From Rethoric to Archetype: Screenwriting Manuals

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■ *The translation of* The Writer's Journey*, by Christopher Vogler, and the practically simultaneous publication of Story, by Robert McKee, revived the debate about books on film and TV scripts, in which guides, descriptive studies and academic analyses are mixed together in a field where often the borders between different particular issues are crossed. This intersection of theoretical writings discloses a great deal of agreement between academic conclusions and the ones screenwriters reach in their day-to-day practice, which can produce the question: in what ways do screenwriting manuals and analytical studies complement each other and how do they exchange contributions?*

Bidden or not bidden, God is present
(Inscription over the front door
to the house of CARL GUSTAV JUNG)

The translation of *The Writer's Journey*, by Christopher Vogler, and the practically simultaneous publication of *Story*, by Robert McKee, revived the debate about books on film and TV scripts, in which guides, descriptive studies and academic analyses are mixed together in a field where often the borders between different particular issues are crossed. From time to time, this intersection, helped by the huge amount of titles published, throws up synergies that are from time to time paradoxical, e.g., theoretical works that

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end up forming the basis of practical learning, or manuals that only make taxonomic contributions.

Both Vogler and McKee are analysts who work for large film companies and their books been very successful with screenwriters at the major studios. Despite that, the conclusions they reach adhere to three academic traditions: narratology (in the case of McKee) and cultural anthropology and symbolic hermeneutics (in the case of Vogler). This borderline area between the theory and practice of the script raises a big question: in speaking about the same subject, is it possible for screenwriting models and analytical models to permeate knowledge and be mutually enriching?

The script, and unstable object

We could define a script as any written text used to make a film, from the fragments that Dalí and Buñuel jotted down for *The Andalusian Dog*, through to Hitchcock's highly detailed and assorted storyboards which, he used to say, could be filmed without him. On the other hand, it is important to distinguish different script stages according to level of development: storyline (consisting of a few words), synopsis, treatment, dialogue continuity script, preliminary script and final script, i.e., the script with the technical *découpage*. All of these phases, which are essential in a study system, could be shortened in a more independent context.

When referring to the nature of the script, French filmmaker François Truffaut used to say it was important to film against the script and edit against the shoot. By this, he wanted to emphasise one of the contributions of the new European cinema styles of the 1960s: the discovery of the script as a device able to stimulate the start-up of a shoot that was permeable to any unexpected problem, instead of

valuing it only as a closed shoot programme. Truffaut's words can also be understood in a much broader sense, as a script is never a literary work or the definitive result of artistic labour, but rather the first phase in a long metamorphosis through to the finished film.

Another Frenchman, in this case the screenwriter Jean-Claude Carrière, well known for his work with Luis Buñuel, said that a script is an ephemeral document, despite acknowledging his own career path. The first job he was commissioned was the literary adaptation of the films of Jacques Tati. Before beginning, he decided to study the whole process of film production. The project editor, Suzanne Baron, showed him the original script for *Les vacances de M. Hulot* and then ran a sequence from the film. She then said to him, "the whole problem of films is how to get from that to the other" (CARRIÈRE, 1997).

Carrière believed there was an intimate link between script and editing. He said they were the two sides of the same dialectic between narrating and cutting, synthesis and analysis. The problem in defining an analytical and creative methodology for a script came, he said, from the lack of a history or morphology of the script. Nearly all the technical aspects of a production have a history, but the film script has never been investigated as an independent form because it is an intimate part of the film that disappears once it has been shot. As Francis Vanoye said (1996: 15), it is an "unstable object", thus differentiating it from theatre scripts, which are designed to support new productions.

A film script must contain potential answers to all the questions that any member of the production team may raise: How many pieces of clothing are needed? What objects should be in the frame? What technical resources are needed to solve this sequence? How many extras will there be? How much will it cost altogether? Beyond the clarity, conciseness and purely descriptive style a film requires, giving it a standardised format is knowledge that can be acquired quickly and which supports Orson Welles' belief that everything you need to know about filmmaking you can learn in a day in one of the big studios.

