



The Companions: Sounds for a Lost Screenplay

Part One: The Project

The first commissioned artist project for the de Young's iconic Hamon Tower Observatory, "The Companions: Sounds for a Lost Screenplay" is a cinematic audio environment created by artist Anthony Discenza in collaboration with Sound Designers Gary Rydstrom and Josh Gold of Skywalker Sound. Inspired by Discenza's research into the history of *The Companions*, a genre-defying screenplay from the 1980s that was never produced, the work explores the vital role sound plays in shaping narrative and affective space in film. Using immersive and directional sounds, the installation moves visitors through different thematic, narrative, and atmospheric components of *The Companions*, using the sweeping views from the Tower as a framing device.

A Film without Images

Following his initial discussions with Director of Public Engagement Elizabeth Thomas about a project for the Hamon Tower site, Discenza had conceived the idea for an “auditory cinema,” consisting only of sound elements, which could be superimposed over the observatory’s expansive, 360-degree views. He envisioned working with professional sound designers from the film industry to create a composition that would evoke a cinematic experience purely through audio. “I had been thinking about all the different aspects of production that go into film,” Discenza recalls, “and how some don’t receive the same kind of visibility or attention as direction or acting. In particular, I was interested in the role of sound design, and so I wanted to see what might happen when the visuals are taken away and the work of the sound team takes center stage.”

Discenza had been inspired in part by Michel Chion’s analysis of sound in film, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, in which he argues that sound shapes visual perception in film to a much greater extent than we realize. In cinema, sound design lends weight and dimension to the images onscreen, providing a film with much of its sense of reality and continuity (regardless of how naturalistic or fantastical the world depicted may be) in a way that seems so natural and inevitable that our awareness of its constructed nature disappears. Chion terms this effect, which sits at the center of all relations between sound and image in cinema, the “audiovisual illusion.” He further articulates this concept through something he calls *added value*:

“By added value I mean the expressive and informative value with which a sound enriches a given image so as to create the definite impression, in the immediate or remembered experience one has of it, that this information or expression “naturally” comes from what is seen, and is already contained in the image itself. Added value is what gives the (eminently incorrect) impression that sound is unnecessary, that sound merely duplicates a meaning which in reality it brings about, either all on its own or by discrepancies between it and the image.”

Intrigued by Chion’s argument, Discenza wanted to see if it might be possible to create a “sound film,” a work constructed solely from sound elements but which still strongly conveyed the vernacular of cinema. “I saw the project very much as an experiment,” he says. “Frankly, I had no idea if it would be interesting to sound professionals. But when I talked to the team at Skywalker Sound, they were all immediately on board.”

Skywalker had always been Discenza’s first choice for the project, in large part because of the company’s iconic status in the motion picture industry. “Lucasfilm, Skywalker, ILM—these names are all synonymous with big, spectacle-driven moviemaking,” he notes. “They’ve worked on more films than you can count; for almost four decades now, they’ve engineered the sights and sounds that populate our collective cinematic imagination. I thought it would be amazing to have sound designers from Skywalker work on this—and because they’ve always been associated with the Bay Area as much as with Hollywood, I was hoping the local angle of the project might also appeal to them.”

As an artist who often works with withheld or imagined narratives, Discenza proposed that Rydstrom and Gold create their own interpretation of an unrealized film using only sound design

elements. In pitching his concept, Discenza framed it as an inversion of the normal relationship between sound designer and filmmaker: “In my first meeting with Gary, I told him, ‘think of me as a director hiring you to do the sound design for a film— except in this case, the film doesn’t actually exist.’ So it’s really the sound designer creating the whole movie.” From Rydstrom’s perspective, Discenza’s proposal was irresistible: “After working on so many films, the notion of developing a sonic environment for an unmade film was really appealing to me, in that it gave me an opportunity to illuminate the enormous role sound plays in film—without having to be tied to any images.”



The Skywalker Sound team setting up in Hamon Tower.

