“IT’S A CREATIVE BUSINESS”: THE IDEAS, PRACTICES, AND INTERACTION THAT MADE THE HOLLYWOOD FILM INDUSTRY

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Abstract

During the first half of the twentieth century, as cinema transformed from a novice form of technology to a full-fledged industry, the major production companies in the United States were forced to reconcile a rationalized profit seeking operation with a dependence on artistic imagination. In that sense, they were far from a conventional assembly line and required a unique mode of production. This dissertation examines the distinctive apparatus that developed in the motion picture business and how it shaped the film industry and its labor force during the golden age of the Hollywood studio system, c. 1920-1950. It is a study of the American motion picture industry as a modern system of labor, which reveals the day-to-day reality behind the screen and the effect work relations and politics had on cinematic production and content. I argue that beyond the cinematic text, the Hollywood workforce and its production practices are equally important to our understanding of America’s foremost cultural industry.

The project has two main concerns. First, it charts the splitting of expertise that took place as filmmaking went from being an unstructured practice produced in an informal work environment to a well thought-out operation with function-specific divisions and tasks. Second, it fleshes out the specialized roles created by the system by studying the experience of the practitioners who carried primary responsibility for the creative content of the movies. Hence, this dissertation is also a social history of Hollywood’s creative class. Drawing from personal papers, correspondence, oral histories, trade papers, and studio files it examines the work routines of producers, writers, directors, and actors, how the people occupying these positions perceived their
roles, what demands and constraints were placed on them by the system, and how they learned to negotiate their own artistic and material interests with those of the studios and with other practitioners. While paying attention to the complexity of the workforce and the different groups operating within it, the dissertation also emphasizes the commonalities and shared perceptions that fostered a sense of unity and conformity in Hollywood and helped preserve organizational harmony and stability.
Acknowledgements

“I think if a man is an egotist and doesn’t want his work touched … I think that motion picture work is the wrong work for him to be engaged in; because motion pictures are necessarily collaborations.”

David O. Selznick

I have one thing in common with the Hollywood stars I write about; just like them I have acquired a large debt of gratitude to an unfailing support system. Indeed, so many wonderful people supported me throughout the last six years that this dissertation often felt like a collaborative effort.

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Introduction, or Magic Packed in Pink Slips

There is something magical about movies. Something spellbinding about the fine-tuned images and coherent narratives they present, especially when compared to the non-glamorous and disintegrated experiences of our daily lives. Taken into their captivating alternative realities, they make us long for the illusions created on the screen.

Moviemakers have been forever capitalizing on this allure. Ever since the first cameras started rolling, the people who work for the movies wish to keep us enchanted.

Perhaps for this reason, stretching back to the industry’s heydays, motion picture producers always preferred to keep the mechanisms behind the production process under a cloud of mystery. Like trained illusionists, in public they constantly spoke about their trade in terms of randomness and wonder rather than foresight and expertise. Hal Wallis, who for years served as the head producer at the Warner Bros. studio, once claimed that “if there is an unpredicted business, it’s motion pictures. Make one bad bet … and you’ll find yourself in the unenviable position of having a picture on your hands in which people are no longer interested.” He added that “if it weren’t for the stimulation of working in this business,” he “probably should have quit long ago.”¹

Darryl Zanuck also paid homage to the goddess of fortune. “It [could] be said without fear of challenge that nowhere else in the world are so many millions risked under such hazardous circumstances and conditions,” stated the studio head of 20th Century-Fox. Making movies was not “exactly like betting a million on the whirl of the

ball at a roulette table” he wrote, “but it’s still always a gamble and the odds are even longer.”\(^2\) A speculative and unpredictable game, filled with lucky high rollers like himself. Indeed, his fellow producers seemed to have been sitting right beside him at the table. “It isn’t possible to make a successful picture [only] by selecting any good director and by engaging any good actors or actresses who happen to fit the parts for which they are selected – except, perhaps, by luck,” exclaimed legendary MGM executive producer Irving Thalberg.\(^3\)

If one were to adopt the jargon used by Hollywood professionals, filmmaking would appear to be nothing but a trade of hunches and gut feelings. “It’s a creative business. It’s something new,” said Adolph Zukor, the owner of Paramount Pictures and one of the men credited with inventing the studio system. “It’s not like making shoes or automobiles when you have a model and you follow through for the year. Every picture is an individual enterprise by itself. There are certain ingredients you have to study,” but there are also many times when you simply have to speculate: “I don’t think I’ll take that story, I don’t think I’ll make it, I don’t think it’s what the public will take.” Even so, despite relying so much on tentative thinking, Zukor admitted, while squeezing in a rather commonplace noun, it was “a very pleasant occupation.”\(^4\)

There is something inherently disenchanted about writing history and even more so about writing the history of the movies. This dissertation takes away some of the big screen’s magic by uncovering the everyday commercial and labor practices that were

\(^3\) Irving Thalberg and Hugh Weir, “Why Motion Pictures Cost so Much,” *The Saturday Evening Post*, November 4, 1933.
responsible for its creation during the golden age of the Hollywood studio system. Revealing the mundane apparatus, i.e. the pleasant (and less pleasant) occupational aspects that backed up Zukor’s speculations, it brings into focus the stories of the men and women who produced the narratives, images, characters, and style of the American motion picture industry. Yet, the chronicles told here are neither their sparkling stardust-filled biographies nor their memoirs from Tinseltown nightlife. They also do not follow the ingenious trails of the filmmakers’ creative process. Rather, the following pages bring the story of their employment, the routines and interactions they endured while navigating their careers within the big motion picture production companies. In that sense this is a labor history of Hollywood, a microhistory of the creative occupations that comprised it, which exposes the skill behind the showmen’s veneer of luck.

During the first half of the twentieth century, as cinema transformed from a novice of technology to a full-fledged industry, the major production companies in the United States, including such familiar names as Paramount, MGM, and Warner Bros., created an unprecedentedly successful entertainment medium. An essential part of that process was learning how to reconcile a rationalized profit seeking operation with a dependence on artistic imagination. These companies were orchestrating a growing cultural industry, the first of its kind to function on a truly grand scale. On the one hand, they subscribed to the modern industrial rationale emergent in America at the time and were searching for ways to streamline the production process. On the other hand, managing a business that was guided by popular taste they were forced to rely on the unruly talents of creative professionals including directors, writers, actors, cinematographers, and designers. They had to maneuver along a “constant and pervasive
tension between innovation and control.”  Hence, the second story told in this dissertation is that of the industry itself. It weaves together the experiences of different workers to follow the history of the innovation/control tension and the “contemporaneous struggles” that ensued from it, the struggles between and within different groups of workers that shaped Hollywood’s mode of production.\(^6\)

In any given industry, there are many factors that govern the mode of production. Filmmaking was heavily influenced by various determinants including the technological realm of possibilities and audience reception. In a modern mass-producing creative business such as Hollywood one central formative factor was the industry’s division of labor. By the late 1920s filmmaking had matured into one of the most profitable businesses in the United States as well as a quintessential American export. It also evolved from being an informal workplace, where, as one employee put it, “anybody on the set did anything he or she was called upon to do,” to a well thought-out operation with function-specific divisions and tasks. For example, around 1930 a standard cinematography department included first, second, still, and assistant cameramen, and the actors’ ranks featured stars, bit players, and extras. This “splitting of expertise” had a singular upshot in the case of creative production; it concentrated power in the hands of those who were able to control the causes of uncertainty that pervaded any such industry, the people who possessed “inspirational strategies” or “entrepreneurship” capable of

\(^5\) For more about this idea and how it relates to the production of culture see Paul DiMaggio and Paul M. Hirsch, “Production Organizations in the Arts,” American Behavioral Scientist 19, no. 6 (July 1, 1976): 735–752.

circumventing them. Consequently it created a hierarchy between the different occupational groups as well as networks of cooperation and solidarity among them. Dividing the creative labor was a meaningful organizing principle, whose understanding is equally important to this structural history of the Hollywood industry.

Creative employees in the motion picture industry had to contend with this division of labor. They also had to contend with economic constraints and managerial control, which often restricted their artistic freedom. Hired to perform what is commonly viewed as artistic tasks, they had to translate their work into the terms of a modern rationalized profit-seeking business. The following pages will focus on their experience: the methods they adopted in order to translate and contend. They will trace the “emotional demands” presented by this system of labor and show how producers, writers, directors, and actors met these demands in an attempt to both assert their needs and maintain the overall harmony of the system. In short, this project asks a rather simple, but rarely posed question: what was it like to work for a big Hollywood studio? In order to make movies in an era and industry that pioneered the standardization of cultural production, what kind of employee did one have to be, or become? Or, to put it even more simply, how did Hollywood work?


8 The terms "emotional demands" and "emotional labor," as well as their application to the modern work place are developed by Arlie Russell Hochschild in The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); For a discussion of these terms with regards to Hollywood child labor see John F. Kasson, "Behind Shirley Temple's Smile: Children, Emotional Labor, and the Great Depression," in The Cultural Turn in U.S. History, 185–216.
Legendary titans like Wallis, Zanuck, Thalberg, and Zukor were lucky men, but they were also skillful workers and savvy managers. Though by stressing their luck they might have been trying to protect the wonders of the screen, their unique methods and artful work habits were in some ways no less magical. Another producer by the name of Pandro Berman once said, it was nothing short of a “miracle,” when “you can get ten guys together to make a movie and all of them be right all the way through, so that you end up with a masterpiece.” By no means an easy task, “it has to do with the inception of the story, with the treatment, with the director, with the producer, with everybody having to be right all the time to make a good picture, and who’s right all the time?”

David O. Selznick, another industry luminary, echoed these ideas claiming it would be “manifestly absurd” for anyone working in movies to hold “the notion that he can have the degree of control over his work that he can have if he is a novelist, or works through the printed page.” In fact, he believed the degree of success one achieves in the business was “in a direct ratio, A, to his recognition of this fact, and B, to his ability to adjust himself to the requirements of the medium, commercially and creatively.” Considering this “mission impossible” as well as its result – the great movies that came out of Hollywood’s golden age, perhaps shifting our gaze from the mise-en-scène of the pictures to the mise-en-scène of the labor system behind them will nevertheless maintain some of the original miraculous thrill.

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9 Pandro S. Berman: a Louis B. Mayer Foundation-American Film Institute Oral History; conducted and prepared by Mike Steen, August 4, 1972, transcript, Oral History Collection, The Margaret Herrick Library, 57-60.
Aiming our lens at the labor system captures a very delicate balance. It brings to light an arena filled with creative visions and material interests, and with people, who were persistently striving to square them off through negotiation. Whether during meetings, in contracts, or over the endless pages marked “inter-office communication,” the workers of the Hollywood studio system were determined to reach harmony. Every new film project summoned mini-conflicts, testament to which are the numerous “pink notes” passed between the various departments on a daily basis to “okay the script, to confirm casting, to approve sets, to suggest tests, to ratify make-ups, to assign crews, to instruct cutters, to recommend musical scores, to hold down performances and to warn hat designers.” Wallis’ secretary recalled “with awe a day in April 1937 when he launched 624 pink slips between dawn and dusk.”11 These slips contained more than dry instructions, they packed the professional claims of the people who wrote them, and the language they used in order to legitimize those personal concerns within the overall good of the system.

Language was crucial. It included such circumlocutions as “I think that such an attitude on the part of any producer would be an unwarranted insistence upon his making fifty-million people sit through something they didn’t like to sit through simply because one man liked it.” Or shorter axioms such as “four different audiences must be right,” all in order to justify what were essentially creative decisions, albeit ones that carried enormous financial weight.12 The creative class in Hollywood developed its own jargon, one that speaks for constructed identities oscillating between artistic integrity and system-conformity. These specially constructed identities were the hallmark of the industry.

12 Inter-Office Communication from David O. Selznick to Dore Schary, June 18, 1946, folder 12, Dore Schary Papers, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research Archives at the Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison.
They were the unique skill required in order to work in the movies. As a matter of fact, when professionals aspired to boost their power-status they highlighted exactly those oscillation and negotiation capabilities. They stressed how they “revised the old script … held night meetings on story and script and changes incorporated … got co-operation … straightened out with [Isa] Miranda that matter of several complicated demands by her,” how they “received Hays Office comments … made corrections, [and] revised schedule.”

Bargaining, cooperating, straightening out, these were the social demands that constituted America’s foremost cultural terrain. Among those who held on to the artistic elements of their craft, these demands inspired much disgruntlement. It was not uncommon for studio employees to protest how they were all “fakes. The writer was a fake, the director was a super-fake, and the producer was a con man. He had no more reason for getting paid than an usher would have for getting all the money in the theater.” One would expect these from a labor force required to bargain and compromise its creative vision. What one does not expect is that much more common than complaint and in fact the most widespread sentiment was complaisance. As Director George Cukor contemplated, “Now that these studios were no longer active … they would talk about them as factories and this and that,” but in fact, people “didn’t realize how much they helped … this was all taken for granted … they had enormous resources.”

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13 Inter-Office Communication from A. M. Botsford concerning the production of Hotel Imperial, November 11, 1938, file 105.f-f, Paramount Picture Production Records, Special Collections, Margaret Herrick Library.

14 Reminiscences of Ben Hecht, interviewed by Joan and Robert Franklin, June 1959, transcript, Popular Arts Project, 710.

Charles Bracket asserted, “No other life in the world could possibly be so interesting.”

This was more than mere lip service. This was patriotism. It was a loyalty shared by expert craftsmen, employees who learned how to work in a complex and demanding trade, and who, in the process of learning, developed a deep sense of belonging to the industry that shaped them.

Insiders were not the only ones contemplating. The eminence of the American motion picture industry as a whole, and that of the Hollywood studio system in particular have generated much scholarly interest. Yet, so far, a comprehensive historical study of Hollywood’s labor practices had not been attempted. Of course, the practice of disenchanted the screen has a long tradition, which stretches beyond the district of historical analysis. Just think of the longstanding ritual of celebrity gossip and paparazzi journalism that seems to get more and more intrusive and destructive with every new technological innovation. On more respectable and well-intentioned grounds one can find the discipline of film studies and its sophisticated literary and technical analysis of the medium. However, when it comes to the history of the industry itself, the attention paid to the labor force leaves much to be desired. This lacuna can perhaps be explained by the fact that until recently historians were still grappling to come to terms with the phenomenon of motion pictures and its reflection in society writ large. Available through technological innovations of the late 19th century, the moving image is a relatively new

16 Charles Bracket, speech for the Carl Lonyay’s Authors club luncheon, draft, august 28, 1957, file 20.f-48, Charles Bracket Papers, Special Collections, Margaret Herrick Library.
historical experience. This feature combined with the medium’s immense popularity across the world, directed intellectual curiosity first and foremost towards questions regarding the impact of this art and business on broader transformations in culture, politics, and economics.

Here it is important to note that the terms “Hollywood” and “The American motion picture industry,” are ambiguous. One could interpret them literally, to mean the actual market structure behind these institutions, the companies, the trade practices, labor relations, etc. A second, more symbolic meaning, takes these concepts to denote the cultural artifacts produced by this industry, i.e. the movies, their content, and perhaps also some of the star personalities. Both of these meanings attracted the attention of scholars. This dissertation, however, confines itself to the literal meaning of the terms, or, to put it crudely, it does not engage in film analysis. Thus, the rich body of work dedicated to Hollywood film theory is beyond the relevant scope of this project, which aims to go beyond the literary and bridge the social history of the studio system with its cultural significance.

Alongside the symbolic realm, several historians and film scholars have been on a mission to “take Hollywood seriously.”18 In fact, the effort to document and study the industry started already during the Hollywood golden age, and even dates back to the silent era.19 More recently, in tandem with the development of film studies as a discipline and the inclusion of cinema within the realm of literary criticism, a number of scholars

directed their attention in particular towards Hollywood’s means of production, generating a body of work that is sometimes referred to as industry studies. The best works in this genre reveal the complex mechanism behind the production process, shedding light on the cooperative creative effort and the decision-making hierarchy that stood behind every studio and every picture.

Among these studies, some veer towards a materially determinist analysis, stressing the dominance of business owners and corporate leaders. Others embrace a more dialectic approach that describes Hollywood moviemaking as a “more complicated” procedure than mere art or commerce. Pioneered by Thomas Schatz, in his seminal book

20 Douglas Gomery, The Hollywood Studio System: A History (London: BFI, 2005), 1–6; Two very early such accounts include Howard Thompson Lewis, The Motion Picture Industry (New York: D. Van Nostrand, 1933), that breaks down and explains the business strategies of the industry's various components from production, through advertising, and exhibition up to the 1930s; Another early study that does the same for the 1940s is Mae D. Huettig, Economic Control of the Motion Picture Industry; a Study in Industrial Organization (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1944); The famous and excellent study of David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson, and Janet Staiger, The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985) provides a very sophisticated analysis and remains one of the best templates to explain Hollywood from its inception up to the 1960s; Another interesting work that looks at the economic rational behind the industry's self censorship is Leonard J Leff, The Dame in the Kimono: Hollywood, Censorship, and the Production Code, 2nd ed. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucy, 2001); The theoretical underpinnings of material determinism are very well known and naturally include the essay on The Cultural Industry in Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments, trans. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, Cultural Memory in the Present (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2002); as well as Herbert Marcuse, One Dimensional Man; Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964); and Louis Althusser, Reading Capital, 1st American ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971). For a fresh and comprehensive discussion of the attitudes held by three of the critical theorists with regards to cinema see Marian Bratu Hansen, Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno, Weimar and Now: German Cultural Criticism 44 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

21 The dialectical approach was developed partially in response to material determinism and partially in order to combat the then prevailing auteur theory, which elevated cinema to the realm of fine art by discussing it in terms of authorship and individual style. The earliest version of this theory, concentrating on the individual style of film directors, originated in France during the 1950s, in the pages of the influential journal Cahiers Du Cinéma, by such filmmakers and critics as André Bazin and François Truffaut. For a collection of their essays see Jim Hillier, ed., Cahiers Du Cinéma, the 1950s: Neo-Realism, Hollywood, New Wave (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1985); The theory was popularized in the United States about a decade later, primarily through the reviews and writings of Andrew Sarris, see Sarris, The American Cinema: Directors and Directions, 1929-1968, 1st ed. (New York: Dutton, 1968); In the following decades scholars developed these initial ideas into more sophisticated theories about film and authorship, including an appreciation to the cooperative nature of filmmaking. For further discussion see
The Genius of the System, this latter attitude sees “classical Hollywood” as “a period when various social, industrial, technological, economic, and aesthetic forces struck a delicate balance.” Neither the creation of mastermind-directors, nor a businessmen’s dictatorship, the Hollywood studio system was a melding of the individual style developed by creative artists and the demands as well as resources brought about by market considerations. The focus here is on the conflicts, struggles, and negotiations that defined this business, and on how these art/commerce contradictions, that were built into the system, culminated in a unique product.

However, regardless of which side they fell on, what unifies almost all industry studies is this focus on the product. Penetrating the organization behind the pictures, most of these works produced highly sophisticated analytical frameworks to explain the effect of human interaction on “the quality and artistry” of the films. That is to say, the content of the pictures, the nature of the product is at the center, and the main question is who holds the ultimate power over it. Schatz mentioned that the “delicate balance” was “stable enough” to provide “a consistent system of production and consumption” and “a set of


formalized creative practices and constraints.” But what he was more interested in, as
demonstrated through the wonderful production stories he excavated from studio
archives, is how all of these culminated in “a body of work with a uniform style – a
standard way of telling stories, from camera work and cutting to plot structure and
thematics.”

Correspondingly, historians studying Hollywood had also chosen to focus on the
film as commodity. Though instead of deconstructing the text into its various
components, historical research tends to use film content inductively, to build upon it, in
order to compose a bigger story about the society that made it. Since the 1970s, scholars
such as Robert Sklar have been looking at “the cultural aspects of American movies as
broadly as possible.” Their expanded scope includes topics such as “the invention of
motion picture technology; the nature and the evolution of the motion picture audience;
the organization and business tactics of the movie trade; the design and economics of
theaters; the social and professional lives of movie workers; [and] the cultural influence
of movies at home and overseas.” Their goal, for the most part, is to understand the
relationship between the industry as a whole and the simultaneously evolving form of
consumer capitalism. Here too, the main sources of analysis are the films, whose style

23 Schatz, The Genius of the System, 8–9. Even Douglas Gomery, who restricts his study to the corporate
level of the film companies, is still ultimately preoccupied with the product, with asking, “how did they
choose how many films to produce? How did they distribute them around the world? What means did they
use to present films to the public, at what price and in what order?” That said, he does reveal a great deal
about the practice and strategies of the highest managerial echelons. See Gomery, The Hollywood Studio
System, 3.
24 Robert Sklar, Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies, 1st ed. (New York:
Random House, 1975), ix-x.
and content serves as a mirror reflecting dominant trends in American culture, "linking Hollywood esthetics to American cultural history."\textsuperscript{25}

The kind of image one gleans from this mirror depends on the theoretical monocle he or she is holding. At one extreme pole, echoing material determinism, a number of historians viewed the cultural texts coming out of Hollywood as nothing more than "affirmative culture." According to those who subscribe to this view, the capitalist "ideological disposition" of the system and its owners eclipsed any "individual variation," and possessed the power to "assimilate formal devices initially conceived as critical departures."\textsuperscript{26} In other words, the American motion picture industry, especially during the studios' golden age, spoke in one voice, and that voice upheld the existing economic balance of power. As an alternative, circa the early 1980s, the cultural turn in history and the proliferation of cultural studies departments encouraged a more subtle approach towards Hollywood. Invigorated by a renewed interest in the writings of Italian Communist Antonio Gramsci, a cohort of scholars began to describe cultural industries, including motion pictures, in more dynamic terms, leaving room for dialog and resistance.\textsuperscript{27} Through their eyes, Hollywood was less of a static commercial hegemony.


\textsuperscript{26} Robert Beverley Ray, \textit{A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1980} (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1985), 17–18; Ray adopts the firm position that "the ideological disposition of Hollywood’s principal modus operandi overdetermines individual variations to the extent that ... no variations can be privileged in the abstract." But his work is not purely historical and might be associated with the materialist tradition in film studies. Two more historical works that follow this tradition are Andrew Bergman, \textit{We’re in the Money: Depression America and Its Films}, 1st Harper colophon ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1972); and Sklar, \textit{Movie-Made America}, which presents a tamer version of the material framework as he concedes that American movies sometimes "altered or challenged many of the values and doctrines of powerful social and cultural forces." For the theoretical works that ground this approach see note 13.

and more of a contested terrain where at “key historical moments” battling ideologies, practitioners, and audiences could “disrupt the production system and compel studios to alter their films.”

Either way, historians used Hollywood as a launch pad for an outward voyage, marking industry practice and, to greater extent content, as the starting point from which to explore American society.

Taken together, the abundance of literature surrounding Hollywood indicates a trend that film scholar Richard Maltby had termed the “slide into the text.” Or at least, as James Naremore explained, a literature that is “concerned more with textuality than with authors or individual workers.” The text, the film, is at the center, whether as the subject of the inquiry or as a means of inquiry into broader themes. Yet, an influential cultural industry, such as the one that developed around Hollywood, drew a great deal of its power from effective work relations, or what media scholar Janet Staiger calls, its “sociology of production.” It outlined a new kind of worker and a professional way-of-being. I am not referring here to the study of stylistic devices and creative techniques, the

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28 Lary May, *The Big Tomorrow: Hollywood and the Politics of the American Way* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 77; May is the main proponent of the Gramscian approach with regards Hollywood and he uses it to show a left leaning or worker friendly tendency in Hollywood movies from the 1930s and 1940s, see also his *Screening Out the Past: The Birth of Mass Culture and the Motion Picture Industry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); Other work that follow in this vain include the edited volume, *Film and Politics in America: A Social Tradition*, Studies in Film, Television, and the Media, Phillip Davis and Brian Neve ed. (London: Routledge, 1992); Using the Gramsci’s concept of historical bloc Michael Denning discusses some Hollywood products from the likes of Orson Welles and Disney cartoonists as part of a broader cultural hegemony that formed around F.D.R.’s New Deal coalition in *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1997), particularly chapters 10 and 11.

29 Richard Maltby, “‘Film Noir’: The Politics of the Maladjusted Text,” *Journal of American Studies* 18, no. 1 (April 1, 1984): 49–71. By a “slide into the text” Maltby actually refers to tendency of film scholars to avoid the kind of broader historical analysis undertaken by scholars such as Sklar and May, but I use his term to describe the focus on the text not only as subject but also as source of evidence. That is to say, while some of the literature slides into textual analysis and avoids contextualizing it within broader context, historians slide into the text as an object, as a primary source. In both cases the labor of moviemakers falls to the sidelines.

evolution of which has been explored continually in a tradition that stretches back to the 1930s. What is missing is an inquiry into the organization and nature of employment developed in the American film industry, into those meanings buried in the pink slips. A few scholars have begun to look at the “routine work behavior” at the studios, but their studies are often too general, identifying broad patterns and structures of hierarchy without taking under consideration the actual history of the day-to-day activity during the classical studio era. As Janet Staiger, the most prominent among these scholars, pointed out recently, there is room to expand the template and “explain why individuals might pursue enacting those routines.” In other words, there is room for a labor history of Hollywood that takes into account the mundane practices of studio production without losing sight of the particular forms of agency that developed in it.

There had been some attempts to place workers at the center of the Hollywood studio system. Such studies are few and far in between and their scope is often limited to one group of employees, particularly if that group displayed any characteristics resembling the New Left model of class-consciousness. However, their contribution is important for shifting some attention away from the product. The involvement of certain

31 Janet Staiger, “Authorship Approaches,” in Gerstner and Staiger, Authorship and Film, 40-41; The chapters by Staiger in Bordwell, Thompson, and Staiger, The Classical Hollywood Cinema; present the most comprehensive study of work patterns. Though they remain at the structural level without offering much in terms of historical case studies, they offer a clear analysis of the system from its inception to the 1960s, and remain the best place to start any inquiry. Two early attempts by anthropologists to study the studio system as microcosm include Leo Calvin Rosten, Hollywood: The Movie Colony, the Movie Makers (New York: Harcourt, Brace and company, 1941), which presents some interesting quantitative analysis; and Hortense Powdermaker, Hollywood, the Dream Factory; an Anthropologist Looks at the Movie-Makers, 1st ed. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1950). Both of these, whether in line with professional etiquette or in an attempt to remain discrete, present a very general, and at times even vague, picture, and Powdermaker also displays a clear highbrow bias against this form of commercial entertainment.

32 One excellent book that deserves to be mentioned within this context is Steven J. Ross, Working-Class Hollywood: Silent Film and the Shaping of Class in America (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1998). Though it does not deal with Hollywood itself, it fleshes out quite extensively, one form of
prominent screenwriters in the Communist Party for example, or the fact that nine out of the famous Hollywood ten, cited for contempt of Congress and blacklisted following the HUAC hearings, were among the writers’ ranks, inspired politically minded studies about the experience of this group.  

A number of scholars began penetrating the daily lives of actors, trying to understand the less glamorous implications behind the phenomenon of stardom and star making.  

Finally, a handful of authors have written about collective bargaining in the motion picture industry, particularly about the organization and union battles of the back-lot workers.  

Interestingly, aside from personality centered and often glorifying biographies, there has been no work on the experience of producers or directors as a collective. This is perhaps due to the status of these groups within the system, which, as we shall see, reminds one more of the traditional professional guilds than of conventionally understood working class culture. This project fills this gap, assembles, and builds on the existing fragments to present a comprehensive account of the creative labor force in the American motion picture industry.

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production that was sidelined by Hollywood, and the search for class-consciousness and politicized cinema in the form of a worker film movement.


Outside the gates of the Hollywood studios lies a long tradition of scholarship dedicated to the culture of work. Ever since E. P. Thompson sought to “rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, [and] the ‘obsolete’ hand-loom weaver,” historians have been striving to preserve and make known the voices of the workingmen. Writers such as Herbert Gutman expanded the boundaries of labor studies beyond “trade-union development and behavior, strikes and lockouts, and radical movements,” to include the “frequent tension between different groups of men and women new to the machine and a changing American society.” The intersection of class and culture became a popular topic of historical research generating numerous studies of specific industries and the communities that surround them. At the heart of most of these was a left-leaning search for class-consciousness and agency among the previously disregarded ranks of the American proletariat. Yet, underlying this mission was a thorough persuasion that any such consciousness was inextricably linked to everyday experience and culture, and consequently, that any search for it had to “recapture [the workers’] world … the homes they lived in, the factories they worked in, and the city streets in which they marched and protested.”

Of course, most creative workers in the film industry had little to do with the “poor stockinger,” as most of them were neither poor nor forgotten. Just think of all the star biographies filling the shelves of any bookstore, or the autobiographies, a large chunk out of whose proceeds must have circled back into their writers’ pockets. Not to mention the annual self-congratulating spectacle called the Academy Awards.

Nevertheless, even with regard to celebrities like Frank Capra or Joan Crawford, there is a sense of historical myopia. After all, an important part of such people’s stories, namely their identity as cultural workers, was indeed disregarded, hidden behind a “discourse of popular entertainment that diverted public attention away from the sphere of production.”

Labor historians never confined themselves only to the experience of conventional working-men, and the search for agency expanded into less traditional realms such as women’s labor, the domestic sphere, and slavery. Still, the question might be asked, whether such exceptional employees as actors and screenwriters, whose weekly pay often exceeded $1500, can be included in a historical endeavor habitually reserved for the “underprivileged.” Whether the term “industrial proletariat” retains its meaning when it assumes the likes of Clark Gable. Studying the experience of what he calls “elite slaves,” historian and sociologist Orlando Patterson suggests it does. He claims, “it is precisely at the limits,” when “we seem to be at the very limit of the concept … if not well beyond it,” that “one tests the sharpness of one’s constructs,” for those “limiting cases raise issues of analytic value not immediately apparent in the less

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problematic cases.” To study the creative employees in Hollywood is to study elite laborers, those at the limit of the category. Their experience, in that sense, reveals something about limits, the limits of control and alienation in high capitalist societies.