However, the problem goes deeper than that, because a script is a story, and narrating is not something you can learn in a day. Some of the manuals that have become classics today, such as those by Syd Field, Simon Feldman, Jacob Most, Linda Seger, Tom Stempel, Lajos Egri or Constance Nash and Virginia Oakey, aim to offer tools to get results fairly quickly. The downside is that this precipitation does not stimulate the preparation of each story with the attention required for specificity, but quite often runs the risk of being resolved in formulas and prescriptions that vouchsafe planning stories in a conventional fashion.

Syd Field's works *Screenplay and The Screenwriter's Guide* might be the clearest examples of this type of guide which, although offering the advantage of order and clarity, provide stereotyped solutions such as dividing a script into three segments of exactly 30, 60 or 90 pages each for the introduction, body and denouement, or writing the turning points on pages 25-27 and 85-90. These recommendations take too many things for granted, e.g., that each page has an exact duration of one minute of screen time or that any story can be reduced to a predetermined grid.

We should remember that "fiction is not built on the norm but on the exceptions," as Gabriel Garcia Marquez said in *La bendita manía de contar cuentos* (1998), an interesting extract from the screenwriting course he teaches at the International Film and Television School at San Antonio de los Baños in Cuba. The way to discuss Garcia Marquez's fiction in this work shows that, before using any of the appropriate tools to give shape to a story and even before structuring it in any classic sense of the word, it is important to discuss and analyse the mechanisms.

Plot variation

Robert McKee managed to synthesise the tradition of hand-on guides with more analytical contributions from writers such as Eugene Vale, Dwight Swain, Michel Chion and Francis Vanoye. All these authors were able to construct screenwriting pedagogy able to probe deeper into the organisation of different types of stories and plots and extract the ulterior motive before applying rhetorical formulas to support the suspense mechanisms, the management of information and the depiction of the characters. In fact, McKee does not add much to the points Vanoye or Chion made with regard to the distinction between script phases and typologies.

In *Cómo se escribe un guión*, Chion uses as a starting

point four films from different periods, nationalities and genre and analyses them in detail: Eric Rohmer's Pauline à la plage (1983); Howard Hawks' *To have and Have Not* (1944); Fritz Lang's *Das Testament des Dr. Mabuse* (1933) and Kenji Mizoguchi's *Sansho Dayu* (1955). Each of these films illustrates an historical period and, at the same time, a narrative model that sets it apart from the others by a whole series of features: the disposition of the sequence, the closure of the different plots, the "narrative motivation" of the characters (to use the term of the formalist Tomashevski), the articulation of the sequences and the mythological background.

This set of differences cannot be considered in isolation, but rather forms part of narrative systems, some of which have a fairly conventionalised level of organisation. McKee establishes the typology first of all, which begins with what is known as the *archplot*, "a story built around an active protagonist who struggles against primarily external forces of antagonism to pursue his or her desire, through continuous time, within a consistent and causally connected fictional reality, to a closed ending of absolute, irreversible change." (MCKEE, 2002: 67).

It is possible to identify an *archplot* in classic Hollywood scripts that responds to the traditional notion of the plot, the Aristotelian *mythos*. The Greek philosopher defined 'plot' as a *mimemis* or imitation of a unique and complete action. Any action is unique and complete "if it has a beginning, a middle and an end, i.e., if the beginning introduces the medium, if the middle (peripetia and agnition) lead to an end and if this concludes the medium" (RICOEUR, 1987-II: 42-43). Then, the philosopher Paul Ricoeur said, the overall configuration prevails over the episode and harmony over the disharmony of the represented actions.

But even Aristotle's *Poetics*, the blueprint for most screenwriting guides today, circumscribes the scope of the model with a closed ending to tragedy. In other words, he does not universalise his principles but frames them within their genre (for example, he considers that the epic has a more episodic inclination), something that authors like Seger or Field do not do. That is why McKee, aware of the history of the cinema, added two further script models: the *antiplot* and the *miniplot*, basically identified with modern European filmmaking.

The main idea in the *miniplot* is attenuation. The conflict is not externalised as with the *archplot* but nearly always lies in an internal problem of the characters. Causality does not centre on the character and motivation is not so clear. The opposition between desire and prohibition, the basis of all classic narrative, is diluted in a multitude of causes, and consequently the end tends to be more open than in the *archplot*. In a fictitious world that does not give preference to efficient cause, the presence of chance shatters the temporality and fosters a more episodic configuration of the actions.