A Lost Screenplay

Realizing that they would still need a narrative framework for the project, the team decided to build the composition around a screenplay from Hollywood’s vast repository of unrealized scripts. “We wanted to find a story that hadn’t made it off the page, one of those projects that became hopelessly entangled in the complex machinery of the motion picture industry,” Discenza recalls:

"In one of our earliest conversations, Gary and I discussed the recent documentary about Alejandro Jodorowsky's failed attempt to adapt the novel *Dune*. What was particularly interesting to us was how, even though Jodorowsky's project was never realized, various elements of the production design material—sketches, storyboards, music—that he and his team had generated got circulated around Hollywood, and somehow found their way into dozens of other films over the years. Something similar happened with Claire Noto's infamous screenplay, *The Tourist*, another great science fiction story that also got stuck in development hell and wound up having parts of its story cannibalized by other films. So there was this idea of the unmade film existing as a ghost inside other movies that did make it to the screen; this became a stepping-off point for us...we thought it would be a great challenge to take one of these lost projects and see if we could bring a version of it to life using the tools of the sound designer."

In researching possible screenplays to work with, Discenza stumbled across a reference to a screenplay called *The Companions*, which had been written in the early 1980s by a woman named Carol Montana. Montana's script had a turbulent history; it had been optioned numerous times but never managed to make it into production for one reason or another. The more he learned about the screenplay and its troubled past, the more intrigued he became. "*The Companions* immediately felt like a great fit to me—the story itself had so many weird elements; it had all these features we associate with the blockbuster, but other aspects of the script made it sound more like an art film. The fact that it was set in San Francisco and made heavy use of locations throughout the city was also a major draw, in that it offered us an opportunity not only to use the incredible views from the Hamon Observatory as a kind of container for the audio, but to tie into the whole history of films set in the city. It gave the whole project a kind of site specificity that seemed really exciting."

Given the breadth of Skywalker's sound design work, the team wanted the project to reference a wide range of movie genres, so the multifaceted nature of Montana's story was appealing as well. *The Companions* combines aspects of at least a half-dozen different genres, from hard-boiled noir to erotic psychological thriller. For Rydstrom and Gold, this suggested a vast playground of sonic possibilities to explore. As designers with decades of experience working on big-budget, effects-driven movies (most recently, Rydstrom was the Supervising Sound Designer for Steven Spielberg's *Ready Player One*, while Gold just finished working on *Avengers: Infinity War*), they hoped to use the project to talk about the enormous vocabulary of cinematic sound and the myriad ways it can be used to shape a story.

Although a complete version of Montana's screenplay no longer exists, Discenza saw this as an opportunity rather than a limitation. "We never wanted to work off a script too directly," he notes. "In the case of *The Companions*, we really couldn't, because there appears to be no intact copy of it available anywhere—all we have are a few sections of it, and a lot of anecdotal accounts drawn from interviews and various articles written over the years. But I also saw the sound work as being more about interpretation and imagination, on the part of Gary and Josh as much as the audience. So while we wanted the project to pay homage to *The Companions*, we thought of the script more as a kind of prompt, a basic armature off of which they could construct the sound composition."

Through his research, Discenza was able to assemble a wealth of information about Montana's screenplay, enabling him to reverse-engineer elements of the story's narrative structure; he then turned these materials over to Rydstrom and Gold to realize as they saw fit. The goal was to create an affective environment that was based on the unrealized script, but which still left much of the story itself to the viewer's imagination. "The core part of the sound designer's job is creating mood,"

says Rydstrom. “A huge component of what you experience emotionally in a film is really set by the sound, though often it’s in ways you may not be fully conscious of. So what seemed like such an interesting challenge with this was to see how you could use sound alone to suggest all of a film’s complex narrative structures and shifts, without telling too specific a story.”



Gary Rydstrom working with organist Jonathan Dimmock during the recording session at the Legion of Honor.