To grasp fully how this exceptional labor force fits into capitalist social relations, this dissertation employs frameworks from the sociology of culture and organizations. Sociologists have been analyzing “cultural apparatus” and “artistic production systems” since the 1960s. Taking art or cultural production to be a particular world or field of social activity embedded within larger social structures, they sought to understand how it interacts with other adjacent and overarching fields. Quite a few scholars within this tradition, including Paul DiMaggio and Paul M. Hirsch, reformulated questions regarding art and society into organizational questions focusing on the institutional conditions for cultural production. They choose, as their starting point, “the diverse range of situations in which works of art are conceived, sketched, actualized, and enjoyed.” It is only after we understand this “concrete range of activities,” they claim, that we can start thinking of such questions as “How does society affect art?” and “What is the role of art in

42 Orlando Patterson, Slavery and Social Death: a Comparative Study (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1982), 299. Patterson is drawing from Hegel who claimed “the distinctive difference of everything is … the boundary, the limit, of the subject; it is found at that point where the subject matter stops, or it is what the subject matter is not.” I thank Christopher Florio for this reference.

43 Though this is not a “making of a class” story, there have been quite a few studies that examined the process of class formation outside the realm of the working class. One of the best examples of these is Sven Beckert, The Monied Metropolis: New York City and the Consolidation of the American Bourgeoisie, 1850-1896 (Cambridge, U.K. ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001); In addition, several scholars have pursued the social histories of creative or intellectual communities and their relation to Capitalism, see for example Christine Stansell, American Moderns: Bohemian New York and the Creation of a New Century (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2000); Hugh Wilford, The New York Intellectuals: From Vanguard to Institution (Manchester ; New York : New York: Manchester University Press ; Distributed by St. Martin’s Press, 1995).

society? Embracing the models and organizational approaches produced by their studies proves useful here. It facilitates an examination of the creative professions of Hollywood in their everyday terms, as occupations, as it provides a language with which to substitute the artistic, technical, and personality centered jargons that currently surround this field of study.

The timeframe of this study is conceptual more than it is temporal. It surrounds the classical Hollywood studio era. By this term I mean to identify not a style but a particular business model, one whose beginnings can be traced back to the 1920s and its decline to the late 1940s and early 1950s. Throughout those years the American motion picture industry was, as most scholars tend to agree, a “mature oligopoly,” that is to say a market structure that “institutes a mixture of rivalry and tacit cooperation with regards to pricing policies.” Filmmaking in America was always a business, and, true to form, it was always accompanied by fair and unfair trade practices in search of monopoly. Thomas Edison was responsible not only for the first motion picture projector, but also for its first trust. However, this routine mode took an enhanced form when a series of mergers and

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47 I am referring here to the Motion Picture Patent Company, which was formed by Edison in 1909 and united the patents of all significant production companies of the time, including Edison, Biograph, Vitagraph, Lubin, Essanay, Selig, Kalem, Méliès, Pathé, and George Kleine, as well as raw stock supplier Eastman Kodak. The company was commonly referred to as “the trust” for its manifested attempt to control all production and exhibition by essentially forcing them to use their products exclusively. See Eileen
consolidations that began already in the mid teens culminated, by 1930, in a vertically integrated industry controlled by five major companies – the majors – each of which owning theater chains, nationwide distribution systems, and studio production facilities. These five companies controlled key resources in the three branches of film supply. It was this march towards oligopoly that also created, as Schatz said, a “uniform mode of production,” including the standardization of labor practices across the industry.

The temporal-focus of this project, therefore, starts with the first buds of the oligopoly, the formation of the five majors. The first was Paramount, which was formed in 1914 by a merger between Zukor’s production company Famous Players, the Jesse L. Lasky Feature Play Company, and a newly formed network of regional distribution firms called the Paramount Picture Corporation. Zukor took over the merged enterprise, which by 1917 was the biggest film company in the world, and he immediately began taking advantage of this status and the lack of any serious competition, by increasing the rental price of his star filled pictures. In an attempt to halt Paramount’s control over prices, a group of twenty-six theater owners from across the country joined together to create a company by the name of First National, which used its now considerable purchasing power to force Paramount’s hand by promoting alternative sources of film production. Always ready to contend with aggressive opponents, Zukor struck back and commenced buying his own theaters, a move that reached its pinnacle with the 1926 purchase of Balaban & Katz, the largest theater chain in Chicago.48 Thus, Zukor created the first

48 Gomery, The Hollywood Studio System, 12–26; for a full account of all the major business developments of this time period that saw the initial mergers of all majors, see Richard Koszarski, An Evening’s Entertainment: The Age of the Silent Feature Picture, 1915-1928 (New York: Scribner, 1990), 63–94.
vertically integrated company, which was able to make, rent out, and exhibit its own pictures.

Other moguls followed suit. Marcus Loew, the biggest theater holder in New York, bought the Metro distribution system, the Goldwyn Picture Corporation production facilities, and the Louis B. Mayer production unit, merging them in 1924 to form MGM, the production-distribution division of Loew’s.  

William Fox, of the Fox Theaters Corporation, also decided to build his own theaters, catching up with his two competitors. Next came Warner Bros., incorporated in 1923 by the four Warner brothers, Harry, Abe, Sam, and Jack. This family venture ensured its place in the big league through serious investment in sound technology and the acquisition in 1929 of the First National chain. The final integration was that of RKO. David Sarnoff, the president of RCA, conceived this last major so that the sound equipment developed by its parent company could turn a profit. Having lost in the battle over the sound market to Western Electric, RCA remained without any customers in the form of existing studios or theaters. In an attempt to bypass this problem in 1928 Sarnoff entered into partnership with Joseph P. Kennedy, who owned the little FBO studio, and the Keith-Albee-Orpheum vaudeville

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50 On the origins of Fox, see Gomery, The Hollywood Studio System, 37–45; Upton Sinclair, Upton Sinclair Presents William Fox (Los Angeles, Calif: The author, 1933). The Fox Company ran into serious financial problems during the Depression and following some unsuccessful business ventures. In order to save it from bankruptcy in 1935 the company merged with newly formed production firm, 20th Century, and was henceforth named 20th Century-Fox.
circuit now turned theater-chain, forming together the fifth vertically integrated company.  

By 1930, “the merger movement had run its course.” The big five were set with impressive production facilities, worldwide distribution networks, and strategically located theaters. These grand-scale operations were connected in a “symbiotic relationship” with two additional production-distribution companies, Universal and Columbia, and the distribution only firm United Artists, all of which owned no theaters and are commonly referred to as the “little three.” By 1930, “the merger movement had run its course.” The big five were set with impressive production facilities, worldwide distribution networks, and strategically located theaters. These grand-scale operations were connected in a “symbiotic relationship” with two additional production-distribution companies, Universal and Columbia, and the distribution only firm United Artists, all of which owned no theaters and are commonly referred to as the “little three.” Between all of them they produced 60 percent of the American industry’s output, collected 95 percent of the national film rentals, and controlled 3,000 theaters. They also found ways to work in unison.  

The owners of the big companies sought to stabilize their status. They did so by “pulling their interests” and initiating trade practices that benefited them over smaller independent producers, distributors, and exhibitors. Outside the realm of production these practices included the acrimonious “blind selling,” i.e. the leasing of pictures that were not yet complete, and “block booking,” that is the leasing of several films in fixed packages upon the condition all would be exhibited, without allowing the theater owner

53 For a partially history of Universal see I. G. Edmonds, Big U: Universal in the Silent Days (South Brunswick [N.J.]: A. S. Barnes, 1977); A good background article on Columbia is Edward Buscombe, “Notes on Columbia Pictures Corporation 1926–41,” Screen 16, no. 3 (1975): 65–82; As it did not have any production facilities United Artists is not significant to this study, but it was very significant in the economic structure of the system, and it is also the topic of the best history written about any Hollywood company. See Tino Balio, United Artists: The Company Built by the Stars (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1976).
54 Quotes and data from Balio, The American Film Industry, 253–255. The number of theaters is true to 1945 and it represented about 1/6 of the total number of theaters in the United States. Despite this small percentage, the majors’ 3,000 theaters were all “first-run houses,” those were usually located in big cities and exhibiting new pictures. They could also charge higher ticket prices, and therefore accounted for 70 percent of the nation’s box office receipts. Of course, the majors invented the theater ranking system as a whole in order to protect their assets.
to pick and choose among them. The majors also engaged in an effort to institutionalize these practices. Already in 1922 Zukor and Loew formed the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association (MPPDA), appointing as its head former Postmaster General William H. Hays. As Gomery explains, this trade organization ensured the motion picture business “worked on commonalities, whereby the insiders who joined together solved common problems while competing only among themselves in the marketplace.” Five years later, this time following an initiative of Louis B. Mayer, the partners also formed a joint company union, the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences.

Despite some fluctuation in revenue this cooperative system maintained its stability through the Depression years, the New Deal, and the war years. Yet, towards the late ‘forties, three “major disturbances” as economist Richard E. Caves calls them, pushed film production away from the studio system and towards a system based more and more on “spot production” or separate deals. One of these disturbances was the arrival of television, which introduced a new technological competitor to the market, one that enabled the public “to enjoy B-movie entertainment at home, at no marginal cost and in the comfort of a six-pack and an undershirt.” By the mid 1950s, television had taken over the average American household, while box office revenues were losing ground.

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55 For more on these as well as other trade practices within the distribution and exhibition branches see Huettig, *Economic Control of the Motion Picture Industry*, 113–139; Lewis, *The Motion Picture Industry*, 142–180; Jacobs, *The Rise of the American Film: a Critical History*, 287–301.


second disturbance was policy driven. A change in the tax code during World War II, increased the rate on personal income, thus creating a “strong incentive for the highly paid [producer, actor, director, or writer.] to form her own production company and thereby reduce her effective marginal tax rate from 90 to 60 percent.”

Finally, probably the most disturbing occurrence was a legal one. In 1948 the Supreme Court delivered its final ruling in a nearly decade-old federal anti-trust case against the majors. In what is known as the Paramount decision, the Court found the big companies, including Universal and Columbia, in violation of the Sherman Act and effectively ended their vertical integration by ordering them to divest. Studios were stripped of their theater ownership and visa versa.

These developments had many effects on the industry as a whole. For present purposes, the most meaningful of them were changes in employment patterns within the production branch. Throughout the “classical era” or the “studio era,” the integrated nature of the industry ensured a steady cash flow from the box office back to the filmmaking facilities. As a result, in terms of labor, the studio operations of the majors could maintain their own stock companies. At any given moment, a studio like MGM had under its employment an army of producers, actors, writers, directors, editors, cinematographers, and any other kind of personnel. Their various departments were always fully staffed and their members signed to contracts ranging between a few months and seven years. This ability, to keep so many people on the payroll, proved extremely important when it came to the creative talent, particularly the big stars, whose unique

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59 Caves, Creative Industries, 92.
skills could be deployed upon request. After the Paramount decision the stock-company model eroded. The reason, as Richard Maltby explains, was that “production itself could not make money; it was only through the distribution system that film rentals were collected and the investment in production recouped.”61 Without the theaters and the oligopolistic trade practices, the generous and steady studio budget that was necessary to maintain the talent stables was no longer available. This erosion serves as an end point and helps frame the years of the integrated studio system and its distinctive mode of employment as a clear case study, one through which it is possible to isolate a particular type of organization and experience of creative labor in a modern cultural industry.

Echoing the division of labor in the studios, the dissertation is structured around professions. Each of the first four chapters each follows one group of employees, who carried primary responsibility for the creative content of the movies, namely producers, writers, directors, and actors. Drawing from personal papers, correspondences, oral histories, and autobiographies these chapters flesh out the different roles created by the system; what the people occupying them thought of the studio system; how they perceived their role in it; what kind of products they sought to make; and how they negotiated their intentions with those of the other practitioners.

Naturally a group of professionals like screenwriters or actors includes diverse characters and opinions, and is far from homogenous. However, while emphasizing the complexity of each one of these groups and the different forces operating within it, these chapters also seek out the commonalities and shared perceptions that contributed to a

sense of unity. Screenwriters, for instance, came from all parts of the political spectrum, and were divided on the issue of collective bargaining, yet almost all of them believed they were underappreciated, inadequately compensated, and treated as “second-class citizens.”

The first chapter, “Between Steinbeck and Chase National: How Studio Executive-Producers Crafted the Hollywood Golden Age,” looks at the work of head producers, people like Thalberg and Selznick, who were responsible for the reorganization of the Hollywood studio as an intermediary space that accommodated the demands of profit seeking corporate executives as well as artists. It shows how they did so by essentially embodying the contradictions of the system, operating as brokers between the top managerial echelons and the creative ranks. How, on a day-to-day basis, they were translating the demands and visions of each group to the other, while keeping a close watch on the production process of every picture and the studio as a whole. In a way they were the model workers, the epitome of the system. Other groups had a longer learning curve. The second chapter, “The Best of Both Worlds: How Screenwriters Learned to Write and Rewrite in Hollywood,” explores the condition of picture writers. Torn between their desire for the creative control traditionally enjoyed by authors and the available economic security offered by working for the movies, the wordsmiths had to assimilate into the system. When Hollywood entered the sound era a flock of writers emigrated to the city, and to the world of motion pictures, from other fields of writing such as theater and magazines. As they oscillated between those creative worlds, between East Coast and West Coast, they used their previous experience in other industries to shape their response and interaction with the studios. While adapting their expectations
and integrating, the writers also affected the system as they carried with them some of the cultural capital and legitimacy of the more established worlds they came from.

Chapter three, “The Birth of the Auteur: How the Studio Production Process Kept the Director both In and Under Control,” traces how directors, who are traditionally associated with film authorship, were indeed accorded a level of autonomy and responsibility that was unique in industry terms. This autonomy, however, was limited to the shooting portion of the production process and was more the product of economic expediency than of respect to the director’s artistic freedom. In addition, in order to maintain their autonomy, directors had to demonstrate their conformity and commitment to the studio’s material concerns. With their relative autonomy, directors became a privileged professional group, one that was perhaps even more privileged than the system’s prized possessions. The fourth chapter, “A ‘Shipping Clerk’ and a ‘Safety Deposit Box:’ How Hollywood Screen Actors Functioned as both Standardized Employees and Treasured Commodities,” traces the experience of players, and particularly of movie stars, who were subjected to two seemingly contradicting types of management. On the one hand, together with the other creative talent, they were treated as regimented employees, bounded by draconian contracts, which essentially alienated them from their labor. On the other hand, they were safeguarded by the studios, pampered with exorbitant salaries and a network of professionals, who worked day and night in order to make them look and sounds good. Of course, the aim of both kinds of treatment was to bind the star to the studio and prevent him or her from ever attempting to cash in on their marketable persona on their own.
The final chapter, “Cooking a Goose,” *Keeping the Golden Eggs: How Hollywood Creative Talent Fought for Collective Bargaining*, pulls the four groups of practitioners together to examine labor disputes of the creative class as a whole. Using trade papers, guild magazines, and hearings held at the National Labor Relations Board, it examines how the groups discussed above asserted their rights as employees against the studio needs via lawsuits and collective bargaining. Since most of Hollywood’s labor troubles occurred during the thirties, this last chapter also stresses the connection between the studio system and the socio-political reality it was operating in, particularly the New Deal. It demonstrates those aspects of the system that made it an American industry.
Soon after Darryl Zanuck, head of production at 20th Century Fox, bought the rights to John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* in 1939, “rumor flooded Hollywood. It was said that Zanuck had paid $75,000 to keep it off the screen. Another report was that he had purchased it only in order to make a whitewashed version of it. A third report was that if the novel was made into a picture, the financial backers of the studio would withdraw their money.”

Zanuck apparently loved it: “Show me a man who can prove that I spent $70,000 for a book in order to shelve it … and I’ll make a picture about him!” As one of his employees pointed out, “nothing improves Zanuck’s disposition like a good stiff rumor that he’ll never do it. His spirits rise, soft drinks flow like water in his office, and it is a first-rate time to hit him for a raise.”

The rumors did hit some nerves though, particularly those of Steinbeck. In April 1939, during his first meeting with Nunnally Johnson, the screenwriter assigned to adapt his book, he demanded to know “what the hell was this rumor that the company had got the story for the sole purpose of ditching it.” Johnson tried to assure him that was not the case but Steinbeck “remained skeptical – polite, to be sure, but clearly skeptical. Nor,

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incidentally, has his skepticism ever abated … he’ll still be dubious until he has seen the picture on the screen.”

Though the rumors were false, Steinbeck had good reason to be skeptical about the prospect of a Hollywood adaptation of his book. After all at the beginning even Zanuck was. Despite his personal belief in the project, Zanuck feared that Winthrop Aldrich, the chairman of the board of Chase National Bank, which essentially controlled Fox studios, “would probably raise hell with me because I was attempting a controversial subject that did not hold capital in too high a light.” But, when he ultimately met Aldrich, expecting “the ax to fall”, the latter congratulated him on the project. “To hear one of the tycoons of the banking world express confidence in The Grapes of Wrath astonished me,” claimed Zanuck, “because none of the Hollywood wiseacres shared this opinion.”

Steinbeck was happy too. In a letter to his agent he wrote: “Zanuck has more than kept his word. He has a hard, straight picture … looks and feels like a documentary film and certainly it has a hard, truthful ring. No punches were pulled.” For Zanuck this was “the pay-off”, he made a successful picture that earned Steinbeck’s approval as well as the big banker’s blessing.

This was the place people like Zanuck occupied, between Steinbeck and Chase National. As an executive in charge of production his job was first and foremost to make sure the studio was profitable, yet, in order to do so he had to negotiate and orchestrate the talents and aspirations of a diverse creative force. Men like Zanuck, who could be

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2 Nunnally Johnson, typescript by Johnson regarding the writing of The Grapes of Wrath, folder 7.1-41, Rudy Behlmer Papers, Special Collections, Margaret Herrick Library, Beverly Hills.
5 Zanuck, “But I never had an Ulcer.”
referred to as executive producers, head producers, or executives in charge of production, “coordinated the operations of the entire plant.” Except that as employees of a taste-guided industry theirs was not a conventional assembly line spitting out identical products. It was a different kind of production process, one in which they had to “translate an annual budget handed down by [a] New York office into a program of specific pictures,” each of which featuring an original plot, drama, and characters.\(^6\) This task required a unique capability. Indeed, as screenwriter turned industry-anthropologist Leo C. Rosten pointed out, such producers developed a complex skill that included “a knowledge of audience tastes, a story sense, a businessman’s approach to the costs and mechanics of pictures making”, and, on top of everything else, the ability “to manage, placate, and drive a variety of gifted, impulsive, and egocentric people.”\(^7\)

More than simply possess this complex skill, throughout the 1920s and 1930s a number of successful executive producers used it to shape Hollywood’s mode of production. They did so by organizing the Hollywood studio around their skill, making it an intermediary space that accommodated the demands of profit seeking corporate executives as well as the artistic potential of writers, directors, cinematographers, and actors. Along the way they also enthroned a form of moviemaking that was in itself intermediary – combining cost-effectiveness with high-level sets, stories, dialogues, and acting. In a sense then, the evolution of this profession and the stories of the people who occupied it is the story of the industry incarnate. It charts the coming together of efficiency and art, bureaucrats and artists, big budgets and creative visions. It is a story of


\(^7\) Leo Calvin Rosten, *Hollywood: The Movie Colony, the Movie Makers* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and company, 1941), 238.
a few “straddlers,” who turned their tricky standing into an essential and influential position within the power structure of the studio system.

**Brokering Turbulent Waters**

To understand why studios developed the function of executive producer, it might be worthwhile to consider the market structure they were operating in. Filmmaking is done in an organizational environment that sociologists generally refer to as “turbulent,” meaning an environment that is “changing in ways that are incapable of analysis and prediction.”

Most, if not all, cultural industries fit within this category as their profits depend on such inconsistent and intangible factors as fashion and taste. As Charles Perrow suggests, when the determining factors are “so vague and poorly conceptualized as to make [them] virtually unanalyzable,” decision-making often “draws upon the residue of unanalyzed experience or intuition, or relies upon chance and guesswork.”

Just think back to Zanuck’s roulette table analogy or Adolph Zukor’s rendition of “I don’t think I’ll take that story, I don’t think I’ll make it, I don’t think it’s what the public will take.”

Sociologist Paul DiMaggio marks this “deroutinization of creative work” as a key problem in the production of popular culture, one that companies rarely leave up to chance alone. Looking deeper into the specific apparatus of creative industries, he reminds, “Most items of popular culture … are produced by profit-making firms operating under the constraints of the marketplace.” Indeed, the main constraint affecting

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This type of production is that “consumers desire a diverse range of cultural products and that the demand for diversity usually exceeds the supply.” Furthermore, “the aesthetic preferences of consumers are in many ways unknowable and major changes in theme, style, or content may meet with commercial resistance or disrupt sales-division routines.” In other words, “uncertainty is intimately related to the exigencies of product generation.”

Finally, to exacerbate matters, due to this uncertainty, the production process itself appears to defy standardization. It requires one to “negotiate and renegotiate the norms and rules governing the creation of new products with writers, artists, and other creative personnel,” who are often guided by other sets of considerations that are foreign to the economic realm.

Companies whose business it is to produce popular culture constantly endeavor to contain this uncertainty. DiMaggio found that one method they employ is a system he calls “brokerage administration.” In this type of organization, managers of large firms “employ brokers to link the creative process with the other functions of the firm.” These brokers function as mediators, i.e. they “represent the goals of management to popular culture creators,” and visa versa. He claims “brokerage administration” is a distinct feature of “virtually all culture producing organizations.” Its uniqueness lies in the nature of the interaction offered by the brokers. For while “bureaucratic administration of production is based on close supervision, repetition of routine, and compliance with orders … brokerage administration is characterized by ambiguity, informality, and negotiation.”

Another way to think of these brokers is as representing an unconventional

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11 Ibid., 442.
and dynamic type of leadership, one which Richard A. Peterson and David G. Berger term “entrepreneurship,” i.e. the “use of a novel combination of the available means of production.”

The need for brokerage administration in Hollywood grew with the industry. Though motion pictures attracted audiences already at the beginning of the twentieth century, it was only during the 1930s that the American film industry turned into a “modern business enterprise.” As mentioned, a series of mergers and consolidations leading up to that decade, culminated in a vertically integrated industry. One outcome of this process was that big studios, such as MGM, Warner Bros., and Fox, were simply too big and could “no longer [be] run by their founders as family business.” Accountable for delivering a product to large theater chains and worldwide distribution deals, these studios were now under the orderly command of “hierarchies of salaried executives who rationalized operation to insure long term stability and profits.”

Such bureaucratic structure might have also been the outcome of the increased involvement of banks and financial corporations in Hollywood. Mergers required capital, as did the development of sound technology, an enterprise that accompanied the industry throughout the 1920s. In addition, though the repercussions of the Great Depression were late to hit Hollywood, by 1931 most companies stopped registering profits. One by one the majors filed for bankruptcy, while even those that managed to stay afloat, namely Warner Bros. and Loew’s, were losing millions. Wall Street bankers and other

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investment firms recognized all of these as an opportunity to penetrate the film market. They subsidized business expansion, financed technological experimentation, and resurrected studios from receivership. Thus, companies such as Paramount, found their board filled with stakeholders from Lehman Brothers and the Royal Insurance Company of Great Britain, while Fox was reorganized as 20th Century-Fox under the supervision of Chase.  

In other words, expansion introduced a new top layer of bankers and bureaucrats into the industry. A layer that was far removed from the filmmaking ranks. These outside executives and board members were often foreign to the creative language of production. To be sure, production was not at the center of their attention. As film scholar Richard Maltby explains, “What most clearly characterized the economic functioning of the film industry” at the time was “not the existence of the studios as production centers but the domination of the Big Five as distributor-exhibitors.” In that sense, the studios were subordinate to the two other branches and at the “center of gravity” stood the “stable profitability of the theaters,” not the motion picture. Indeed, distribution practices such as block-booking and blind selling were instated to guarantee rental revenues for the majors. Nevertheless, even with such oligopolistic trade practices, the industry still rested on that “base of intangibles” – the movies, which still had to be made and still had to draw the

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14 Balio points out that Warner Bros. was the only company to remain under the management of its original founders throughout the “thirties. For more information about this time period see Ibid., 15; Andrew Bergman, We’re in the Money: Depression America and Its Films, 1st Harper colophon ed (New York: Harper & Row, 1972); Lary May, Screening Out the Past: The Birth of Mass Culture and the Motion Picture Industry (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); For more on the economic implications of the conversion to sound see Donald Crafton, The Talkies: American Cinema’s Transition to Sound, 1926-1931, History of the American Cinema v. 4 (New York: Scribner, 1997).
crowds to the box office. Bankers and efficiency-expert managers still ultimately needed to contend with creative personnel.\textsuperscript{15}

Enter the producer, or more accurately the producers, the people whose unique job it was to serve as the ligament between the business strata and the creative labor force in the studios. Connecting two such seemingly foreign elements was a complicated task. As Jesse L. Lasky, a producer and the executive vice president of the original Paramount–Famous Players–Lasky Corporation once said, the producer “must be a prophet and a general, a diplomat and a peacemaker, a miser and a spendthrift.” He must have “the patience of a saint and the iron of a Cromwell.” He essentially had to embody the internal contradictions of the system. Producers were the brokers of the Hollywood film industry. On the one hand, they were responsible for “the control of the artistic temperament, the shaping of creative forces and the knowledge of the public needs for entertainment.” \textsuperscript{16} On the other hand, as Lasky told a group of Harvard students in 1927, they were tasked with “justifying [the] negative costs” to the management and with “determining the profits that may be made.”\textsuperscript{17} They had to translate market rational into creative work and explain artistic choices in terms of future earnings.

Of course, this was not a task for one person alone. When asked about the role of the producer in the studio, screenwriter Philip Dunne replied: “You say producer, and do you mean … Zanuck, who ran the whole studio, all the pictures, or do you mean Cliff

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{17} Jesse L. Lasky, “Production Problems,” in Joseph P Kennedy and Harvard University, \textit{The Story of the Films, as Told by Leaders of the Industry to the Students of the Graduate School of Business Administration, George F. Baker Foundation, Harvard University} (Chicago & New York: A. W. Shaw company, 1927) ??????????.
\end{footnotes}
Reed, who was subordinate to [John] Ford, or do you mean a staff producer who is grinding out 10 pictures, or is it the fellow sitting in an office in New York who is trying to raise the money?"18 There were many kinds of producers. An industry churning out between 500 and 800 pictures every year naturally generates a high frequency of negotiations.19 Every film had to be brokered individually while keeping track of the output as a whole. Due to this fact every studio had a network of producers streamlining the creative work, a blood circulating system with vessels of various importance channeling information to and fro the company’s headquarters.

If we think of producers as blood vessels then the most important of them, the main artery, must have been the studio’s head producer, sometimes known as the executive producer, or the vice president in charge of production. As Lasky stated, “he is the producer of producers … he works as the co-ordinating force of functioning producers under him.” This was a pivotal role and it was “largely by [it] that the product of [the] studio [was] hallmarked.” This “major executive” chose his workers, inspired them, and directed them, and hence “the product of those workers inevitably [bore] the stamp of his personality and his mind.” Lasky added that a wise producer “understands the artistic temperament enough to permit it to have its way within reason, so that the product bears not only the trademark of the mind of the general producer but contains the results also of the other creative forces that work under him.”20 A master of art and

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18 Philip Dunne, interviewed by Thomas Stempel, August 28, September 9, and October 7, 1970, transcript, oral history collection, Margaret Herrick Library, 142-144.
19 The average number of films produced by the major Hollywood companies every year between 1920 and 1948 is 641. Some years like 1918, 1921, and 1928 yielded over 800 pictures, while especially through some of the war years the number dropped below 500, hitting a low of 377 in 1945. This other data can be found in Gene Brown, Movie Time: A Chronology of Hollywood and the Movie Industry from Its Beginnings to the Present (New York: Macmillan, 1995).
reason, the head producer was the main broker, and consequently this role is also the main focus of this chapter.

First, however, we need to examine why it was the producer, rather than the director or the writer, who assumed such a key role in the studio system. Why the evolution of the industry pushed this particular role to the fore, or more accurately to the crucial midpoint.

A “Steady March to Efficiency”
In the beginning there was disorder. The technology to record and project motion pictures developed in the late 1890s, but it was only a decade later that one could speak of a real industry. Before that, “making movies was not yet an extensive business,” claims film historian Lewis Jacobs. All one needed in order to make them was “a business office, a camera, and enough money to pay for the film and to cover the cameraman’s modest salary.” After they were made, “films were sold outright to the exhibitors, largely by mail order.” Such a loose structure did not require a well-defined division of labor. Indeed, it seems that filmmaking lacked any such division. A word search through the digitally available trade papers reveals that the terms producer and director, probably adapted from the theater, were virtually not in use in the motion picture world before 1907, at least not in order to describe any particular profession.22

22 The search was performed in the periodicals available through the Media History Digital Library, which digitizes collections that belong in the public domain. I searched through the available issues of the New York Clipper from 1903 to 1909, the Moving Picture World from 1907 to 1909, and The Nickelodeon, 1909. See http://mediahistoryproject.org. As mentioned, the word “producer” is used very sparsely if at all, and for the most part it is not used outside its literal meaning as a verb. I say that the term “producer” was probably borrowed from the theater since between the pages of the Clipper, one can find a limited use of
Yet, the slapdash days were short-lived. 1907 was a year of economic recession in America; paradoxically it was also the year during which “the little store shows known as Nickelodeons were doing a gold-rush business.” Audiences flocked to the theaters in “ever-increasing” numbers. This surge put a strain on the disordered production end of the industry. As film scholar Eileen Bowser explains, “there were only about 1,200 films of one reel or less, mostly less, released in the entire United States in [1907], and only about 400 of them were made in America … this was not much to feed the thousands of hungry Nickelodeons,” most of which were changing their programs twice a week or even daily. The market was ready for expansion, and expansion, says Jacobs, “necessitated more people and a division of duties to speed the output.” Accordingly, he claims, by 1908 some roles including “directing, acting, photographing, writing, and laboratory work” were already split into separate crafts.

