

# **Screenwriters in Toronto: Centre, Periphery, and Exclusionary Networks in Canadian Screen Storytelling**

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Charles H. Davis, Jeremy Shtern, Michael Coutanche, and Elizabeth Godo

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[c5davis@ryerson.ca](mailto:c5davis@ryerson.ca), tel. (416) 979-5000 ext. 7866  
RTA School of Media, Ryerson University, Toronto  
[jshtern@ryerson.ca](mailto:jshtern@ryerson.ca)  
[mcoutanc@fcad.ryerson.ca](mailto:mcoutanc@fcad.ryerson.ca)  
[elizabeth.godo@gmail.com](mailto:elizabeth.godo@gmail.com)

## **Summary**

In screenwriting, the supply of talented hopefuls exceeds the number of available opportunities to earn a living. Three factors affect the social dynamics of innovation among Toronto screenwriters: the international division of cultural labour; exclusionary networks in the screenwriting talent market; and the Canadian screen industry's challenges in meeting its cultural and economic objectives.

## **Introduction: creative work requires more than talent**

A narrative across several scholarly literatures casts post-industrial creative workers as highly footloose, enjoying wide freedom to earn a living through self-expression, with abundant opportunities for lucrative short-term employment in various attractive metropolitan centres. This narrative is expressed notably in creative class theory (Florida 2002), creative city theory

(Montgomery 2007), and in the strands of creative economy theory that foreground creative labour's self-expressive, self-managed, and self-creative attributes (Leadbeater 1999).

Screenwriters conform to the generic portrait of the creative worker in the sense that they are mainly well-educated individuals who are drawn to large, culturally important urban centres to earn their living through immaterial labour. Screenwriting, however, does not conform in important respects to prevailing views of footloose creative activity. Notably, in the screenwriter profession, talent shortage *per se* is not an issue because, as is true in many other cultural occupations, the supply of talented hopefuls far exceeds the number of available opportunities to earn a living.

The social dynamics of innovation in screenwriting revolve instead around selection mechanisms *other than talent* at work in the screen industry. Screenwriting is steeply stratified, with relatively few highly visible and well remunerated individuals at the centre, and many part-time or economically inactive screenwriters on the margins. As we explain below, in English-speaking Canada the screenwriting occupation is defined by exclusionary networks dominated by white middle-aged Anglophone males. The social process of selection has important implications for innovation in the Canadian screen industry, which in Canada revolves mainly around television. The television industry in Canada is required by law to produce and disseminate Canadian content, and Canadian governments devote considerable attention and public subsidies to this purpose. Public support for Canadian screen content production is motivated by concerns about nation-building and national cultural expression. It also has recently come to be regarded as a

means to spur development of promising "cognitive-cultural" metropolitan economic activities (Davis 2011; Davis and Mills 2013).

Toronto plays a key role as the central hub of Canada's English-language screen industry.

Toronto's gravitational pull attracts many aspiring screenwriters to the city. At the same time, Toronto occupies a secondary position in the international division of cultural labour. The screen industry is highly concentrated in a small number of cities, especially in North America where Hollywood and New York City eclipse Toronto in terms of size, prestige, and the financial rewards they can offer successful screenwriters. These factors constrain Toronto in the scale and variety of cultural outputs it can produce, as well as in the range and quality of opportunities it can offer to screenwriters.

In this chapter, we draw on results of research on Canadian English-language screenwriters undertaken in connection with the ISRN *Innovation and Creativity in City-regions* project. We show that the social dynamics of economic innovation in the screen industry affect Toronto screenwriters in three key ways: Toronto's secondary position in the international division of cultural labour; exclusionary networks in the market for screenwriting talent; and the challenges experienced by the indigenous film and television industry in meeting its cultural and economic objectives, which evidently are related to the characteristics of the screen products it delivers to Canadian audiences.

## Screenwriters and the work of screenwriting

Screenwriters are key contributors to the success of film and television, providing the script or screenplay without which many types of screen productions cannot take place. Analysis of the critical success factors of thousands of feature films points to the quality of the screenplay and quality of the direction as the two most important factors (Simonton 2002).

