring I have established clearly-defined intent for each beat, scene, sequence and act, I can better understand which parts of my narratives need to be fleshed out further in new drafts.

Conclusion

My work on the screenplay for *The Music of Erich Zann* was valuable experience for me, and I've found that by reflecting on the shortcoming of my work during the process of creating new drafts I've pinpointed various ways in which my creative practice as a whole can be improved. Thanks to this project (and my undergraduate dissertation), I now have a more solid narrative framework to experiment with, and an improved understanding of what to keep in mind during that process and how to get better results.

As a side note, I should say that I found the work on *Clockworkers* to be less valuable in this regard, though it certainly served to highlight how strongly I benefit from working in a collaborative context. *Clockworkers* was written in something of a creative vacuum, and with no-one to exchange ideas with at the time I found it much more challenging to get the screenplay completed in a timely manner.

For this reason, I'm inclined to treat discussion as a wholly essential part of my creative workflow.

Bibliography

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Draft 2 Notes

MAIN FOCUS

- Reducing the amount of voiced narration.
- Establishing information that was previously a part of the voiceover through visual storytelling instead.

SPECIFIC EDITS

- Scene 1
 - No changes.
- Scene 2
 - Removed “I do not think...brought me there.”
 - Elaborated on the mannerisms of the Receptionist.
 - Edited the exchange between the Writer and the Receptionist to be slightly longer and better establish the Writer’s immediate confusion.
- Scene 3
 - The Receptionist is now present and ushers the Writer into his room.
- Scene 4
 - Removed “In hindsight...to be within it.” The act of straightening the picture serves the same function as this section of voiceover, and it is implicit in the beginning of the next narrated section.
 - Removed “Faced with...might have felt.” This is too direct.
- Scene 5
 - Elaborated in visuals accompanying the voiceover to depict the Writer wandering the halls in a surreal, dreamlike haze.
 - Removed “I suppose that...before the player’s own room.”
- Scene 6
 - The Writer now actually knocks in Zann’s door rather than simply touching it.
- Scene 7
 - Removed “Though he never...barely knew it.”
 - Replaced with a brief exchange between the Writer and Zann. Zann now offers his own name and warns the Writer away from the hotel.
- Scene 8
 - No changes.
- Scene 9

- Visuals now focus on the Writer's immediate reaction to Zann's performance.
- Removed "He was a man...rarely experienced."
- Removed "I left his room...profound dissatisfaction."
- Removed "I would only...lack of my trying." Replaced with a remark about Zann's warning.
- Removed "I do not honestly...its true purpose."
- Removed "Then came that...me at last."
- Scene 10
 - Removed "My God...those curtains."
 - Removed "Even now...naught but prey."
- Scene 11
 - No changes.

Appendix 2

Draft 3 Notes

This draft uses Draft 2.5 (the concise version of Draft 2) as its base. Notes on a specific story change made in Draft 2.5 are also noted here.

DRAFT 2.5

- The main priority of this draft is a reduction in the density of the Action text. This draft lacks some of the novelistic qualities of previous drafts, but features little significant change to the actual story.
- Scene 6. At John's request, an extra line of dialogue has been added in which the Writer apologises for catching Zann's door. This beat is what makes Zann recognise that the Writer does not represent a threat.

FOCUS

- Adding to the voiceover in scene 1 so as to afford the scene an extended runtime.
- Add another appearance from the Receptionist (who we may refer to as the Manager depending on the final location of the film).
- The incorporation of surreal dream imagery representing the Writer's escalating fixation on Zann. This version of the script treats this as a recurring thread throughout the film; a finalised version may change the dream's function.
- The incorporation of a recurring visual motif (in this case, crooked paintings) to highlight the uncanny quality of the Threshold Hotel and also create a notable pattern in how the Writer responds to them.

SPECIFIC EDITS

- Scene 1
 - Extended the voiceover at the end of the scene. The extra dialogue alludes to the vagueness of the Writer's understanding of the Threshold's nature and asserts his intent in telling his story.
- Scene 4
 - The Receptionist now appears, tells the Writer to enjoy his stay and closes the door, sealing the Writer inside. Adjustments have been made to the proceeding moments so that they accommodate this.
 - Extension of the voiceover.
- Scene 5
 - The first of the dream sequences is shown here, as we hear Zann's music for the first time.