Under this primary division, the producer seems to have been the person commissioning and financing the filmmaking ordeal, the one standing at the head of the production company. “It is likely that before next Fall ground will be broken for one of the largest motion picture studios in the world somewhere near Denver,” declared the Moving Picture World in June 1908. The paper reported that “Colonel W. N. Selig, the noted Chicago inventor and motion pictures producer, will be in the city within a few weeks to decide on the plans which are necessitated by the constantly growing demand

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23 Eileen Bowser, The Transformation of Cinema, 1907-1915 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 1, 22. Motion Pictures around that time were still rather short. A one-reel picture was typically around 10-12 minute long. Due to that fact theaters screened more than one picture every night.

for films and the further necessity of making them where sunshine instead of electric
lights can be utilized.”25 This was one of the very few times the paper mentioned the term
“motion picture producer” that year, and it is clearly in reference to the financial
endeavors of this ex-minstrel company owner turned film business entrepreneur. That
said the term was still far from fixed. In fact, though there was definitely an increase in
its use, through the early teens “producer” was frequently taken to be synonymous with
“director.” For example, “A producer for one of the large moving picture manufacturers,
accompanied by a party of fourteen people, has been taking pictures from a special train
on the Yosemite Valley Railroad,” reported The Nickelodeon in July 1909.26 “The eye of
the spectacular producer dominates the entire production and eclipses the acting and the
photography,” commented the Moving Picture World in 1912, while evaluating the
direction of a picture titled St. George and the Dragon.27

Even so, the search for order was well underway. Already in the early teens
several companies were experimenting with labor division and efficiency. In June 1913,
Motion Picture News reported, “Lubin is falling into line with Edison and Vitagraph,”
incorporating their policy “to put a working script up to a director with strict order to
produce it.”28 This new “efficiency system of management” was orchestrated by Wilber
Melville, whose title was “producer-manager of the Western branch” of the company.
Melville does not seem to have been supervising individual productions, but he did plan
the structure of work in the Lubin studio. His planning, in addition to establishing an
independent script-editing department, also had a spatial component by which “the

27 “St. George and the Dragon,” Moving Picture World, June 8, 1912, 933.
relative locations of the buildings were determined with a view to the part they play in the
general scheme.” Making sure that “those which are most used in connection with the
work on the stage,” such as the property room, “are grouped around the stage.”
According to the *Moving Picture World*, this new policy adopted by Melville “makes
possible the production of pictures of high quality while effecting substantial economies
of money – and of time.””29 It is probable that other studios adopted similar templates, and
together, these well-formed structures gave birth to a new organizational function.

By the mid teens it was already possible to detect a separate craft: the creatively
involved production manager. Media scholar Janet Staiger identifies a distinct mode of
production that developed around 1914, which she terms “the central producer system.”
This new structure “centralized the control of production under the management of a
producer, a work position distinct from staff directors.” This change was in some sense
part of a general embrace of “efficiency” and “scientific management” by American
businesses following the publication of Frederick Winslow Taylor’s studies. More
specifically, says Staiger, the lengthening of motion pictures “from an average of
eighteen minutes to seventy-five minutes” and a shift towards a uniform style of
production, incorporating such elements as “continuity, verisimilitude, narrative
dominance, and clarity,” all “required production planning” to ensure both “profit
maximization” and “quality control.” As a result, production firms began designating a
specific person, the producer, who oversaw all filmmaking and was responsible for the
entire firm’s output. His job included developing a detailed shooting script, using that

29 “Studio Efficiency,” *Moving Picture World*, August 9, 1913, 624.
Consider the following transition reported by *Photoplay* in 1915. David W. Griffith, who, the magazine declared, earned “the right to be known as the world’s foremost director of motion picture plays,” was recently appointed “the chief producer of all Reliance, Majestic, and Griffith photo dramas.” The writer of this piece was not simply conflating the two roles; he was emphasizing a change. As he explained, between them, the three film brands mentioned release “an average of five new photoplays every week,” and naturally “it is impossible for Griffith personally to produce this number of plays each week.” As a result, under his new role, “to each of them he devotes part of his time.” Griffith was now a producer. He has “many directors work under him,” and he frequently “casts their pictures, and, in all cases, he selects their stories.” Only with a few pictures, those released under the Griffith brand, did the master retain his original directing duties. This story not only implies the separation of “producer” from “director”, but also the emergence of the producer-as-supervisor, presiding over a multitude of pictures.

Griffith was not the only director to be entrusted with managerial duties. As until that point the mode of production relied on the organizational abilities of the director, when the system expanded, the initiative these filmmakers demonstrated while coordinating their own productions seemed to suggest they would be the most suitable to

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30 David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson, and Janet Staiger, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 128–137. The uniform style of production discussed by Staiger is what the authors of this book term “the classical Hollywood cinema” and it includes conventions with regards to story causality, narration, time and space layout, etc.

take charge of larger operations. Certainly, the man who commanded *The Birth of a Nation*, proved to be a skilful and efficient producer. However, his interests laid elsewhere. As Bowser suggests, “while the industry as a whole invested in a specialized system and divided up and limited the functions in the studio, Griffith, preferring his intuitive working method and full creative control,” chose to focus on directing and ultimately “became more or less an outsider.”

One other director that did display a taste for organization was Thomas H. Ince. The son of two actors from Rhode Island, Ince, born in 1880, entered show business at a young age. He began acting when he was only six, joining various theater-touring companies. His career in motion pictures started in 1910. He returned to New York following an engagement in Cincinnati and, he explained, “As it sometimes happens with actors and others, I found myself out of a job.” One day, after “completing the rounds of the booking offices without success,” he encountered an actor friend by the name Joseph Smiley, who, to Ince’s surprise, was now “an assistant director at the Imp studio on 56th street.” As was often the case in those days, Smiley took Ince with him to the studio, where he was immediately offered an acting job. The young actor took it, even though he claimed the place reminded him “some of my unpleasant one-night stands.” In a similar and typical haphazard manner, “several months later, one of the Imp directors resigned before his picture was complete and I was given a directorship.” Taking up the role of a director, Ince made a name for himself by completing several very successful two-reel Westerns.

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Then came a very meaningful stage in his career. A year after he joined IMP, he heard that Adam Kessel Jr. and Charles O. Baumann, the owners of the New York Motion Pictures Corp. wished to expand their nascent operation in Edendale, California and were looking for an able director to take a company out West.

I decided to apply for it … feeling that I would have greater possibilities in this new field than in New York. A little strategy was necessary, I felt, to impress my prospective employers with my importance, so I allowed a moustache to grow, and on the day of my interview with Baumann I borrowed a large and sparkling diamond ring. This I figured would make the impression that I was a man of means who did not have to work for the paltry $60 a week, which was my munificent salary at the Imp studio.33

He got the job, a salary of $150 a week, and stock in Keystone, Mac Sennett’s production unit in the Los Angeles region, which was financed by the New York Motion Picture Corporation.34

It was in Los Angeles that Ince created the studio that would serve as a dress rehearsal for the well-oiled production facilities of the golden age. After completing a couple of films in Edendale, the director realized that “the facilities had to be improved, if the infant art [of cinema] was to live.”35 In October he convinced Kessel and Baumann to let him lease an 18,000 acres farm on the shore north of Santa Monica. In what would soon be known as Inceville, the director constructed “a main stage 175x220 feet; a new glass stage 360x160 and two auxiliary stages 50x80 feet, an administration building, a restaurant, a commissary, a wardrobe building, a property building, a scene building, 200 dressing rooms, an arsenal … a power house … a reservoir … six stable,” and some

33 “Memoirs of Thomas H. Ince,” *Exhibitors Herald*, December 13, 1924, 29-30. This title is one in a series, published by the Exhibitor in late 1924 and early 1925, and is described as “an autobiography of his fourteen years in the motion picture industry, prepared by the noted producer a short time before his death.”
additional structures. Even though it was in the vicinity of a variety of natural landscape, the operation also included settings of “a Spanish Mission, a Dutch Village with a genuine canal, old windmills, etc; a Japanese village with jinrikishas; an Irish village; a Canadian village; an East Indian street and a Sioux camp.”

This was really only the setting.

Ince was interested in progress, or as he termed it, in “the rapid and sustained growth of the picture industry, and the steady march to efficiency.”

His Taylorist persuasion manifested itself even when it came to subtitles, which he considered “a very important phase of the industry.” He only decided on a form of lettering “after experimenting with many types of letters,” and with regards to “the question of how long to run a title,” that too, he explained “had been worked out scientifically.”

Considering this frame of mind, one could imagine that Ince was uncomfortable with the prevalent situation, where “a director would get the germ idea of a plot, assemble a cast, go out on location and start to shoot, having only a hazy idea of what he was going to do.” Especially as head of operations in Los Angeles, he could not content with the “inevitable” and recurring situation in which a director “would have to hold up the picture and keep the cast standing around while he racked his brain for an idea.”

As explained, at the time the industry was about the turn the corner. With longer narrative films gaining popularity and the demand for more films only increasing, production had to become more organized. As Ince explained, “A director could no longer be the jack-of-all-trades, for the industry was out of its swaddling clothes.”

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36 “Ince to Move to Culver City,” Moving Picture World, October 9, 1915, 272.
38 “Memoirs of Thomas H. Ince,” Exhibitors Herald, December 27, 1924, 156.
now “it behooved the director to concentrate solely upon directing, and to employ men
and women who were especially qualified along certain lines to take charge of its various
departments.”40 And so it was in Inceville. By 1913 Ince had stopped directing and began
supervising the “520 … names on the weekly payroll.”41 He had a staff of six directors
working under him, to whom he handed a detailed shot-by-shot continuity script,
including setting and props.42 He had specialized departments for every other part of
production, such as wardrobe and acting, and he also introduced tight budget control.43
Rather than directing films, he was directing a whole studio.

The executive producer was born. Staiger refers to Ince’s position in those days as
“Director-General.” She also points out that under his new role, Inceville “had moved to
a central producer system.”44 He was not alone of course, but his innovations together
with those introduced by Griffith, Melville, and others at that time helped align
Hollywood with what she terms, “monopoly capital’s quest for organizing and
supervising the potential for labor time and power.” There was also a creative quest, for
bigger and more ambitious movies. As it turned out, these pursuits went hand in hand.
Two years after its establishment Inceville was no longer big enough. It’s success,
manifested in the success of the pictures it produced, summoned a distribution
partnership with the new Triangle company as well as an additional gargantuan operation
in Culver City, with even more workers, stages, and departments. This was the new
normal. As Staiger says, “by 1915 … a pyramid of labor was the dominant structure with
top manager, middle-management department heads, and workers.” The Ince-type

40 “Memoirs of Thomas H. Ince,” December 27, 42.
41 “Ince to Move to Culver City”
42 For more on the development of the shooting script see the next chapter.
43 For more on the operations at Inceville see Taves, Thomas Ince, 53–71.
producer was at the head of the pyramid, and from that position he could control some of the problems inherent to creative production, including “irregularity of production … slowness of manufacture, lack of uniformity, and uncertainly of quality.”

This was the first step. At that point, the new Hollywood studios, though constantly growing and certainly much larger than their East coast predecessors, were still rather small in comparison to the vast and sprawling business operations that were beginning to emerge when Ince moved to Culver City. Though he was contractually bound to powerful companies such as The New York Motion Picture Corp. and later on Triangle, these were not parent companies in the traditional sense. They did not interfere in the production process. Furthermore, Ince owned his product. In 1915, for example, he held sixty-five thousand shares in Triangle, and received dividends from Keystone, Broncho, Kay Bee, Empire, and the Domino production brands. He was not in the middle, but at the top of his self-made pyramid. As the industry kept expanding, his craft relocated to the middle, and it is to this repositioning that we shall turn to next.

The Evolution of a Motion Picture Producer

History is rarely about one man, but when it comes to the transformation of the producer, from its role in the twenties, to its central position during in the golden age of the studio system, one name seems to stand out. That name is Irving Thalberg. One of the founding members of MGM, Thalberg updated and improved the system of supervision developed during the teens to fit the studio of the vertically integrated industry, the studio that was

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46 Taves, Thomas Ince, 90.
now only one part of a production-distribution-exhibition mammoth. Consequently he also adapted the role of the producer. A creative and efficient manager, like him, could no longer stand at the top of the pyramid. That position was now taken by executives such as Nicholas Schenck, a businessman and president of Loew’s Inc., the owner of MGM. Nor was Thalberg, as film scholar Thomas Schatz observes, “the most artistic individual at the studio.” Nevertheless he found a focal position between those poles – “between New York and L.A., between capitalization and production, between conception and execution.”47 His power stemmed from his ability to bring them together.

Thalberg was not one of the pioneers. Born in 1899 and suffering from a congenital heart defect, he spent most of his childhood and adolescence in bed in Brooklyn, while motion pictures transformed from a novice technology into a profitable industry based in Los Angeles. In fact, Thalberg reached California for the first time only in 1920, long after Thomas Ince and Carl Laemmle, his first employer, established themselves as leading picture showmen. Unlike these men, for Thalberg cinema was not a new industry up for grabs, it was a passion. Or at least so claims Samuel Marx who was head of the scenario department at MGM. Marx met Thalberg while both were junior employees at the New York offices of Laemmle’s Universal Film Manufacturing Company. The latter was working as Laemmle’s personal secretary. The two bonded while staying overtime and dining at Thompson’s Cafeteria at the bottom of the Mecca Building on Broadway. As Marx suggests, it was already there that Thalberg expressed his integral managerial vision. “The people have to take what we give them,” he professed to Marx, “[and] it seems to me they deserve better.” He wanted to be in

47 Schatz, The Genius of the System, 47.
charge, “make them do it my way so they never know if their way was better.” He was concerned with quality, in particular the poor quality of production at Universal, but he also believed in the power of management – his own management. 

As is often the case with Hollywood legends, there is no way of knowing if Marx’ recollections are accurate. In any case, whether he was as explicit about them or not, soon enough the young secretary got a chance to demonstrate this dual set of concerns. In March 1920 Carl Laemmle took Thalberg on a trip to Universal City, his five-year-old studio in the San Fernando Valley. Impressed by the young secretary’s ideas about production he left him there, and by the end of the month also appointed him general manager in charge of production.

Thalberg went right to work, putting things in order à la Ince. He introduced mandatory shot-by-shot scripts, schedules, and budgets, all to make sure that “one big picture after another went to the screen on schedule.” He worked “quietly, earnestly, [and] efficiently” in order to “keep the big plant running.” By the fall of 1921 he was able to proudly announce, “seven companies are now at work, and … within a fortnight some twelve or fourteen will be busy.” As the Los Angeles Times declared, Thalberg was “a driver,” of the kind that “asks for twice as much as he can possibly expect from every man, and, in consequence gets every man’s full effort.”

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49 “Laemmle Leavets,” Film Daily, March 17, 1920, 1.
50 For more about Thalberg’s biography see Marx, Mayer and Thalberg; Mark A Vieira, Irving Thalberg: Boy Wonder to Producer Prince (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).
51 “Great Executive Job Held by a Boy of 22,” Los Angeles Times, October 15, 1922, III37.
53 “Great Executive Job Held by a Boy of 22.”
To achieve this kind of authority could not have been easy, especially not for someone who did not really have any background in filmmaking. Knowledgeable of the methods employed by the producers that preceded him, which were regularly reported in the trade papers, Thalberg nevertheless lacked their experience. Unlike Griffith, he never directed a motion picture before. Still, he felt apt to purchase stories, supervise script writing and casting, and oversee the cutting and editing of every film. In 1920, it is important to remember, efficiency-guided management systems were common in Hollywood but not preeminent. As film scholar Richard Koszarski explains, in the early twenties “creative power was [still] concentrated in the hands of a relatively small group of filmmakers capable of conceiving, orchestrating, and executing specific projects.”

One of these directors was Eric von Stroheim, and he represented those pioneer industry people who were ill disposed towards the idea of scientific management.

The standoff between Thalberg and Stroheim is yet another famous tale. However, underneath the embellished, exaggerated, irresistible details, stands a deciding moment in which a young executive producer asserted his authority over an artistically talented star-director. Stroheim was not only successful on his own he made Universal successful. His first feature for the company, Blind Husband, which he wrote, directed and starred in, grossed almost half a million, and marked the first time “the little studio had a film that was both profitable and prestigious.” The movie was quite expensive to make as Stroheim ignored the allocated budget of $25,000 to spend $250,000. When Thalberg became head of production the now celebrated director was busy running

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55 Vieira, Irving Thalberg, 12.
behind schedule and above budget on his next feature, *Foolish Wives*. Thalberg attempted to curb Stroheim by appealing to his reason, cutting off money, and even removing him from the movie. But to no avail, as both the director and the lead actor it was impossible to get rid of Stroheim without letting the extensive footage he already shot go to waste. As Stroheim saw it, he was an artist, Thalberg a clerk, and “since when does a child supervise a genius?” That was round one.

Round two ended quite differently. In 1922 Stroheim and Thalberg put differences aside and started work on another project titled *Merry-Go-Round*. And once again, problems abounded. This time Thalberg had the upper hand. Before the film went into production it was agreed Stroheim would stay behind the screen, and other actors were cast for the leading roles. Therefore on October 6th, after costs, rather expectedly, went overboard, Thalberg could write to Stroheim: “You have time and again demonstrated your disloyalty to our company … and have attempted to create an organization loyal to yourself, rather than to the company you were employed to serve … you are discharged from our employ.” As Thalberg saw it, art could not trump the organization. Creativity was important and often merited increased spending, but it had to be checked. It was such thinking which won him the trust of businessmen like Laemmle. However, while determined to assert his control over the maverick director, it appears Thalberg had a little bit of Stroheim in him.

Swearing by efficiency and order, when it came to film content, Thalberg was also a perfectionist with a flare for extravagance. Soon after he got rid of Stroheim he turned to produce his first grand picture, *The Hunchback of Notre dame*. The production

was lavish, including the construction of a full size façade of the Parisian Cathedral in addition to nineteen acres of sets, and a cast numbering two thousand people. Laemmle originally authorized the project but while supervising the editing Thalberg was not pleased and he ordered, without the big boss’s approval, a restaging of the crowd scenes. This pushed the budget and the film into the realm of a “prestige epic.” Universal was not in the business of such pictures, which, lacking a theater chain, required a robust promotional budget. Laemmle preferred to leave those for Paramount and Fox and concentrate on low-budget films. He let Thalberg off the hook this time, but despite *Hunchback*’s great success as Universal’s top grossing movie of 1923, it was unclear whether Laemmle would authorize such a project again. This difference in vision only added to what at that point was a deteriorating relationship between the young producer and his boss. Thalberg decided to move on and find a company that would share his passion for organization as well as ambitious movies. One in which he could negotiate with the management.

He found it in the newly merged Metro Goldwyn Mayer. The triangular trademark MGM is somewhat of a misnomer since the balance of power it implies had little to do with the company that was signed into existence in 1924. For starters Samuel Goldwyn never took part in it. But more importantly the name does not account for Nick Schenck; the head of the Loew’s theater chain, who orchestrated the merger of the new company in order to better compete with industry giants such as Paramount. In 1920

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58 For distribution purposes the motion picture industry in the United States used to divide its product into categories, corresponding to the price for which they were leased to theaters. The expensive pictures, often referred to as A features, were characterized by a larger production budget, big stars, a big promotional budget, and were often associated with some higher cultural value. For more on this system of differentiation see Lea Jacobs, “The B Film and the Problem of Cultural Distinction,” Thomas Schatz, ed., *Hollywood: Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 2003), 147–160.
Loew’s, Inc. was the dominate theater chain in New York City, but its production branch, including only the small Metro Picture company, was unable to deliver a sufficient number of quality pictures. Schenck decided to overcome this problem by acquiring Goldwyn Pictures, a company with considerable production facilities that lacked competent management. For that latter part he turned to the Louis B. Mayer Company, which was short on facilities but included the expert team of Mayer himself and his newly appointed head of production – Thalberg. Despite their skimpy studio, which was located on the same lot as the Colonel William Selig’s Zoo, Mayer and Thalberg were able to create solid A-features, which was exactly what Schenck needed.

Loew’s and later on MGM were in a way the opposite of Laemmle’s Universal. Even after acquiring the Goldwyn Company, Loew’s theater chain was comparatively meager. Schenck’s strategy “followed the model of the Keith’s and Orpheum vaudeville circuit,” which meant controlling the New York market and “[owning] a couple of major first-run houses in the biggest cities in the USA.”

First-run theaters demanded high-end product to justify the expensive admission prices. Therefore, unlike Paramount, which owned around 1,200 movie houses of all kinds, or Universal that relied on the distribution of lower budget films, Loew’s, which owned only about 130 theaters, needed a steady supply of quality features. This is where Schenck’s business model aligned with

60 Movie exhibition houses operated according to a zoning system. In general, theaters were divided into two: first-run and second-run. First-run theaters were located in the big cities’ center and were usually large, fancy structures, with ample seating and often including new technological innovations such as air conditioning. As a result admission prices for these theaters were higher. Second-run theaters were smaller and simpler. They were located in smaller neighborhoods or outside the cities. Under the NRA code, signed in 1933, this division was set as a developed zoning system divided into multiple categories with clear zoning, screening priority, and pricing limitations which gave preference to the first-run houses. Of course by that time most first-run theaters were owned by the big picture companies and independent ownership was prominent among the smaller second-run or lower theaters. See 21.
Thalberg’s vision of cinema production; both believed in prestigious pictures. It was Thalberg who proved he knew how to make them. Even historian Douglas Gomery, who is reluctant to assign power to anyone below the corporate executive level, admits that while Schenck “had the last word,” the “rising producer … was the effective head of film production at MGM [who] by-and-large, saw to it that the required feature films were regularly turned out.”62

From his new position as vice president in charge of production, earning $650 a week, Thalberg developed a system of tripartite consensus: pleasing audiences, hence pleasing Schenck, but also satisfying the aspirations of his creative staff.63 In order to achieve this consensus one had to negotiate, and Thalberg was a gifted broker. As he stated, motion pictures were an intermediary product, for “nobody had been able to say definitely whether picture making is really a business or an art. Personally,” he thought, “it is both.” He saw it as a business “in the sense that it must bring in money at the box office,” but it was also art “in that it involves, on its devotees, the inexorable demands of creative expression.” In short, Thalberg wrote, “it is a creative business,” and it should be managed as such, “with budgets and cost sheets” but without “blue prints and graphs.”64 Movies were in-between products therefore their production had to take place in a middle ground between the possibilities of unbound creativity and the constraints of scientific profit management. Such an organization demanded compromise – on both ends.

63 Data taken from Vieira, Irving Thalberg, 30.
64 Irving Thalberg and Hugh Weir, “Why Motion Pictures Cost so Much,” The Saturday Evening Post, November 4, 1933, 10-11, 83-85.
On the one hand, creative personnel had to succumb to regulation. At MGM, as Schatz explains, Thalberg expanded on the “centralized producer system” he instigated at Universal, inserting “increased specialization and division of labor.” With the help of Mayer’s managerial skills, the two were able to develop the most impressive production facilities in Hollywood. At 1927, their stock company included “forty five actors, forty one writers, and twenty five directors.” In addition they oversaw an expansive art department headed by Cedric Gibbons, and a vast studio with multiple sets and an army of technical staff supervised by Eddie Mannix. This vast operation, as Schatz explains, “required meticulous scheduling and script development, close collaboration with the various department heads … and careful supervision of each picture.” To ensure a steady flow of information, Thalberg introduced middle management in the form of five supervisors: Harry Rapf, Bernie Hyman, Hunt Stromberg, Al Lewin, and Paul Bern. Each of these “Thalberg men” was responsible for several pictures and reported directly to the head office. Centralization gave way to steady output. A report from 1925, for example, indicates that “MGM had seventy-seven projects in some stage of development … ten pictures were in production, seven were completed… two were reissues,” and “the remaining fifty-eight were in some stage of preproduction.”65

Thalberg was very proud of his operation. In fact, he claimed that due to it “the director … has a greater opportunity to express his individuality.” Echoing Ince’s statement that directors should concentrate on directing, Thalberg proclaimed, “thanks to efficient organization, [the director’s] mind is relieved of all the multifarious, important but time-consuming details of production.” As a result, “he has just one thing to do,

instead of many – to infuse all his artistry and ability into making a good picture.” As he saw it, management actually liberated the artist. It was “distributing the burden on many shoulders, employing many minds,” thus affording “the director the greatest opportunity for self-expression that he has ever had.” A great opportunity, albeit one that is limited to shooting the picture, as opposed to the entire production process.

All the same, with its built-in director-regulation mechanism, the Mayer-Thalberg system was making a name for itself across town. Pandro S. Berman, who was working as a producer at RKO at the time, remembers the two MGM managers as the fathers of the “producer system”: “with Thalberg, [Mayer] was able to set up a method of making pictures … he [could] hold the directors more or less in check financially by giving the producers authority. He made [the latter] responsible for finding the properties, and watching over the development of the screenplay with the writer.”

Due to their jack-of-all-trade status in the early days, directors were the loose cannon of the modern studio. As indicated by Von Stroheim’s behavior, they were the most likely to oppose forced measures of control. Not so in MGM. There, as Berman explained, the “stable of directors which was rather extensive would be called in to make a picture two weeks before the production started.” That is, after most of the script was written and the lead roles were cast. As Ed Woehler, a unit production manager at MGM recalled, “when you had a script from Thalberg, it was ready to shoot, and when you took it on the stage, you shot it. And that’s where this man was clever.” Clever because, “this way it stopped all of the set changes that the director would find late in the picture and

had to change the script.” Creative caprices, which often led to more spending, were no longer available as a network of supervisors curtailed individual directors and subjected them to strict monitoring by Thalberg.

But directors were not the only ones who had to compromise. Corporate executives were also paying a price, literally. Thalberg believed that “a bad picture, or even a fairly good picture which is not so good as it should be, may do the company which puts it out many times as much harm as the cost of the picture itself … in other words, the cheap pictures are the expensive pictures.” Therefore, “the intelligent producer will go on experimenting – which, in pictures, means going on spending – until he believes in his own mind that he had made the best possible product.” Thalberg’s philosophy was not necessarily frugal. On the contrary, despite his efforts to curb directors he was sensitive to the needs of a creative process. He understood that “pictures not only cost a great deal of money,” they also “require comparatively leisurely production in the factors of time and energy – particularly time – which must be consumed in searching for the human ideas on which the success of every picture depends.” In fact, he expressed these ideas in an op-ed he wrote for The Saturday Evening Post, denouncing any intention to cut back on production costs, which he considered a “blow at the very life center of the business.” In a sense, it was an op-ed aimed at his employers, suggesting that if Loew’s was to be profitable it had to start spending, since only “assured quality will mean assured attendance,” which in turn will entail assured revenues.

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69 Thalberg and Weir, “Why Motion Pictures Cost so Much.”
And spend they did. Surveying the studio’s ledgers reveals that in the silent era the average cost of a film was between $125,000 and $400,000, depending on the year, with several prestige productions ranging from $400,000 to $800,000. For example, The Big Parade from 1925 had a budget of $382,000, while The Temptress, from the same season, was made for $669,000. Between 1927 and 1928, White Shadows in the South Seas was produced for $365,000 along The Student Prince, which had a budget of $1,205,000. To compare, in this same season the average production cost at MGM was $277,000 while Waren Bros. spent only $104,000. To be sure, in industry-wide terms MGM was not overspending, as the cost of an average Hollywood feature film in 1924 ranged between $150,000 and $500,000. Still, the annual presence of a number of prestige pictures with excessive budgets combined with a relatively small number of low budget productions confirms that Thalberg was pushing for the higher end of the normal.

Raw numbers, however, only account for part of the picture. The Thalberg philosophy demanded more money but, as he stated himself, also more time. Despite the fact that on the whole MGM churned out a sufficient number of pictures every season, the time spent on each specific feature was far from standardized. As testified by writer Anita Loos: “sometimes, certainly with Thalberg, one was on any picture at least five years. I don’t think Thalberg ever produced a picture that five years work hadn’t gone

Data was taken from Marx, Mayer and Thalberg; Crafton, The Talkies; H. Mark Glancy, “MGM - Film Grosses, 1924–1948: The Eddie Mannix Ledger,” Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television 12, no. 2 (1992): 127, doi:10.1080/0143968920260081; H. Mark Glancy, “Warner Bros Film Grosses, 1921–51: The William Schaefer Ledger,” Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television 15, no. 1 (1995): 55; John Sedgwick, “The Warner Ledgers: a Comment,” Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television 15, no. 1 (1995): 75. Disclaimer: As is stated both in Crafton’s appendix and Glancy’s article, the reliability of the data cannot be assured. Statistics from the studio system are hard to come by and the ones available for scholars were compiled by personnel from within the studios, who might have had reasons to tilt the data one way or another. In addition accounting procedures may have differed from one company to the other.
into.” The time was spent on “conferences, rewrites, conferences again.” Loos recounted that “at least twelve scripts were written on every story that was ever done … retakes were done for the slightest reason – they’d do a whole sequence over, to improve something you hardly could find was wrong.” This relaxed procedure could on occasion appear superfluous or even wasteful:

I remember that one time I was working on a story with Irving, and we used to wait for story conferences, and sometimes we would wait for six weeks, three months, six months. While I was waiting, I was knitting a scarf, and by the time the scarf was finished, I figured that scarf cost MGM about $70,000. And it wasn’t a very big scarf at that.