As a form of creative labour, screenwriting has *exemplary* and *idiosyncratic* features (Conor 2010a; 2010b). Screenwriting exemplifies post-Fordist creative labour in terms of its economic insecurity, freelancing, multitasking, perpetual networking, inequitable collaboration, complex subjectivity, portfolio careers, and self-performing work behaviour (Ibid.). Screen production is a project-based industry, and screenwriters (like many other production workers in this industry) are employed on a “life-of-project” basis (Bielby and Bielby, 1999). Screenwriting work offers no guarantee that efforts will be culturally or financially successful. Agents, producers, or other industrial gatekeepers read only a small fraction of the thousands of screenplays offered to them, and only one or two percent among these reach production (Macdonald 2003). Thus most screenwriters do not live from their writing activity: only five percent of the members of the Writers Guild of America earn their living from writing screenplays (Elbert 1999, xiii). A major occupational challenge for screenwriters is to generate income from multiple sources. As one Canadian writer/director told us, “we do whatever we can between writing contracts ... we teach, we story edit, we work at other jobs ... whatever it takes to fill the gap”.

Screenwriting also has *idiosyncratic* features of an institutional, sociological, and national cultural/political-economic nature that shape the social dynamics of screenwriting as much as generic creative-labour features do (Kaye and Davis 2010). Institutional features refer to industrial and organizational practices in the film and television industry. For example, the screen industry in Canada revolves around television, not feature films. This has several implications for the demand for screenwriting talent in Canada. Television differs from feature film in terms of storytelling formats, conventions, and aesthetics, and also in terms of the dynamics of the labour market, offering larger volumes of smaller contracts for freelancers than feature films do, as well as relatively stable employment for some writers for television series. Because television writers often work collaboratively in "writing rooms", they are more dependent on co-location with production firms or broadcasters than are film writers. Furthermore, in the television industry a new, hybrid writer-producer role called showrunning has emerged. As the term implies, showrunners are writers who are responsible for running the show on a television series by managing the creative content and its execution over many episodes, for which they receive Executive Producer credit. Showrunning is a high status role without close equivalent in the feature film industry. The role emerged first in the U.S. and only recently appeared in Canada, where the screen industry is believed to suffer from a showrunner deficit (Nadler et al. 2010).

Screenwriting has ambiguous status as a creative activity. In the highly collectivized and industrialized film and television production process, product conception is separated from execution. Writers may be commissioned to write one or more elements of a script under development: proposal, treatment, outline, story, drafts, rewrite, or polish. The script delivered

by the screenwriter is only an approximation of what eventually ends up on the screen; the screenwriting function is eclipsed by the work of producers, directors, and actors, diminishing the authorial status of the screenwriter. The screenplay itself, the product of the writer's labours, has neither economic nor cultural value on its own:

...the script may be the blueprint for the film, [but] it is rarely admired in itself; the screenplay has been understood as part of an industrial process and thus viewed as a craft rather than a creative act, part of an industry which is driven by profit. This has resulted in the screenplay being generally considered a lesser form than playwriting or prose.

(Nelmes 2007, 108)

Apart from some hobbyists and collectors, the general public does not purchase screenplays or teleplays and only a few specialty stores stock them for sale, usually for other screenwriters or academics to purchase. Screenwriting's relative marginality leaves it a largely invisible occupation in the public's eye, in scholarly research, and in the film and television industry itself. As Mehring (1990, 1) writes, "the screenwriter has always been and continues to be the low person on the totem pole", suffering from relative anonymity in a creative occupation in which nobody knows their name (Prover 1994). This invisibility affects screenwriter occupational culture and the individual motivation of screenwriters. Screenwriters must expect to undergo emotional roller-coaster rides, anxiety from "being scared out of their wits by stress, pressure, and the premonition that it all may end very soon", and suffer from "pain, disappointment, rejection, critics, and executives" says Elbert in *Why We Write* (1998). Signalling psychological resilience in the face of structural marginalization is an important feature of the occupational culture of screenwriting, and the invisibility of screenwriters and the ambiguous literary status of

the screenplay are unavoidable topics in the scholarly literature on the theory and practice of screenwriting (Kaye and Davis 2010; Maras 2009; Price 2010).

By differentially shaping access to screenwriting work and employment opportunities according to ethnicity, gender, and age, sociological factors within network-based reputational labour markets make screenwriting in Canada an extraordinarily homogenous occupation. Well-documented exclusionary networks differentially allocate work opportunities to white males, and pigeon-hole or deflect females, ethnic/cultural minorities, and older writers (Bielby 2009; Bielby and Bielby, 1992; Christopherson 2009). In the U.S., screenwriting is dominated by middle-aged white males despite decades of efforts to call attention to the problem and induce greater diversity in the occupation (cf. WGA West 2007; 2009).