Constructing a Sound Film

In designing the sound composition, Rydstrom and Gold approached the project in many ways as they would any film, using the film industry’s standard three-act structure as their template. “Basically, I built scenes and shots as though it was a normal production,” Gold says. “I typically start out with way too much stuff—my initial edit of the first act alone was 20 minutes—which is what often happens in a film production. It’s not unusual that a first cut will be 5 hours long. A big part of the process is actually going through and getting rid of a lot of things that you’ve put in, continually cutting and trimming...so in some ways it’s been very similar to working on any movie.”

Although there was a certain freedom in not having to tether the sound to any action or dialogue, this was also part of the challenge for the two designers. Instead of a rough cut, which sound designers typically use to compose, all they had to work with were the notes Discenza had compiled about Montana’s screenplay. These consisted primarily of descriptions of a handful of specific scenes, references in the script to other films and books written or set in San Francisco, and

Discenza's own comments regarding the sort of mood or atmosphere he imagined for the story. Occasionally, this left Rydstrom and Gold in uncharted territory. "On a normal production, the image can be a crutch," says Gold. "Typically, whenever I get stuck, I always look at the screen, because that's where the answers usually are...but here I wasn't able to do that, so I had to invent other ways to navigate through the process. Sometimes I would just put up an image of the view from the tower and work off that."

Ultimately, Rydstrom and Gold had to be guided by the images or associations the material conjured in their own imaginations. Part of their strategy was to incorporate sounds that they had always wanted to use but for which the right project had never come along, or sounds they had built for other films that hadn't made it to the final cut. "In any project, there's always elements you get really attached to that for one reason or another don't make it in," says Gold. "This project became a way for some of that material to have a second life...there are a few ghosts from other movies lurking in this one."

Another component of Rydstrom and Gold's approach was to connect aspects of the composition to some of the San Francisco locations depicted in the screenplay. Since one of the things that had drawn the team to *The Companions* in the first place was the way its narrative was so steeped in the city's unique landscape, this seemed to be another way to give the work a layer of site specificity. Montana's screenplay is filled with scenes that take place at well known landmarks, such as The Legion of Honor and the old Pacific Bell building at 140 New Montgomery. In particular, the enormous and iconic Sutro Tower (which sits directly opposite the Hamon Observatory) plays a starring role in *The Companions*, a sinister focal point around which the story orbits, and where it reaches its violent, transcendent culmination.

Rydstrom and Gold used these references as entry points into the sound piece. Most notably, *The Companions'* opening scene at the Legion of Honor gave the designers an opportunity to access the enormous Skinner Organ, a 4,500-pipe instrument that had been built into the very architecture of the museum during its construction. The team spent several afternoons recording organist Jonathan Dimmock running through various compositions, including works by Mendelssohn and Oliver Messiaen, that eventually became central components of the project's "score."

The work makes extensive use of Skywalker's vast catalog of sound elements, along with the field recordings made at the Legion of Honor. Rydstrom and Gold used over 1,500 discreet sound elements in the composition, with around 200 of those being new sounds created specifically for the project (many of these include the communication and transmission effects, along with a set of sounds Gold describes as "time/space/reality bending" elements.) Reflecting *The Companions'* San Francisco setting and the placement of the work in Hamon Tower, the composition also features many iconic sounds associated with the city, such as streetcars, foghorns, and seagulls. Meanwhile, in keeping with the tradition of the Marvel Comics movies on which Gold worked, the composition contains a number of hidden "Easter eggs" and other filmic references, especially to other movies set in the city (the bongos from *The Conversation* make an appearance).

This aspect of the work subtly highlights another practice of sound design that often goes unnoticed by general movie-going audiences: the recycling of sounds for use in different films. The most well-known example of this is the infamous "Wilhelm scream," which has been used in over 382 films since it was originally recorded in 1951. These hidden sonic linkages between unrelated films is reflected in "Sounds for a Lost Screenplay;" for example, Rydstrom uses wind elements that were

originally created for Pixar's *A Bug's Life*—but which a listener might more likely recognize as the sound of the wind from the iconic “King of the world!” scene in James Cameron's *Titanic*.