Yet whether one chooses to view such time consumption as extravagance or as one of the necessities of creative thinking, it is definitely not just business oriented. In fact, the time factor is a great indication of Thalberg’s intermediary status and brokerage abilities – he was both efficient and lavish. He allowed for creativity to reign on a film-specific level but made sure well-organized productivity was maintained overall, i.e. that there was always a steady stream of completed pictures headed to the theaters.

Another indication for Thalberg’s capabilities as a broker was his high approval rating across jurisdictions. In the biography he wrote about the producer, Samuel Marx declared that he had “never found anyone who hated Thalberg.” This is probably an exaggeration, but superlatives are indeed not hard to come by, especially in the creative ranks. Despite the discipline he enforced, many directors seemed to have appreciated

71 Reminiscences of Anita Loos, interviewed by James Gaines, June 1959, transcript, in the Oral History Collection of Columbia University in the city of New York, 14-15
72 Ibid., 23-24
73 Ibid., 29-30
74 Marx, Mayer and Thalberg, viii.
75 Author and screenwriter James M. Cain for one found Thalberg to be “one of the most unpleasant guys.” See Pat McGilligan, ed., Backstory: Interviews with Screenwriters of Hollywood’s Golden Age (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 121.
their MGM boss. George Cukor, who worked under Thalberg in the thirties, observed that he “was very creative” and “had a good sense of what was melodrama and what was tough.” Artists like Cukor, who belonged to the New York literati circles, recognized that Thalberg was not exactly one of their own and still held him in high regard: “he wasn’t well educated but he was by no means ignorant. He would talk about Shakespeare and analyze it the way no professor ever did, from the showman’s point of view.”

King Vidor, one of the few directors at MGM who maintained artistic control over their pictures, was far from dismissive of his supervisor’s contribution claiming, “Thalberg’s consciousness of the responsibilities of his position was far above the average.” In his autobiography, Vidor describes a very fruitful and supportive relationship with Thalberg, who he says “knew instinctively when someone presented a good idea or at least one which that person considered really important, and didn’t try to talk him out of it.”

Despite his curbing techniques, it seems most directors found that Thalberg was no hindrance to creativity.

Even more than directors, it was writers who were in awe of the head producer’s capabilities. MGM was notorious for its attitude towards its writing staff. “It employed twice the number of writers as the next largest studio,” which allowed it to assign several of them for every script, withholding any artistic control, and assigning screen credits as the management saw fit.” Most of them were not appreciative of this system. “MGM’s scheme of making movies was found to be the most Humpty-Dumpty notion that ever hit

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78 Ibid., 121.
79 Nancy Lynn Schwartz, The Hollywood Writers’ Wars, 1st ed (New York: Knopf, 1982), 128. Hollywood writers were not formally unionized until the late thirties, largely due to the efforts made by the studios and in particular MGM to prevent such organization, a topic which will be discussed in following chapters.
the entertainment world,” claimed famed screenwriter Ben Hecht. “Movies were made by people who not only didn’t know how to make movies, didn’t know how to look at them, but who were for the main part illiterate.” Despite his successful and lengthy career in the industry, Hecht is often dismissive of Hollywood; to the extent one might write off his remarks as a provocation. Nevertheless, even he was sympathetic when it came to Thalberg:

[He] was a genius. I worked with Irving, and he was different. Irving was a naturally born storyteller … he had a flair for telling stories like comedians have for telling jokes. He could make them up. It was a fantasy-ridden head he had, and it was good. Then, he had a flair for telling movie stories, he knew about the medium, much more than most writers knew. He lived two-thirds of his time in the projection room … He hadn’t the faintest idea what human beings did, but he knew what their shadow should do.

Hecht was not the only one who reserved his praise for Thalberg. Loos was similar in her observations. “I went back to work for Irving, who was another great genius, and extraordinary man,” she said. However, “when Irving died, I saw the writing on the wall, and I knew that the fun was over and the magic was gone. There were no geniuses around any more…”

With such appreciation and cooperation from his creative staff Thalberg was able to win the approval of the most important group in show business – the audience. He did not get it directly. Since Thalberg refused to take screen credit, he was probably anonymous to most people outside the world of moviemaking. The pictures he made, on the other hand, were well known. Like a true showmen Thalberg believed his business depended, “as almost no other … on the emotional reaction of its customers,” and he

80 Reminiscences of Ben Hecht, interviewed by Jan and Robert Franklin, June 1959, transcript, Popular Arts Project, Oral History Collection of Columbia University in the city of New York, 722-723
81 Ibid., 724
82 Reminiscences of Anita Loos, 12-13
sought to avoid “public apathy.” The central producer system he developed proved capable of doing just that. “The overwhelming success of MGM” under the Mayer-Thalberg administration “is fully evident in the statistics of the first four seasons, as seasonal earnings and profits doubled [and] marked MGM’s arrival as one of Hollywood’s leading studios.” Surprisingly, one of the early triumphs of the system, was a cooperation between Thalberg and none other than Erich von Stroheim. *The Merry Widow*, which was completed only after the director was fired by Mayer and then rehired upon Thalberg’s insistence, was the top grossing movie of 1925, earning $1,933,000 domestically. Following his understanding that only quality assured attendance, Thalberg was willing and able to negotiate even with Stroheim to fill the theaters.

All this was, needless to say, extremely pleasing to Schenck. Thalberg’s positioning helped make Loew’s/MGM one of the most profitable picture companies, second only to Paramount and not for long. The chief executive acknowledged Thalberg’s importance to the company by boosting his salary from $650 to $2,000 a week in October 1926, only to adjust it again a year later to $4,000 with a guarantee for a minimum income of $400,000 annually. The head producer had corporate approval, and not only from his own corporation. In an unfinished novel that was inspired by Thalberg’s career F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote about his protagonist: “he was a marker in industry like Edison and Lumièrè and Griffith and Chaplin. He led pictures way up past the range and power of the theatre, reaching a sort of golden age.” Fitzgerald was no stranger to movie-town as on top of selling the rights to several of his stories he also

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83 Thalberg and Weir, “Why Motion Pictures Cost so Much,” 85.
85 Ibid., 129. See disclaimer at no. 43. In addition, domestic grosses express the money earned from rentals, that is the percentage taken by the studio from the overall box-office profit.
dabbled in screenwriting for several of the studios. His selection of Thalberg as an inspiration and a vehicle for understanding the industry is telling and indicative of the stature held by Thalberg throughout the thirties. As Fitzgerald observed in the book, “proof of his leadership was the spying that went on around him – not just for inside information or patented process secrets – but spying on his scent for a trend in taste, his guess as to how things were going to be.”\textsuperscript{87} Soon enough spying was not enough and other studios were searching for a Thalberg of their own.

The Boy-Wonders

The presence of an executive in charge of production proved to be very beneficial. Thalberg’s ability to coordinate operations and negotiate between the potential of the creative staff and the economic demands of the management created a coveted paradigm. As Schatz indicates, “by 1927 Irving Thalberg’s central producer system was being heralded as a model of filmmaking efficiency, productivity, and quality control” to the extent that “other studios developed similar management setups.”\textsuperscript{88}

Of course, setups on their own were incomplete, as was simply placing an individual at the head of West Coast studio operations. In order for the paradigm to work a company had to find a capable broker, who could understand both ends of the industry while having some effective philosophy on how motion pictures should be. What Thalberg essentially did that was worth replicating, was to synthesize the interests of both the managerial strata and the creative ranks. He did so by personifying this synthesis, by

\textsuperscript{87} F. Scott Fitzgerald, \textit{The Last Tycoon: An Unfinished Novel} (New York: Scribner’s, 1969), 38. Fitzgerald was in the process of completing the novel when he died on December 21, 1940. 
\textsuperscript{88} Schatz, \textit{The Genius of the System}, 48.
inspiring creativity and at the same time being mindful to those factors of uncertainty so threatening to a modern business. Essentially expanding on the modernization brought about by Ince and others, Thalberg helped carry the studio into the vertically integrated age, reformulating it as a creative space within a big business. Consequently, by the early thirties, all major movie companies were on the lookout for their own “boy wonder” to turn their studios into such a working space.\textsuperscript{89}

The search was one of trial and error and it gave birth to a generation of producers who believed they could imitate Thalberg’s success. Those that rose up the ranks were people, who proved to be successful brokers, who could speak the language of both art and commerce as well as translate from one to the other. While several of them modified and expanded on the MGM system, all were, in their own way, following the template set by the first middle manager in charge of production.

One successful follower was the man who would become perhaps the most recognized producer in the business - David O. Selznick. In fact, he claims to have “originated the title of Executive Producer, which had not previously been used.”\textsuperscript{90} Selznick, the producer of \textit{Gone with the Wind} and the man who brought Hitchcock to Hollywood, started his career in tinsel town working for Thalberg. It was not his first encounter with the movie business, but it was a fresh start. Like Thalberg, Selznick, born in 1902, was not one of the pioneers. His father was. Back in New York Lewis J. Selznick was an important entrepreneur whose company, Selznick Pictures, was big

\textsuperscript{89} The title “Boy Wonder” that was often used to describe Thalberg was associated with him following a short story, by the same title, written by George Randolph Chester and published by \textit{The Saturday Evening Post} on May 26, 1923. Like F. Scott Fitzgerald’s unfinished novel, \textit{The Last Tycoon}, Chester’s story was part of a series, which was as a whooe inspired by Thalberg’s career.

enough to unsettle the monopolistic intentions of Adolph Zukor, president of Paramount pictures, to the extent that the latter helped bring it down. David and his brother Myron both worked in the family business:

> I worked for my father’s companies when I was in my teens. I was trained by my father in distribution and finance and advertising, his idea being that Myron would take care of the producing end and I would take care of the other things … It is unfortunately true that there are very few producers in the picture business who know what they ought to know about domestic and foreign distribution, merchandising and advertising, and finance. I don’t think there is any branch or any phase of the picture business in which I have not worked, except as a cutter.  

When Selznick Pictures collapsed in 1923, David wanted to stay in the business and three years later made his way from the center of motion pictures’ finance to the new capital of film-making.

> Whether it was due to his experience or simply to an inherently high self-esteem, David Selznick was not satisfied with the lower ranks of the studio hierarchy. He had bigger plans for himself and for pictures, and he began spreading those around without delay. Already in his second day at MGM, working as a reader for Harry Rapf, he sent a memo, an action he was going to become very famous for, to his direct boss saying: “…it is immediately apparent to the newcomer that the organization is so vast, and its departments so varied and unrelated in duties, that contact is practically impossible.” Later that same day he also felt the urge to point out that “beyond doubt … astonishing almost unbelievable grosses can be rolled up in the foreign countries on pictures that are both big and local.”

His potential and zeal for organization were noticeable, but MGM already had its architect. Indeed, a little over a year later Selznick was fired after he

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91 Ibid.  
indignantly questioned Thalberg’s authority, a fact hinting that a successful broker also knew how to get rid of any real or possible challenges to his throne. Nevertheless, even in that short span of time Selznick managed to serve as the head of the writers’ department, a story editor, and even to produce with great efficiency, two low-budget Tim McCoy westerns.

His reputation was established to such an extent that his next job was for Paramount; the company owned by the man who was Selznick the elder’s most bitter competitor. That said it was not Zukor himself who hired him, but his general manager of West Coast operations, B. P. Schulberg. In Selznick’s own words, “Schulberg was the most efficient general manager of a studio I have ever known … a really great mill foreman.” In other words, he was not a filmmaker. That was not a problem, he thought, since this “was in the days when … pictures were sold en masse, and when a difference in quality made extremely little difference in the gross on the picture.”94 As mentioned before, up to the early thirties, Paramount was the most profitable motion picture company. That did not necessarily mean it had the most profitable studio. What it did have was a very well orchestrated chain of theaters, and in particular a network of subsequent-run theaters. That is to say, “unlike MGM with its emphasis on the first-run market, Paramount was a volume outfit.”95 While the former released between forty and fifty films per year, the latter had a program of around seventy.96 For this reason, a competent general manager like Schulberg, who held a similar position to that of L. B. Mayer, was sufficient to maintain profits. But Schulberg was rumored to envy MGM’s

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95 Schatz, *The Genius of the System*, 74; Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System*, 1 and Ch. 7. See also note 35.
success in producing A-features and so he hired Selznick and soon made him his executive assistant.

Selznick’s responsibilities at Paramount were not as overarching as Thalberg’s; nevertheless he was executing his role with a very similar approach. Schulberg prided himself on giving “more respect for independent opinion than did MGM.” Therefore Paramount was known to be somewhat of a “director’s studio” as its prestigious productions were merely “monitored” by the executives, and largely steered by star directors like Ernst Lubitsch and Rouben Mamoulian. As a result, Selznick only supervised the standard budget pictures. Even so he exerted his influence wherever possible. He also listed his own achievements. To name a few, he stated for example: “the best of our writers … are with us because I fought for their retention,” in particular “I fought for [writer] Joe Mankiewicz, and gave him his opportunity.” In addition, “[I] originated several times more story ideas that saw production than any other single individual in the studio.” Writing talent was a hot commodity in those years, as sound came in and all of a sudden dialogue became a key component in production. Selznick’s concerns, however, were not just for the creative capabilities of the studio, he also prided himself on managing to “maintain our Writers’ Department at very low cost,” and on having “been very largely responsible for keeping our important writers’ salaries at a lower level than those of any other major studio.”

These were just a few from a very long list Selznick composed in order to justify his request for a raise. It is interesting therefore that he stressed his managerial as well as artistic contributions. He knew what his bosses were looking for. He even alluded to it

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directly claiming that over at “our outstanding contemporary, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, the 
equivalent of my work is handled by no less than six high-salaried executives.”99 One 
apparently could only benefit from equating his qualifications to the Thalberg system, 
and Selznick did benefit. During 1931 Zukor, Sidney Kent, and Jessy Lasky, the studio’s 
New York executives, authorized two raises for his salary, setting it at $2,000 per 
week.100 Not only that, according to Selznick “they were also thinking of putting me 
permanently in charge of the studio, replacing Schulberg,” but “I would not consider 
taking the job of the man who had brought me in.”101 Apparently, Paramount came to the 
understanding that having a mill foreman was good, but a creative broker was better.

When it came to the industry, Selznick was a visionary, and his own philosophy 
regarding film production also included a mix or artistic expression and regulation. “I 
have many misgivings concerning our own individual policies as a studio,” he wrote in 
June 1931, in a memo he never sent. “Production is being influenced to what I consider 
as being an extremely unfortunate degree by men who are, to my mind … completely 
unqualified,” yet they “have more influence on executive decisions than the directors and 
writers of respective pictures.” Though he did not name names, Selznick recognized that 
in the process of cultural production, the creators of content need to be consulted rather 
then strictly standardized. Or as he stated it, “we have the players, the directors, the 
writers – a staff comprised of people of enormous talent and great ambition … the system 
that turns these people into automatons is obviously what is wrong.” Of course, there 
must also be supervision, “there must … be an executive head to a studio.” However,

99 Ibid., 59
100 Thomson, Showman, 116.
such a position does not necessarily entail that one person will “[carry] in his mind, the plans of seventy pictures yearly, plus the enormous amount of material from which these seventy are selected, plus the executive work involved in the management of a large studio.” Selznick saw the future in “breaking up production … into smaller units,” each run by an executive such as himself and responsible for one or two features per year. That, he claimed, was “the best way out of the pit of bad and costly pictures in which we are now sunk.”

Selznick did not mean to imply that good pictures are not costly. As he would write several years later, in another letter he never sent, “lose your leading producers … and you will then find the difference between cost with quality and cost without it.”

Quality was the main issue, and Selznick seems to point out that in order to produce it one needs to invest time, money, and close attention. The latter he considered to be lacking, especially in the supervisors level. The creative space Selznick envisioned necessitated the focus of a dedicated writing staff, director, and also the close attention of an adequate negotiator like himself, who would be capable of representing the best interest of the project while keeping an eye on the budget. With what he called “production units”, Selznick in fact foresaw the future of the industry; a future he would help realize. Back in 1931 though, Hollywood was still thinking in Thalberg terms.

In fact, Selznick’s next job was as the Thalberg of a brand new vertically integrated company. RKO was established in October 1928 by RCA “to exploit its Photophone sound system,” after all other companies signed agreements in May of that year.

102 Selznick to B. P. Schulberg, not sent, June 27, 1931, Ibid., 65–67.
103 Selznick to Nick Schenck, not dated and not sent, presumably from June 1935, Ibid., 126.
year with Western Electric for its sound-on-disc Vitaphone system.\textsuperscript{104} Two not very successful years later, David Sarnoff, owner of RCA, hired Selznick as vice president in charge of production. In a letter he wrote to Louis B. Mayer, who was by then his father in law, Selznick mentioned a key element behind his motivation for taking the job: “I want to continue to develop my own people and my own stars and my own facilities from the scratch line where I started a year ago. Then truly, if I put it over, I will have done something – and that is the best reward!” Selznick seems to have written this letter in response to some sort of a job offer from Mayer, therefore he added that while he had “the most enormous respect for Irving Thalberg,” and regards “him as the greatest producer the industry has yet developed,” he could not work under him. Selznick did not want to be a subordinate, he wanted to be the main broker so that he could equal Thalberg’s achievements and, he hoped, “one day to surpass them.”\textsuperscript{105}

He did his best. During his first and only year at RKO Selznick “produced forty-seven features, and a like number of shorts at a cost of $10 million, $5 million less than during the previous year.” In addition he “brought in new directing and writing talent, including George Cukor, William Wellman, Ben Hecht, Dudley Nichols … [and] signing unknowns Katharine Hepburn and Fred Astaire.”\textsuperscript{106} His reforms produced such films as \textit{A Bill of Divorcement}, \textit{Bird of Paradise}, and \textit{What Price Hollywood}? Unfortunately, RKO began and continued to be a struggling studio, and despite his efforts to establish “a rigid economy policy in making capital expenditures,” Selznick found it very hard to negotiate with the corporate wing of the company. “It is hampering and discouraging to me to be

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\textsuperscript{104} Crafton, \textit{The Talkies}, 160.
\textsuperscript{105} Selznick, \textit{Memo from David O. Selznick}, 78–82.
\textsuperscript{106} Gomery, \textit{The Hollywood Studio System}, 145–146.
\end{footnotesize}
constantly criticized on costs,” he wrote in 1932, especially since “no studio in the business has ever had such great reduction in costs, considering quality.”¹⁰⁷ This letter was never sent, another one from January 27, 1933 was, and it essentially ended Selznick’s association with RKO.

The reasons for Selznick’s resignation were many. As his biographer points out, Selznick “was at times foolish and idealistic; at others, he was an arrogant manipulator.”¹⁰⁸ It was probably the former that made him resign his position at RKO. However, upon his departure he stated one dissatisfaction, which illustrated the sort of production space he hoped for. Simply put, he objected to the demand of Merlin Aylesworth, the president of the corporation, to approve all matters concerning production. On January 27, 1933 he wrote to Benjamin B. Kahane, the vice president: “while recognizing you as the head of the company in matters of finance and policy, I could not consider accepting the possibility of any veto power on the part of anybody on stories which I might select.” Selznick understood his own position as “being in charge not merely of costs but also of everything that went into the making of a picture.” While he was willing to get advice on the former from Aylesworth, and about the latter from his creative staff, the reverse order was not acceptable. He insisted, “to stand on [his] record on both costs and quality,” something he could only do if he continued “to have final authority – and by final, I mean final.” He proceeded with a comparative argument claiming, “Irving Thalberg has never been subjected to the word or approval of Nicholas

¹⁰⁷ Selznick, unsent letter apparently intended for one of the RKO executives, August 22, 1932, Selznick, Memo from David O. Selznick, 77–78.
¹⁰⁸ Thomson, Showman, 128.
Schenck.” He was wrong, but that being said, he had a point. If the heads of the RKO Corporation were capable of making both financial and creative decisions, what was the benefit of having a broker like Selznick?

Here it might be worthwhile to point out that corporate executives attempted to assume complete responsibility of studios, without much success. As Tino Balio states “bankers and financiers proved singularly inept in managing motion-picture businesses,” since “they did not have the know-how or the temperament to make pictures audiences liked.” Take for example the case of Paramount. Following, but not due to, Selznick’s departure the company went into receivership, during which time “fifty-three different law firms, banks, protective committees, and experts yammered and bled for two and one-half years over the sick giant.” The result, as one studio employee pointed out, was that “for the first time within my recollection, Paramount had no picture among the first ten for the year 1934.” The reason as far as he was concerned, was simple – the executives in charge “had no experience in the production of feature pictures prior to his advent at the studio.”

The situation continued to deteriorate. The new board, established in 1935 and controlled by Lehman Brothers, Electrical Research Product, Inc., and the Royal Insurance Company of Britain appointed John Otterson as the new president. Otterson, a “solid businessman … bombarded the studio with cost-accounting procedures, efficiency schemes, and personnel forms.” Once again, the result was abysmal: “the negative

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112 Henry Herzbrun to Adolph Zukor, March 5, 1935, Adolph Zukor Collection, 2.f-15, Special Collection, Margaret Herrick Library.
costs were exceeding their budgets … shooting schedules were being disregarded [and] the planning of the 1936-37 program was hopelessly inchoate.” The composer of this quoted report, former film executive Joseph P. Kennedy, advised the board “to get rid of their quality businessmen or prepare for another receivership.” Only after Barney Balaban was appointed president, in July 1936, was the studio reorganized. Balaban, one of the pioneers of the exhibition business in Chicago, appointed executives such as Y. Frank Freeman and producer William LeBaron in addition to arranging, as per Selznick’s vision, production units centered on individual producers or producer-directors. All this is to say, that while Selznick’s abilities as an efficient broker might have suffered form his hotheadedness, he did seem to understand the organizational needs of a creative industry.

This structural understanding manifested itself in practice as well. As mentioned, Selznick left a long trail of memos and inter-office communication that reflect his business-art bilingualism. Consider the following memo he sent to George Cukor, who at the beginning of 1938 was the assigned director for *Gone with the Wind*. The executive producer was at work crafting the movie-script with screenwriter Sidney Howard and he was “worried that all this painstaking work is going to be largely in vain” if they did not have “a pledge” from Cukor, promising that he “won’t use the book during the course of production to add three lines here and four lines there.” The reason for this worry was economic, as he explained, “even the addition of five or six words per scene is going to count up to a thousand feet or more that we have taken out with terrific agony.”

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114 “Paramount Pictures.,” 198
115 For more about Paramount during the Depression see Balio, *Grand Design--Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930-1939*, chap. 2; Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System*, chap. 7; “Paramount Pictures.”
Additional feet of film translated of course into an increased budget, and a possible “tremendous loss to the company.” Selznick was not trying to eliminate the director’s creative control. “Certainly,” he said, “I am not going to have any objection to your raising any points about lines or cuts on anything else in advance of our starting in production … which we can then thrash out in a few final conferences.” But he wanted all such creative additions to be discussed in cooperation, before filming, and not as a result of Cukor “trying to sneak [them] into the picture on the set.” Appealing to the director’s artistic integrity as well as to his reason, the producer was actively carving an intermediate space for Cukor to work in.116

Selznick was not the only one to follow in Thalberg’s footsteps, though between them, these two producers have disseminated brokerage administration into the operations of four of Hollywood’s major studios. The early thirties saw the rise of two additional production-distribution-exhibition firms, namely Warner Bros. and Twentieth Century-Fox. Both companies understood the importance of a capable central producer, and both recognized this capability in Darryl Zanuck.

In December 1935 Fortune labeled Zanuck “the new crowned boy genius of the films.”117 This followed his appointment earlier that year as Vice President in Charge of Production of the newly merged Twentieth Century-Fox. Fox, of course has been around since the teens, but a series of debacles at the late twenties left the company in financial disarray and lacking proper management. In a similar move to the one made by Nick Schenck in 1924, the corporation’s vice president, Sidney Kent, who understood the

116 David O. Selznick to George Cukor, February 25, 1938, file 11.f-106, George Cukor Papers, Special Collections, Margaret Herrick Library.
necessity of management, orchestrated the purchase of a year old production company, titled Twentieth-Century, that was headed by Zanuck and Joseph Schenck, Nick’s brother.118 At that time Zanuck was already a hot commodity around Hollywood, as he spent the past ten years establishing his reputation with a different group of siblings.

Warner Bros. was a family owned business, and it remained that way throughout the studio era. The main reason behind the company’s ability to survive without falling into the hands of big banks was the fiscal conservatism of Harry, the president of the corporation and the brother in charge.119 He had a “simple vision” according to Gomery; “he sought a cut-rate movie factory, which could produce the number of features and shorts for Warners’ theatres each year.” Like Paramount, the production branch of the company, “operated on a volume basis, trying to make a small profit on every film.”120 Only Warner had far fewer theaters than Paramount, even after its consolidation with the First National cooperative in 1929. What the company did have was sound. Warner Bros. was the first studio to experiment with and seriously pursue “talkies”. On April 1926 Harry signed an exclusive deal with Western Electric to use their Vitaphone technology, a deal which enabled the company to produce Don Juan, The Jazz Singer, and The Singing Fool, three productions that signaled both the end of the silent period and the company’s admission into the studio system as one of the majors.121 As mentioned, sound

118 For more about the history of the studio as well as on Zanuck’s biography see Upton Sinclair, Upton Sinclair Presents William Fox (Los Angeles, Calif: The author, 1933); “Twentieth Century-Fox”; Mel Gussow, Don’t Say Yes Until I Finish Talking: a Biography of Darryl F. Zanuck, 1st ed. (Garden City, N.Y: Doubleday, 1971).
119 There were four Warner brothers. Aside from Harry, Abe was supervising distribution and Jack was the head of the studio. The fourth brother, Sam, who was instrumental in the incorporation of sound, died in 1927.
121 For more on the history of this company see Charles Higham, Warner Brothers (New York: Scribner, 1975); Michael Freedland, The Warner Brothers (New York, N.Y: St. Martin’s Press, 1983); Nick
required good stories and good dialogue, therefore it is not surprising that to back its expanding operations the Warner brothers chose a writer.

Born in 1902, Darryl Zanuck was not a pioneer and neither was his father. He simply wanted to work in the movies and was indefatigable by nature. To illustrate, in 1917 despite being underweight and underage he joined the Omaha National Guard and was stationed in France during World War I, all before his seventeenth birthday. By 1924, as his biographer wrote, “Charlie Chaplin was the biggest star in the world, Irving Thalberg was running production at the expanding Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer … and Darryl Zanuck was writing dog pictures.” 122 The dog in question was Rin Tin Tin, the star of a series of movies produced by Warner Bros., which for Zanuck presented an opportunity to start writing for the pictures instead of pulp newspapers. He quickly rose up the ladder until in 1927 he was made “an associate executive to [Jack] L. Warner.” His responsibilities included “writing original stories, adapting manuscripts, books or plays already written, collaborating with authors, directors and scenario writers, editing and titling films in the making, to be made, or the finished product.” In addition, his contract stipulated that he is to serve as a “general overseer of production, acting in an executive capacity with J. L. Warner in and about the business of making motion pictures.” 123 Following the merger with First National he also received the title – Chief Executive in charge of all production.

Working under Harry’s regime was very different than the conditions at MGM. One main difference was that the executive producer could not rely on increased

Roddick, A New Deal in Entertainment: Warner Brothers in the 1930s (London: British Film Institute, 1983).
122 Gussow, Don’t Say Yes Until I Finish Talking; a Biography of Darryl F. Zanuck, 38.
spending. As the company’s president once said, “a picture, all it is, is an expensive dream. Well, it’s just as easy to dream for $700,000 as for $1.5 million.” Zanuck managed to do just that. This was particularly apparent in his revival of gangster films like *Little Caesar* and *The Public Enemy*, the latter made for only $230,000 and grossing $557,000. The generated profits gave Zanuck a chance to further experiment with content, rather than cost. He produced such pictures as *42nd Street*, a low-budget musical that generated earnings of $2,281,000, and *I am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang*, a controversial story that went on to earn $1,599,000 as well as critical acclaim, including praise from the National Board of Review. He learned how to inspire creativity under a tight budget, a quality that was immensely important as the Depression set in. Evidence for his success were the multiple job offers he got after submitting his resignation from Warner in 1933, whether it was Joe Schenck who immediately took him under his wing, or Kent, who recognized in him the potential to revitalize the Fox lot.

A typical Zanuck day at Fox’s Movietone City illustrates the creative involvement of this executive producer. Not the first one on the lot, his day usually started at ten thirty, when he “rolls in through the gates.” First, “there are treatments and synopses to be read,” of which “he reads the best dozen or so himself.” Second, “at eleven thirty there is a story conference,” with the scenario writer and the associate producer of specific productions. Zanuck goes about these meetings in a similar way; “he mentions what pleased him about the script or treatment. Then he dismembers it,” for about twenty minutes, “then there is some discussion and there are some suggestions from the writer and the producer.” At three in the afternoon he enters the projection room where he will

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125 Data taken from Glancy, “Warner Bros Film Grosses, 1921–51.”
stay until late at night, talking to the editor, “re-editing scenes as they were run.”

Throughout the day “he talks incessantly of whatever comes into his head,” recording everything on one of his many dictaphones.126

Zanuck kept to his schedule and he expected his employees to do the same. He saved both “time and money by laying down a rigid schedule for his productions,” and to “guard against delay he will make any sacrifice – even replacing the star.” With writers for example, “he tries to keep their time on scripts down to ten weeks,” when “in most studios twenty is the average,” and “exact weekly reports to check on their progress.” However, if they proved reliable, Zanuck’s writers were “given more responsibility than is customary in Hollywood.”127 The same went for the cinematographers and directors, as long as they stayed on script, Zanuck “never went on set.”128 As Ben Hecht remembered it, “you could make a good movie with Darryl, because he adored efficient work, and if you made your work efficient, he would go along.”129 He rewarded competence with creative freedom in the hope of building an organization that enjoyed both.