Up until here it is surprising how closely McKee's classifications coincide with the historical models of narration established from an analytical perspective by theorists such as Noël Burch (1991) or, particularly, the neoformalist David Bordwell (1995, 1996, 1997): classicism corresponds to the *archplot* and the narration of art and essay to the *miniplot*. The case of the *antiplot* is more complicated because it involves three of Bordwell's subsystems: the *historical-materialist narration* of Soviet filmmakers, the *parametric narration* of filmmakers like Bresson, Ozu and Dreyer, where the attention is on stylistic permutations, and the *palimpsest narration* of Godard, characterised by hypertextuality.

McKee's *antiplot* can thus be identified with the exercise of antistructural variations, such as those practised by the previously mentioned filmmakers, together with filmmakers as different as Buñuel, Resnais, Marguerite Duras and Chris Marker, or the experimental artists Stan Brackhage and Michael Snow. The works of all these filmmakers, as well as the literary contributions of James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Musil and Samuel Beckett, are concerned with the unfinished personality, the diversity of the strata of consciousness and the limitations that language imposes when it comes to giving shape to an inchoative character fleeing from the effects. They therefore breach the order of the narration, breaking it and superimposing on it an articulation of a poetic or discursive nature.

Action, character, conflict

Canto XVIII of the *Iliad* provides a metaphor of the principle on which any story is forged, i.e., distance versus reality, according to which the world is no longer perceived as a

multiple and fragmentary experience. The narrator of the Homeric poem distances himself from the world and is recreated in the famous description of the shield that Hephaestus builds for Achilles, taking heed of the prayers of his mother, Tethis. Representations of the sun, moon, the Earth, the sea, cities, agricultural tasks, wars, agreements, dances and everything else that humans and the gods know about appear on the shield.

It is only from that moment on that hierarchy and balance is granted to the cosmos and the story can once again take its course. In describing each fragment of the Shield of Achilles, the previous conditions of narrative concinnity make it possible for narrative and mythological orders to be arranged so the story can then begin to flow. The task of any storymaker reproduces this process exactly, i.e., it supports the story with a narrative shell and then opens it up to the exercise of imagining the story, breathing time into that which is only a hierarchy, the anticipation of a trajectory.

Structure is even more important in a script than in a novel, as it has to support innumerable modifications when production begins. Carrière underlined the difference between a writer and a screenwriter when he said, "the novelist writes, the screenwriter plots, narrates and describes: the writing is contingent for him " (CARRIÈRE and BONITZER, 1991: 117). It is important to delimit other variables according to the structure, which may correspond to any of the models McKee established. The variables could include the genre it adheres to, the nature of the instigating incident or the design of the acts.

Nearly all script theories, from Nash and Oakey through to Brazilian TV screenwriter Doc Comparato (his book, *The Script: Art and Writing Techniques for the Screen and Television* (1989) (*Arte e Técnica de Escrever Para Cinema e Televisão*) takes a very similar approach to McKee's) bestow great importance on the classification of dramatic units, an attempt as old as fiction studies themselves. The seven types that Goethe listed were followed, for example, by the detailed typology of Georges Polti, author of the influential work *The Thirty-Six Dramatic Situations* (*Les Trente-six situations dramatiques*).

McKee also assigns a list of 25 categories, which, like Chion's, are located halfway between dramatic modality and genre. In looking more profoundly into the rhetorical concept of structure, we run up against a problem that Aristotle also

detected: what is more important, the structure or the characters? Does the motivation of the character have to be subordinated to the constitution of the action or the other way around? The answer, which in the modern novel comes down on the side of the character, in this case depends primarily on the type of plot and is one of the most persistent concerns of all books on screenwriting.

For example, Lajos Egri (1946) felt that the character was so important he recommended developing an extensive bibliography for it. Eugene Vale (1993) linked the character with the dramatic action through notions such as motivation, intention and purpose, while Antoine Cucca (1986) replaced these notions with condition, aspiration and realisation and Howard Lawson (1936) focused on social conditions and strength of will. Looking at these values, we can appreciate that the place in which the sphere of action and character definition is located is also the place where questions such as verisimilitude and the suspension of incredulity are settled, which during the 19th century eclipsed any other discussion on narration.

