Dear Colleagues:

I wrote the script and dialogue for Death of a Silence (Le Lys cassé) and I want to share a few thoughts I have had as a result of that experience.

First of all, so there can be no misunderstanding, I must state that I will always remember the entire team that worked on the production of Death of a Silence with warmth. Starting with the gifted conductor of the orchestra, André Melançon. And also my producers Michel and Anouk Braut, who stood guard with respect and enthusiasm.

So what’s my problem? I’ll tell you. I was dumbfounded to discover how little credit the electronic and written press give to the director and the author: official recognition that I created the work.

And I was forced to examine the consequences not happen name put in brackets.

Yes, there were exceptions (Mouffe, Nathalie, justiﬁcation.)

There were a few exceptions, certainly. For instance, when Radio-Canada advertised that it was going to show the film, it made sure that the director and the author were placed side by side. Yes, there were exceptions (Mouffe, Nathalie, Petrowski, Minou Petrowski and perhaps others), but they only proved the unhappy rule. And I was forced to examine the consequences of applying the ‘a ﬁlm by’ convention without justification.

Consequences that are suffered by the screenwriter:

1. As a screenwriter, I have often seen my name put in brackets. Oddly enough, this does not happen when I appear in a ﬁlm’s credits as an actor. Of course, the consequence is quite simple, sorrow—sorrow tinged with anger. I carried Death of a Silence for ﬁve years before I gave it birth. I felt deprived of my ﬁrst right as an author: ofﬁcial recognition that I created the work.

2. It follows that it is easy for journalists to slip on the banana peel of ‘a ﬁlm by’. When they do, they attribute the choice of theme (and/or) dramatic treatment, the colour of the characters, the Composition of Images to the conductor of the orchestra. And this is done (I repeat to avoid any misunderstanding) without malice, without premeditation, simply because ‘a ﬁlm by’ is an expression that conveys a lot of territory. And so I read:

- Another journalist who discussed the theme of silence broken, summarizing the core of the scenario’s subject. He did not mention my name. Not even in brackets. He talked about André’s cinematography.
- Another who, relying on ‘a ﬁlm by’, slid to far off track as to give me credit as dialogue writer only. Am I to understand that I provided dialogue for André’s film?
- Yet another, who called the ﬁlm a little masterpiece and rightly praised André’s remarkable talent, did not have one good word to say about the scenario and dialogue. Not one. It might be a ‘little masterpiece’ but the mother is not even entitled to a ‘My, what a beautiful baby!’ And I could go on, because many others have slipped and fallen on the ‘a ﬁlm by’ banana peel. Yet I am certain that if they were asked what was needed to make a good ﬁlm, they would agree that ‘first and foremost you need a good story.’

Another consequence of this particular slide:

3. As a result, the message conveyed is that… screenwriters? Well, they…er… screenwriters…um…just what do screenwriters do? Let’s go further down the slide: if screenwriters don’t choose the theme, if they don’t create or colour the characters, if they don’t build the story’s dramatic line IF THEY DO NOT WRITE IMAGES, what do they do? Maybe… between two silences… they write dialogue? (hence a screenwriter does not describe silences).

Dialogue, then? That must be it… so it’s not surprising that at the bottom of the slide screenwriters are forgotten or their names appear in brackets (which amounts to the same thing), or they simply are not named at all. Period. Why did I put the phrase IF THEY DO NOT WRITE IMAGES in capitals? I’ll tell you. It’s because I think that this may be where we hit the major snag. Film, they say, is first and foremost a medium of images. One picture is worth a thousand words, they say. I laugh a lot to hear them say “first and foremost the image” when I think of Le Désir de l’Empire amérindien, or Les Bons Déshérités! But even so, yes of course it is also a medium of images. So let’s return to the slide: if a screenwriter writes words (meaning dialogue) then he doesn’t write images! Conclusion: the screenwriter writes words, the director creates images. Do you follow me?

I found it wonderful to work with André because one person’s talent enriched the other’s and vice versa. It was an ideal combination. But it didn’t extend to the point where anyone could talk about a script written or directed jointly.

For example: why does one journalist attribute to André the fact that one character, Marielle at 29, appears in her own ﬂashbacks in company with herself as a child of 6, a child of 11? I believe that this is another unfortunate consequence activated by the notorious ‘a ﬁlm by’. Because if this journalist believes that screenwriters do not write images, to whom can he give credit for this dramatic effect if not to the director? Well, as it happens, this procedure lies at the very heart of the cinematographic writing of Death of a Silence. I was writing a ﬁlm. I was writing dialogues, silences, images.