A case in point was the production of Jesse James. In late September 1938 Zanuck sent a telegram to director Henry King, who was filming out in Missouri, stating: “after reviewing everything that has been shot to date, I am definitely convinced that the entire location trip was, to a great extent a financial mistake … at the rate we are going the picture will never break even, no matter how successful it is.” Shooting on location, rather than on a studio stage was costly and companies tried to limit it only to when absolutely necessary. Having watched the dailies sent from King’s unit, Zanuck realized

126 “Twentieth Century-Fox,” 132.
127 Ibid., 134.
129 Reminiscences of Ben Hecht, 726.
that “there is nothing in the way of scenery or background that we could not have photographed near here at far less expense and trouble.” Due to the lack of efficiency Zanuck decided to enforce his authority and interfere in the director’s work. But he was not angry, saying “I blame no one but myself for not acting on my original hunch, and realize that in the history of our industry there has never been a successful location trip that lasted longer than two weeks.” Furthermore, he wrote to King, “I appreciate your desire for authentic location, which prompted you to suggest the trip. And I also realize that you have no confidence in process shots.”¹³⁰ Despite having doubts about such expenditure Zanuck approved it; he was attentive to his director, allowing him to experiment and stepping in only when he felt the budget was over-compromised without superior results. It was a negotiation between a purely profit-based rational that would deny such shots altogether, and a wholly artistic one that would let the director experiment on-end.

Compromise and negotiation were expected from the managerial ranks as well. While particular pictures could not be wholly subjected to artistic integrity, Zanuck was similarly unwilling to expose his productions to the complete control of the corporations. Consider this reminiscence by writer Philip Dunne: “we were sitting in the projection room one night and Zanuck said, “Lock the door.” He had the projectionist called and told to lock the door too. He said, “Spyros is on the lot.”” Dunne is referring to Spyros Skouras, who became the president of the Twentieth Century-Fox Corporation in 1942, and was apparently on a visit to the West Coast. The writer recounted that “later [they]

heard this knocking on the door and this voice, “let me in.” But he was not let in, Zanuck would not let him; he was unwilling to let the president monitor the creative production process. According to Dunne “he was absolutely right that he just would not permit any interference with the studio operation.” It is hard to imagine Zanuck would treat his superior like that, and indeed, it could be he was merely trying to impress his employees, or that he later apologized. Even so, this recollection by a writer signals that Zanuck wanted to create a perceived buffer, a comfort zone for the creative personnel to work in.

Such vote of confidence in his creative staff made Zanuck, like the two producers discussed above, someone worth working for. As Nunnally Johnson stated in 1951, “I miss Zanuck – I miss him terribly at Fox. No picture-maker, no focal point, no feeling of strength at the top.” He missed having “a boss up there who was watching, and whose opinion you respected, who would say, “This is going good,” or “That’s not going good,” or “Nunnally, I think you ought to do this over…”132 Director Anatole Litvak noted, “he helped me enormously, and I have the greatest respect for Darryl, for having the courage of allowing me to do [The Snake Pit].”133 Even Fritz Lang, whose relationship with Zanuck was troubled to say the least, admitted that he was “very responsible”, “not a fool”, and “a very good producer.”134 However, his ability was probably best described by

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131 Philip Dunne, 117-120.
133 Reminiscences of Anatole Litvak, interviewed by Robert and Joan Franklin, April 1959, transcript, Popular Arts Project, 18.
director George Cukor, who stated that Zanuck was simply a “very imaginative showman.”

On September 14, 1936 Irving Thalberg died. He was only 37 when his weak heart succumbed to severe pneumonia. “The wheels at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer studio … were stopped at midnight last night in his memory” reported the Los Angeles Times, “and not a camera will turn for twenty-four hours.” But the grief spread beyond the gates of the Culver City studio. The whole industry was in mourning. United Artists conducted memorial services, the Samuel Goldwyn, Walter Wanger and Pickford-Lasky companies gathered for a eulogy, and all “the famous and the great of Hollywood, about 1500, stopped their work to assemble in Temple B’Nai B’Rith, Wilshire Boulevard, to join in the last tribute to the “boy wonder” of the screen.” In a way it was an end of an era – the Thalberg era. As the newspapers reported “no successor is to be appointed to fill his shoes” because “there is no one who could.” Or in the words of one executive, “he made his own job. It ends with him.”

But it did not end. Thalberg molded a culture of production that spread to the industry as a whole. The balance he struck in studio operations was emulated and elaborated on by Selznick, Zanuck and other influential producers like Hal Wallis, Pandro Berman, and Dore Schary, who later in the forties inherited Thalberg’s position at MGM. It is true that aside from Zanuck, and perhaps Wallis, who replaced him as head producer at Warner Bros., none of these men were responsible or directly involved with

135 Ibid., 460.
137 “Tribute Paid to Thalberg,” Los Angeles Times, September 17, 1936.
138 “Films to Pay Homage to Thalberg Today.”
such an extensive setup as Metro, but all practiced what Thalberg preached. The function of an executive producer, as a mediator between commerce and art remained an essential one. Towards the late thirties such executives, in accordance with Selznick’s vision, were put at the head of units within the studios. After 1948, when the Supreme Court essentially struck down the studio system in the Paramount case, many producers set up their own independent operations. But their function as brokers remained.

Furthermore, the ability of such producers to maintain a creative-financial balance continues to be the standard to which the industry holds itself, at least in pretense. Shortly after Thalberg’s death the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences named an award after him, the Thalberg Memorial Award. Selznick claims it was his idea, as he wanted “to perpetuate the standards that Thalberg stood for” and give “incentive to people to try to make every film that they did as good as they could possibly make it – instead of thinking it was satisfactory to have an occasional good one.”139 The award is still presented periodically, not annually, when the academy recognizes “creative producers whose bodies of work reflect a consistently high quality of motion picture production.”140 Its recipients include Zanuck, who collected it no less than three times, Walt Disney, Steven Spielberg, and most recently, in 2010, Francis Ford Coppola. This award, and one may claim that all Academy Awards, reflects the ongoing belief within the industry that “good movies” are products of good brokers.

140 “The Irving Thalberg Award,” the website of the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences, accessed on April 19, 2011, http://www.oscars.org/awards/academyawards/about/awards/thalberg.html
Veteran screenwriter Charles Bracket used to reserve the following warnings for “potential dramatists” who “have an eye on picture studios.” First, “If you are only happy in an ivory tower, don’t go into motion picture writing.” Furthermore, “if every word you set down was dictated to you from on high and mustn’t be questioned, don’t go into motion picture writing.” Working in Hollywood, proclaimed Bracket, was a group effort; therefore “if you can’t subordinate your ego enough … forget the studios. Write magazine stories, write novels, write plays.”

Even if a writer managed to suppress his ego, there were other hurdles to overcome. “If you do go into the studios and are successful … you’ll run into another irritation,” Brackett divulged, “your work will never be recognized as satisfactory … you’ll never be as familiar to the general public. Nobody will fight for your autograph. When you drive to a premiere, the crowd in the bleachers will peer into your car and say, “oh, that’s nobody.” For that reason, the best advice he could offer was “reconcile yourself to that anonymity.”

In many ways, screenwriters in Hollywood were in a constant mode of reconciliation. They had to resolve their incompatible desire for creative control, traditionally enjoyed by authors, and the suddenly available economic security offered by

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1 Charles Brackett, Address for the Samuel Goldwyn Award for Creative Writing, April 22, 1957, folder 20.f-48, Charles Brackett Papers, Special Collections, Margaret Herrick Library, Beverly Hills.
the movie industry, since at least initially, the two were mutually exclusive. This chapter shows how upon its arrival in the early thirties, a fresh and large cohort of writers learned how to write for a new medium while at the same time transforming this medium. It argues that, following the development of sound, many writers who came to Hollywood, after trying their hand in other literary fields such as short story or playwriting, were affected by their past experience in a way that shaped their reaction to the movie business but also helped them formulate, express, and assert their demands in it. Confronted with a highly rationalized division of labor, these people, who were used to working solo, learned how to square their artistic ego with an industry ruled by cooperation. Along the way they carved a new place for writing in the movie world while improving the status and reputation of the latter in the greater realm of art and entertainment.

Indeed, writing for a Hollywood studio was often frustrating. “I know of two men whose names are widely known to all of us, who wrote competitively the same story for a well known company,” exclaimed screenwriter John Howard Lawson. He added that after pitting them against each other “the executive in charge of the production never read either of the scenarios.” The creative verdict “was left entirely in the hands of a reader who was getting $25 a week.” Lawson, a former president of the Screen Writers’ Guild, was complaining about the condition of the Hollywood writer in a hearing held before the House Patent Committee on March 1936. “We have in the motion picture industry a situation where we find that the writer has none of the protection, none of the dignity he has attained in other fields,” he claimed. In the studios “creative energy is not allowed free play,” therefore screenwriters who had already demonstrated their technical abilities elsewhere, and were brought to Hollywood in order to “give certain definite creative
value are deprived of the rights to those values.” The only way out, according to him, was more creative control, and therefore Lawson was advocating for “legislation strengthening authors’ rights to dictate how their writing should be handled in Hollywood.”

This negative view was not universally shared. Fellow writer Joe Mankiewicz was far more sanguine, claiming that “as far as so-called control over material is concerned”, one thing that “should be said and remembered” is that “the Hollywood writer is paid anywhere from $300 to $3000 a week to write screenplays.” Furthermore, “if a screenplay is not good, he does not give the money back.” Thus, “you get paid whether or not the buyer wants what you write,” which is “a security that [no] artist in history ever had.” When an author works on a novel or a play he can say “I have put in a year or two years of my life on this. I want to control it.” Equally, charged Mankiewicz, “I think it’s idiotic – I know it’s idiotic – for a writer to draw two or three thousand dollars a week, 52 weeks a year, sometimes not writing at all, playing golf or tennis, and writing with no guarantees that the writing is good or that the buyer will like it, and under no compunction to give back the money if it’s not good.” With this kind of security you cannot ask for control, he said, “I don’t think you can have both.”

Mankiewicz was somewhat exaggerating. For one, very few writers earned three thousand dollars every week. In reality, as late as 1938, payrolls at major studios suggested that forty percent of employed writers earned a weekly salary of less than

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$250, with only around twelve percent exceeding $1,000. On top of that many of them were not employed for fifty-two full weeks out of the year. On the other hand he does raise an interesting point, namely that Hollywood screenwriters, unlike their fellow wordsmiths in other creative industries, were employees. They were paid to write, on a weekly basis -- not as an advance -- and without specific commitments with regards to the quantity or quality of their output. To reconcile such an obviously creative process as writing with conventional labor practices is fairly unintuitive. Indeed the introduction of the screenwriting profession to the studio system proved challenging, as both writers and studio heads were recalcitrant, each for their own reason, and perturbed by the implications of submitting lyrical composition to a punch clock. The battles of moguls and producers with creative organized labor are the topic of another chapter. As for writers, Mankiewicz was not off the mark suggesting they wanted both.

During the early 1930s, after movies became talkies, many men and women of words were caught between two worlds, that of traditional authorship and that of screenwriting. Changes in leisure and consumer culture in the previous half century had loosened the margins of the more traditional literati world to include playwrights as well as fiction writers for magazines and even some news reporters or columnists. Screenwriting, however, was still very suspect. Nevertheless, the increasing need for stories and the sudden want of dialog, combined with the heavy wallets of motion picture producers, contributed to an influx of talent from that old guard of novelists, short story writers, and playwrights into Hollywood. The rationalized operation that developed in the studios was very different from the atmosphere of the literati circles in New York or the

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Ivy League universities. As one writer put it: “In the beginning of the world there was the word. But in the beginning of Hollywood … only the picture.” Words were new to the movie capital, and it, in turn, was new to the people who wrote them. Like Mankiewicz implied, tinsel town offered the prospect of financial security but in return it demanded control over the writer, his time, and his output.

The responses were varied. Some, like Lawson, were frustrated. Others, like Mankiewicz and Brackett, were more receptive to the new opportunities. In addition to the newcomers, there were also the veterans, like Frances Marion, Anita Loos, or Casey Robison who had been in the business since its silent days or even its East Coast days, and took pride in it. Together they made a very diverse and well-articulated crowd. Their coming together, as a group, into a union, was in some ways the familiar “making of the writing-class” story. Yet in other ways, it presents a more complex and dynamic tale about the transformation of an industry through its practitioners and the repositioning of this industry within the larger framework of American art and entertainment. For whatever their reaction was, studio writers formed and maintained another link between East and West, this time the East of bohemians and intellectuals rather than bankers and stockholders. Lawson and Mankiewicz may have been at odds when appraising their condition, but both presented it in comparative terms, relative to “other fields” where authors worked on novels and plays. They knew how other writers in other industries lived and worked; they understood the pros and cons. Many screenwriters kept one foot firmly planted at the other coast, and from that split position they could at least hope to combine the best of both worlds.

Worlds of Possibilities

To better understand the position of screenwriters within the burgeoning movie industry it might be helpful to think of Hollywood as one system within a larger structure of creative production; or, to use the language of prominent cultural sociologists such as Pierre Bourdieu and Howard Becker, as one art world/field embedded within the larger world/field of American art and entertainment. Becker defines an art world as consisting “of the people and organizations who produce those events and objects that world defines as art.” He emphasizes that to identify such a world one needs to start not by looking at the work of art itself but by looking for “the complete roster of kinds of people whose activity contributes to the result.” These people, maintains Becker, “may participate in only one world or in a large number, either simultaneously or serially”, and the best way to analyze their activity is “with reference to the degree to which they participate in or depend on the regularities of behavior of which the collective action of the world consists and on which its results depend.” In other words, every art world is its own structure and participants are described according to their function within it. Becker himself identifies several types of participants, whom he sorts according to the kind of product they create e.g. “integrated professionals” who follow the “regularities” and produce the canonical works of that world, or mavericks, who understand the conventions but choose to ignore them.8

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6 Howard S. Becker, “Art Worlds and Social Types,” American Behavioral Scientist 19, no. 6 (July 1, 1976): 703.
7 Ibid., 705.
8 For a comprehensive discussion of this theory see Howard Saul Becker, Art Worlds (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).
This characterization of artistic production as a system of interactive structures with multiple participants is crucial, since, as Bourdieu pointed out, it constructs all kinds of it “as a collective action, breaking with the naïve vision of individual creator.” That is, not only Hollywood movies but also legitimate theater, literature, and the fine arts are structures that extend above and beyond the idealistic notion of “artistic activity as pure, disinterested creation by an isolated artist.” All of these creative endeavors represent juxtaposed and often superimposed fields of interaction within a larger structure. For my purposes, however, Becker and Bourdieu’s theories, paint only half the picture. This is because, though they acknowledge the coexistence of various art worlds/fields, they nevertheless examine them in isolation from one another. Furthermore both theoreticians tend to view the interaction within a field as governed by typologies of products, e.g. music styles, book genres, rather than practitioners, when in fact, the latter can be just as influential in defining and shifting regularities of behavior. This is particularly true, though not exclusively, in industries such as the studio system in Hollywood where multiple “artists” or creative people contribute directly to the formation of one product.¹⁰

To overcome this problem I turn to the work of William H. Sewell Jr., who, drawing from Bourdieu as well as Anthony Giddens develops a theory of structures that allows for a discussion of agency. Sewell is not interested in art-producing structures in particular but in the abstract notion. In his view all structures are composed of agents, schemas – the rules or norms of cultural conduct, and resources – the sources of power in social interaction. Schemas and resources are transposable and ploysemic; they “can be

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¹⁰ As opposed, for example, to the prevalent method in the literary field in which one author creates the product, a book, and then interacts with other participants such as agents, editors, book publishers, reviewers, etc. In film production multiple participants are necessary to create even the most basic product.
applied to a wide and not fully predictable range of cases outside the context in which they are initially learned.” That is to say, they are subject to interpretation by agents within the same structure and in other structures. For this reason, Sewell defines agency as the actor’s capacity to mobilize and reinterpret resources and schemas under new terms and structure complexes, which by nature “intersect and overlap.” Simply put, agents operate in various structures, which are not mutually exclusive; therefore they often transfer and adapt the tools they acquire in one and use it in another, and in turn steadily and continually change the structures. Putting everything together, by interpreting Becker’s art worlds in terms of Sewell’s structures, one can see the unique position of the Hollywood writer as an agent participating in several art worlds.

The movie industry was a world within the world of American creative production, and as such it competed with other sub-worlds, for instance theater or radio, for resources, mostly audiences but also for recognition as a legitimate rather than inferior form of entertainment. With the advent of sound Hollywood saw the rise of a new class of agents, the writers, who carried with them the schemas and resources they acquired in other sub-worlds. Screenwriters were not the first to “cross worlds”; many of the moguls and actors turned to cinema from vaudeville, not to mention practitioners such as costume and set designers. Screenwriters were also not a wholly new phenomenon; a considerable number of them were operating in the movie business since the early 1900s. Nevertheless, writers were a new force to be reckoned with, for several reasons.

First, due to volume: there were many of them. Sound created a new sort of rush in California, one for dialog. New writers therefore came en mass and were soon taking

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up space on the lots and in the budget sheets. Second, due to timing: they were newcomers. In the late twenties and early thirties, when studios hired new writers by the dozens, one could already speak of an integrated movie industry – a creative system was already in place. But the use of sound transformed the concept of the script and the division of labor surrounding its writing. Thus, writers for sound pictures were a new function. Finally, particularly due to their inter-world status: they were outsiders.

Writing, like acting, is not unique to the movies, and in fact, most of the practitioners who flowed into Hollywood earned their experience in other creative fields such as playwriting, the newspaper and magazine world, and literature. They were not novices but transfers, not native-born but emigrants. Consequently, their trajectory as a group, demonstrates the dynamism identified by Sewell and the ability of agents to reorient themselves within a system and transform it at the same time.

Following Sewell and Becker’s art world metaphor, it might be helpful to conceptualize the accumulation of wordsmiths from various industries in the movie capital in terms of migration. Recent theories of immigration embrace what some scholars call a “diasporic perspective”, which draws attention “to global connections, networks, activities and consciousnesses that bridge [the] more localized anchor reference.” Migrants are no longer thought of as substituting one local for another while severing all ties and burning all bridges to their old habitats. Instead, they are thought of as forming new ties that bind various geographic locations to one another. Writers in Hollywood fulfilled exactly this function. As they moved out West, while coming to

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terms with the habits and practices of the movie world, they also strengthened the ties between that world and the other creative fields back in New York and Chicago, from which they came.

Words for a Silent World

In the beginning of Hollywood, too, there was the word, even if it was not yet spoken. Scenarios were a byproduct of the shift away from documentary and towards narrative pictures starting around 1907. This shift, as film historian Kristin Thompson suggests, was a result of an increased demand for motion pictures generated by the booming vaudeville and nickelodeon markets. Staged films were “more predictable” in terms of manufacture, because they were shot in a studio under a schedule, a method that proved more suitable for mass production than outdoor filming of topical subjects. In addition, “a longer narrative film was proportionately cheaper than a short one, since the same sets and personnel could be used to create a greater amount of footage.”

The demand for stories was reinforced on other fronts as well. In 1911 the Supreme Court ruled that Motion Pictures were in fact dramatic productions thus subjecting them to copyright laws and sending companies on a hunt for original material. The star system that developed throughout the teens pushed for particular character-driven stories that could serve as vehicles for people like Mary Pickford or Douglas Fairbanks. All this helped bring about what film scholar Edward Azlant refers to as “scenario fever,” while giving rise to a group of “pioneer scenarists.” Like those who

14 The decision was made in the case of *Kalem Co. v. Harper Brothers* on November 13, 1911.
would follow them in the thirties, many of these first writers for the screen “emerged from fascinating backgrounds throughout the popular culture, bringing to film their experiences in journalist, graphic art, theater, and literature.” As we shall see, their incorporation into the industry in such an early stage was rather smooth. In this pre-standardized phase of filmmaking the division of labor was not yet very rigid and there was more room for experimentation, therefore in practice, these pioneers helped solidify the initial mode of production.

Writers were not merely hired to write scripts, they helped invent them. In the early days of cinema there were no scripts: “they used suggestions – they were called suggestions – and they might be very brief, just ideas, or they might be cribbed from some book or play. Nobody considered anything as copyrighted in those days,” remembered one of the pioneers Frank E. Woods. There was no standard method of submitting “suggestions” either: “as I happen to write them; sometimes orally; sometimes the director would be told the story. Sometimes they would start out and say, well, what will we shoot today? … I expect the director usually had some thought about how he was going to shoot it, but very frequently I was without any preparation.” Woods is accredited with submitting the first “continuity,” which means the splitting of the story into scenes. Of course, as he stated, “we never knew the word until about 1912 or 13. It was all, previous to that, merely cutting a picture into scenes, consecutive scenes.”

Woods, a native of Pennsylvania, who started his literary career as a reporter for the New

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17 Ibid., 608
York Dramatic Mirror, was also among the first to write critical reviews of motion pictures. It all started due to a feud in the theater world that cost the Mirror some of its add accounts and forced it to look for new patrons in the “previously disregarded … vulgar realms of the motion picture industry.” In return for the studios’ business the paper started running film reviews written by Woods though under the byline “the Spectator.”

From critic he turned insider. Woods started selling “suggestions” to the Biograph film company and in 1908 one of them, a version of Tennyson’s poem Enoch Arden, was the first to be submitted in a form of continuity. Or so he was told. “I couldn’t swear it was the first one written. Some other studio may have had a similar one, but I never knew of it, and I was always credited with having written the first continuity.”

First or not it marked a watershed, Woods was certain about that. After 1909, he claimed, “the importance of a well prepared script increased continuously from the very start until the present day.” Companies started employing “what they called a scenario editor, and as it grew, pictures grew in length and quality, they employed writers to put the script into continuity form, and at the time I was with Griffith, about ten or fifteen writers were on salary, and then I was with Lasky we ran up to about fifty on salary.”

The scenario fever had begun, but it was still pretty haphazard. Producers were partial to the idea of paying “more rigorous attention to preparing a script which provided narrative continuity before shooting actually started.” This effort, explains film scholar

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19 This “continuity” was later produced under the direction of D. W. Griffith.
20 NLRB, XXI-R-149, et al., Box 516, Volume V, October 6, 1937, 595.
21 Ibid., 608.
Janet Staiger, proved useful since “it was cheaper to pay a few workers to prepare a script and solve continuity problems at that stage than it was to let a whole crew of laborers work it out on the set or by retakes.”22 As producer Edwin Thanhouser, the owner of a studio in New Rochelle was reported to have said, “when I had my theatrical company … I never told the director, ‘Go and put on a play,’ and trusted to his inventive genius. I selected a manuscript I liked, and he followed it. And I don’t see any reason why the same course shouldn’t be a success in the motion pictures game.”23 Staiger identifies several stages in the development of script writing. She claims that by 1911 “firms had a story reading/writing department with head, readers, and writers,” and by 1913 there already occurred a “splitting of expertise … some workers excelling in creating stories, others in re-writing … title and subtitle draughtsmen,” and even “inter-title specialists.”24

Though specialization was undoubtedly well on its way, things might have not been that clear on the ground. One of the earliest scenarists Beulah Marie Dix recounted that “in those early days of silent pictures … a writer often sold an original to the company and then worked on it, frequently in collaboration with the director.” Dix, a children’s books author, was hired by the Famous Players-Lasky Company in 1916. She was a writer, but as it seemed to her “it was very informal in those early days. Anybody on the set did anything he or she was called upon to do. I’ve walked on as an extra, I’ve tended lights – and anybody not doing anything else wrote down the director’s notes on the scripts.”25 Fellow writer Clifford Howard supported these impressions. He claimed that “the scenario department, destined to become the most important and most expensive

features of a studio,” and comprising of a “corps of readers, a staff of story adapters, a staff of continuity writers, a bunch of gag-men, and a coterie of title writers,” was “a development that none could have foreseen even as late as 1913.”26 That was the time when he took the position of a scenario editor in the Balboa Amusement Company, one of the first to set foot in Southern California.

It was during the post-World War I era that one could truly speak of an integrated screenwriting profession. The reason, for the most part, was the decline of a free-lance scenario market. An important part of the “scenario fever” discussed by Azlant was “public promotion of the craft through contests, schools, magazines … resulting in a wave of public screenwriting,” i.e. scenarios submitted to the studios by practically anybody.27 The level of public participation is demonstrated in a letter received by writer Lloyd Lonegran:

This play is written by my son, Thomas, who is 16 years old. He is too delicate to go to work and since he had a bad fall, two years ago, has been very backwards in school. The doctor thinks that in time he may outgrow his feeble mental condition, but in the meanwhile he has turned his attention to motion pictures writing, and perhaps there may be a place for him there, so I send this story which he wrote after supper last evening.28

This system had its problems. For one, “submissions had grown so heavy that no quality control could be maintained.” Furthermore, “lawsuits by disgruntled authors” whose work was plagiarized by members of the enthusiastic public were reoccurring all too often.29 Such troubles were extremely undesirable to an industry whose center of gravity

26 Clifford Howard, “The Cinema in Retrospect part II”, Close Up 3 (6), December, 1928, 32
28 Lonergan, “How I Came to Write Continuity.”
just moved from east to west, and was trying to establish itself as a respectable, reliable, and consolidated business.

Though, in terms of organization, the Hollywood studio system would not reach its zenith before the mid-thirties, the road to integration began in the early twenties. It was during those years that Adolph Zukor of Paramount began purchasing theaters across the United States, that Nicholas Schenck consolidated Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, and that the up-and-coming moguls, facing the threat of censorship and foreign trade limitation, created a cooperative trade organization, the Motion Pictures Producers and Distributors of America. The search for order did not skip the writing departments, which by then were very much in existence.

With the shrinkage of the free-lance market, studios were focused on acquiring contract writers from among the professionals who have been with the industry for several years. Names like Woods, Dix, Anthony Kelley, Charles Kenyon, Anita Loos, Bess Meredyth, Jeanie MacPherson, Hector and Margaret Turnbull, and June Mathis would reappear in the writing credits, which were standard practice by then. Many of the leading scenarists were females, most of whom joined the business in the teens. The disproportionately large percentage of women, “occasionally [even] in executive positions in Hollywood producing companies,” is often commented about. In her biography of Frances Marion, Cari Beauchamp suggests that, “in fact … an important reason they were welcomed and appreciated and even occasionally nurtured and

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30 For more on this see chapter 1.
promoted from within was that movies were not taken seriously as a business.”

Nevertheless they were there and their status was unquestionable. When Marion assumed a position in the writing department of the newly incorporated MGM, “over a quarter of the scenario writers were women and many of them were already friends.” Most of them were regarded as pillars and treated accordingly: “Frances was to collect $3,000 every Saturday and her contract specifically allowed her to help supervise and edit her productions.” Such leeway was not common property.

To the contrary. Whether it was another mainstay from the “scenario-fever” days or a Taylorist innovation, the 1920s saw the rise of the infamous practice of “writing on committee.” As Staiger points out by the early twenties “it was customary … for scripts to travel through several writers or groups of writers … seldom did one person do all the work all the way through.” Writer Anita Loos concurred: “This is true – they had an enormous number of writers, and of all those writers, 10 percent of the writers did all the writing. … But it was Thalberg’s theory to have an enormous staff, so he would hire writers by the dozens… It’s a very special technique, and if you’re not the type who will rewrite a hundred times, you’re no good for motion pictures.” Part of the turn to committees was related to the increased division of labor, which, on top of stories, continuities and titles, also added the writing of “treatments.” Explains Woods, “[it] is a narrative story of the picture as it is proposed to produce it … it is like a short story. You

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33 Ibid., 199, 210.
might call it a short story, except it confined itself to the material to be used in preparing a continuity.”

Labor was divided but most pioneer writers took it with stride. These men and women were used to the “informal” atmosphere described by Dix where everybody did anything they were called to do; they were accustomed to the cooperative aspect of filmmaking. Some even started out working in other “departments.” Take Grover Jones who wrote for the movies well into the forties. He had been in Hollywood since “well, since 19 --- the latter part of 1913.” Prior to that, “I was a sign painter. Prior to that I was a coal miner … And I was inspired to come to Hollywood, simply because, having been a sign painter, and in those days everything was labeled in the pictures. The man who was the janitor had a sign “Janitor” across his cap. The fellow who took pills – it said “Pills” on the box.” He figured that “seeing so many pictures,” that needed so many signs, “I would get rich.” Indeed Jones spent five years in technical positions at studios such as Universal and Vitagraph until one day he was “watching Gilbert Pratt direct these two comics, trying to get into a dancing school,” and he made a suggestion:

I said, “Wouldn’t it be funny if one of the comics hid in that suit of armor in the hallway?” Gilbert Pratt looked at me and said, “what for?” I said, “And then when the professor walks in and he throws his cigarette away and he throws it in the suit of armor, look what will happen.” He thought that was funny, and they wrapped the story around it.

Later that night one of the executives at the studio hired Jones as a gag-man for fifty dollars a week. Jones, “had never heard the word ‘gag.’ I didn’t know what they meant,

35 NLRB, XXI-R-149, et al., Box 516, Volume V, October 6, 1937, 608.
36 NLRB, XXI-R-149, et al., Box 516, Volume Unspecified, October 18, 1937, 1701.
but I did know the difference between $35 and $50, and I said, ‘Yes’ … That started me on the career of what you call writing.”

“Writing” gags was not exactly a writing job. As Jones explained, “the gag man … is a fellow who sits on the set, disliked by everybody, who tells the Director that it would be very funny if Gary Cooper caught his coat tail in something as he went out of the door.” In other words, it was not part of the pre-shooting preparation. However, many of these practitioners, who sat on sets helping comedy directors add funny bits as shooting was taking place, were later incorporated into the writers departments, and some of them, like Jones, transformed into full-fledged screenwriters. Such inter-industry promotions strengthened the communal feeling and loyalty of many of these pioneers who learned to write for the movies at the same time the industry, as a whole, learned to make them.