National cultural and political factors also exert influences on the screenwriter occupation in Canada, giving it idiosyncratic attributes. Film and television are highly capital-intensive industries requiring considerable domestic business and policy infrastructure and capabilities. The indigenous English-language screen industry is centred in Toronto largely as an outcome of government policies and programs intended to support advanced cultural production for purposes of affirming and strengthening Canadian national identity and cultural sovereignty (Davis 2011a).

In spite of the many obstacles to economic and psychological fulfillment, screenwriting exercises an enormous power of attraction over many creative individuals, inducing thousands to prepare screenplays, pitch ideas, and work on the margins of the industry until the big break occurs.

More than money alone, expressive freedom and gratification from telling stories that appear on screen, and the cultural capital that many associate with professional screenwriting credits, are considered the screenwriter's true compensation for the trials and tribulations along the way. Said one Toronto-based screenwriter we interviewed, "people pay you to dream" – a rarity in English-speaking Canada, a society that sources most of its screen-based dreams in California.

### **Toronto as centre**

Screen industries are highly geographically clustered, usually in major metropolitan regions (Picard, 2009; 2008). Toronto is the only "second-tier" media production centre in North America (Krätke 2003) and is the principal creative screen production centre of English-speaking Canada, where decisions to produce Canadian content for English-language film and television are taken (Davis 2011a).<sup>1</sup> Canadian content, especially scripted drama, generates demand for screenwriters in Canada. In 2007-2008, \$933 million was spent in Canada on producing Canadian television content in the fiction genre, and \$240 million on Canadian-content fiction feature film production, of which nearly three-quarters was in the English language (CFTPA 2009). Approximately 80 percent of Ontario's nearly \$2 billion in film and television production in 2009 was indigenous (i.e., Canadian or broadcaster in-house production).

Toronto offers many opportunities to writers in addition to screenwriting. Toronto ranks as the third or fourth largest North American city for core copyright industries, encompassing film, television, interactive media, book and magazine publishing, live and recorded music,

advertising, newspapers, and live theatre (Davis 2011b). English-speaking Canada's major book, magazine, music, and newspaper publishers are headquartered in Toronto. The city is home to many of the country's major screen production houses, its principal English-language public broadcasters, many of its private broadcasters, and two important public broadcasters. Four of the major Canadian media conglomerates are headquartered in Toronto. The Toronto region hosts Canada's largest population of independent screen content producers, specialty broadcasters, and suppliers of specialized services and inputs (Davis 2011a). Toronto's screen industry is unlike Vancouver's, which is based mainly on foreign location or "runaway" productions from California. Foreign location production engages mainly below-the-line labour and does not offer opportunities to Canadian screenwriters (Davis and Kaye 2010).

In order to draw the first-ever portrait of English-speaking screenwriters in Canada, in 2010 we conducted an online survey of the members of the Writers Guild of Canada.<sup>ii</sup> Of the nearly 2,000 WGC members, 266 completed our survey, for a response rate of around 13 percent. Although a screenwriter is not required to belong to the Writers Guild, we assume that most established English-language screenwriters (i.e., those who have been produced or who have screen credits) in Canada are members. The geographical distribution of respondents did not differ much from that of the WGC population: 49.4 percent of respondents call Toronto their home, with 15.1 percent living in Vancouver, 10.6 percent in Los Angeles and 7.9 percent in Montreal.<sup>iii</sup>

The views of Toronto-based screenwriters about why they live where they do emphasized the economic rationale. Writers indicated that location in a major screen production centre is helpful because of proximity to producers, funders, and other gatekeepers. Yet this view was nuanced.

Some pointed to the increased local competition for writing jobs in a major production centre as an inevitable negative factor. But certain Toronto writers spoke of the creative inspiration provided by the backdrop of Canada's largest city. "It's the most multicultural, heterogeneous city in Canada" pointed out one respondent, before continuing that

My writing reflects the (now) urban sensibility of most Canadians, and the increasing demographic tilt of younger viewers. I am exposed daily to people who live, think, worship, believe, and exist with different values, beliefs and life and economic circumstances -- and those interactions enrich and widen my worldview. It makes my writing less provincial.

A handful of others described the Toronto region's urban (and suburban) environments as inspirations for their work, or described how urban centres inspire creativity due to close contact with various cultures and youth populations. But the fact that screen stories are seldom set in Toronto or Vancouver was underlined as a creative challenge for many writers who are forced to write in general about "who you know" and "how you live" rather than "where you live".