The final 24-channel composition is a moody, urgent fusion of multiple cinematic genres explored through the vernacular of sound design. Using Discenza's notes as their departure point, Rydstrom and Gold eventually constructed their own vision of *The Companions*, building a sequence of scenes that takes the audience from an unnerving encounter in Golden Gate Park, through the labyrinthine interior of the malign corporation Global Sequence, to a cataclysmic confrontation atop Sutro Tower. Distilling an entire movie's worth of story into a compact 20 minutes, the composition hurtles listeners from the naturalistic sounds of crowded city streets into highly constructed effects suggestive of malignant extra-dimensional forces and fractured time. The sound composition does not “tell” the story of Montana's screenplay so much as it channels it, immersing listeners in a sonic environment that continually articulates different tropes of cinematic narrative. Rydstrom and Gold make generous use of sounds one might imagine in the context of a “conventional” action film—motorcycle chases, circling helicopters, but usher in a wealth of stranger, less identifiable sounds less connected to clear action. Rydstrom, who worked on the sound for films like *Minority Report* and *AI*, describes his and Gold's interpretation of *The Companions* as “psychological science fiction,” but also sees the project as a consideration of his role in the film industry. “The work is definitely self-aware,” observes Rydstrom. “In some ways the project represents Josh and I thinking about our relationship to movie-making as much as it's our interpretation of the screenplay.”

Part Two: The Story

“The trajectory of any artistic project is always unstable and treacherous, subject to the various failures of its delicate internal mechanisms, of course, but also uniquely sensitive to external conditions as well. For every work that achieves escape velocity from its creator's mind to find its realization in the world, there are innumerable others whose flight is stalled or interrupted [...] the vast majority of such failed endeavors will go unmarked and unrecorded, but on rare occasions the crash itself may arouse the passing interest of onlookers.”

- Margaret Reeves, *A Writer's Life*

The history of American cinema is filled with the stories of countless might-have-beens; screenplays that seemed destined for the screen, but which somehow got lost along the way. Of all the projects that have fallen through the cracks of the motion picture industry, few have a stranger or more troubled history than *The Companions*. Written in 1982 by an art student and aspiring writer named Carol Montana, the screenplay was fated to become another enduring mystery in the annals of film. Kicked around Hollywood for over two decades, subject to bad deals and endless legal and personal disputes (and at one point, the project was rumored to have been cursed), *The Companions* eventually disappeared into the same limbo that has swallowed up so many other promising scripts.

What follows is a summary of Discenza's research into Montana's lost script, which was included in the materials he turned over to Rydstrom and Gold.

The Companions

The Companions centers on Sydney Reston, a seemingly ordinary young woman working as a data entry specialist for a vast multinational corporation called Global Sequence. Sydney is also trying to develop a career as a fashion photographer in her spare time—Montana's screenplay depicts her living something of a double life, moving between the sterile corridors of the Global Sequence headquarters and San Francisco's then-still burgeoning culture of underground punk clubs, performance art, and the city's lively queer scene. While on a photo shoot at the Legion of Honor, Sydney catches sight of a woman who appears to be her double (one of *The Companions'* many overt nods to Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*). Her attempt to unravel this mystery leads to a series of increasingly unsettling encounters. Global Sequence seems to be implicated in these sinister events; how and why is not clear, though it may have something to do with a "protocol" the company is developing called Unity. Gradually, Sydney is drawn deeper into a complex web of intrigue that becomes ever more ominous and strange, even as its outlines fail to ever come entirely into focus. (At various points, Montana's screenplay inexplicably cuts away from Sydney's story to excerpts of a proto-TED talk-style interview with Global Sequence's CEO Traven, a charismatic, Werner Erhard-like figure who utters cryptic pronouncements extolling humanity's imminent technologic ascension. These odd insertions, which one would expect would distract from the central narrative, somehow only intensify its atmosphere of claustrophobic unease.)