- Changes to voiceover.
- Scene 6
 - We see the Writer wandering the corridors, ignoring crooked pictures as he goes.
 - Reduced dialogue from the Writer.
 - Zann now puts his note in the bin, which is full of similar scraps of paper.
- Scene 9
 - Significant changes made to the montage sequence so that it now incorporates the dream of Zann while retaining the elliptical quality. Note that the voiceover remains intact, but probably won't work as well with this new variation.
- Scene 10
 - Notes a specific parallel between the appearance of Zann at the end of the dream and after his apparent death.

Appendix 3

Draft 4 Notes

SOME THOUGHTS ON ACT STRUCTURE

It's probably worth stating that my perception of the structure of the film sees the narrative divided into 6 Acts. The 1st and 6th are the Prologue and Epilogue, wherein the focus is on the older Writer. The 2nd Act leads the young Writer into his hotel room. From hereon is the 3rd Act, which is insubstantial in previous drafts and sees the young Writer interacting with the Hotel and the Receptionist. The structural Midpoint of the narrative is marked by a brief return to the old Writer. The 4th Act (again, insubstantial) shifts the Writer's motivational focus from the Hotel to Zann, and leads into the climax in Act 5.

- Act 1: Prologue
- Act 2: Into the Hotel
- Act 3: The Writer and the Threshold Hotel
- Act 4: The Writer and Erich Zann
- Act 5: Behind the Curtain
- Act 6: Epilogue

NOTES ON SCENE NUMBERS

In this draft, new scenes are numbered slightly differently to old ones. The ones bridging Scenes 5 and 6, for example, are numbered 5A, 5B and 5C. This is a carry-over from how Adobe Story numbers scenes placed in-between existing scenes by default, and I kept it in to highlight the additions. In any future drafts as well as the final Shooting Script, those numbers will be changed (eg: 5A will become 6, 5B will becomes 7, 5C will become 8, 6 will becomes 9, etc.). Let me know if this is an issue.

PC VS. TYPEWRITER

For this draft, I'm still going with the laptop as the device that the Writer is using to pen his story. That being said, I'm inclined to argue that a typewriter might be a good idea from both a physical performance standpoint and considering the Writer's age in the prologue and epilogue scenes. Seeing as I haven't been given the go-ahead on that change, I haven't incorporated it into this version of the script.

FOCUS

- Extension of parts of the script that can be argued to be overtightened in previous drafts, from individual scenes to significant portions of the 3rd and 4th acts and the ending.

- If possible, account for the shift in target audience.

SPECIFIC EDITS

- Scene 1
 - Removed “So much of that time is hazy in my mind.”
 - *Extra changes needed. Scene requires extension but currently struggling for ideas. Title sequence?*
- Scene 2
 - Elaborated on the Writer’s university course: “I was a moderately successful student of English literature...”
 - Added “...and for a while afterwards” to the Writer’s monologue.
- Scene 3
 - Unchanged.
- Scene 4
 - Removed “Not once after...sooner than I did” and “The scenes we see...standing over his bed.”
- Scene 5
 - Considerable changes made to this scene. In place of the voiceover, we hear the music fade, and pounding footsteps pass by the Writer’s room. On a functional level, this is pretty much a new scene.
 - Removed “He gets up...source of the music.”
 - Removed all voiceover from this scene.
- Scene 5A (New Scene)
- Scene 5B (New Scene)
- Scene 5C (New Scene)
- Scene 6
 - Added a small piece of voiceover continuing from 5C.
 - Added “I wondered if you could help me” to the Writer’s final line before entering Zann’s room.
- Scene 7
 - Unchanged. (*Though I would like to expand upon it, I’m struggling for ideas.*)
- Scene 8
 - Unchanged.
- Scene 9
 - Like Scene 5, this scene has undergone a significant revision. The Writer now returns to his room, but is freaked out by a series of knocks on the door and window, as if something wants to get in. He runs away from the room.
- Scene 9A

- This is the other half of Scene 9 from the previous drafts.
 - “I’m not convinced...a few minutes at a time” added to the voiceover.
- Scene 10
 - Unchanged.
- Scene 11
 - The Writer now begins writing a new version of the same story, unsatisfied with his latest effort. This includes a new piece of voiceover.