Most suggestions that Toronto inspired writers creatively came from screenwriters discussing the ability to connect, meet, and develop relationships with other writers, not from the aesthetic, cultural, or larger social characteristics of the city itself. The common view was that a writer's location in Toronto is important because of proximity to broadcasters, agents, production companies and the other gatekeepers and decision-makers in the English-Canadian screen industry.

In general, numbers support this logic. Nationally, 53 percent of Canadian screenwriters report earning less than \$40,000 per year from screenwriting (Table 4-1). This figure drops to 43 percent for Toronto-based screenwriters. For those who aspire to a middle-class income based on screenwriting work, Toronto is the place to be.

Table 4-1: Screenwriters' income from screenwriting

<b>Income from screenwriting</b>	<b>National</b>	<b>Toronto</b>
< \$40 000	53%	43%
\$40k - \$60k	10%	12%
\$60k - \$80k	9%	13%
\$80k- \$100k	9%	12%
\$100k- \$150k	7%	8%
\$150k+	9%	12%

At the same time, nearly half of those who make less than \$10,000 per year from screenwriting are Toronto residents, suggesting that the city attracts the highest and lowest earners in the field. The economic advantages to screenwriters' location in Toronto stem primarily from the Canadian screen industry's geographic centralization and as well as the country's implicit cultural policy that brought the Toronto media-production cluster to predominance.

Toronto provides opportunities unavailable elsewhere in Canada for screenwriters to move more easily into senior positions in the industry. Of the writers who listed "Story Editor of a TV Show" as their most common contracted writing task, 61 percent are based in Toronto. The same concentration in Toronto is seen among those who listed "Show Concept Creator-Story Bible Writer" (55 percent), and especially "Showrunner/Writer Producer" (74 percent). Of all respondents reporting showrunning experience, 63 percent identified Toronto as their primary place of residence. In comparison, writers listing "feature film screenplay" as their most common

job were severely underrepresented in Toronto (29 percent), showing that Toronto's importance as a television production centre is not equalled in film.

It might be expected that one of Toronto's advantages in attracting and retaining screenwriters would be its status as a creative city where a professional writer could find other ways to capitalize on creative talent outside of the screen production sector. Yet evidence from our survey suggests that this is not the case. The half of Canadian screenwriters based in Toronto accounted for 35 percent of all Canadian screenwriters who are also journalists; 40 percent of novelists; 38 percent of short story writers; half of poets; half those writing for advertising firms; 40 percent of those doing corporate technical writing; 49 percent of theatrical script writers; and half of internet writers. Toronto writers reported earning income from such activities with no greater frequency than their counterparts across Canada, and with less frequency in many categories. In other words, despite being based in a major creative metropole where opportunities for professional work in various other creative industries abound, Toronto-based screenwriters are slightly less likely to work at other forms of writing than their screenwriter counterparts elsewhere in Canada.

This might be explained by the fact that Toronto-based screenwriters are busier working on screen production than colleagues across Canada. Toronto hosts a disproportionately large share of screenwriters in each of the three highest ranges of screen credits. Conversely, despite playing port-of-arrival for many novices aiming to break in to the industry, Toronto has a disproportionately low share of screenwriters in most lower brackets of screen credits.

Toronto attracts screenwriters from the Canadian hinterland, playing the role of national centre for English-speaking Canada. This tendency is reflected through the myriad screenwriters who move from elsewhere in Canada to Toronto, and also through the high percentage of non-Toronto based screenwriters who occasionally travel to Toronto to work. Toronto exerts a strong gravitational pull on young Canadian screenwriters looking to get their start. Screenwriters living in Toronto tend to be only slightly younger than average, but Toronto attracts a disproportionately large share of young screenwriters; of the 11 WGC members in their twenties who responded to our survey, only one was based outside of Toronto. This difference is reflected in the number of years Toronto-based screenwriters have been in the industry. While 36.6 percent have been writing for less than 10 years, 48.9 percent of screenwriters in Toronto have less than 10 years experience. Similarly, 58.8 percent of Canadian screenwriters have worked between 11 and 35 years, while less than half of the writers in Toronto fall into the same category. Clearly, Toronto is regarded as the port of entry for those wishing to enter the Canadian English-language screenwriting labour market.

Toronto offers two major advantages to persons seeking to enter screenwriting: an elite training centre -- the Canadian Film Centre -- and widespread opportunities for mentoring and networking.

