Writing is dead. Long live writing. What do I mean when I say writing is dead? That’s a whole other article, but in brief: cinema killed the novel, email killed the letter, CGI killed cinema and Twitter killed email. The good news is that, despite this bloodbath, writing is actually alive and well and living in Texas. And the reason I know that is that I was there at the end of last month.

The Austin Film Festival, where I had a script in the competition, is the only major film festival in the US that focuses primarily on the writers (as opposed to directors or actors). The result is that, for those few days while the festival takes place, you can’t stir an elbow in Austin without knocking over a writer’s pint. The place is crawling with them, seething with them. It seems to be breeding them — and there’s certainly a degree of sexual activity that goes on, as I learned from one tired, unrepentant writer who showed me some intriguing pictures on his iPhone. Why wouldn’t there be? We all have so much in common. It was like the gathering of dwarf actors before the filming of The Wizard of Oz in 1939, which swiftly devolved into a mass dwarf orgy.

For those who don’t know, the way a film festival works is this. Some films are shown, some awards are given, some drinks are drunk. Meanwhile, everyone’s trying to make a deal. The difference in Austin is that a large part of the festival is taken up by the conference, which consists of panels (three distinguished screenwriters discuss a topic with a moderator), conversations (one distinguished screenwriter discusses one of his films with a moderator), and round-table events (several distinguished screenwriters discuss the craft with many undistinguished screenwriters such as myself). And the message that came out of these variegated sessions, like a chorus in a song, is that cinema is tough right now for writers. It’s all happening in television.

This is hardly surprising for anyone who has watched The Sopranos, Breaking Bad, House of Cards, True Detective, or any of the other extraordinarily literate, near-novelistic TV shows that have blossomed on our screens over the past 15 years. They’re calling it a golden age of television. They’re saying it harks back to a first golden age, after the rise of the medium in the 1950s, when shows such as The Twilight Zone and Alfred Hitchcock Presents made their appearance. But Wes Brown — a slow-talking, fast-rising screenwriter, whose pilot for Ascension (a series set during the American Civil War) won the contest in his category — has doubts. In his opinion, there has never been such a golden age as now. Would he swap Mad Men for The Twilight Zone? He would not.

My experience in Austin supported this general theory, about all the heat and energy moving out of cinema and into television. I attended the première of The Humbling, the feature-film adaptation of ageing author Philip Roth’s novel about an ageing actor (Al Pacino) losing his thespian powers. It came over as a metaphor for the death of the old forms; of the grandstanding acting style that Pacino, for all his gifts, stentoriously represents, but also of the novel (the book adapts uneasily) and even, perhaps, of cinema itself.

An even stronger example was Miss Julie, based on Strindberg’s play, which must have been terribly exciting when it opened in 1888. The film wasn’t. I fell asleep, defeated by information and ‘making contacts’ (my new euphemism for drinking). Whenever I opened
my eyes, the protagonists were either having sex or trying to kill each other. It was not unlike the Austin Film Festival.

Both films embody the truth and weakness of the other mantra that echoed through the conference: the notion that a movie now has to be based on pre-existing material for it to have much chance of getting made. The Hollywood suits don’t want to take risks. They want to know that they already have an audience for their product. So you end up with a form that doesn’t take risks, a form essentially derivative, in the sense that its structure and substance derive from something other than itself, which may actually be uncinematic, like the sad and static Miss Julie.

‘They’re not making popcorn unless it has IP,’ explains Scott Rosenberg, whose legendary credits include Con Air and High Fidelity. Which summarises the second mantra with style. They need pre-existing material. They need IP (Intellectual Property). They need attachment. Rosenberg laments that not only are studios not making films like Philadelphia any more; they’re not making Terminator either.

Yet to me, this is as if someone complained, in the age of the romantic poets, that no one was writing decent satire. Times change. Change with them, right? If you write, write television.

One who is making this transition is the screenwriter and director Whit Stillman, whom I entrapped in the press room for half an hour. His credits include the effete Metropolitan (1990), the zippy Last Days of Disco (1998), and this year the pilot for a new TV show, The Cosmopolitans, commissioned by Amazon Studios: a witty, pretty portrayal of the expat community in present-day Paris. This is a man who started out wanting to be the next F. Scott Fitzgerald; then remembered that Fitzgerald had switched from novels to screenplays, so did the same; then moved to Paris, where Fitzgerald raised hell in the 1920s, before finally realising that Scotty, if he hadn’t drunk himself to death at 44, would probably have taken the plunge and written The Twilight Zone.

My own screenplay, The Magnificent Kate Morgan, which was nominated in the comedy category, is about a writer who has to change industries (in his case, from journalism to screenwriting) to survive. Specifically, its message is that when things go bad, one way to save yourself is to apply the same level of creativity to your life as you would if you were writing fiction.

I know. It sounds like a self-help spiel. Write your life! You are the hero of your own story! But on some level, I really do believe that.

Nothing is perfect, not even television. All you can work on is your attitude. Stillman says that, counterintuitively, he feels Amazon gives out too much money to film-makers; it makes it harder for them to score when it comes to the bottom line. During another roundtable, screenwriter and novelist Brian McGreevy (credit: Hemlock Grove) also criticised Amazon, on the grounds that, unlike Netflix, they don’t commission whole series, only a pilot and then the rest depending on audience response. Which means writers and directors proceed with more creative caution.
This surely is a five-star problem. Amazon’s arrival as a rival to Netflix, with the muscle for tussling with the networks, can only have the effect of bringing more money into the room.

None of the arguments presented in this article is entirely true. The truth is more complicated, as it tends to be. It isn’t wholly the case that good films aren’t getting made in Hollywood. It’s just that they’re fewer. And when they hit, we all gather round like hikers, who’ve stumbled on a circle in the corn.

The buzz is strong around Unbroken, for example, due out next month, and Wild, scheduled for January. What do they have in common, apart from both being based on true stories of suffering and redemption (there’s your IP)? The fact that in each case, the director thought it worthwhile to pay top dollar for the writing. The WWII film Unbroken gives a writing credit to the Coen brothers; the script for Wild, which stars Reese Witherspoon, comes courtesy of the novelist Nick Hornby.

So is respect for the writer starting to flow back, out of television, and into the Hollywood feature film? It’s possible, and yet, for the time being, it’s most likely to be located in TV drama (where it will remain until the wow factor of CGI and 3D and vast destructive robots eventually wears off). It can also be found in documentaries, which have, for similar reasons, also enjoyed something of a golden age over the past decade and a half.

On my last evening in Austin, I dragged my sorry limbs (weary from making so many contacts) out to a sequence of short films by young festival contenders. The opening one blew me away. It wasn’t even on the programme — I still don’t know why it was added — a 15-minute documentary called Albert, about the experience of going blind as told by New Yorker Albert Rizzi, who lost his sight at 41 after contracting meningitis. The subject matter’s inevitably emotive, but creative too: a visual study of a loss of vision. And film-maker Daniel Jaffe definitely lucked out when he found Rizzi, a man who combines articulacy with humanity and honesty, and sheer irresistible positivity to the point where he declares, ‘I can honestly say that I have never felt lonely in my blind life.’ It gives me a shiver just to write that. But there’s a writer’s skill too, as in all documentaries, to the way the speech has been cut and the whole of it structured. It was worth flying 5,000 miles to see that film.