As it progresses, Montana's plot grows more disorienting. Several disturbing encounters lead Sydney to suspect that people are being duplicated or multiplied in some fashion. This doubling apparently begins to affect the city's architecture as well; space itself appears to be subtly shifting—buildings are being erased or replaced, though no one seems to notice the changes. Could it be that parallel dimensions are colliding, causing alternate versions of the city to become enfolded within each other? It isn't clear if this is part of some intentional plot—an invasion of sorts—or simply an unexpected side effect of the Unity technology gone awry. Even time itself becomes subject to a similar fracturing: at one point, during a nerve-racking chase in the fog, both Sydney and her pursuers become stuck in a sort of loop, continually returning not only to the same deserted alley in San Francisco's Tenderloin district, but to the same moment in time. Throughout her script, Montana teases the reader with various explanations for the bizarre events piling up around Sydney: corporate espionage, secret mind-control experiments, extra-dimensional prostitution, even a plot to open a gateway to Hell itself (using mass hypnosis and manipulation of San Francisco's energy grid) are among the theories advanced by different characters. But the screenplay never fully commits itself to any of these hypotheses, lending the story a feeling of pervasive, dream-like ambiguity that lingers restlessly in the mind long afterwards.

"In some ways, *The Companions'* structure is not so much non-linear as oddly recursive, as though the story was running itself through a series of variations that slowly build in intensity," Discenza notes. "I was strongly drawn to this idea, as well as to the script's science-fictional aspects, which are at once very 'active' in the story and at the same time somewhat muted—they can be read literally but also as metaphoric or affective elements, which is a modality of science fiction that has always appealed to me. I was also intrigued by Montana's whole take on technology, both in the way that the corporation in the film appears to be taking over San Francisco (and possibly the world), and in how this kind of sinister, unspecified technology is having such a destabilizing effect...not surprisingly, that part of the story felt particularly prescient."

It's not hard to see that the qualities that made *The Companions* so compelling were also those that made it difficult to realize. The story's appeal is obvious; its strong visual sense and slyly recombinant attitude to pulp genre tropes offers up a treasure trove of visual possibilities. But there is a pervasive feeling of narrative unreliability to the script, a quality that does not always lend itself to filmic adaptation. Much of the story seems to be presented from Sydney's perspective, but can this be trusted? Is Sydney simply succumbing to the alienation of urban life, or is there something more complicated and strange happening — a denaturing of reality itself, possibly as a result of the experiments Global Sequence is conducting? *The Companions'* apocalyptic climax, set atop the massive Sutro Tower and culminating in its destruction (along with much of the rest of the city), would seem to argue for the latter interpretation. Yet the strangely subdued final scene, with Sydney walking alone through an apparently undamaged Golden Gate Park, suggests something stranger:

One of the most fascinating and unsettling aspects of *The Companions* (and one that undoubtedly helped foster the rumors that followed the screenplay for years) is the way it consistently leaves readers with the impression that some unrevealed but potentially annihilating knowledge lies at its center. Like some nightmarishly inverted set of Russian nesting dolls, *The Companions* generates a kind of existential free-fall, a sense of gazing into a vista that keeps opening further onto ever-vaster dimensions of terrifying possibility. Shifting almost imperceptibly from the mundane to the dramatic, to the outré, and eventually to the cataclysmic, it ultimately arrives at a kind of cosmic apotheosis in which awe and dread fuse into something totally inexpressible.

- Lindsay Selwyn, "Looking Glass Apocalypse: Carol Montana's *The Companions*," *Film Review Quarterly*, Issue 37, March 1998

EXT. SUTRO TOWER SERVICE PLATFORM -- NIGHT

Trembling with exhaustion, SYDNEY pulls herself up onto the platform of the TOWER. The left side of her body is drenched with blood, but her eyes glitter unnaturally with determination and a strange inner fury. The view from the platform is dizzying, terrifying; the earth seems to fall away on all sides. SYDNEY stands with difficulty and looks across the platform.

