

## Interview with screenwriter John Richards

*John Richards is the co-writer of the recent ABC1 series Outland.*



### **What inspired you to become a screenwriter?**

Strangely enough, it was probably Doctor Who. I was obsessed with it as a kid, and back then the special effects were rubbish, so it tended to lean more heavily on the acting and the writing. It was quite a 'literary' show in the 1970s, so the Doctor would quote Shakespeare or poetry, and the stories would reference other books and films. It was a show that celebrated knowledge and the written word, and would lead me to other works (I read both Evelyn Waugh's *The Loved One* and JG Ballard's *High Rise* because they were paid homage – or ripped off – by Doctor Who). It was probably the first thing that made me aware TV had 'writers' and that those writers had the power to turn bubble wrap and tinfoil into whole other worlds.

### **What was your first step to following this pathway?**

Like a lot of writers I started as a performer, and in particular I was a stand-up comedian. It was a way of writing material and getting it in front of an audience, but I soon realised I wasn't that interested in the performing side of it. That led to a radio sketch comedy called 'The Third Ear' on community radio station RRR, which I'm still very proud of. Then I received funding from Film Victoria to work on a feature script about a community radio station. And *Outland* came out of a short film I funded myself and filmed in my lounge room – there's a tendency for one project to lead into another. I never had any formal training in writing, but I've watched a lot of television and film and learnt from what works and what doesn't. It's extremely affordable now to make your own short films or internet content and I think that's a brilliant way to learn.

### **What does a typical day in the life of John Richards involve?**

It changes day to day. At the moment we're doing publicity for *Outland* so I've done two interviews, one in person and one on the phone. I've also had a meeting about another possible project, and I'm preparing a talk for the Australian Centre for the Moving Image about sex and violence on television. You spend more time emailing and in meetings than actually writing, I've found. If I'm actually writing something I tend to take my laptop out to a café and work there for about five hours. I'm pretty old-fashioned, so I write my first drafts by hand, then when I type them up I'll make changes and amendments as I go. I like working in cafés because I like the movement and energy around me. I also drink a lot of coffee.

### **What is your favourite aspect of your job?**

Well, it's certainly better than working in a call centre! My favourite moments are the 'eureka' moments – usually in the shower – when you suddenly realise how you can make the plot work by connecting two elements in a new way. Or when someone tells you that your writing has moved them in some way – you feel like you've succeeded. I think most writers have some sort of God complex, and we're hoping we'll create something that lives on after us, so there's a real satisfaction when you hit a nerve.

### **What is your least favourite aspect?**

There are a lot of meetings. There's not a lot of glory. And it's frustratingly unreliable as a source of income.

**What makes a good film narrative?**

I don't think there's hard and fast rules, and I get annoyed when people try to pretend that there are. Generally I need to have empathy with the characters, and I like to have a plot, but as long as the film keeps me engaged I'm happy. I like to have a beginning, a middle and an end, but they don't necessarily have to be in that order.

**What is more important, the story or how it is told?**

How it's told – after all, audiences still see Shakespeare without whinging about spoilers. You can tell a story that's been told a million times before but you have to be really good to pull it off. And it's important to know your genre. There's nothing as embarrassing as including what you think is a novel twist to discover the audience is seven steps ahead of you.

**What is one narrative film cliché that you believe is overused?**

It's not a cliché in narrative but a cliché about narrative and it's the phrase 'raising the stakes'. You hear it a lot in production meetings and it drives me nuts because it's incredibly unhelpful. While it's supposed to mean 'what's happening has to be important to the characters' it's somehow become a reason for making a lot of drama totally over the top. So a story about a character who has to achieve something becomes a story about a character who has to achieve something and her job is at risk and her daughter's been kidnapped and there's a nuclear bomb in the city. Sometimes small stories can be just as important as saving the world.

**Top five film opening sequences and why?****1 *Brazil* (1985)**

Terry Gilliam's masterpiece is a highly bureaucratic take on Orwell's 1984 in which evil thrives because good men do paperwork. The film starts with a shop window in which a TV set is showing an advertisement for ducts, before the shopfront explodes in flames. In the following chaos we stay with the TV while a government minister responds to a question about terrorism by quoting sporting clichés. This leads into a seamless sequence in which a computer error leads to the arrest of an innocent man, and in a few minutes we have an understanding of the world this film takes place in, the style of the film, the central themes and the overwhelming bureaucracy. We see the incident that incites the plot and we meet the female lead and one of the antagonists. Curiously, the very last character to be introduced is Sam Lowry, ostensibly the hero of the film, who doesn't appear until some 10 minutes in. And even then we first meet him in a dream sequence, all of which emphasises how little power he has in everyday life. It's an incredible amount of information to convey, yet it's done effortlessly.

**2 *Children of Men* (2006)**

Like *Brazil*, *Children of Men* is a highly visual take on a near-future dystopia, this one in a world where no child has been born for 20 years and the world is slowly dying. The opening of the film is a single take that starts simply before building to a dizzying complexity. We start on Theo Faron (Clive Owen) buying a cup of coffee and learning from the television that the world's youngest man has died at the age of 18, which introduces us to both Faron but also the central premise of the film. Leaving the café we now visually – and viscerally – see the crumbling London he lives in before a terrorist bomb destroys the building he just left. It engages the audience first intellectually, then emotionally, but also doesn't condescend to them or feel forced.

**3 *Amelie* (aka *Le Fabuleux Destin d'Amélie Poulain*) (2001)**

Voice-overs are normally poison when it comes to narrative, and reek of either desperation or lack of imagination. When narration stops being narrative polyfilla and

becomes part of the film's texture, however, it can become engaging. *Sunset Boulevard* is narrated by a dead man, for example, and *Memento* has a narrator who doesn't know anything and is just as confused as the audience. The opening to *Amelie* is great because the unnamed narrator – who is not one of the characters in the film – establishes the whimsical 'storytelling' nature of the film in a sequence that informs later events but mostly establishes the mood and tone. It tells the audience what sort of film it is and sets them up for what is to come.

#### 4 *Being John Malkovich* (1999)

Like *Amelie*, the beginning of *Being John Malkovich* doesn't serve a strict narrative purpose but instead gently leads us into the film while also establishing the themes of the movie. Blue curtains on screen open to reveal a puppet show, where a wooden marionette sees its reflection in a mirror and then in despair destroys the room around it. It's a strong visual opening and immediately sets up the ideas of manipulation, self-image, power and artifice without overtly saying anything, and it casually introduces us to the protagonist Craig Schwartz (John Cusack).

#### 5 *North by Northwest* (1959)

Hitchcock's classic thriller involves advertising exec Roger Thornhill (Cary Grant) being mistaken for a man named George Kaplan, and the mistaken identity leads him into a world of danger and intrigue. In order for this to work, the audience needs to know who Cary Grant is, before they find out who he isn't. This could lead to a fairly dry introduction but *North by Northwest* starts with a dynamic Saul Bass credit sequence before moving to the streets of New York where we see crowds of rushing people, including two women fighting for a taxi and Hitchcock missing a bus. Kaplan is dictating letters to his secretary not in the office but out here among the throng. They take a taxi to his club (cutting in line to do so) before his secretary returns to the office and the plot kicks in. What could have been a boring office scene suddenly becomes much more exciting – even the legal disclaimer that the following characters are fictional is made to look strangely suspicious.