Furthermore, the *conflict* is also outlined in the connection between character and action. Swain (1988) defined it as "the interplay between forces seeking to attain mutually incompatible goals". McKee divided it into intra-personal, inter-personal and extra-personal and, like Field, considered that the conflict has to be manifested in all the strata of the narrative through what is known as the *controlling idea* that presides in each sequence. At the end of the day, it involves a concept that has its origins in the theatre and which is shared by a number of people: Egri, Feldman (who called it the *totalising supergoal*) and the filmmaker Kuleshov, who, in his famous workshops, called it the *superobjective* or *superproblem* (PUDOVKIN et al., 1988).

As Henry James maintained, the only absolute imperative within and outside the scene is to dramatise, i.e., to transform that which you wish to express into sensitive and visual signals and filter it through conflict. In accordance with that premise, the screenwriter has to always control the balance between dramatic conflict and character. As Horacio Quiroga recommended in the 8th Commandment of *Ten Commandments for the Perfect Storyteller* (*Decálogo del perfecto cuentista*): "Take your characters by the hand and lead them firmly to the end, without seeing anything

other than the road you drew for them. Do not get distracted by seeing things that they either cannot see or do not bother to see. Do not betray the reader. A story is a novel purified of waste".

From rethoric to archetype

Since the legendary production company Biograph, which employed the filmmaker David Wark Griffith, determined the bases of what would come to be called the classic narrative model at the end of the 19th century and demanded the collaboration of writers and playwrights in providing *outline scripts*, most of the films that are screened have a length, conformation and narrative economy more in keeping with a short story than the proteiform plot of a novel. The austerity that Quiroga postulated for the story is perfectly matched to the cinema, which further has a number of laws with regard to plot endings that are very similar to those of a story.

On the other hand, the cinema, as a stage for theatre, possesses the weapon of the presence of the actor and the asset of a form of time that inexorably takes its course, something which enables it to represent tragedy and melodrama, i.e., to apprehend and dramatise death, loss and the erosion that the passing of time inflicts on feelings. The difficulty lies in combining these features with a limited length that often makes it difficult to invest the characters with psychological profundity or, as Linda Seger said, to create "multidimensional characters". That is why there are two big sets of resources, linked respectively to the definition of conflict and the configuration of a mythological substratum.

With regard to the definition of conflict, which determines both the pace and the turning points in a story and the magnitude of the character's will, we should mention the narrative grammar of Algirdas Julien Greimas. His analytical proposal, which is indebted to structuralism, sustains the hypothesis that every dramatic character or actor can be built up from an initial want. This formula, based on the figure of Lacan's *sujet barré*, is right in that it is a minimal logic structure. If desire is the fruit of a lack, then conflict constitutes the trajectory from the initial disjunction between subject and object through to the final conjunction, whether effective or frustrated.

Understood in this way, dramatic action is based on the itinerary of approximation between subject and object and has its basis both in the test the character faces and the so-called *contract*, an analytical notion that has an exact response in Dwight Swain's *commitment*. Greimas' verbose academic rigour is good at describing the nature of the desire that moves the whole narrative system of classicism and the basic boy-meets-girl concept, i.e., the search for the other which, at the end of the day, has a clearly visual formulation: from the initial shot/counter-shot that records the moment when the boy and girl meet through to the final kiss that brings them together in a single shot.

Possibly the person who has best understood and parodied the importance of the constitutive want in the type of epic narrations that interest Greimas is the Chilean playwright, screenwriter and writer Alejandro Jodorowsky, who, in his comics, even uses heroes with a physical lack. The paradigmatic example is the saga of *Alef-Thau* (1982-1998), a character born without any limbs and who in every canto or episode of his adventure has to get the legs and arms that will enable him to enter the final battle with an antagonist who, in reality, is his own shadow and who, according to Greimas and Courtés, would develop a "narrative antiprogramme".

For Greimas, the narration is such an intimate part of any text that the categories described for dismantling it can only support a process of analysis (GREIMAS, 1973: 188) but not of construction. In fact, the abstraction of Greimas' narrative grammar awards it little use as a driving force in the construction of fictions. The reason once again dates back to Aristotle, as the Greek philosopher did not say anything in *Poetics* about the time construction of a plot and, from then until now, it appears that this silence has provoked an absence of time in the tradition of narrative study, from the exegesis of Porphyry through to Herder and Coleridge during the Romantic Age and on to Greimas, who proposes a rigorously acronymic model.