TRAVEN stands across from her, watching her calmly. The gale-like winds buffeting the platform don't seem to affect him; his hair and clothing barely stir. His right hand is placed upon a strange, PEDESTAL-like object with dozens of cables snaking out of it. He looks like someone with all the time in the world.

TRAVEN

And so here you are at last. The necessary imbalance in the system.

SYDNEY

(speaking almost to herself)
Traven. Yes. It's me. The "inadvertent mistake."

(more loudly)

It's time to stop this, Traven. Before everything is destroyed. Before there isn't anything left at all.

TRAVEN

Not destroyed, Sydney! Repaired. I am merely correcting an error that was made a very long time ago. An error that never should have occurred.

The PEDESTAL next to TRAVEN begins to glow faintly. Complex patterns flicker briefly across its surface.

TRAVEN (CONT'D)

At the dawn of creation, existence was whole, intact, perfect. But something happened; a flaw was somehow introduced into the code. The universe shattered like a mirror into an infinity of different realities, each shard a reflection of the whole, but broken, incomplete.

TRAVEN (CONT'D)
(gesturing around him)

But the Unity protocol will re-align the splintered fragments of existence and heal the fractures. The continuum of flawed realities will be wiped away. At long last, the universe will be one again.

TRAVEN moves his hand in a complicated way across the surface of the PEDESTAL. The flickering patterns appear again, this time more brightly, and begin to whirl faster across the object's surface. A deep HUM begins to vibrate up through the structure of the TOWER, barely noticeable at first, but steadily growing in intensity.

TRAVEN
Imagine, Sydney! Imagine a world without pain, without death, a world in which all things are possible. A world in which concepts like heaven and hell have no meaning.

SYDNEY
Oh, there's a hell alright, Traven. I was just there. They sent me to bring you back.

TRAVEN
(smiling politely)
Did they?

TRAVEN moves his hand again, and the HUM deepens and intensifies; the metal structure of the TOWER groans in response, as if in agony.

WIDE SHOT - SUTRO TOWER/TWIN PEAKS - NIGHT

Like some nightmarish entity, the TOWER seems to loom larger than ever over the nighttime city, its skeletal structure faintly outlined against the pitch-black sky.

A complicated series of ORGAN CHORDS begins to play at high volume. As they do, the entire view undergoes a strange transformation; it is as though space itself has begun to unfold into a complex arrangement of reflecting planar surfaces, like some intricate origami flower slowly opening up to reveal an even more elaborate interior. This effect is subtle at first, but becomes more pronounced as the ORGAN MUSIC progresses,

A Wealth of Cinematic & Literary Influences

Montana's screenplay resonates with the echoes of many other great films set in San Francisco—in particular *Vertigo*, to which the script makes several overt references. In certain ways, *The Companions* could be viewed as a re-imagining of the Hitchcock classic, funneled through the experimental sensibility of feminist science fiction authors like Joanna Russ and Anna Kavan. In what is arguably one of the story's more shocking scenes, Sydney encounters not just one, but multiple versions of herself—some disturbingly altered—in a vast, luminous chamber at the heart of Global Sequence's headquarters. The ensuing confrontation with these doppelgängers is a tour de force of floating, dreamlike horror. Montana's theme is no longer just the doubled self, but rather an endlessly fractured identity. As Selwyn has observed, the scene can be viewed as a radical re-imagining of one of *Vertigo*'s most pivotal moments—Scottie's first sight of the “resurrected” Madeleine—and makes explicit Montana's critique of the uneasy gender politics of Hitchcock's film. “Here, there is no possibility of an essential self,” Selwyn writes; “there is only Sydney and her representations, caught up in a fatally spiraling subjectivity into which even the reader is subsumed.”