Founded by Canadian director and Hollywood icon Norman Jewison, the Canadian Film Centre (CFC) is “committed to promoting and investing in Canada's diverse talent; providing exhibition, financial, and distribution opportunities for top creative content leaders from coast to coast” (<http://www.cfccreates.com>). The CFC offers a range of training programs and master classes,

often drawing on prominent local media practitioners as resident instructors. Many of Toronto's production community elite are amongst the CFC's network of alumni, benefactors, and party crashers, making CFC training a door-opener for many and a fast-track for some. The CFC proclaims itself "Canada's leading institution for advanced training in film, television and new media": more than 1300 media professionals have passed through its training programs since 1988.

Many screenwriters receive formal training in the craft. Overall, the percentage of screenwriters who have taken some form of formal training program or professional workshop was relatively constant in (27 percent) and outside (26 percent) Toronto. Thus, providing access to screenwriter training does not distinguish Toronto from other places. In their comments, certain respondents insisted that training was irrelevant to learning the craft, since professional screenwriting could only be learned "on the job" by doing.

However, the CFC training programs offer an advantage to Toronto-based screenwriters. CFC training contributes to the "stickiness" of the Toronto labour market, since 80 percent of CFC-graduates surveyed described their primary place of residence as the Toronto area. While 20 percent of Toronto-based screenwriters had attended the CFC, only 5 percent of Canadian screenwriters based outside of the Toronto area had done so. Only 13 percent of survey respondents had participated in training programs offered by the CFC, but 20 percent of Toronto-based screenwriters have attended the CFC.

CFC training directly correlates with financial success amongst English-language Canadian screenwriters. While 53 percent of screenwriters earn less than \$40 000 per year from screenwriting alone, only 30 percent of CFC graduates fail to earn that much from screenwriting. This income advantage may reflect the quality of the instruction of the CFC programs relative to comparable programs offered elsewhere; it may also reflect the role the CFC plays in helping screenwriters get into the Toronto screenwriting network by establishing mentoring relationships.

Mentorship is crucial to honing the craft of professional screenwriting, to helping individuals develop, market, and transfer their skills to work on the ideas and projects of others. In a freelance business in which success and opportunity depend on reputation and professional contacts, mentorship plays a crucial networking function, connecting workers with employers, ideas with funding, and skills with projects. This is particularly true given the extent to which respondents made it clear that personal contacts are absolutely crucial to success in the Canadian screenwriting industry, a claim corroborated by scholarship on the importance of personal relationships in breaking into elite project-based work networks in Hollywood (Skilton 2008).

Our survey data show that having a mentor is closely correlated with financial success among Canadian screenwriters. Mentorship relationships among screenwriters are a more common practice in Toronto than elsewhere in Canada: 56 percent of Toronto-based respondents report having had mentors; only 34 percent of Canadian screenwriters living elsewhere report having had mentors. The mentorship gap between Toronto-based screenwriters and those from other parts of Canada is not a simple case of an urban-rural divide, since Toronto's rate significantly

exceeds that of Vancouver (38 percent) and Montréal (19 percent). Amongst urban centres with significant populations of respondents, only Los Angeles-based WGC members reported similar levels of mentorship (57 percent). In other words, Canadian screenwriters are as likely to find mentors in Toronto as in the global centre of the screen production industry.

The CFC and other formal mentorship organizations and institutions might explain Toronto's advantage. The critical mass of talent located in the Greater Toronto Area provides more options to both mentors and apprentices for finding individuals with complementary personalities and career ambitions. The sheer volume of screen production in the Toronto area might lead well-connected, successful screenwriters to feel that opportunities abound and thus to be more cooperative and less competitive with their younger colleagues than screenwriters working in centres where opportunities are scarcer. Strong evidence suggests that a culture of mentorship and networking operates among screenwriters in Toronto, providing a unique social mechanism for those entering the Canadian screenwriting occupation.

### **Toronto as periphery**

While Toronto is the principal screenwriting centre for English-speaking Canada, it is also a periphery, losing some of its talent to Hollywood. Many Canadian screenwriters believe that the brightest talent moves to LA. When asked for a general word of advice to young aspiring Canadian screenwriters, many of our respondents replied simply: "move to LA".