Russian formalists also tried to take the plot out of chronological order, but inserted time indirectly, bringing it nearer to the symbolic mechanisms of plot timing. The study of popular stories undertaken by Volkov and Veselovsky hazarded inventories of dramatic situations very similar to the ones mentioned above but which firstly distinguished between *theme* and *dramatic situation*. In *Morphology of the*

Folk Tale, Wladimir Propp defined the category function when he realised there was a strange phenomenon of permutability: "Stories have a peculiarity: their constitutional parts can be transferred without any change in another story" (PROPP, 1981: 15).

In reality, and this is where the mythological substratum intervenes, Propp's discovery formalised and protected with a structural methodology something that religious historians and myth theorists already knew. His contribution thus created a favourable atmosphere for the convergence between different spheres of knowledge and made it possible to locate them closer to more pluralistic myths, such as those of Mircea Eliade, Carl Gustav Jung, the Eranos Circle, Otto Rank, Heinrich Zimmer, Gilbert Durand, Hans Blumenberg, Lluís Duch and Joseph Campbell. In *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (1959), Campbell recovered the idea of the model story with all of Propp's functions and postulated the existence of the *monomyth*, i.e., an elemental and transcultural mythic concept.

The hero's journey

In *The Writer's Journey*, Vogler transformed the monomyth into a model for constructing stories. There are many works that apply the Campbellian map and Jungian studies to contemporary North American cinema[1], but it is Vogler who is possibly the most faithful to Campbell and at the same time responsible for the work most often used as a screenwriting manual in major studies. Vogler's writing classes have given rise to films such as *Gandhi*, *Toy Story*, *The Truman Show* and *Forrest Gump*, as well as television series including *Friends*, *Sesame Street*, *M.A.S.H* and *Ally McBeal,* and his stamp, together with that of Campbell, can be detected in other, very diverse works, from Clint Eastwood's tragedies and the melodramas of M. Night Shyamalan, through to the *Matrix* saga by the Wachowski brothers.

The backdrop to the monomyth concept is simple. Life is a continuum without any divisions, or rather only the ones needed to structure a story. The only absolute paradigms, i.e., birth and death, often extend to an interval that is so long it is of no use in explaining any type of fable. Journeys, on the other hand, were already a story before there were

stories: they had a beginning and end, so their structure was already narrative. Journeys have therefore always been a metaphor for any story, and the journey model that Campbell elucidates based on comparative methodology is a basic mythic matrix underlying many of the myths in traditional and even modern societies.

The basis of the monomyth is the hero devoted to the search for an object (the initial want) through a series of tests or stages, from his home to the "land of mysteries". Like the myth, the hero provides coherence to a multitude of diverse images, and in this dynamic order we can catch a glimpse of a temporalised version of the Shield of Achilles, like the story that threads diverse stars with a continuous line and relates an image to a myth[2]. Throughout the hero's journey, Campbell notes a series of functions similar to Propp's, i.e., the double paternity and second birth of the hero, the refusal of the call, the initiation, the collaboration of helpers, the snares of opponents, confrontation with the guardian of the threshold, the ultimate test, the compensation, the abandonment of the instruments of power and the return.

The hero's journey is also a concept of self-discovery, which concludes when "the two - the hero and his ultimate god, the seeker and the found - are thus understood as the outside and inside of a single self-mirrored mystery, which is identical with the mystery of the manifest world. The great deed of the supreme hero is to come to the knowledge of this unity in multiplicity and then to make it known" (CAMPBELL, 1959: 44). Thus the metaphor of the journey is one of the main strategies human beings possess for dominating the provisionality of time. As Ramón Gömez de la Serna said, for man everything is a road, as a road is the main way to spatialise the time that devours all before it and to exorcise death.

This concept, which George Lucas faithfully applied when preparing the script for *Star Wars* (1978), has become a type of screenwriting bible, often supported by other concepts, such as transactional analysis of life scripts[3]. In classic cinema built on this concept, it is important to see one of the social practices of the domination of content that sociologist Max Weber called *theodicy*. Vogler was aware of it and used an instructive style to put Campbell's conclusions within the reach of screenwriters in the form of tools that show that before using language for writing, a creator of

fiction is, as Jorge Luis Borges said, "a user of symbols" (RODRÍGUEZ MONEGAL, E., 1973: 93), someone who faces the task of giving shape to mankind's fears about death.