Along with *Vertigo*, *The Companions* evokes a number of other filmic depictions of San Francisco in which the city is portrayed as a site of profound alienation. It's not difficult to imagine that, had it succeeded in ever reaching the screen, *The Companions* might have taken its place among other cinematic visions of urban paranoia, such as Philip Kaufman's 1979 remake of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, David Fincher's *The Game*, and especially Coppola's *The Conversation*—a film, appropriately enough, in which sound plays a central role.

In addition to its portrayal in cinema, Montana clearly intended *The Companions* as homage of sorts to the Bay Area's rich literary history. In its dark, deeply cynical worldview, profound sense of cosmic dread, and subversive approach to gender, the screenplay deftly combines the noir atmosphere of Dashiell Hammett, the metaphysical anxiety of Philip K. Dick, and the radical sensibilities of Kathy Acker. Montana includes the Bay Area's many contributions to supernatural fiction as well, giving a sly nod to Fritz Leiber's obscure classic, *Our Lady of Darkness*, a playful but terrifying tribute to San Francisco's bohemian past. Several elements from Leiber's novel are imaginatively redeployed in *The Companions*: along with the depiction of Sutro Tower as a locus of malignant power, Montana borrows the notion that the massed psychic energies of modern metropolises might cause them to act as attractors for unnatural forces—then cleverly cross-wires this conceit into the nascent development of the software industry, and its origins in the utopian rhetoric of the 1960s counter-culture.

Montana's interweaving of globalized corporate technology and underground culture would suggest connections with the then-emerging literature of cyberpunk, were it not for her screenplay's decisive tilt into the regions of meta-fictional horror. Throughout *The Companions* there's a disquieting sense of its human characters being overshadowed by something darker and vaster than a mere techno-corporate conspiracy, an implication that the city has taken on a strange and terrible sentience of its own. (One critic has even gone so far as to suggest that the entire narrative may represent a dream the city is having about itself.)



Still from "Vertigo." "The Companions" makes a number of deliberate references to Hitchcock's classic mystery.

An Un-makeable Film

Somewhat predictably, the vertiginous, otherworldly qualities of *The Companions* proved too great a challenge for Hollywood. In its deliberate embrace of narrative ambiguity, Montana's screenplay displays the sort of markedly literary sensibility that the film industry has tended to view with unease. One director, recalling Montana's script, described it simply as "unfilmable":

"The problem was, the whole thing's just got too much going on. I mean, you've got all these great plot elements—there's this big corporate conspiracy, there's spy stuff and car chases and even a shootout—but you also have a lot of very weird things happening, seduction by aliens or people from another dimension or whatever. At the end the whole city gets maybe destroyed or something, but then you get this final scene where it's like, huh? Did anything even happen? [...] Don't get me wrong, I loved the script—I remember it gave me some very freaky dreams—but there's no good way to tackle that. You either have to dumb it way down, in which case, why even bother. Or you wind up with something that most studios won't touch because they can't slot it into anything. I mean what sort of story is it? How would you market something like this?"

Montana was only 26 when she wrote *The Companions*. She had dropped out of the graduate program at the San Francisco Art Institute a few years earlier, and was paying the bills through a mix of bartending and freelance writing gigs while working her way through several drafts of her script, which she described to a friend as an "ambivalent love letter" to San Francisco and its history. In the fall of 1982, Montana passed a copy of the script to Steven Trevino, a former boyfriend who had recently moved to Los Angeles and started working in the film industry. Trevino, a slick operator who made connections easily, was able to get the script picked up by a producer at Paramount.

Almost immediately however, trouble started. Disagreements between Montana, Trevino, and the executives at Paramount over script changes led to a complicated legal dispute over rights that dragged on for months. Eventually, the studio sold off the script to Disney, where it languished for two years before being picked up by Francis Ford Coppola's production company.



Carol Montana in London in 1981

Over the course of the next decade, *The Companions* floated through Los Angeles like a dream one can't quite dispel. At various points, all sorts of big names were rumored to have been attached to it—actors as varied as Madonna, Isabelle Adjani, and Rae Dawn Chong were all considered for the role of Sydney—but production always failed to go forward for one reason or another. *The Companions* lingered for years in limbo, passed between studios and producers until it eventually faded into oblivion. Embittered by the experience, Montana gave up on Hollywood and moved back east, where she pursued a moderately successful career as a visual artist. She never wrote anything else of note. Eventually, she returned to her hometown in Massachusetts, where she died in a car accident in 2004.