In the late twenties Howard tried to sum up what he believed was the overall tenor uniting him and his fellow writers. He claimed that while, “novels are written; pictures are fabricated.” While “literary creation is solo work; cinema producing is collaborative, composite, multifarious, and vastly intricate.” For that reason, while “many writers are called to Hollywood … few are chosen. And the elect are content to become and remain, but individual cogs in the giant machinery of picture making.” Early Hollywood writers were overflowing with team spirit and proud to be a part of this newly emerging art world. Howard’s language often calls to mind Sewell’s definition of structures. In particular his assertion from 1928 that, in order to succeed as a screenwriter, one had to

37 Ibid., 1721.
38 Ibid., 1735.
“keep in touch with the developing technicalities and intricacies of picture making and its constantly fluctuating conditions and requirements.” He saw himself as embedded in a world, one that was indeed fluctuating. The next fluctuation proved decisive for the scribing cogs.

Days of Dialog

Talking pictures increased the studios’ demand for screenwriters, as sound implied longer scripts filled with conversations, speeches, dialogs, monologues, or in short, with talk. The invasion of sound, however, did not happen overnight and neither did that of novice writers. Film scholar Donald Crafton reminds that “the transition was years in the making and finishing … and the motion pictures did not turn topsy-turvy because of the talkies.” On the contrary, sound filtered in “gradually, in little crates, over a period of ten years, beginning around the post war period.” All the while, “the studios tried to anticipate the outcome of the audible cinema trend by hedging, that is, by continuing their silent production practices while adapting to new techniques.” It was only in 1929 that “one studio after another announced all-sound product for the [next] season,” and only after 1931 that “sound production had been standardized and projection practice was again routine.” By then it was clear that dialog writing was a necessary new talent. Perhaps not coincidentally, it was also around that time that other media experienced a decrease in demand for such talent.

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40 Ibid., 34.
The migration of writers away from the literary circles of the East Coast had both a push and a pull factor. The pull was Hollywood and its money; the push was the publishing and theater markets, or their lack thereof. Though some of the pioneer writers, like Loos, Marion, and Jones adapted well to sound, there were not enough of them. With a planned all-talkie output the studios needed a large resource of fresh talent, such that “could turn out polished, swift, and effective dialogue,” which “was fit to be spoken.”

Naturally they looked to New York, to “Manhattan’s network of publishing houses, newspaper and magazine editorial offices, literary agencies, theatrical production companies, and theaters.” In his profound study about the profession of authorship in Hollywood, Richard Fine explains that the “desire of serious writers for a studio paycheck reached a peak a few years” after the conversion to talkies, “when the Depression crippled the publishing industry and the commercial theater.” By 1933, “the bull market for the writers’ work ended”: in the publishing world “the number of new titles issued plunged lower than in nearly a decade” and on the legitimate stage “the number of openings shrank further to 130 – exactly half that of the 1926 season.”

Hollywood probably deserved some of the blame as it offered cheaper and quicker entertainment that, at least initially, won out in the competition over audiences. In any case it was beginning to look better for authors as well.

A word about numbers. It is hard to determine the exact quantity of writers who migrated west beginning in the late twenties. Fine identifies 138; film scholar John Schultheiss puts the number at 157. Either way the sum is considerable, particularly when

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44 Ibid., 1.
45 Ibid., 74.
compared with the number of writers working in the industry during those years, which Leo C. Rosten estimates was around 800.\textsuperscript{46} Moreover, in his anthropological study of the industry Rosten lists the 17 writers who drew the highest salaries in 1938, ten of them started writing for the pictures after 1929.\textsuperscript{47} All of this is to say that even without accurate statistics it is clear that the newcomers were significant both in percentage and in impact.

The story of Eastern writers in the Hollywood studio system was summed up nicely by one of them. Dudley Nichols, who would become one of the most influential and well-paid writers in the business, producing the screenplays for Bringing Up Baby, Stagecoach, and For Whom the Bell Tolls among many others, started his career as a newsman. Before coming to Hollywood in 1929 he worked as a correspondent for The New York World and The Nation, covering criminal trials, foreign affairs, and occasionally the theater.\textsuperscript{48} In a 1936 article for The Screen Guilds Magazine he commented that once “those reprehensible inventors, who might have left well enough alone, developed the sound track”, Hollywood lost its peace and quiet: “Authors dropped from the Chief in droves. They were paid wonderfully well. They were supplied with typewriters charming stenographers, luxurious homes and parked cars. For a time they were happy.” But only for a time, since, “having emerged from dingy newspaper offices and garrets into the sunlight, they began to remember certain joys that even poverty had not denied them, but which Hollywood certainly did.”\textsuperscript{49} That, in a nutshell was it. Though

\textsuperscript{47} Rosten, Hollywood, 322. The ten writers were Robert Riskin, Ben Hecht, Preston Sturges, Claude R. Binyon, Talbot Jennings, Sidney Buchman, Vincent Lawrence, John L. Balderston, John Lee Mahin, and Jack Yellen. All of them earned over $75,000 in 1938.
\textsuperscript{49} Dudley Nichols, “Cooking a Goose,” 7.
somewhat blinded by the money, sunlight, and, as another writer put it, “the tremendous excitement of a vast growing industry,” people like Nichols were also aware of the disadvantages.⁵⁰ Therefore fairly soon after their arrival the screenwriters set out on a struggle, one whose essence was reconciliation of the world they knew with the one they were now living in.

The lasting influence of other writing fields such as Broadway and publishing on Hollywood screenwriters was manifested mainly in two respects: it framed the way they experienced the movie industry and the demands they presented to it as a group. Fine makes a very convincing argument with regards to the newcomers’ experience. He claims that “writers’ reactions to the studio system … only makes sense in light of the beliefs, attitudes, and values attendant to the identity of the “writer” that these individuals had learned in New York’s literary marketplace.” He demonstrates how people like Nichols “arrived in Hollywood believing that they had been hired as writers,” but “quickly [learned] that in Hollywood the “writer” was defined not only differently but dramatically so.”⁵¹ Or in other words, “the profession of authorship as they knew it was … under attack.”⁵² Fine’s argument can be taken one step further, however, since New York beliefs, attitudes, and lived experience also informed the screenwriters’ struggle throughout the thirties for recognition and unionization. The world of “authorship as they knew it” might have been under attack but it was also striking back.

Before they could fight, though, writers had to reorient, and like in most cases of migration, first came the shock. Eastern intellectuals, who were used to the leisurely and

⁵² Ibid., 16.
romantic routine of fiction writing and the social gatherings at the Algonquin Round Table, had a hard time adjusting to their new work atmosphere. “What happened to us out here Charlie?” Actress Constance Collier asked her friend; “In the East we used to be people going about with people. Not out here. We’ve become people in aspic.” The friend, screenwriter Charles Brackett, was in agreement, “All the composure and perspective I acquired in the East collapsed like foam. May God give me strength never to accept a really silly project again.”

Brackett was indeed the product of Eastern composure and perspective. The son of a prosperous lawyer and bank owner from Saratoga Springs, NY and a graduate of Williams College and the Harvard Law School, he “was brought up to be a cultured man of the world.” As such he also dabbled in writing and in the mid twenties, after publishing two novellas in The Saturday Evening Post decided to move to the big city and become a full-time writer. He published three novels and served for a while as the New Yorkers’ dramatic critic, when in 1930 a job offer at RKO brought him to Los Angeles.

He spent the next six years under contract at Paramount until August 17, 1936, when he learned that he was to be teamed with Billy Wilder on Bluebeard’s Eighth Wife. Wilder was “a young Austrian [Brackett had] seen about for a year or two and liked very much.” The duo formed a partnership that lasted until 1950 and produced such classics as Ninotchka, The Lost Weekend, and Sunset Boulevard. Though until this matchmaking “none of Brackett’s early films lasted much beyond the year of their release,” he himself

53 Charles Brackett, excerpts from diary, January 1936, folder 28f-[20], Charles Brackett Papers, Special Collections, Margaret Herrick Library. I cannot be entirely sure this was indeed a diary that Brackett maintained daily as it is written in the past tense. The title “diary” might indicate a collection of notes, perhaps in preparation for a memoir.
55 Brackett, typed diary excerpt, August 17, 1936, folder 28f-[19], Charles Brackett Papers.
was thriving, earning a weekly salary of $1,000. Nevertheless, as shown, he was not entirely happy. Something in the nature of the work frustrated him, as he wrote in his diary: “I found myself in agony of thinking I was neither funny nor competent … finally I reached the comforting conclusion that nothing but the absolutely commonplace pleases anyone at Paramount. Oh, well, maybe now and then something with a kind of high-school foolishness about it.”

This understanding of Hollywood as a creative commonplace was shared by Samson Raphaelson. Raised among the immigrant Jewish community of the Lower East Side, Raphaelson was perhaps the quintessential Eastern writer, except that he started his career in Chicago, writing short stories and working for publishing and ad agencies. In the early twenties, which coincided also with his early twenties, he returned to work and write in New York. One of his short stories “The Day of Atonement,” that was published by Everybody’s Magazine in 1922, was rewritten to become Raphaelson’s first stage play. It was also re-titled as The Jazz Singer. Starring George Jessel the play became a huge Broadway hit, which made its writer, who owned the rights, a wealthy man. One of the royalty checks he received was from Warner Bros. The cinematic importance of the film version of The Jazz Singer is almost mythical. Yet, contrary to common belief it did not “cosign the silent film to the scrap heap.” Starring Al Jolson, who, coincidently, was the inspiration behind Raphaelson’s original story, the film did, however,

57 Brackett, excerpts from diary, 1935, folder 28f-[20], Charles Brackett Papers.
“demonstrate forcefully … the potential rewards for adding dialogue and singing to otherwise silent film.”

While his play made it to Hollywood already in 1926, it took the playwright four years to follow. Raphaelson was not tempted by Hollywood in the least: “I felt you lowered yourself. I had no historic sense of the meaning and significance of movies.” As for the hit movie he was credited with, “I had nothing to do with it. I would neither be proud not ashamed of it … it was something that the movie people did. They took a play of mine, they mangled the hell out of it … If a lot of people went to see it, for reasons that I can’t fathom to this day, I take neither credit nor blame.”

The stock market crash made him take a cross-country train. Having lost most of his savings Raphaelson took a job with the newly formed RKO studio for $750 a week. Less than a year later he moved to Paramount for the same money. There, like Brackett, he was introduced to the man with whom he would collaborate for nearly twenty years, director Ernst Lubitsch, writing hits such as The Merry Widow and The Shop Around the Corner. However, back in 1930 Raphaelson was still suspicious.

His view of movies has somewhat improved but his experience remained that of an outsider. “Not that pictures aren’t interesting,” he wrote to a friend, “they are. They are too engrossing. It is hard to live in this town without measuring … yourself by your salary.” That was exactly the problem. “The assignments, the politics, the salaries of the various lots are of such intense immediate interest … that you find after months have

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59 Crafton, The Talkies, 12.
gone by you’ve talked and thought about nothing else.” A couple of months later he explained to a different friend, “the first thing needful is to accept that fact,” that “here … not great stories, but practical ones written quickly, are the point. Let some more naïve soul than I strive mightily to write the great picture; I will content myself with the simpler imitation of a fine play or a fine novel…”

Where was all this frustration coming from? There were many reasons, but the common denominator seems to have been that studio work was depriving writers of their authorship – of control over their creations, a feature most Eastern writers understood as essential to the profession. Rosten, who worked as a screenwriter for most of the forties, pointed out that “the writers who find it easiest to adjust to Hollywood are [ones] who have served as writer-employees before coming to Hollywood,” i.e. “newspapermen, advertising writers, publicist,” since “these men do not invest too much self-esteem in their work.” Indeed, the standardization and order brought to the system by people like Irving Thalberg stressed the product over the practitioners who produced it. A movie was a collaborative endeavor and as such it belonged to a studio that orchestrated and determined the conditions of the collaboration. Actors, directors, cinematographers, and writers were more akin to resources, albeit indispensable and precious ones, than individual geniuses or artists. In addition, because their contribution was at the less expensive therefore extra-controlled stage of preproduction, studios could afford to treat writers with the least respect. Eastern writers have migrated to a place where authorship was subjected to a division of labor.

61 Raphaelson to Monty Montross, September 21, 1930, Box 3, Samson Raphaelson Papers, in the Special Collections of Columbia University in the city of New York.
62 Raphaelson to Alfred Wallerstein, March 29, 1930, Box 3, Samson Raphaelson Papers.
Consider the screenwriting process as described by the Vice President of Columbia Pictures, Benjamin B. Kahane. The senior executive was testifying in 1937 at a hearing before the National Labor Relations Board regarding the writers’ conditions of employment and right to unionize. One would assume he tried to paint a pretty picture, but instead his account validated screenwriter Philip Dunne when he said that for the executive “the writer was slightly a second-class citizen, but the script was first class, because the script was his.”

The course of action indeed started with a producer, who chose a property; “a stage play, it may be a novel, a book, a poem, or an original written expressly for screen purposes.” Then “a contract is made with a screen writer, or a screen writer under contract is assigned to write either a treatment or a first draft of a screen play script.” All the while “the writer operates under the general direction of the producer. The producer confers with him as to the subject matter and as to scenes and situations. The writer does the work.” He or she will start by writing a treatment; “assuming that the producer approves [it] and concludes to go ahead with the productions, the next step will ordinarily be the preparation of the first draft of a screen play.” However, if the treatment is not approved “either changes are required to be made or the treatment is abandoned and production is abandoned … or another treatment is made by another writer.”

Next comes the first draft, which is “a complete script indicating all of the actions, all of the dialogue, the themes and the continuity, indicating the sound, sound effects and everything that enables – well, everything pertaining to the shooting of the particular photoplay.” The first draft is followed by “conferences between producer and executive

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and writers … sometimes the director,” which in turn, lead to more drafts until the producer is satisfied. During this process of draft writing and rewriting the screenwriters may be changed, “this is frequently done … in many instances more than one writer is involved at the same time in the preparation of a script.” The logic, as Kahane saw it, was simple: “one writer’s particular ability may be along the line of construction. Another may be able to write good dialogues. Another may be a comedy or gag man. The rule now is for more than one writer to be engaged in the preparation of a screenplay.” As is the case when labor is divided, Authors were like technicians, each utilized for his particular expertise. Their creative control, which used to be the essence of their work, was now not even in question.

This new work routine was the source of much discontent. First, writers had to come to terms with the fact that the producer had the final word, even if his understanding of story or drama was inferior to theirs. As writer Sheridan Gibney testified at the same hearing, a script would be changed “if [the producer] doesn’t like a scene as it is written, or if he doesn’t like a situation as it is developed; if he doesn’t like the character and wants the character changed.” In an occasion of a disagreement, “sometimes it is a discussion sometimes it is a very heated argument,” of which the writer wins “only minor ones.” In general, said Gibney, producers will only “give up their point after they have had five or six different writers trying to write what they suggest, and then they decide it was wrong.” Or as dramatist Ben Hecht saw it, “they never ask you to

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66 NLRB, XXI-R-149, et al., Box 516, Volume IX, October 13, 1937, 1129-1131.
Another point of contention with regards to literary integrity was the practice of “writing on committee” or “mixing writers.” Sidney Howard, one of the seventeen writers who worked on *Gone with the Wind*, and one of the four who actually received credit, explained why it was an absurdity: “This [collaboration] not only wastes untold quantities of money – such producers have more than once spent close to a half a million dollars in screen writers’ salaries – but deprived the finished picture of any homogeneity of style.”

Edwin Justus Mayer, one of the five writers credited in the 1939 film *Rio*, added, that “every writer had had the experience of seeing his name on the screen and recognizing that he was not responsible for moods and lines in the picture.” The bond between the author and his work was broken.

There were practical problems too, on top of the attack on authorship. As demonstrated with the cases of Howard and Mayer, often a picture would carry multiple writing credits. Maurice Rapf, one of the six people to be accredited with composing Disney’s *Song of the South*, who at one point served as the Screen Writers’ Guild chairman of credits, explained that “a writer’s position in the motion picture industry is determined by his screen credits. The size of his check depends both on the quality and the number of pictures which bear his name, with emphasis on quality.” Now there were multiple kinds of credits; a script could be “written by” or “based on a story by” or

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67 Reminiscences of Ben Hecht, interviewed by Joan and Robert Franklin, June 1959, transcript, Popular Arts Project, 770-771.
based on an idea by,” and it could feature “added dialogue by.” Sometimes the list would grow so long that the names of some writers were left on the floor of the editing room. Perhaps it did not matter, since when a story has so many names attached to it, who can really take credit?

Disputes on this matter were abundant, as demonstrated by the next story.

Ferdinand Reyher arrived in Hollywood in the early thirties after publishing a novel and having spent most of his twenties in Europe, where he formed a friendship with Bertolt Brecht and was later instrumental in bringing the German playwright to America. In 1938 he wrote for Paramount the screenplay of a western titled Ride a Crooked Mile. At first, “the credit was assigned to me, accredited to me, and the original story had been assigned to another writer,” but then “two days later the studio changed it.” Reyher was not denied credit, “it was a question of the placing of the credits.” He explained: “you see, the value of the credit is in the original thing. I would have had the original screenplay based on a story,” but after the change “I had credit of the story and screenplay [together with] the other man,” rather than being given exclusive credit for the screenplay alone. Reyher did not want to receive credit for someone else’s idea, likewise he refused to share credit for his own story. He complained to the studio to no avail. Now and again screenwriters refused undue credit. Brackett remembered that while working with Wilder on Blossoms on Broadway, “Mr. [B. P.] Schulberg was kind enough to have our names on it, and we felt it was not fair and took them off.” Their contention was that “the young


72 Official Report Proceedings before the National Labor Relations Board: Hearing in the matter of Universal Pictures Inc. and Screen Writers’ Guild Inc. and Screen Playwrights Inc. Party to a Contract et al., Case No. C-1055 to C-1063, Box 1724, Volume XIII, August 29, 1939, Record Group 1460, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD, 1357 (henceforth NLRB, C-1055-C-1063)
man who rewrote it deserved the credit.” However, in a town where credit determined position, such chivalry was not always forthcoming.

The separation or, if you will, alienation between the writer and his work, was in fact a formal matter, seeing that rights over creative material were wavered the moment a writer signed a contract. Most basic studio contracts, as if written for a case study in *Das Kapital*, contained some variation of the following paragraph:

> The writer agrees that all material composed, submitted, added and/or interpreted by the writer hereunder shall automatically become the property of the Corporation which, for this purpose, shall be deemed the author thereof, the writer acting entirely as the corporations’ employee.

That was not all. Many of the longer contracts included a “lay-off” clause according to which, the producer had an “arbitrary option” to dismiss the writer without pay for a specified period. Since the “lay-off” was part of the contract the writer was still bound by it; therefore anything he wrote during that time was the legal property of the studio. In general Hollywood contracts were somewhat unequal in nature. Anthropologist Hortense Powdermaker even went as far as calling them “feudal,” since, for the most part, they bound “the employee to the studio for seven years and [permitted] the studio to dismiss him at the end of six months or one year, without having to show cause.”

Here it is worth pointing out that despite the limiting conditions of the basic contracts, the objective, for most writers, was not to be without one. As Kahane explained “there are different types of deals. There is the writer who is employed under contract for a particular period … and there is the writer who is engaged for a particular assignment –

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73 NLRB, XXI-R-149, et al., Box 516, Volume Unspecified, October 18, 1937, 1582, 1591.
that is, one assignment from week to week.” The latter, also known as freelance writers, in addition to having no stable income, were exposed to other forms of maltreatment like “writing on spec.” Working “on speculation” was a situation in which one was “writing something in the hope that a producer will buy it.” That something would not be an original story, play, or novel but more like a treatment based on a specific idea by the producer. Often, as one freelancer commented, “a producer would employ as many as eight on that basis.” More often than not their work was for nothing. Writer Martin Field sarcastically observed that when the writer submitted the “on spec” work, the producer “who by this time had made four trips to Santa Anita, played six gin-rummy sessions, flown one quick round trip to New York, and in general undergone a mental change of regime, had no interest left in what had once been a hot story angle … naturally, not a red cent crossed palms.”

Working freelance and “on spec” might have resembled the conditions some writers experienced in New York with one notable distinction – in Hollywood they did not own the material. Writers in other fields often composed sans contract. As Mankiewicz implied, they might spend anywhere between a few days to a few years on a short story, novel, or play with the hope of selling it when it was finished to a publisher, a magazine, a theater company, and if they were really lucky, also a motion picture company. In fact, the studios’ story departments all had extensions in New York whose role was to obtain information on available material and make contacts with publishers or

76 NLRB, XXI-R-149, et al., Box 515, Volume I, September 30, 1937, 106.
77 NLRB, XXI-R-149, et al., Box 516, Volume IX, October 13, 1937, 1172.
79 Some of these fields were not mutually exclusive. Like in the case of Samson Raphaelson, one might write a short story that would be bought by a magazine, develop it further and offer it as a play, and later on sell the rights to a motion picture based on it.
writers. However, when a story was sold, whether to a publisher, a Broadway producer, or a studio, the writer still held some rights over the original copy. And it goes without saying, that if he or she failed to sell, they remained with the property in hand. Not so in Hollywood. When one wrote on speculation, it was usually in order to develop an idea that was already bought and paid for – that belonged to someone else. Therefore, if the producer chose to pass on the suggested story, the writer was left with nothing but lost time and energy.

For the most part though many red cents did cross palms, a fact that, as mentioned, was one of the initial draws of tinsel town. Perhaps the best illustration for the migratory status of writers in Hollywood was their attitudes about remuneration. On the one hand, whatever their status, in their new habitat they were making more than in any other industry, and they knew it. Frances Goodrich and her husband Albert Hackett moved to Hollywood in 1931 after writing and acting together on the New York stage since the early twenties. “In those days, writers made lots and lots of money,” said Hackett, “I think the top men were making about $5000 a week. We went out there at a contract of $750 for the two of us, a team.” Edwin Justus Mayer may have complained about writing conditions, but he was honest enough to admit, “Salaries are large and comparatively sure.” Many writers even used the money earned in Hollywood to compensate for its lack in other fields. Ben Hecht liked to brag that he “was working at Metro … very happily,” but never for more than “eight or ten weeks” consecutively. He

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80 For more about the New York extensions of the story departments see Howard Thompson Lewis, The Motion Picture Industry (New York: D. Van Nostrand, 1933), 31-34.
82 Mayer, “Writing for Pictures Is a Rational Thing,” 5.
“got paid by the week,” and received “bonuses for every movie that was finished,” so he only stayed “till I got enough money to quit for the year.”

On the other hand by the mid thirties writers were also measuring their paychecks in intra-industry terms, comparing themselves to their current coworkers rather than to the meager paychecks they left back east. In 1935 Dudley Nichols granted that “Hollywood writers are hacks creating or trying to create entertainment for money,” but the real question, he claimed, was “whether such writers are overpaid hacks.” His answer was a categorical no: “the total salary paid to writers in Hollywood is well under five per cent of the total cost of pictures. That is not much, considering that pictures today could not begin to be produced without the writers’ ideas and talents.” Nichols had a point. In his study Rosten found that while “the top movie writers are very well paid … they are by no means well paid as Hollywood’s directors, actors or producers.” Though the top seventeen writers mentioned before made over $75,000 in 1938, there were, in comparison, “80 actors, 54 producers and executives, [and] 45 directors,” at this pay bracket.

The sideling of writers relative to the other creative forces was often commented on. To some writers it was nothing short of a conspiracy generated by “the Star-Director-Producer triumvirate – the Trinity of Egoism, Power, and Dollars, which consciously and unconsciously conspire to keep the Writer outside the Gates of Paradise.” In such state of mind even a small affront could serve as a casus belli. As

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83 Reminiscences of Ben Hecht, 745
85 The statistics are taken from a salary list published by the Treasury Department and quoted in Rosten, Hollywood, 322.
luck would have it, it was a rather large attack that inspired screenwriters to shake the system – an attack on fifty percent of their paycheck.

**Talking Back**

Throughout the latter part of the thirties Hollywood screenwriters were engaged in a struggle with the studios for their right to unionize and for better conditions. The inspiration behind this talk back came both from the writers’ experience in New York and from national events, which created an atmosphere that facilitated the rise of labor unions.

At the same time that Eastern writers were assimilating to the world of movie making, a series of external events pushed them towards collective action in an attempt to change their position within the system. According to Bourdieu, in capitalist societies, any artistic field “whatever its degree of independence, it continues to be affected by the laws of the field which encompasses it, those of economic and political profit.”\(^{87}\) That is, a structure such as the Hollywood studio system is contained in a larger system of art and entertainment, which, in turn, is contained within the overarching fields/structures of power and class relations. In the 1930s the seismic shifts in those outer structures were caused by the Depression and the various responses to it under the New Deal. The financial crash affected the picture business late but did not pass it over. By March 1933, like many companies in other industries, the studios were unable to meet their payrolls. In order to prevent a general shutdown, the executives made a joint decision to enact an industry wide wage cut: employees that received fifty dollars or more weekly would get a

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\(^{87}\) Bourdieu, “The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Reversed,” 320.
50 percent wage cut while those earning less that fifty would receive a 25 percent wage cuts,” all of which were to last eight weeks.88

Interestingly, the New Deal, with its variety of responses to the Depression, served as a double-edged sword in the studio system. For one, the NRA helped the big companies solidify their cartel by approving monopolistic practices under the pretense of “codes for fair practice.” At the same time, section 7(a) of the NIRA, as well as the Wagner Act, and in particular the National Labor Relations Board, were instrumental in enabling the organization of various Hollywood guilds in the course of its transformation to a union town. A broader discussion of the Screen Writers Guild (SWG) and other labor disputes in Hollywood will follow in a different chapter, but for present purposes it is important to point out the correlation between the writers’ community and the broader struggles occurring around it.

SWG was officially launched in April 1933, immediately following the industry-wide pay cut.89 A month later, on June 30, the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) was also formed. Initially the studios refused to recognize these unions and further antagonized them with the approval, in November, of the NRA’s Code of Fair Competition for the Motion Picture Industry, which was signed without adhering to the pleas of special committees representing the talent guilds. With the passing of the National Labor Relations Act and the formation of the Congress of Industrial Organizations in 1935, Hollywood unions gained political leverage, and indeed by May 1937 the actors had forced the studios to recognize their guild. The Screen Directors Guild (SDG), which

89 There were organizations for writers in pictures prior to 1933 like The Writers Club or The Photoplay Authors’ League but they were rather informal and functioned more like social clubs.
sprang up early in 1936, reached an agreement with the studios by early 1939. The longest battle was waged by SWG, which after two sets of hearings in front of the National Labor Relations Board finally won recognition only in May 1940. All this was happening while other forces in the industry such as the electrical workers and projectionists were waging battles of their own with and against the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IA).\textsuperscript{90}

The impetus behind the writers’ struggle might have come from the socio-political structure but its content was borrowed from the schemas and resources of the adjacent creative worlds of New York wordsmiths. Writers in the East Coast had a history of collective action prior to the national developments of the thirties. Though hardly a union, the Authors’ League, established between 1911 and 1912, standardized the use of contracts in the publishing business, and created a forceful assembly of writers, under which various groups could operate. One such group, which had a significant influence on screenwriters, was the Dramatists’ Guild that began as a committee within the League around 1919.\textsuperscript{91} Playwrights in New York were subject to various forms of manipulation by producers. As one of them recounted, “it was not by any means usual to get an advance against royalties … a manager owned world rights… we had no say about the deal,” and “though theoretically an author could object to changes in the script, this


was true only in proportion to the fighting strength of the author.” In 1926 the Guild, backed by the Authors’ League, managed to achieve a Minimum Basic Agreement with the important theatrical production companies. The agreement, among other things, “wiped out practically all [pay] abuses,” and “ preserved integrity of scripts,” so that there could be “no change without Author’s consent.” But “above all, the agreement cemented League Dramatists into a compact entity.” As such, it gave many writers the sense that “collective power through organization … enforces their rights,” and that it “has certainly made [the] road easier,” for young writers upon which “the future of the theater depends … as well as that of experienced writers.”

Many of the writers who were forced to accept a studio pay cut had experienced the Dramatists struggle first hand. Among the participants in the inaugurating meeting of SWG that took place in 1933 were Lawson – a veteran of New York’s New Playwrights Theater, Mayer, who was an established author, and Raphaelson; men who were intimately familiar with the playwrights’ struggles in the twenties. At the meeting these men “pointed out that the task to be accomplished by writers in Hollywood was far less difficult.” They saw the parallels. As Raphaelson once wrote to a friend back east, “I suppose [Hollywood is] as mad an industry as you hear it is, but I don’t think it’s any more grotesque than the sort of thing you and I went through daily with the Phillipe Boys, or with the delightful but equally fantastic Mr. Douglas.” Hackett and Goodrich

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94 Davis, “What Guild Shop Had Meant to the Dramatist.”
96 Raphaelson to Alfred Wallerstein. By “Phillipe Boys” and “Mr. Douglas” Raphaelson was probably referring to Broadway producers, as he goes on to compare the conditions in Hollywood to New York,
expressed similar sentiments: “we were accustomed to Actors’ Equity and Dramatists Guild. We didn’t feel dependent upon the industry, so we weren’t intimidated by the nature of studio antagonism.”

Broadway battles prepared Eastern writers for their fight in Hollywood. They also set their strategies.

Screenwriters in Hollywood wanted to bring their eastern achievements to the west – they wanted a guild shop. Throughout their negotiations and confrontations with the Hollywood moguls and producers, writers brought forward various demands pertaining to their particular conditions of employment: they wanted contracts to be “required in all cases;” the prohibition of writing on speculation; they wanted writers not to be “on call during lay-off” so that they “may do other work;” they wanted the prohibition of any black list; and that credit arbitration would be “disinterested,” so that “writer [will] pick [the] organization to act for him.” Some of these, like the call for contracts, also linked back to the demands of authors and dramatists. However, encompassing all these requirements was the goal of collective bargaining in the form of the 1926 Minimum Basic Agreement.