Aware of this reality, and despite the fact that it can sometimes incur excessive and dogmatic simplifications, the virtue of Vogler's manual is the recognition that telling stories it not just an *ars rhetorica* but, on the contrary, a poetics which, in its ideal formulation, would mix Aristotelian taxonomy with the perennial idea of a number of platonic shapes always within the grasp of the narrator, i.e., archetypes. Furthermore, building a fictional world does not authorise a screenwriter to think he knows everything about the characters. Good fiction, as Carrière and the theatre producer and playwright Peter Brook (1973, 2000) maintain, involves exploring a situation or story with the reader or viewer.

This presence of mystery throughout the hero's journey is one of the factors that runs the most danger of escaping any type of script didactic. However, Vogler, like Jodorowsky, realised that the work of building a script in accordance with this concept aspires to obtaining a holistic representation of the world, as occurs, for example, with tarot cards: "The progression of the images in the tarot pack clearly show the evolution that occurs in the hero until he reaches the grade of mentor. A hero starts out as a fool and in various stages of the adventure ascends to the ranks of magician, warrior, messenger, conqueror, thief-lover, governor, hermit and so on. Finally, the hero becomes Hierophant, miracle-maker, mentor and guide to others" (VOGLER, 2002: 156-157).

In effect, the tarot provides a very similar tool to the Shield of Achilles: an assembly of discriminating elements, of archetypal structures that can be juxtaposed, linked and modified to create stores. The arcana constitute a moment of detention and organisation; an optical language, the ambiguity of which changes into a type of articulated *mythological matrix*. If sequences are organised with the cards, as Jodorowsky and other screenwriters do to construct their scripts, the time factor is filtered in, the situations are linearised and stories are then constructed. That imposes syntax, i.e., a logical language, but only once it has passed through the symbol, through the world of images, where the principle of association reigns.

Therefore, when it comes to explaining stories it is important to eliminate the discrimination between symbolic and logical thought, between theory and practice. Books such as Jordi Balló and Xavier Pérez's *La llavor immortal* (1995), an exploration into the mythic root of film stories very much in keeping with the work of Campbell and the mythic criticism of Durand, can also be used as narrative matrices. In a second stage, McKee, Field, Feldman, Seger or Comparato could provide the surface tools to finish off a story based on a mythological soil fertile enough to nourish it. It is therefore important to see any catalogue of dramatic situations as a reversible investigation with a double, i.e., taxonomic and myth-building, utility.

The works of McKee and Vogler represent two ways of approaching the script, which, as we can see, can be mutually enriching. The monomyth and the symbol are thus presented as dynamic mediations between the character and the world and make real one of the best-known statements of Gaston Bachelard, one of the theoretical fathers of Campbell and Jung, i.e., "Man is not born of need but of desire". Although it could violate Greimas' central hypothesis, this phrase encapsulates a point on which all the previously mentioned authors agree: the seed of all stories is desire projected in time. Once the root of desire has been located, the role of the screenwriter is as vast as organising all this time, i.e., to provide the boundaries and to go down the road.

Notes

1. Examples include: HAUKE, C.; ALISTER, I. *Jung & Film: Post Jungian Takes on the Moving Image* (2001); HENDERSON, M. *Star Wars: The Magic of Myth* (1997); HILL, G. M. *Illuminating Shadows: the Mythic Power of Film* (1992); HOCKLEY, L. *Cinematic Projections: the Analytical Psychology of C.G. Jung and Film Theory* (2001); GALIPEAU, S. *The Journey of Luke Skywalker: An Analysis of Modern Myth and Symbol* (2001); IACCINO, J. F. *Psychological Reflections on Cinematic Terror: Jungian Archetypes in Horror Films* (1994).
2. The structuralist Leszek Kolakowski used this approach as the starting point for chapter 7 of *The Presence of Myth* (1990)
3. Some critics have signalled an excessive presence of the Campbellian model in contemporary commercial North American cinema, arguing that it provokes a heroic homogenisation of fiction, such as Vogler himself says (2002: 34).

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