

The Writer and the Screenwriter: An Interview with Domenico Starnone

[Domenico Starnone](#) has written for film both directly and indirectly: he has over a dozen screenplays to his credit, and has had one of his novels, *Denti*, turned into a film. This interview was conducted on e-mail. The questions were translated into Italian by Marco Candida, and Starnone's responses were translated into English by Elizabeth Harris.

Susan Harris: How do you view the role of the author/writer vs. the role of the screenwriter?

Domenico Starnone: No matter how hard one might try to change things, in Italy, the screenwriter isn't autonomous but collaborates with and is dependent upon the director and producer. The novelist is the master, the absolute *padrone* of the world he creates: he even owns his commas. The screenwriter, in contrast, contributes to realizing a film that is only fully realized when the screenwriter's work has been buried beneath the story in images. A screenplay is permanently modifiable. Everyone meddles in the screenplay—the producer, the director, actors, their consultants—right up to the set.

SH: Can you comment on the escapism of the movies vs. books?

DS: A movie is more constraining. It has its set times; it runs. The images are dictated; they drive the viewer's imagination. A movie takes little time to watch, but that time doesn't presuppose any interruptions. A movie's time, then, is a real prison. While with books, both in their realization and consumption, the mesh is wider. But books also require a great deal on the part of the reader. Pages won't turn unless the reader is an active collaborator, giving life to the writer's world. Indeed, books are steadily losing ground: the effort involved in reading is a deterrent. Theaters are also emptying out, but for different reasons. Film consumption has shifted to the small screen, and taken on more intimate qualities. In many ways, watching a movie on DVD is like reading a book (though without the same level of commitment): you can stop the story, mark your place, do other things, reflect, go back to watching. Probably the future for both books and movies lies in the portable small screen.

SH: What differences do you find between shaping a novel and shaping a screenplay? What happens in terms of style, characterization, point of view?

DS: A novel is made up of words. When I write, I know that every situation, every character, every landscape, every feeling depends on how I use words, how I articulate words in sentences, the play of grammatical tenses, the syntax. I know the strength of the book lies in my voice as author, in my ability to move in and out of my characters, in what point of view I choose and when and how I decide to leave or modify that point of view. Most of all, I know I can do whatever I want with words, because they don't cost anything, and more importantly, because they contain everything. When I'm working on a screenplay, I always have to keep in mind that I'm using words to prepare a map to images. Images, for example, are always in the present. Creating any significant nuance of time in a movie—I am, I was, I was once long ago, I will be—requires a great deal of visionary imagination. In literature, handling nuances of time is our daily bread. And then it's the actor, the actor's body, that creates the character, not some directions that define a character's appearance or psychology while also leaving ample room for the reader's imagination. When we read *War and Peace*, we each invent our own Natasha. The movie *War and Peace* has only one Natasha: Audrey Hepburn. And it's the actor who defines the character's interior movements (through crying, laughing, staring at something, running, gasping) and not some sort of dug-up verbalized psychology. The same goes for dialogue; it's all in the interpretation. The screenwriter does distinguish point of view, determine characters, construct relationships, articulate the various stages of the story. But this is all a trampoline. Whether the leap is elegant or

clumsy depends upon the story in images.

SH: What was your experience with seeing your novel *Denti* turned into a screenplay?

DS: Every time my books have been turned into movies, my first reaction has been negative. The problem is when you're writing, you see with your mind's eye. The power of mental vision lies in its lack of definition. When defined by words, this vision seems impoverished to the person doing the writing and the rereading. So imagine what happens with a movie that by its very nature has more sharply defined images. Even a successful movie will still have the defect of not matching up at all with what the writer imagined during the writing process. The same can be said for the relationship between the screenplay and the realized film.

SH: When you write screenplays, do you produce the story first with the idea of translating it into a screenplay?

DS: I never think of movie-writing as a literary endeavor. Even when I toss out an idea, it will be the kernel of a story rendered with images, not words.

SH: What differences do you see between collaborating and writing alone?

DS: When it works, collaboration can be quite rich. One idea spurs the next, one image joins another, different sensibilities, different imaginations colliding and generating a world. But sometimes the best solutions don't win out—just what's been imposed. Major problems arise from being too aggressive or conceding too much, in the name of the best interests of the movie. The absolute worst thing is when collaborators lose any sense of responsibility. Working alone has the benefit that, up to the point when the producer and director take over, you're working on forming a world that's entirely your own. It might not be as rich as the one born out of collaboration, but it's definitely more solid. You'll suffer a bit more, though, when the revisions start, when the producer and director weigh in, maybe right on the set.