Interviews conducted with veterans of the film industry provide a range of explanations for why *The Companions* never made it to the screen. Screenwriter Zak Penn, who has written or consulted on dozens of scripts over the past three decades, sees the troubled history of Montana's script as a story about the industry's longstanding inability to embrace difficult projects:

"It's not surprising to me that *The Companions* was never able to get made. In some ways it reads like a classic conspiracy/sci-fi thriller—*Parallax View* meets William S. Gibson— but the plot spins out so wildly from there it's impossible to get a grip on what's going on or what it all means. That kind of story will always be a tough sell in the American film industry—even established directors like Cronenberg and David Lynch still have problems getting their films produced here. People need to fit things into neat boxes and there wasn't any box *The Companions* seemed to fit into."

For some, the issue lies with Hollywood's well-known reluctance to commit its extensive resources to a project that didn't fit into conventional expectations. Warner Brothers producer Donald DeLine recalls some of the problems the script faced:

"I remember there was a point in the 80s when it seemed like every other person had read it or was trying to get it made. We even had it briefly under option at Disney back when I was an executive there. Part of the challenge, I think, was technological; the script described things that would have been tremendously difficult to realize with the visual effects available at the time. It would have cost a fortune to make, and no one wanted to commit to that sort of budget for something so offbeat. But I think there was also an awareness that making the script more commercially appealing would have killed everything that was unique about it—that was the main reason Scorsese dropped out of the project when we put it in turnaround to Universal. Ironically, with today's tools, none of this would have been an issue."

For others, the fate of *The Companions* is simply one out of countless examples of Hollywood's decades-old disregard for the importance of the screenwriter—especially if she happens to be a woman. "The sad thing is that, however unique a story *The Companions* may be, the story of what happened to it, and what happened to Carol Montana, is one of the most common in the motion picture industry," comments screenwriter Erin Cressida Wilson.

"The screenwriter is always the forgotten soul of Hollywood. We don't remember names like W.D. Richter, Alec Coppel, or Samuel Taylor, the writers behind the scripts for films like *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* or *Vertigo*, no matter how famous the films themselves are; we don't remember them because we never knew who they were in the first place. Though the screenwriter creates the blueprint, the tone, the thematics, the dialogue, the characters, the story—everything that makes up a film—we're often treated as if we're expendable, and our stories as though they're the least important part of a project. In the movie industry, a screenplay is viewed much the way female actors are. Both are supposed to be vehicles for the vision of the director—who, even now, is still almost always a man. Both are

supposed to accomplish everything and yet not exist. How could a director make a film without a script? And yet, movies are always “by” the director, not the writer. Someday in the future maybe we will laugh at this. But if being a screenwriter in Hollywood is still a form of invisibility, then being a screenwriter and a woman remains practically a form of non-existence.”

Regardless of what lens through which one chooses to view the story of *The Companions*, it remains an enduring example of a peculiar artistic paradox: That the unrealized artwork can retain a kind of mystery and influence that a completed work often does not possess. Unmade films like *The Companions*, Claire Noto’s *The Tourist*, or Shane Carruth’s more recent *A Topiary* may offer us a sense of possibility greater than a fully realized project could ever attain. We long to see these stories actualized, but at the same time, secretly hope they remain in the private space of our imaginings, unsullied by another’s vision. For Discenza, who as an artist has always had a keen awareness of the strange lacunae (both internal and external) that can bedevil the creative process, this paradox has always been strangely compelling. “Maybe,” he muses, “had one of the many attempts to produce *The Companions* been successful, it might have become just another movie— interesting perhaps, possibly even great—but not the tantalizing puzzle that it became, and continues to be.”