In 1935 Ernest Pascal, the president of SWG, proclaimed, “the guild is fighting for one thing – guild shop.” He explained that such a condition “opens its door to every Writer regardless of qualification. The Writer merely agrees to abide by the rules of the Guild – and no writer, except a Guild Writer, may be employed in a Motion Picture Studio.” Pascal stressed that they were not proposing a “closed shop,” which might “result in a virtual monopoly of the labor market.” As opposed to it, he claimed, “The

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guild shop idea has been tried and proved conclusively.”99 The SWG president based his claims on New York experience, and he did so directly. “The Dramatists Guild,” he explained, “through guild shop it corrected all the evils that existed for the Dramatists in the theatre.” Playwrights in the east realized “that only through guild shop could they negotiate a deal with Producing Managers that could be binding and enforceable.” Pascal proceeded with an analogy: “Screen Writers are the dramatists of Motion Pictures,” therefore “the key that solved their problems … will solve our problem.”100

An analogous guild was not sufficient to some writers, who sought to unite all writing fields in one coast-to-coast organization. In April 1936, in an effort to force the studios’ hand into recognizing it, the SWG board proposed an amalgamation of the guild with the Authors’ League and the formation of “one organization for all American Writers.” The rational behind this proposition was that “basically the problem of all writers is the same, and always has been.” Therefore it is a collective interest to “consolidate all writers in all fields into one strong and unified organization, strong and able to protect writers against the invasion of his rights and to fight for and win what is rightly his.”101 Beyond the utopian language, the proposition had specific practical implications. Even if it won recognition, which at the point it had not, acting alone SWG

99 The difference between a guild shop and a closed shop is not a trivial one. The idea behind SWG proposition, as it appears from the various articles it published in its magazine, was that, similarly to the prevalent notion of a closed shop, all screenwriters employed by the studio would be required to join a particular union, namely SWG. However, the guild itself, would be open to all new members the studios wished to hire. That is the producers shall not be limited to the existing pool of writers, but whomever they choose to employ will have to join SWG and work according to the union’s conditions and basic agreement with the studios.


was “unable to cut off the supply of man-power and material.” In case of a
screenwriters’ strike, producers could always reach out once more to the pool of talent in
the east. A joint union with a minimum basic agreement, “so that all persons employed
are members of the League and all sellers of material are members of the League,” would
prevent that from happening. It would mean the best for both worlds.

A word about communism. The CP was present in Hollywood and some writers
like John Howard Lawson, Ring Lardner, Donald Ogden Stewart, Dorothy Parker, and
Lillian Hellman were affiliated with it in one way or another. In addition, one could
make the claim, as historian Nancy Lyn Schwarts does, that “in Hollywood in the thirties,
the Communist Party was barely distinguishable in policy and activities from the
noncommunist Left.” However, a close look at the propositions made by the SWG
board reveals a very careful choice of language, which indicates an attempt to avoid
particular terms that gravitate too far left. The emphasis on “guild shop” as opposed to
“closed shop” is one example. Another is the inclusion, in the amalgamation proposal, of
a clause providing “against the contingency of two Guilds being able to call a third Guild
out on strike.” Such caution was not coincidental. For one, members of the Guild
wanted to avoid accusations, by the studios, that they were used as a front for the
Communist Party. More important though, was the active membership in SWG of

102 Ibid., 15.
103 E. E. Paramore, Jr. and L. W. Beilenson, “The ABC’s of the Amalgamation,” The Screen Guilds’
104 For more about the Communist Party and Hollywood see Schwartz, The Hollywood Writers’ Wars, ch.
5; Saverio Giovacchini, Hollywood Modernism: Film and Politics in the Age of the New Deal, Culture and
the moving image (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001); Michael Denning, The Cultural Front:
The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century (London: Verso, 1997); Ceplair and Englund,
The Inquisition in Hollywood.
105 Schwartz, The Hollywood Writers’ Wars, 82.
moderate and even conservative writers. Pascal might have been speaking for the board, but seating there with him was also Nunnally Johnson who self identified as a “Southern white Methodist,” and in later years claimed that “if you had to put a name on it, it would be “liberal Democrat,”” though, “a radical wouldn’t call me very liberal.”

Also on the board was Bracket, who often testified he “happen[ed] to be a born Republican, a tried-in-the-fire, voted for Landon Republican.”

Their propositions, therefore, represented a diverse political crowd.

That is not to say there were no dissenting voices. There were, and most of them were voiced by members of the old guard. Writers from the silent days were divided in their views about the new organization. Some like Frank Woods and Anita Loos joined it enthusiastically, and Frances Marion even served on the board for two years. However, for the most part the veterans of the silent period were antagonistic to the idea of a union and in particular to one that was integrated with people who did not write for the screen. Indeed, several of them, with the encouragement of studio heads, resigned from SWG claiming, “They didn’t want to be governed from New York.”

Among the leaders of the dissenting group was James K. McGuiness, who actually came from New York and was one of the first writers of The New Yorker’s “Talk of the Town” segment. McGuiness arrived in Hollywood prior to sound, in 1927, and settled comfortably at MGM. Despite his East Coast beginning, he had a different worldview. He believed that different writing worlds were exactly that – different, therefore should remain separate. “Their interests


109 NLRB, C-1055-C-1063, Box 1725, Volume VII, August 18, 1939, 491.
were New York interests and the legitimate theater interests,” he said about the authors and dramatists. “It seems to me,” he added, “that there was a danger … that the writers in moving pictures … could be used as a weapon in the fight between moving picture producing companies and the Dramatists Guild or the Authors Guild who were interested chiefly in novels and short stories.” For McGuiness the natural alliance was horizontal, between picture people, not writing people.

Many of the writers who were native to Hollywood, and did not migrate from other creative worlds/fields held similar views. McGuiness took many of his friends with him and formed an alternative writers’ organization called the Screen Playwrights. Some of the other veterans in the dissenting group were Casey Robinson, Grover Jones, Howard Emmett Rogers, Bess Meredyth, Carey Wilson, Rupert Hughes, and Waldemar Young. Then again, this was not a conflict between old and young or between east and west, but rather a reflection of a difference of opinion. In fact, one of the harshest critics of SWG was a New York writer by the name of Patterson McNutt who came out west in the mid thirties, after publishing short stories in *The Saturday Evening Post* and *The American Magazine* among others. The reason for the move: he was offered $350 a week to “clean up” a story called “Salable Ware.” McNutt was not looking for the best of both worlds since he thought his world, the studio system, was already the best. “I consider myself to be one of the luckiest white men in the world,” he testified. McNutt identified a “frame of mind” that he thought was “typical of Hollywood,” but also “rather dangerous to Hollywood writers”:

110 Ibid., 500.
111 He further testified that upon receiving this offer he replied, “well, I believe I told him that I would try to clean up a farmer’s daughter for that kind of money at that particular time.”
112 NLRB, XXI-R-149, et al., Box 516, Volume Unspecified, October 20, 1937, 2034-2035.
We come out here and we get on a gravy train, and after you have been on that gravy train for a certain length of time, I think you tend to get into the frame of mind where you think you belong on that gravy train; no matter what you do, that that is the normal state of life.\textsuperscript{113}

For people like McNutt, SWG and its demands reflected this dangerous state of mind.

Whether they migrated to it or not, some writers saw Hollywood as a creative world one should be thankful for rather than temper with.

In spite of this, the claims of the Guild and the language introduced by it had an influence across the board, even on the Playwrights. Whether it was because they were trying to gain control over the ranks, or disprove the conception of them as studios’ puppets, in March 1937 the Screen Playwrights signed a contract with the producers. The agreement featured accomplishments such as “a minimum wage, standardized contracts … notice, on request, on whether other writers were working on the same material, no speculative writing without payment, and participation in the credit allocation procedure.”\textsuperscript{114} It did not insist on guild shop though, and indeed most writers did not join the ranks of the Playwrights, despite the fact that the organization practically obliterated SWG for a couple of years. Eventually though, with the help of the NLRB the Guild reclaimed its membership. In 1941 SWG, now formally recognized, signed an agreement with the studios that featured “85 per cent union shop for three years, when it would become 90 per cent (and ultimately 100 per cent), and “exclusive control” over credits.”\textsuperscript{115} Though the amalgamation with the Authors League never fully materialized, screenwriters did manage to create a protective union modeled after the organizations

\textsuperscript{113} Ib\textsuperscript{id.}, 2055.
\textsuperscript{114} Ceplair and Englund, \textit{The Inquisition in Hollywood}, 43.
\textsuperscript{115} Ib\textsuperscript{id.}, 46.
some of them belonged to back east in the days they were playwrights, authors, and short story writers.

The affect of migratory writers extended beyond improving their own status within the industry; they also transformed the status of the industry as a whole. Despite the failure of the amalgamation, the fact that it was seriously considered suggested that, like Pascal said, “Screen-Writing … became the same as any other kind of writing. It wiped out the distinction between the “legitimate” writer and the “Hollywood” writer.” To be sure, this was a bit of an overstatement. There were many differences between the different kinds of writing and they did not all “become one.” But the term legitimate is key here, since it seems accurate to say that the presence of formerly “legitimate” writers in Hollywood lent some respect and validity to their new profession, by that making it a bit more “legitimate.” Writing for the screen might have still been looked down upon, but it moved up a peg or two. With their history, their struggle against the studios, and also the quality of their work, by the late thirties screenwriters had turned their profession into one that was worthy and valuable enough to be included within the community of all writers.

It was not only the recognition by the Authors’ League. Ten years after the proposed amalgamation, author James M. Cain, whose novels were a hot commodity in Hollywood during the forties, was advocating for an “American Authors’ Authority,” that would administer copyright and protect writers’ contracts no matter who they sign it with, be it “a magazine, a publisher, a radio station, or a picture company.” No longer was it the case, as in the teens, that “a self-respecting author” who wished to “retain the

116 Pascal, “The Author of The Piece.”
confidence of his friends and admirers,” would “speak softly” about working for the picture business “if he was caught at it.” A screenwriter no longer had to treat “his undignified work as a trifling side issue, done just for the fun of it.” Writing for the movies, and by implication also movies themselves, were treated more seriously.

The influence of migration did not cease with the recognition of SWG. Once the bond with other industries was established its presence persisted and so did its influence; some writers continued living between worlds. This condition was most apparent when it came to the issue of control over material. The question of ownership or, more accurately, lack of it, remained a sensitive topic among screenwriters, who never fully surrendered the dream of owning their scripts like they did their short stories and plays. In fact, it was so sensitive that Philip Dunne referred to it as “dynamite.” In 1945 the author, who for a short time was also a screenwriter, Raymond Chandler commented that a writer without “power of decision over the uses of his own craft, without ownership of it,” was in essence “almost without honor for it.” These were harsh words but Dunne admitted that this was what writers in Hollywood had been thinking for years: “control of material?... Isn’t that what the writers’ really want,” he asked and immediately replied, “of course it was. No writer in his senses could want anything else.” But, he added, “It wasn’t what writers were asking for.” Like Mankiewicz, Dunne believed that it was not logical that a “craftsman, the salaried mechanic, should have a legal right to dictate the manager, the entrepreneur who has a responsibility to his stockholders.” But, he

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conceded, “by controlling the source material,” the screenwriter “would undoubtedly have won by now a far greater degree of recognition and respect than he has.”

In reality, by the mid-forties screenwriters had found roundabout ways to gain more control over their work. The most common method was to hyphenate their writer status with another role such as director or producer, which carried greater prestige and authority. Brackett and Wilder turned from a team of writers to a writer-producer and writer-director respectively, and so did Ben Hecht and his partner Charles McArthur. Dunne and Nunnally Johnson began producing, while Dudley Nichols metamorphosed into a writer-producer-director. Another way to gain control was to participate in the financing of the movie, or in other words, “to work in profit-sharing independent ventures as partners and not as employees.” That meant working without a studio contract, but independent deals offered their own perks. Mary McCall Jr. was advocating for such ventures. She described her deal with producer Sam Jaffee:

My contract called for the payment to me of fifteen thousand dollars for ten weeks work. If the screenplay, as finally shot, was less than seventy-five per cent my work, that fifteen thousand dollars would be the total payment to me. If seventy-five per cent or more of the screen play which was used was my work, I was to receive five per cent of the producers’ share of the picture. The fifteen thousand dollars would then be considered an advance against my percentage.

The result was satisfactory. McCall received fifteen hundred dollars above the advance and was expecting additional income from world market profits. She described this writing assignment as “the most profitable experience of my working life,” and added that she wishes her “fellow writers no better fortune than a contract of this sort.”

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121 This data refers to the classic studio era, before its termination with the Paramount Decision in 1948. Some of these men assumed additional roles in later years.
However, despite these efforts, and despite their, by then complete, assimilation into the motion picture world, some writers remained dissatisfied with the status of authorship in the motion picture world. As Dunne once again conceded, while “the writer who becomes a writer-producer is … accepting both authority over and responsibility for his work, while assuming a far more realistic position vis-à-vis the director,” he is still “not completely free.” The reason was that no matter how “glorified,” he was still an “employee, subject to the directions, and in some cases the apparent lunacies, of the studio executives. His chain may have become a mere web of gossamer, but he is still caught.” For some, the only way to gain control over their creation was simply to leave.

In 1942, shortly after the SWG agreement went into effect, Casey Robinson, a former member of the Playwrights, who started his career as a titles writer in the mid-twenties, sent a letter to his boss Jack L. Warner. Essentially he wanted out of his Warner Bros. contract saying, “after much deliberation I feel it is to our mutual advantage to call off our “marriage”.” He confessed it was not “physically possible for [him] to complete that much work and at the same time maintain the measure of quality [he] insists upon at all time.” He felt he was “approaching stagnation,” and working under “irksome and restricted conditions.” He wanted to make it absolutely clear that “it was not money [he was] after,” but rather “it is my freedom I want.” By freedom he meant “the opportunity of choosing my own subjects – the privilege of writing original screenplays – a partner’s voice in casting and direction – and a full partner’s reward in, primarily, satisfaction, and secondarily, financial rewards (great or small) which result from the free and unrestricted use of my full talents, whatever they may be.” This veteran writer, who originally

opposed amalgamation, perhaps because he had no experience working in other fields outside cinema, was now asking for more control – for traditional authorship rights. He was begging to be “fired immediately.”

Robinson understood that what he was asking was “unheard of in those days,” not to say “revolutionary.” He also knew that “Jack Warner despised writers,” and therefore was not likely to grant his request. He tried to better his odds by using a broker – Hal Wallis, the studio’s head producer, a “very strong man in his job,” albeit one whose “door was sort of open.” He wrote to him saying, “I hope [Jack] sees the light,” and “would appreciate boundlessly any support you feel like giving.” But despite the strides made by screenwriters since the silent days and through the Guild wars. Despite the change immigrant writers brought to the screenwriting community and to the status of their profession, their quest for authorship still sounded like a foreign language to the businessmen of the studios, therefore often fell on deaf ears. Dumbfounded by the request, Warner wrote to Wallis the next day: “I cannot understand the attached note from Casey Robinson. I gave him a good deal and straightened everything out to his satisfaction, and now he sends a letter like this. I think it is uncalled for and isn’t cricket. Will you tell Casey for me, to live up to his agreement.”

A full merger between the screenwriting field and other writing worlds never took place. Nor could it. But the exchange – of ideas, demands, techniques, and practices –

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124 Casey Robinson to Jack Warner, March 9, 1942, folder 226.f-2240, Hal Wallis Papers, Special Collections, Margaret Herrick Library.
126 Ibid., 207.
continued, and by the early forties, screenwriters had managed to transform the world of moviemaking enough to make many of them enthusiastic and utterly loyal to it. Conceivably, it was exactly this combination of newfound loyalty to pictures and a longstanding alliance with other literary fields that condemned writers in Hollywood to a constant attempt at improving their position. As suggested, their condition was not unlike that of immigrants, who move from one country or region to another. By moving to a new industry and a new coast screenwriters established a line of exchange and communication with the industries they left behind. This new channel was probably not in one way; a study of Broadway or the publishing business, not to mention radio and television, during the same years will surely reveal similar borrowing and adaptation inspired by Hollywood. As is often the case in émigré communities, there was never a consensus among screenwriters regarding the merits of their new habitat. Some saw themselves as nothing more than “first-rate cabinetmakers,” who take materials made by other people and “work it into an acceptable form.” Others, like Charles Brackett, maintained that “writing for the screen is a living and important art,” and that the “screen writer [bears] a burden unique among writers” – “sustaining the interest of an audience without interruption.” Either way, as a group they assimilated and as individuals they reconciled themselves to the anonymity entailed by writing for the screen.

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129 Nunnally Johnson, interviewed by Thomas Stempel, transcript, 220-221; Phillip Dunne, interviewed by Thomas Stempel, transcript, 252.
130 Charles Brackett, Address for the Samuel Goldwyn Award for Creative Writing.
The Birth of the Auteur – How the Studio Production Process Kept the Director Both In and Under Control

During the golden age of the Hollywood studios, what was the difference between the creative status of a screenwriter and that of a director? Consider the production of *Lives of Bengal Lancer*, a Paramount picture based on a novel by Francis Yeats-Brown that followed the struggles of three British soldiers in India. Initial work on the screenplay was assigned to two writers by the names of Malcolm Stewart Bailey and Harvey Gates in early 1932. As writer Grover Jones testified, “in those days we used to write scripts alphabetically as the sequence came, A, B, C and so on. Well, they wrote and wrote and got a little discouraged, and finally got down to F and said, ‘the hell with it,’ and quit.” Then the job was handed over to Jones and his partner William Slavens McNutt. They wrote a script but the studio decided not to pursue it. Afterwards, “two or three years went by, maybe four. Writers came from all over the world to work on *Bengal Lancer*. They were from every place. And the cost accumulated – I have forgotten the exact figure now – almost up to $300,000, $400,000 or half a million.”

At that point director Henry Hathaway came on board. “The reason they gave him *Bengal Lancer*,” said Jones, was because he got discouraged … drew out his savings of $2,000, and took a trip around the world … and, by chance, he went through a place called India. So when he got back he was the only guy on the lot who had been in India.”

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1 Official Report Proceedings before the National Labor Relations Board: Hearing in the matter of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios and Motion Pictures Producers and Screen Writers Guild of the Authors’ Guild of
Hathaway was an in-house director at Paramount, who worked mostly on low budget Westerns. As he remembered, *Bengal Lancer* was his “first really important movie.” He decided to shoot the picture like all his Westerns in Lone Pine, California: “I had been up in India … and it wasn’t unlike the country that we were in.” He had one request though. He asked the company to supply an elephant, for cinematic credibility. He wanted to film an elephant going over the hill, and make the audience think, “my God, this isn’t a place I’ve been, here’s an elephant.”

“Then a funny thing happened.” The night before shooting was about to begin, Hathaway was cruising the set in search of his elephant. When he could not find it he approached one of the production assistants who informed him the studio decided not to send one: “they said that they think it’s a whim of yours and they don’t want to spend the money.” The director was furious. He called the main office and said, “I understand you’re not sending me the elephant … well, I’ll tell you one thing. You start him out right now in a truck, start him or start another director.” They said they would send another director. However, about an hour later, “the assistant director came around and said the elephant’s on the way.” Hathaway admitted, “It was more a matter of principle. But there was [also] a great shot.”

The film, released in 1935, featured an elephant, Gary Cooper, one of the first screen appearances by Akim Tamiroff, a directing credit for Hathaway, an adaptation credit for Jones and McNutt, a suggestion credit for Yeats-Brown, and additional writing

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credits for Waldemar Young, John L. Balderston, and Achmed Abdullah. Here lay the difference. While writers accumulated, assigned and reassigned due to no particular reason, the director was irreplaceable, even at the cost of carrying an elephant up the Alabama Hills.

This chapter explains why the director could not be replaced and how in later years this fact helped establish his position and reputation as the sole creator or auteur of the motion picture. Hollywood directors were one part of a production team that included producers, writers, cinematographers, art directors, editors, and actors. Like their teammates they were under the command of the particular studio they were working for and the management of that studio’s executive producer or head of production. Unlike their colleagues, directors enjoyed a certain degree of authoritative autonomy. The development, in the early twentieth century, of the American film industry incorporated a systematic division of the creative labor. Work was slowly divided into departments with supervisors and specialists, and a task such as writing a story for the movie was split up between scenarists, title writers, dialog writers, continuity writers, and gag men. However, within this organizing frenzy the directing profession remained relatively unbroken.

Particularly during the filming stage of the production, when the cameras were actually rolling, studio involvement in the director’s job was reduced to a minimum. Even such towering figures as Irving Thalberg or Darryl Zanuck generally “never went on set” and “left the director pretty much alone.” This disengagement was not solely the result of their respect for artistic freedom. On the contrary, as this chapter will argue, the

reality of production required an independent director above all for commercial expediency. When films became longer and more complex, featuring elaborate settings and the demanding mechanism of the star system, the actual production of footage on the set grew very expensive. Efficiency was of the essence. However, since cinema was still a creative business it had to be accompanied by a genuine talent for pictorial storytelling, good acting, and visual originality. Successful studio directors who proved they have the skill to shoot a “good” film while remaining within budget were given an autonomous sphere between the pre-production preparatory stage and the post-production cutting and editing.

Directing had a history of autonomy. Stage directors in theaters and particularly on Broadway were responsible for many of the creative aspects of a play. Similarly, in the early days of cinema, the director fulfilled nearly all functions in film production save for holding the camera and acting. The maintenance of this freedom, however, should not be taken for granted. After all, writing was perhaps the quintessential self-sufficient task, a tradition that Hollywood quickly transformed. The following pages will illustrate how and why it came to be that the Hollywood director stayed in control.

First, though, it is necessary to address the issue of gender. Throughout the chapter I use the masculine form in reference to directors. The reason is that, sadly, during the studio era there were virtually no women directors, or at least none that succeeded in sustaining a career within mainstream Hollywood. The situation was somewhat better in the early days of the industry when one could often come across a movie by Alice Guy Blaché, Margery Wilson, Ruth Ann Baldwyn, Grace Cunard, Cleo Madison, Ruth Stonehouse, Ida May Park, Elsie Jane Wilson, and Lois Weber. The latter
even maintained her reputation through the early twenties. Their presence was probably due to the industry’s overall appeal for women between 1910 and World War I. As Guy Blaché herself commented, “it has long been a source of wonder to me that many women have not seized upon the wonderful opportunities offered to them by the motion picture art to make their way to fame and fortune.”¹ The exact numbers of those who took the opportunity, however, is far from accurate, while it is clear that as the teens drew to a close, “most of these women soon dropped out, presumably for lack of talent, interest, or the ability to cope with Hollywood politics.”² In addition there was definitely prejudice. Particularly due to the autonomous nature of directing, one should not discard implicit gender discrimination as the main reason that, unlike their fellow actresses and screenwriters, women directors were not given a chance to stay in control.

The Function of Autonomy

Studio film directors operated in the section of the production process that proved the most difficult to control. As previously mentioned, being a business that relies on creativity, the motion picture industry could not operate exactly like a conventional assembly line. The division of labor into minimal and automatic tasks was impossible since the dependency on original stories, imaginative set design, innovative camera angles, and unique acting performance necessitated some autonomy. Sociologist Clinton Sanders explains that in taste guided industries “the conventionalization of production

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activities varies with the complexity and centralization of the production organization, the routineness of production, the intricacy of production tasks and the extent to which innovation is valued and rewarded.” He mentions that in the production of popular materials such as television commercials and soap operas the level of conventionalization is high: sets are formally organized, resources are “readily available”, and “the division of labor and power relations are firmly established.” Alternatively, he points out that when making such artifacts as fine art photographs or independent films the process is “considerably less routinized.” In such industries “relationships and work roles are relatively unstructured, innovation is valued, [and] available resources change rapidly.” As a result, “production activities are least constrained by conventions.”

Sanders’ distinction is valuable and could even be taken one step further. While levels of conventionalization and routine vary among industries they also differ within them. The production of all kinds of culture and art is done in a system or world made up of various professions, some of these trades are less “routinized” than others as they are more complex, less formally organized, and feature a high level of unpredictability. To put it differently, some tasks necessitate more autonomy. In the making of a news program, for example, the work of the journalist reporting live from the scene is far less monitored than that of the news anchor who sits in the studio and recites prewritten text.

Theoretical studies of labor and capital have long ago called attention to the correlation between skill and autonomy. In all kinds of industries there were some trades that required what Fredrick Winslow Taylor termed “rule-of-thumb” or “traditional

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knowledge” and were therefore harder to break-up, supervise, and control. As Harry Braverman put it in his seminal work *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, in capitalist societies “every step in the labor process is divorced, so far as possible, from special knowledge and training and reduced to simple labor.” However, “the relatively few persons for whom special knowledge and training are reserved are freed so far as possible from the obligations of simple labor.” Historian David Montgomery referred to this type of knowledge and skill as “the manager’s brain under the workman’s cap.” He noticed, in his study of iron mills in late nineteenth century U.S. that “the division of labor … had created, on the one hand, common laborers, who fetched and pushed at the command of their gang bosses, and, on the other hand, large groups of craftsmen, who learned their trades by doing and who clearly directed their own work and that of their immediate helpers.”

Braverman and Montgomery emphasize the struggle between labor and management. The first stresses how those who manage seek to “destroy the craft as a process under the control of the worker” and “reconstitute it as a process under [their] control.” While the latter, in contrast, points out that when workers maintain their control it is because “they fought for it” and their fight “drew strength” form, among other things, “the group ethical code that they developed” and “the organizations they

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9 Montgomery actually borrows this phrase from William D. Haywood and Frank Bohn. The original use can be found in Big Bill Haywood, *Industrial Socialism*, 7th ed (Chicago: C.H. Kerr, 1911).
created for themselves in order to protect their interests and values.”12 While not trying to disparage the importance of class conflict I wish to draw attention to a feature of skilled labor that Montgomery mentions but does not assign a great deal of attention or importance – that of “functional autonomy”. Sovereignty in the workplace is often the result of struggle, but it could also be a necessary outcome of the mode of production. Sometimes the employment of skilled workers who are left to their own devices is simply more practical.

As American cinema evolved into a modern business, keeping the director somewhat free happened to be functional. There is no question that the owners of motion picture companies sought to exercise as much control as possible over the production process. However, even at its most domineering, the studio system failed to break down the craft of directing and left it almost completely in the hands of its practitioners. This was despite the fact there was never a formal or any other kind of meaningful resistance from the ranks. Organization also came late; the Screen Directors Guild was established only in 1936, failed to gain recognition until 1939, and never went on strike. Regardless of this absence, between the late teens and the early thirties Hollywood developed a production routine that relied on the director’s “rule of thumb” during the filming stage when the picture was “in production”.

There were four main reasons for the maintenance of this autonomy. The first was exactly that – maintenance. During the early days of cinema, before any kind of managerial system was put in place, directors did enjoy, or endured, sole responsibility for all aspects of filmmaking. When the financiers of the companies started to increase

their involvement in the details of production the pattern of an independent director was already in place. Secondly, the film directors’ counterparts in theater and foreign film industries, who were also self-sufficient to some extent, influenced the Hollywood version of the profession. Thirdly, the nature of directing, that is the orchestration of the shooting of a motion picture, is a creative task that like writing, acting, or designing, requires some level of freedom.

Finally, on top of all these lies the fact that the actual process of filming is a complicated and expensive endeavor whose successful and punctual completion demands the command of a skilled and experienced professional. Shooting a movie involves film, which always was and still is a costly product. Shooting a movie also takes time and in motion pictures time equals loads of money. Shooting a good movie, one that features clear footage with good lighting, a dramatic story, and credible acting, also takes care, attention to detail, and some level of perfectionism – all qualities that often lead to waste of either film or time. Therefore, shooting a good film with care and without wasting too much money demands skill, and as the scholars quoted above indicate a high level of complexity and skill usually entail autonomy. The evolution of directorial autonomy in Hollywood is worth a closer look. In order to do so though one has to go back to the days when the director was not autonomous, he was everything.

“Making Bricks without Straw”

When pictures just started, in the first fifteen years of the twentieth century, the director was “the mainspring of the new industry … for he knew how to make bricks without straw.” At least, that was how one anonymous director writing in the Saturday Evening
Post saw it. “It was all a wild hurly-burly to throw film onto the market,” he claimed.

“Exhibitors were clamoring for new pictures” since “the ten-cent customers stood in line with their dimes in their hand.” The feeling was that “any old thing would draw a crowd, and the cameras could not grind fast enough to supply the demand.” The director was he who proved he could answer the call for “footage, and still more footage”: “unlimited money was poured into his lap and he was told to make pictures and to keep on making pictures as fast as he knew how.”

What appeared to be an unlimited demand was the only guideline in the early days. Eager investors were constantly in the market for anyone who thought he was up to the task of churning out pictures quickly. As one film historian put it, “if you were twenty and though you could direct, one company or another would probably give you the chance.” That was exactly the case with the Saturday Evening Post director: “the motion-picture game was new in those days, and I though I saw a future in it for a young man.” He started at “the grease-paint end” of some studio and was “permitted to remain on the lot long enough to study the making of pictures – long enough to qualify as a director in the days when almost anyone could qualify – and almost anyone did.”