The American and Canadian markets for screen products are asymmetrical. Hollywood screen products circulate easily in Canada, but Canadian English-language screen products -- especially indigenous drama -- struggle for audience attention and distributor shelf space in their home market. In 2006-2007 Canadian English-language television drama captured only 14 percent of peak-period viewing of drama programming on Canadian television, and Canadian feature films captured only 1.1 percent of the English-language box office (CFTPA 2009). Recognizably Canadian fare is not valued in the US, requiring aspiring Canadian exporters of film and television to align production to American aesthetic standards and to efface cultural markers that identify their product as Canadian (Davis and Nadler 2009).

The low domestic market share of indigenous English-language Canadian scripted screen products reflects the ongoing marginalization of the scripted content segments of the Canadian industry, a situation suffered to varying extents in other small English-language countries (Grant 2008). The problematic status of indigenous screen-based culture in English Canada magnifies the attraction of Hollywood, where the inherent occupational risks of screenwriting are similar, but the rewards are greater, and where Canadian screenwriters, such as superstars Paul Haggis and David Shore, have earned fame and fortune (Kaye and Davis 2010).

According to survey respondents, the main advantage of locating in Los Angeles is the competition to meet the most demanding standards. "LA is a very creative, happening place" according to one WGC member located in California, "and I get a lot done here because the bar is so high". This view is echoed by another writer who observes that "Living in Los Angeles affects my writing as I am in the big time and what I write goes against the best". Reputational

success in LA has undeniable financial benefits, since California-based WGC members make up almost a third of respondents reporting screenwriting income of more than \$150,000 per year (although LA-based WGC screenwriters account for only 11 percent of responses). Some of LA's intrinsic appeals that attract Canadian screenwriters include: frustration with the complexities and uncertainties of Canadian production funding models, a (perhaps naive) view that screenwriters are more likely to get ahead based on merit rather than connections in LA than they are in Canada, frustration with working anonymously in Canada on productions that have little traction with audiences, and a sense that the occupational dynamics of the screenwriting industry in Canada lead to creative stagnation. In the words of one respondent, in Canada the system often leads “to the best of the worst rising to the top rather than what is truly good writing”. Said one Toronto-based Canadian writer who has had success in Canada but is still pitching in LA, “sadly, I’m the best we’ve got”.

To qualify Toronto’s position as the centre of the periphery describes not only the centripetal and centrifugal forces that affect screenwriting talent movements into and out of the city, but also the ways in which Toronto’s concurrent centrality and peripherality influence the creative process of Toronto-based screenwriters. The city serves primarily as a creative production centre for the Canadian hinterland. Screen stories developed or produced in Toronto are infrequently set in Toronto. Consequently, Toronto rarely tells stories about itself to Toronto audiences. Often working with a “will it play in Moose Jaw” rule-of-thumb, many Canadian productions intended for the domestic market consciously avoid urban settings and, in particular, distinctly Toronto sensibilities, in favour of generic Canada-scapes or specific regional flavours: like the Prairies or Newfoundland. Many Toronto screen productions are service productions for Hollywood

studios; Toronto vigorously markets itself to stand in for more expensive American centres, especially New York, Chicago, and Washington (Davis and Kaye 2010). This versatility is good for Toronto's service production business but does not contribute to Canadian identity or to a Toronto urban cultural aesthetic, a key differentiator among metropolitan regions competing in the cognitive-cultural economy (Davis 2011a).

This reality is reflected in the comments posted by Toronto-based screenwriters. One screenwriter who also works as a novelist lamented that "in my books, the GTA is my backdrop. In my TV writing, I try to think American". For another screenwriter used to working towards stories that will play in Moose Jaw, Toronto is "perhaps too urban for the audience we are mostly reaching" to be creatively inspiring as a location. Generally, survey responses contained variations of the theme that, for Toronto-based screenwriters, "Where the story is set has a greater influence on my writing than where I live".

### **Toronto and exclusionary networks**

In an industry that requires strong networking behaviour and has high attrition, Toronto's attraction for screenwriters lies in the opportunity to join a select group of writers able to leverage their proximity to the main production centre of Anglophone Canada to remain aware of writing opportunities, mainly defined by broadcasters. This advantage is reinforced through gate-keeping institutions, formal and informal mentorships, and a professional culture that uses reputation and personal networks as currency.

Proximity to opportunities is not merely spatial but also *cultural*. Breaking into the Toronto screen industry syndicate can open up a rewarding career path for a screenwriter, but many individuals are sooner or later excluded on the basis of race, age, gender, and class, including those who are not able to attend the CFC, who do not have contacts with the right people, or who do not conform to the image of Canadianess required to produce screen culture for the Canadian hinterland.