All in all, it means that using ‘a ﬁlm by’ when the director did not write the scenario has the effect of giving undue credit to the director and thereby discrediting the author. No one is upset that Woody Allen signs his ﬁlms “a ﬁlm written and directed by Woody Allen.” He takes credit as author and director. This is perfectly legitimate. Then why not “Death of a Silence, a ﬁlm written by Jacqueline Barrette and directed by André Melançon?” Yes, and that is what should have been said. Just as it should have been E.T., a ﬁlm written by Melissa Mathisson and directed by Steven Spielberg.

We say a concerto by François Dompierre conducted by Charles Dutot. It is clear. And because it is clear, it would not occur to us to ask Charles Dutot what time it was when he conceived the second movement. When we applaud at the end of the performance, we are applauding François Dompierre, and Charles Dutot, and Edith Bélisle the pianist, and the ﬁrst violin, etc. But ﬁrst and foremost, François had to write his concerto, right? We all agree on that.
When you’ve been granted André Melançon as conductor of the orchestra, Markita Boies as pianist, you give thanks to heaven. But from that gratitude, it’s only a step to the point where my gratitude makes me keep quiet when someone dilutes or downright deprives me of my first right as an author. The step of resignation. No—I–we—must speak out. We must try to convince the written and electronic press because it has the power to help us at this moment in history when copyright is threatened. We, the storytellers, need support from the media. The whole industry depends on the stories we will write. And I am convinced that all our other rights as authors depend on the respect of our first author’s right. We must not fall into the trap of resignation. We must fight against the fear of taking our place, our proper place, just our place—no more no less. We have to resist the temptation to camouflage this fear behind shields like, “It doesn’t matter as long as the film goes over well.” “They’ll think I’m on an ego trip,” “I’ve got the satisfaction of having done a good job. I couldn’t care less about the rest.” No, we must speak out. For our self-respect, out of respect for our colleagues, out of respect for the author’s copyright.

I have just read an article by our American colleague Mel Frohman in the newsletter of the Writers Guild of America (West). I met Mel in Banff. With three other colleagues (Alan Pater from the United Kingdom, Geoffrey Atherden from Australia and Fiona Samuel from New Zealand), we formed the panel of scriptwriters. Every day of that week we shared our “author’s problems.” We were dumfounded by Mel’s description of American authors’ working conditions. And I thought that things could not have come to that pass unless the story began with non-recognition of the author’s primary right: copyright. Here are some excerpts from his brave article:

“...It’s not just who wrote the damn script that counts—what’s important is whose ideas are in it! And, if we won’t make the changes they’ll (network) get someone who will. The writer is an interchangeable part. The writer is a typist, not a thinker.”

And this is how Mel ends his article:

“The basic problem we’re faced with is gaining respect for the writer. When we solve that problem any other problem will solve itself. Unfortunately, sometimes we’re our own worst enemies.”

Right on, Mel. But tell me, is what is happening to us all that different from what is happening to our American colleagues? Is it my one and only experience as a scriptwriter that leads me to believe that producers here all have as much respect for a script as my producers Michel and Anouk Braquet showed for mine? Mel rebels against the fact that the author has become what I call a scribbler. A hack. When a producer or a Network representative wants a chocolate cake, gives the author a list of ingredients, and specifies that he wants coconut sprinkled on top, can we call this creation? Our American colleagues can always console themselves with the fact that they are getting top dollars to stir up exactly the kind of cake the client wants! And what about us? Where do we stand? Spontaneity is the first breath of any creative act. If you deprive authors of their spontaneity, you turn them into hacks. Société des Auteurs, Recherches, Documentaristes et Compositeurs (SARDEC) is now questioning institutions about the treatment meted out to scriptwriters, and it is vital that we all support its initiatives. Unite our voices. Remind the decision-makers in the industry that, yes, when you think about it, first and foremost the industry needs storytellers. The dreadful thing is that we still have to say “when you think about it.” We must tell the different parties involved that if they put their stakes on the authors’ talent and promote authors’ creativity by providing good working conditions, in the long run this will guarantee a healthy industry.

We must convince them that what we are doing is justified, we must make sure we acquire the support of the electronic and written press. To dilute, to conceal the authors’ first right, copyright, is to open the door to other abuses which ultimately attack freedom of expression. And I ask you, who will take us seriously if we let our first right as authors be flouted?

I am also speaking out to avoid becoming bitter. I am 40 years old. I still have many children to bring into the world. You will understand why I do not want to become barren and embittered. I am speaking out because my future as a writer, and I venture to say our future, is at stake.

Your colleague,

Jacqueline Barrette

Translated by Kelly Ricard

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B.C. Film congratulates producer Stephen Foster and all his associates at Northern Lights Media Corp. on the completion of principle photography on the feature film

“The Outside Chance of Maximilian Glick”