Professional screenwriting is difficult for young people to break into. Only 4 percent of all survey respondents were in their twenties. In addition to workable raw ideas for stories, novices require contacts to get projects off the ground, and mentorship and experience in order to refine ideas and polish scripts appropriate for professional production environments. Getting that first professional credit and opening the door to Guild membership requires prolonged networking, professionalization, idea refining, and perseverance that can take years to complete. For example, when asked to give advice to younger screenwriters, one respondent opined: “count on ten years of getting nowhere, but eventually a break will come your way”.

Breaking into the screenwriter fraternity apparently requires paying dues: this often means working for free, at a discount, or under dubious arrangements. In their responses to our survey, many screenwriters expressed frustration with the challenges associated with being compensated in a fair and timely fashion. In the words of one respondent “many deceitful, dishonest producers [are] in the business for the wrong reason. I have been screwed so many times by well known companies”. Certain respondents expressed frustration with the extent to which gatekeepers are

able to leverage freelancers' dependence on reputation and contacts for getting future work to renege on agreed working arrangements with screenwriters, knowing that writers are unlikely to risk being blackballed by mounting a serious protest. An oft-cited example was the tendency for screenwriters to find themselves working "on spec" or at dramatically unfair wages for prolonged periods of time and on an indeterminate basis on projects "under development" that were ultimately never funded for production. In such cases, screenwriters often had neither credit nor fair pay to show for serious investments of time, energy, and creativity. The difficulty of being paid in a fair and timely fashion is far worse in Toronto than elsewhere in Canada. Only Los Angeles is comparable, suggesting that such practices are common in larger production centres with a standing reserve of surplus talent.

Reflecting the problematic nature of an industry in which personal connections and social networks are crucial determinants of creative and economic opportunities and everyone is considered personally responsible for personal success or failure, responses to questions about the industry's effectiveness at fostering, mentoring, or apprenticing new writing talent were decidedly bifurcated.

Evidence suggests that membership in the club is exclusive; getting in depends on circumstance and luck, favouritism, preferential treatment, and exclusionary practices. Some screenwriters told positive personal stories of relatively friction-free initiations into the Canadian screenwriting industry. One respondent described how "I developed as a writer and producer because of the excellent mentorship I've received from seasoned writers/producers in the industry"; another was "very lucky to have a mentor who pushed me to write all the time". Recognizing that "it's

difficult to break into the industry”, and that not many are given the same kind of chance, one respondent described how a big break came when

I was fortunate in that I worked on a non-scripted show with a mentor who taught at the CFC and thought I had potential as a writer. When the opportunity arose for a scripted show, he gave me a chance.

Many assessments of new talent development in the Canadian screenwriting industry were positive, putting the onus to break through on the individual. Typical of this view were statements such as “the industry is good, but the young screenwriter has to go and seek out the mentorship - sometimes meeting 10, 20, or even 30 people before you find someone who can give you a break”, and “the industry has ample opportunities for fostering new talent and opportunities to develop screenwriting skills if new writers seek them out”.

Clearly this recipe for success depends on having access to 30 important people in the industry more than on drive, gumption, or the willingness to hustle. Many personal anecdotes of how individuals eventually got their big break seem to hinge on being in the right place at the right time, or on patronage or extraordinary support from established industry insiders. The “self-made success” theme was also repeated in certain personal narratives such as “I had the good fortune to get a script coordinator job and I don’t credit the Canadian industry for that” or the more direct response that “I’ve had to do everything myself”.

Other respondents—those who likely struggled to get appointments with 20 industry insiders—feel stonewalled by entry barriers. For example, only 15 percent of respondents gave the industry

a score of 4 or above on a 5 point scale (where 5 was excellent) on the question about how well the industry develops new talent. Comments ranged from criticism of the competitive nature of the screenwriting business to frank assessments about the prospects for sustainable careers to expressions of frustration and even puzzlement with the seeming impenetrability of the system.

Exclusionary networks affect older writers: age defines an individual professional screenwriter's career prospects. Nearly 80 percent of Canadian screenwriters are between the ages of 30 and 59. Screenwriting is a professional occupation requiring constant novelty in a context of rapidly changing technologies, tastes, and styles. Broadcasters, film studios, and advertisers like to appeal to young audiences with hip content. Many participants expressed profound frustration with structural ageism that pushes all but the most successful screenwriters into other facets of screen production or out of the industry altogether. Overall, 26 percent of respondents reported being the victim of age-based discrimination. Some described writers sidelined because producers felt they were too far removed from the themes and characters in youth-oriented shows to write in an appropriate voice. Older female writers are especially vulnerable to ageism.

Given the general difficulty experienced by individuals trying to break in and remain screenwriters, the extra degree of challenge that this highly networked profession presents to women and minorities can readily be imagined. Although Toronto is one of the most culturally diverse cities in the world, the screenwriting profession is overwhelmingly white, male, and native English-speaking.

Table 4-2 illustrates the effects of exclusionary networks in the screenwriting profession and points to the predominance of culturally elite perspectives in Canadian storytelling, even when the screen industry is located in Canada’s most diverse city. The exceptional cultural diversity found in Toronto and Canada as a whole is not reflected in the extremely homogenous group of Canadians working as screenwriters. In fact, Toronto-based screenwriters are not much different from the national population of English-language screenwriters. While Toronto does not struggle to recruit and retain screenwriters from other parts of Canada, few individuals from Toronto’s culturally diverse population make screenwriting their career.

Table 4-2: Demographic characteristics of English-language Canadian and Toronto-based screenwriters

	<b>Toronto- General (2006 Canada Census Data)<sup>iv</sup></b>	<b>Canada - Screenwriters</b>	<b>Toronto-based Screenwriters</b>
% female	52%	35%	35%
% university degree	37%	70%	71%
% visible minority	47%	4.1%	3.8%
% born outside Canada	50%	26%	21%
% mother-tongue other than English	47%	5%	3%

## **Screenwriters and the stories told**

Our investigation of the social dynamics of screenwriting in the Greater Toronto Area raises two major questions that require further research. First, some of the conceptual models developed within the cultural labour, creative economy, and creative cities literature do not apply in the case of screenwriters, or require considerable nuance. Industry-specific practices and nation-specific institutions, more than abstractions about creativity and mobility, explain the social dynamics of screenwriting in Canada which, as we have seen, have very strong parallels with screenwriting in the US.

Second, our study underscores the need for research into how the social dynamics of creative professions affect the cultural products offered to consumers. This is particularly true in countries like Canada where the screen industry is mandated by cultural policy and subsidized with public funds. Exclusionary networks in screenwriting affect the kinds of stories that show up on Canadian film and television screens. Despite exceptions to the general rule, English-Canadian film and television products do not attract large audiences or animate popular culture. They function mainly to fill content-quotas and round out screening schedules (Beatty and Sullivan 2006). The exclusionary attributes of the screenwriter profession in English-speaking Canada are entirely consistent with what is known about the social dynamics of labour in elite project-based cultural industries, of which Hollywood is the exemplar (Skilton 2008). The difference between Hollywood and Toronto is that the screen industry in Canada is more of a national cultural project than an economically viable industry, a situation that reflects the much

smaller size of the domestic market, competition from Hollywood, the cost of screen production, and the chicken-and-egg problem of generally low public interest in Canadian screen products.

The City of Toronto's motto is "Diversity Our Strength". If Canada's screenwriting population better represented the Canadian people, perhaps their stories would resonate with Canadian audiences (Raboy and Shtern 2010), who live mainly in urban regions. Indeed, if Canadian screen offerings reflected greater diversity in storytelling voices, the results might be more attractive in creative as well as commercial terms, domestically as well as internationally. This is why Canadians need to ask the same question the Writers Guild of America asked in 2007: "whose stories are we telling?"

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<sup>i</sup> To qualify as a “Canadian” screen production by the Canadian Audio-Visual Certification Office (CAVCO), the director or screenwriter must be Canadian and points are awarded for Canadian nationality of top creative talent. Certification as Canadian has important implications for tax credit eligibility. An analogous system certifies Canadian content requirements for broadcasters. For an overview of “Canadian Content” policies in broadcasting, see House of Commons 2003 (chapter 5) and Raboy and Shtern 2010 (chapters 4 and 9).

<sup>ii</sup> The WGC is the principal professional association for Canadian English-language writers for film, television, radio, and digital media (See <http://www.writersguildofcanada.com/>)

<sup>iii</sup> Approximately 43% of the 1,885 Writers Guild of Canada members (in 2008) live in the GTA. The other principal locations of English-language Canadian screenwriters are Québec (9%), British Columbia (13%), and California (17%) – predominantly in the Montreal, Vancouver, and Los Angeles metropolitan regions, respectively

<sup>iv</sup> Source: 2006 Census Backgrounder: <http://www.toronto.ca/demographics/reports.htm>.