Indeed, as it was a new profession, film directors came from everywhere. Some like D. W. Griffith, G. M. Anderson, and Al Christie had theatrical experience. Others brought with them any other kind of experience: “Sam Wood had worked on pipelines for an oil company … James Cruze had worked in a medicine show … Clarence Brown had been

15 “Putting the Move in the Movie,” 14.
an auto salesman. W. S. Dyke had been a lumberjack, gold miner, railroader, and mercenary. ”

Take Allan Dwan’s case. “It was a funny thing,” he remembered, working as an electric engineer in Chicago in 1909, “I was sent out to the old Essanay studio … one day to install some Cooper-Hewitt lights. They were new then, and took an expert to handle them. While I was adjusting them, I watched things that were going on and became interested.” He asked them for a job: “the company was being reorganized in some ways – a lot of the old bunch had left to go west to form the American – and they made me scenario editor.” A couple of months later the company sent Dwan to California to write some stories for director Frank Beal. As mentioned production was very unorganized in those days and it took Dwan a long while just to locate the film crew he was looking for. “I finally found [them] at San Juan Capistrano … there were about eight actors, a lot of cowboys, some horses, and everyone was sitting there doing nothing.” Beal apparently chose to vacation in Los Angeles where alcohol was more readily available. Dwan wired Chicago saying, “I suggest you disband the company. You have no director.” The wire that came back read “You direct.” The rest he learned on the go.

Film scholar Janet Staiger labels those days as a “director system.” She claims that the function of the director became prevalent in 1907 when a separate worker was hired by companies to take over production. During the next two years one could speak of a system in which “one individual staged the action and another person photographed

The reason the first was called a director was probably since a turn to fictional narrative suggested “as a model the stage director who controlled the choices of scenery, costumes, and acting, and used a script as an ‘outline’ of the narrative.” In those days the producer and the director were the same person, and the terms were even used synonymously. After 1909 demand increased and companies were in need of even more, “footage, and still more footage.” The problem was that one director could shoot only about one or two picture per week. As Dwan recalled, “we would work say, Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday shooting and make two pictures. Then on Thursday and Friday I’d develop and cut them … we wouldn’t ship them until we had maybe six, and then they’d release them in their own order.” Staiger says that the solution was logical – “hire more directors,” and companies did exactly that; they employed several directors and sent each of them out to work with his own company. This expansion beginning in 1909 symbolized a slight change in production routine, which now resembled what Staiger calls a “director unit system.”

Even though firms commissioned the work, the director was the one in charge; he was “rewriting, directing, and editing,” sometimes even developing. Everything outside distribution and exhibition was in his hands. The director in the Post remembered one time he was hired, which was “typical of the period”:

“Want to work for us? Asked Mr. Jones, who was and is a man of few words. I said that I might consider a proposition. “Consider the proposition made … How much?” I told him how much and he grunted: “All right! You’re hired.” “When do you want me to begin?” I asked. “To-morrow.” “But my people – my company? I’ll need a camera man and a property man and a ---” “Get ‘em,” said

20 *Who the Devil Made It*, 56–57.
Jones briefly. “Get all the people you need.” I next wished to know whether he had any stories in sight – any scenarios in preparation. “Get your own stories,” said he, “Same kind of stuff you’ve been doing. Get everything and start shooting as soon as you can.”

By this stage, of the mid teens, proven experience in turning out one-reel pictures or features was valuable. Raul Walsh was making films with Griffith when in 1915 Winfeld Sheehan of the newly formed Fox Company set out to hire him. “Nobody ever heard of the Fox Company,” and Walsh who wanted to remain with Griffith figured “the best way to get out of this [was] to blast him with a big salary.” He told Sheehan he wanted four hundred dollars a week, an astronomical figure. He received a contract the next day. Everyone wanted reliable directors, whatever the cost.

Demand for directors remained constant, but beginning in the mid teens the system around them started changing. There seems to be a consensus among film scholars that “the outlines of the new industry began to take shape in 1913-1914, with the formation of the new feature-production companies … that would end up with greater control of distribution and exhibition.” The process, which culminated only a decade and a half later, was triggered mostly by competition over markets between companies, which sought a bigger share of the potential profits from this still rather novel and definitely mushrooming business. In the case of the film industry the competition, backed by an audience preference for longer feature films, drove production prices up. The success of long, ambitious and expensive pictures such as Griffith’s *Enoch Arden*, a two-

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22 “Putting the Move in the Movies”, 14.
23 During those days a conventional picture was shot on one reel of film, which was approximately 1,000 feet and lasted around twenty minutes. The term “feature” was given to special pictures that had multiple reels and lasted longer. For more see Eileen Bowser, *The Transformation of Cinema, 1907-1915* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), chap. 11–12.
24 *Who the Devil Made It*, 152.
reeler, in 1911 and the nine reel, two and a half hour long Italian production of *Quo Vadis* in 1913, signaled a new phase in motion pictures. By 1916 the crowds seemed to be turning away from shorts, as *Photoplay* reported with a somewhat frustrated tone, it was “impossible to make exhibitors understand that a short picture may have a bigger drawing power than a long one.” The “vogue of feature length films” as historian Lewis Jacobs, writing in the late thirties, referred to it, combined with the escalating reliance on a stars-system, “caused revolutionary changes in every department of the industry.” Simply put, production became a good deal more expensive. Movie making now had to be a large-scale operation” and the companies’ new goal was “the achievement of an organization and techniques to meet the new conditions.”

Some templates for production organization were already in practice by the mid teens. One of them, modeled on an emergent form of division of labor that gained prominence in the United States during the turn of the century, was developed by a director. Thomas H. Ince began his career as an actor when in 1910 he turned to movie directing. He worked first for Carl Laemmle’s IMP, then was hired by Kessel and Baumann’s New York Motion Picture Company to direct Westerns in their new studio in Edendale, California. It was there in Edendale that Ince built an operation that divided production into a “two-stage labor process – the work’s preparation on paper by

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28 For more on Ince see Chapter 1. In general, not much was written about this filmmaker, some information could be found in George Mitchell, “Thomas H. Ince,” *Films in Review*, 11 (October 1960), 464-68; and in Brian Taves, *Thomas Ince: Hollywood’s Independent Pioneer*, Screen Classics (Lexington, Ky: University Press of Kentucky, 2012); Kalton C Lahue, *Dreams for Sale; the Rise and Fall of the Triangle Film Corporation* (South Brunswick: A. S. Barnes, 1971).
management followed by its execution by the workers.” One could also refer to these stages, as they would later be known, by the names “pre-production” and “production.” The pre-production phase, as devised by Ince, included the formation of a detailed script or “continuity” in which “each scene is numbered consecutively and its location is given,” and “the description of mise-en-scène and action is detailed.” The scripts were not prepared by the director, and were often accompanied by an injunction reading: “It is earnestly requested by Mr. Ince that no change of any nature be made in the scenario either by elimination of any scenes or the addition of any scenes or changing any of the action as described, or titles, without first consulting him.” By 1914 Ince stopped directing and in 1915 he collaborated with Griffith and Mack Sennett to form the Triangle Film Company, where he continued his experimentation with supervision and served as an early version of the later day executive producer.

It is hard to determine whether there was a creative motive behind Ince’ division of production, but there was certainly an economic motive. Staiger points out that Ince was probably not unusual and that evidence suggests that by the mid teens other studios also operated in the same way. The benefit of such an operation was rather obvious; a pre-production phase helped control the outflow of cash by limiting impulsive, on-the-spot expenses – it introduced economic planning. Our Saturday Evening Post director once again painted a valuable picture. Speaking in the praise of organization he described the days before it was introduced:

When a director wanted anything he wanted it bad – had to have it that instant or the next … it was so much simpler to send one of the hired men scooting in an automobile after the stuff … And our pay roll … I had twelve actors under salary

all the time, and it was seldom that a scenario demanded the full strength of my stock company … our big stage as it used to be in the old days – crowded … a dozen or more directors excitedly bowling orders at their assistants; hundreds of employees.\textsuperscript{30}

Each director was acting alone, resources were accumulated ad hoc, while sharing and cooperation were unheard of. The integration of new top-down operations with managers and specialized departments regularized shooting not only by introducing the script, which was the blueprint, but also by forming procedures that fostered coordination in the use of players, stages, props, and other equipment:

Not only did I have an estimate sheet, setting forth in detail authorized expenditures for every part of my work, but I had sketches of all my sets, prepared by expert draftsmen, showing just exactly what I needed, and what I was told I would get … gradually it came to me that I was having less trouble in making pictures. It was easier to get the props I needed; if I turned in an order to the technical department for a special set I got that set when I needed it. Stage space and location became more available; a long quiescent scenario department began to turn in real stories. Unconsciously I was being speeded up at my work. When I found that I was getting more footage than ever before with less hurry and worry … \textsuperscript{31}

This anonymous fellow was obviously advocating for the new system, however other directors seem to have held similar views. “Most directors are not business men,” said Dwan back in 1920, “therefore the films have had to arrange for … men who, when the director had laid out the thing artistically … will find out how it can be done at the lowest cost.”\textsuperscript{32}

The question of creative control might be somewhat irrelevant since it is unclear whether anyone in particular, let alone the director, really had any authority over the way a picture was eventually exhibited. Writer Casey Robinson remarked that it was never

\textsuperscript{30} “Putting the Move in the Movies,” 15.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 97, 99.
“the day of the director,” because once he finished shooting “the producer and the subtitle writers would come in and actually determine the nature of the movie.” Director Howard Hawks concurred. He had a brief career as a title writer, and claimed those could change a whole story, change a whole picture. I could change the leading lady to a heavy and the heavy to a leading lady – and I did a couple of times.” Dwan also recalled how “we’d be astonished when we went to a theatre,” to see a picture he made, “the whole aspect of the movie was frequently changed.” Then again, how often did the director actually see the movie? Dwan was shooting in California, then sending his pictures to the main office in Chicago, which would later distribute them across the country as it saw fit. There was no way of knowing for sure when and where his pictures would feature, especially not at the rate he was going. “I once tried to draw up a list of pictures I’d done,” said Dwan in 1964, “Someone sent me a list with eight hundred titles on it, and I tried to help him by adding on the rest. I got to fourteen hundred and I had to give up. Just couldn’t remember the others.” Paid by the reel and producing at least one per week, the first directors, for the most part, were too busy to worry about protecting the artistic integrity of their work.

That is not to say all failed to do so. Quite a lot has been written about the career of D. W. Griffith, the leading director of silent cinema. His exceptional talent and contribution to the medium are undoubtedly worthy of attention. However, it is exactly

33 Casey Robinson, interviewed by Joel Greenberg, July 14, 1974, transcript, Louis B. Mayer Foundation of Oral History, 15
34 Who the Devil Made It, 261–262.
35 Ibid., 73.
36 Brownlow, The Parade’s Gone By, 96.
due to his exceptionality that he shall not be discussed in length here. Achieving unprecedented success already by 1910, Griffith was able to obtain such benefits as “a commission of 1/8 of 1 per cent for each lineal of positive film leased or sold.” As he himself attested in an add published in the New York Dramatic Mirror on December 3, 1913, “for two years from the Summer of 1908 [he] personally directed all Biograph motion pictures,” and “thereafter … he superintended all Biograph productions and directed the more important features.” These were privileges that were probably accorded to a select few like Ince and Sennett and were not common features of most directors operating between New York and Los Angeles. Indeed it was these three that, unwilling to submit to the management of others, established their own film company. Griffith would have probably disagreed with the Post director about the merits of system and efficiency, then again, his idiosyncratic career is telling particularly due to this disparity: with a committed creative integrity and an unwillingness to concede to supervision and organization, he helped invent and sustain the idea of an artistically autonomous director who holds complete control over his films. He upheld the notion of a director who is responsible for all aspects of production.

Perhaps it is more than a coincidence that Triangle, the hallmark of the silent auteur, was purchased in 1918 by producer-mogul Samuel Goldwyn. The latter

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39 The add was reprinted in Jacobs, *The Rise of the American Film; a Critical History*, 117.
40 As mentioned in Chapter 1, Griffith actually served as a producer for a while and contributed to the industry’s “march to efficiency.” However he ultimately preferred his own more “intuitive” style of filmmaking, a preference that left him on the sideline of the studio system.
incorporated Traingle’s facilities with his own and went on to sell both to the Loew’s Company in 1924. Under Loew’s the lots became part of the Metro Goldwyn Mayer kingdom, which was commanded by the newly enthroned executive producer Irving Thalberg. Perhaps it is also not surprising that the careers of two of the company’s original owners, namely Griffith and Ince, faded, and in the latter case abruptly ended, as Hollywood entered the age of the broker-producer.

**Alone “on the Floor”**

It is hard to pinpoint the exact moment the director lost his absolute creative authority. As we have seen, considering the power of the title-writers, one could suggest they never really had it. Then again it seems that at least through the mid teens directors in the movie business were responsible for most major decisions regarding production – they selected stories, locations, players, other staff members, and equipment as well as what and how to shoot. Staiger claims that it was around 1914 that Hollywood switched to a “central producer” system, in which “efficiency experts and ‘production-line’ practices took over what had been the director’s and cameraman’s responsibilities.” The director was then left only with orchestrating the “integration of production, and maintenance of production performance.” Other scholars, such as Richard Koszarski, disagree with this assertion, explaining that between 1915 and the late twenties “most producers were little more than glorified production managers” and “creative power was [still] concentrated in the hands of a relatively small group of filmmakers capable of conceiving, orchestrating, and

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executing specific projects.” Kozarski is referring specifically to directors like Griffith, Lois Weber, Eric von Stroheim, Ernst Lubitsch, Cecil B. De Mille, Marshall Neilan, and Rex Ingram. Either way, most scholars tend to agree that by the early thirties “the concept of authorial freedom … did not exist in Hollywood.”

Perhaps, as with many other things, the penetration of organization, standardization, and division of labor into the American film industry is best thought of as a process. Attempts to insert systematization and efficiency began already very early on in setups like Ince’s. Irving Thalberg’s struggles with von Stroheim back on the Universal lot, and in particular his triumph over the latter in the 1922 production of *Merry-Go-Round*, served as one decisive moment in the assertion of the studio and head producer’s authority over directors. Another such moment was the formation of MGM in 1924; the operation developed there by Thalberg and Mayer, which presented an important development in the industry’s method of filmmaking and concentration of power. Finally, a definitive and crucial change occurred following the introduction of sound and the Depression, when bankruptcies and receiverships brought big studios like Fox and Paramount under the control of Wall Street. Heavily involved and invested in the film business, big banks and stockholders now had a considerable stake in transferring management from creative, and often impulsive people to compliant and responsible executives. As one economist put it in 1933, “the biggest production obstacle [is] the director … any man who is so unsure of what he is doing … that he has to shoot

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44 The story of Thalberg and Stroheim, the rise of MGM, and the consolidation of Hollywood as a vertically integrated industry aligned with big business is discussed in the Chapter 1.
100,000 feet of film to be sure of 7,500 … should be sent back to whatever he was doing before he began to infest the picture studios.”

So after all that, what was the director left with? It depends of course, who you asked, and on October 1, 1937 the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) asked Henry King. This veteran director, who entered the film industry in 1914 as an actor, was testifying in a hearing concerning the labor conditions of screenwriters. Claiming he could only speak from his own experience, King described the job of a film director in a Hollywood studio. “First,” he explained, “our story, of course, is selected … and it is submitted to him to read.” Then, the director decides whether he feels “that he can make a picture that will justify the cost,” for said story. If he deems it impossible, “why he immediately says so to the producer, and the producer then … takes him off.” Then “there is a conference called,” with the writer, who gives his suggestions and “if they [are] approved by the producer and the director … the writer will add those to his story.” Following the scriptwriting, “there is a breakdown made of the story by the different departments, the art department, the construction department, property department, paint department, location department,” etc., and “we have a budget meeting, at which the director sits at the corner of the table where he can see everyone, and there is generally sometimes 40 or 50 people that participate in those budgets meeting.” The function of these meetings, according to King, was to enable the director to give “all of them the same viewpoint of what will be needed in the making of the picture.”

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46 NLRB, XXI-R-149, et al. Box 515, Volume II, October 1, 1937, 186-188.
King offered an illustration, which, possibly due to the fact he was testifying in a hearing, pertained to the production of a court scene. He claimed that each director would picture such a scene differently: “one man might visualize that he was going to do it with 100 people, another might visualize that he was going to do it with 10.” In the breakdown conference, the director would say, for example, “we will use 20 people in the audience, four lawyers, and two for this and two for that, and we will have a clerk, a judge and so on. And he will enumerate those.” As a result, the different departmental professionals will be able to estimate “what the cost will be fix[ed] against.” The director will also declare “how important an actor you will have for each of those parts.” The same goes for the way the courtroom is to look, i.e. the furniture, props, and lighting. For those “the art department submit their sketches, and [they] are approved by the director and the producer and the associate producer.” Next, is a conference on casting, “in which there will be the casting director, the producer, the associate producer, and the director, who will sit in, and each one will have made a list of suggestions.” Here, probably since King understood he could not ignore the well-known dominance of the star system in determining casting, he added, “so far as my experience has been that the people I have suggested I have always got – that is, if they are available.”

When pre-production is over it is time to roll the camera. “On our starting day we start shooting,” said the director of such pictures as Jesse James and The Song of Bernadette, not forgetting to add, “it is probably clear to everybody that each scene of the picture passes through the director’s mind,” and “naturally, everybody must see it in his way.” King offered a convincing creative rational for this authoritarianism: “Transferring

47 Ibid., 188-189.
[a story] from paper to the screen is just as individual in its undertaking as it is [to write a] story,” and “you cannot have 16 different ideas in the scene.” Without reading too much between the lines, it seems he is suggesting that in order to shoot a picture it is important to have one uniform creative vision. The director is the one who can supply this uniformity therefore his opinion trumps all. He could even change the script. Not big changes, but “all things pertaining to dialogs or change of dialog, or minor things in writing that haven’t any great structural change in them,” the director can alter those during the filming stage, since he “must be familiar enough with the story by that time.” That said, admitted King, “If a new sequence were to be written, out of deference to the writer … they give it back to him to do that. Sometimes they call in another writer.”

On to post-production. “When the picture is completed,” explained King, “the director supervises with the cutter the putting of the picture together, getting it into the first cut.” Actually, he begins this process while still “in production” – “each morning I run the rushed, and I cut the pick takes which, in my opinion, [are] the best.” What makes them the best? “Various reasons – sometimes photography, sometimes for action, many little things we have to keep in mind.” So when shooting is over “those pick takes are assembled, and when they are put together, then I run them with the cutter, and we eliminate, fit together tightly;” all so as to “develop and tell the story in its best, I mean to make it pictorial on the screen at its best.” When the first cut is ready the director “shows it to the producer” and “from then on the director and producer work together in whatever changes they make until the picture is in its final form.”

48 Ibid., 190-192.
49 Ibid., 209-229.
Judging by King’s account, it appears not much had been lost by way of directorial authority. His view, however, was nowhere near unanimous. Screenwriters, for example, painted a far less glorified picture. Philip Dunne remarked that this idea of the director “creating the film” was, simply put, “nonsense.” As he remembered it, “in the assembly line days,” in Fox, “the director was never assigned until [Darryl] Zanuck,” the executive producer, “considered the script finished.” Fellow writer Nunnally Johnson exclaimed, directors “deserve little more credit, say, than the engineer who brings the Twentieth Century Limited [train] from Chicago to New York. There’s very little he can do except stay on the track … he didn’t create the track” and “had no choice about which way he was going.” Producers shared this qualm about the exaggerated role of the director. Pandro Berman, who served as the executive producer of RKO and later worked at MGM, claimed that, “under Mayer’s system the stable of MGM directors which was rather extensive would be called in to make a picture two weeks before the production started,” and “very often the director would be finished within six days or so after the picture finished.” That is, he did not supervise editing.

Legendary producer David O. Selznick, who worked everywhere from Paramount to MGM and RKO, offered a similar account. “The director,” he said back in 1937, “operates differently in different studios.” Speaking in front of a film-study group at Columbia university he explained that at MGM, “for instance, the director, nine times out of ten, is strictly a director … his job is solely to get out on the stage and direct the actors, put them through the paces that are called for in the script.”

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situation was even worse. There, said Selznick, “the director is purely a cog in the machine.” He “is handed a script, usually just a few days before he goes into production.” He could not be more involved, since that would make it impossible for him to churn out the “five or six pictures a year” he was expected to complete. Seeking to differentiate his own budding independent company from such humdrum operations, whose effectiveness, incidentally, was developed to a great extent by Selznick himself, the producer bragged that with him, the director “is on the script as far in advance as it is possible.” He is there “in the story conference with me and the writers … and I always have my director in on the cutting.” But, he added, “That is not obligatory … nor is it the custom in most of the larger studios.”

Perhaps it is only natural for writers and producers to play down the role of the director. Still, they were not alone. In 1939 Frank Capra, arguably the most successful director in the business, complained that in most cases a practitioner like him is not guaranteed a right to “read the script he is going to do and to assemble the film in its first rough form for presentation to the head of the studio.” There was no right to “final cut”. Furthermore, in what has become an often-quoted paragraph, he estimated that “80 per cent of the directors today shoot scenes exactly as they are told to shoot them without any changes whatsoever,” and “90 per cent of them have no voice in the story or in the editing.”

Despite these complaints, it is hard to believe King’s outline was completely false. After all Capra had his own reasons to underplay the director. He was on a

campaign to get the Screen Directors Guild recognized and probably used the op-ed as an opportunity to attract both attention and sympathy. It is also possible, as King suggested, that his own experience was exactly that, his own, and in that sense was unique and rather fortunate. For that matter, due to his celebrity status at Columbia Pictures, Capra’s experience could not have been much different. To be sure, King’s account is exaggerated: the director did not command the entire production in such a way, he did not supervise budget or breakdown meetings, and neither the producer nor the head of the studio was a marginal character to be consulted with only on casting and after the final cut was through. His narrative presents, at most, a best-case scenario for a director, albeit one that was very atypical. What was probably a more typical experience was offered at the same NLRB hearing 24 hours before King took the stand.

Benjamin B. Kahane was vice president of Columbia Pictures. A lawyer by training, Kahane was a member of the executive committee of the Keith-Albee Orpheum Circuit, which in 1932 became part of the RKO film company. After serving as the head of the company’s studio for four years, he was invited by Harry Cohn to work under him at Columbia. As vice-president his responsibility was primarily to manage public relations, though Cohn’s biographer adds that, due to his kindly nature, Kahane also “acted as father confessor to actors and directors in their disputes with [the boss].” Summoned by the NLRB lawyers to explain “the problems that confront a producer in the making of a motion picture,” this executive might have been in the best position to comment on the status of the director. Assuming a non-creative position, and testifying in

56 Bob Thomas, King Cohn; the Life and Times of Harry Cohn (New York: Putnam, 1967), 165.
a hearing about the role of writers, one could presume he did not have very much at stake while explaining the position of a studio director.

Beginning, again, at the pre-production stage, Kahane was asked how the director is selected. He “either happens to be under contract to the studio at the time or is engaged for the particular picture.” As for his participation in the script writing, “well, there is no rule about that,” said the vice-president; “sometimes the director is involved in the preparation of a screen play several weeks or several months before the final play is drafted. Sometimes he comes in when a first draft or even … final draft has been completed.” If it is a “more important production” then “the director is concerned a little earlier and has considerable to do with the preparation of the screen play, collaborating with the writer.” That said, Kahane asked to emphasize, “The director always has a certain amount of preparation.” How about casting, did the director have complete charge of casting characters? “No … I would say the selection of cast is the province of the producer. The director is consulted, but the producer has the decision.” Kahane then went on to explain the details of the budget meeting; his description included the director only as an item on the expense list.

The vice-president did not have much to say when it came to the shooting process itself. He mentioned that the director has to “work for carrying out the script, adding business.” Asked to explain what “business” meant, he offered an illustration:

A director may have a scene with a man and a woman that are having a conversation. It is up to the director to determine where they will be placed, what they are to do, and on. It may be that the man goes to take a drink, they may walk around … the things that each will occupy himself with while carrying on the dialog. That is the invention of the director.
Kahane confirmed that if small dialog changes are necessary, “most director will take care of that.” But here he added an important detail that King failed to mention. Despite the fact the director is in charge of all the “business” while shooting, the producer did not simply wait at the sidelines. “Usually,” he said, “each day after shooting has been completed the negative is developed … and a print is made.” The following day “that print is projected … for the producer and executives in the company, so that they may view the work done the previous day.” This viewing did not function merely as a rubber stamp; studio heads wanted “to see how your production is progressing, how the scenes are being played and what quality you are getting in photography and performance and scenes … that the script is being followed and that the script as written is right.” If a problem was detected, such as “incorrect or improper” characterization, “lighting is bad,” “the camera man is not getting the results expected,” or “a performer is not giving the proper performance,” then “the producer who had that opinion would discuss the matter with the director.”

Kahane’s version brings the producer back in. While acknowledging the director’s creative importance, the vice president reminded his listeners that in the picture business everyone had to answer to the producer. Two other accounts from the late thirties this time by directors, confirm the picture painted by the Columbia executive and add one more important notion, which seems to have been overlooked by King – cooperation. In a personal analysis he contributed to a book about filmmaking, George Cukor wrote, “the director makes his appearance very early on in the life story of a motion picture.” That said, he added, in the “usual case he makes his entry when he is

summoned by a producer.” This director, who was responsible for such classics as *A Bill of Divorcement* and *The Philadelphia Story*, chose to describe the production process as “a series of collaborations which go on … until the film is ready for showing.” He described how from the moment the producer hires him, the director spends his time in conferences with all the professionals the studio has to offer. In fact, “the essence of the directorial approach,” according to Cukor, is “the art of knowing exactly how much to take from each of his collaborators.” All throughout, the director “must constantly select and reject, extract, modify, repulse and refine a continuous output of suggestion.”

John Cromwell, the director of, among others, *The Prisoner of Zenda*, saw it much the same way. With regards to the script, he claimed back in 1938, “the director adds only enough interpolations of his own to give the story the fluidity a screen story must have.” Otherwise, “it must be conceived and formulated by the writer and the director as a complete entity.” When it comes to sets, lighting, and camera angles, he wrote, “the greatest danger to avoid is any set or predetermined ideas … which are not amenable to suggestions from the author, the art director or the cameraman.” About casting: “his star or stars have already been chosen by the producer. He must accept or reject the casting director’s final choice of players.” Finally, on the topic of budget, he explained “a director should be able to determine what it would cost to shoot successfully the story agreed upon,” but “of course the production manager supervises the various details” including “the estimates of all departments involved.”

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Combining all of these versions, it appears the most fitting description of the Hollywood director, is what Thomas Schatz termed a “consummate studio auteur.”60 Directors in the studio system definitely had personal influence and artistic control, but those were enabled by close collaboration with other creative professionals and the supervision of a producer, who knew how to negotiate the art with the finance. One could imagine the labor division in filmmaking as a project in which the director is the creative manager and the producer is the general manager. That said, while the producer usually had the final word, there was one place where, as all accounts imply, the General was forced to make way for creativity.

The expensive nature of resources, particularly during shooting, called for the director to be alone “on the floor.” Studios wanted their product to have quality while staying within budget and, in order to achieve these goals, following a rigorous preparation process, a skillful director had to be given some autonomy. At least, this is how most studio heads saw it. Executive producers like Thalberg, Selznick, and Zanuck rarely went on set, and as the latter was reported to have said, “on the set the director has 90 percent control. You may be able to persuade him to do this or that, but only within 10 percent. The rest of it, he’s going to do it.” Even screenwriters admitted that “once the picture is on the set and the director’s in charge … the producer has no control … it’s in the hands of the director.”61 Kahane’s testimony supports this view, as he claimed that “the business” of “carrying out the script” is “the invention of the director on the set.”62 Considering the towering position of head-producers, it is reasonable to assume this

autonomy was not preordained; it was expedient. To re-quote Selznick, nothing was “obligatory” when it came to studio practice. However, it appears that leaving the director to his own devices made the most economic and creative sense.

To be sure, there were attempts to divide the directors’ labor on the set. Irving Rapper, who came to Hollywood after a directing career on Broadway, mentioned that he “first arrived at the studio to become a dialog director.”63 Indeed he received such credit in over twenty titles including The Life of Emile Zola and High Sierra. Cukor, who occupied this position as well, said, “there were no specified duties” for dialog directors.64 He claimed that “what happened [was] the talkies came in and the movie world split in two.” Since many of the established directors did not know how to handle sound, “they invited or asked, as many stage directors as they could get to come out here … and the movie directors would tend to the movie part and the dialogue director was supposed to coach or listen to the dialogue.”65 On the whole, Cukor held several halfway positions until he finally directed Tarnished Lady in 1931. Prior to that he “co-directed, and that was also – that was even more tricky, because there were two men.” Theoretically the work was to be divided so that “one ostensibly took care of the visual part of it and the other the acting part.” These jobs or what Cukor termed the “peculiar positions they had in those days,” testify that the autonomy accorded to the director on the set was not taken for granted.66 The same way big companies divided the work of screenwriters into suggestions, continuities, dialog, and gags, there were probably similar attempts to split-

65 Ibid., 2-4.
66 Ibid., 40.
up the directing profession. The fading of these by-roles suggests something stood in the way of division and systematization.

Cooperation and supervision were the essence of efficient filmmaking, but they were harder to implement while the cameras were rolling. Cukor managed to capture the importance of preproduction quite clearly claiming that “when the time comes for a scene to be shot,” the director “ought to have a very clear idea of what [he wants] to achieve.”

To elaborate:

In the modern studio there is no room for inefficiency, for anything but clean-cut, fool-proof preparations. If your cameraman has not been given a chance to see the designs for the settings, you may find that a beautifully built scene simply cannot be lit to advantage, nor action in it photographed properly. If a discovery like that is not made until the picture is actually in production, the waste of time and money is enormous.67

These remarks, made in 1937, echo the anonymous Saturday Evening Post director who, in 1916, claimed organization “speeded up” his work. Yet, without making a value judgment about the method, Cukor’s description underlines a simple matter of fact: by the time the director was sitting in his black canvas chair that had its name printed on it and yelling orders into a megaphone, there was no room for any more consultations, because any delay was very expensive.

If we compare filmmaking to war making, picture shooting is like actual shooting. It is D-day. Almost everything that had to do with moviemaking was expensive: cameras, sets, lighting, salaries – in particular those of stars – and raw film. If you were a major studio producing anywhere between forty to seventy films per year then your expenses were very high and you did what you could to contain them. One way to cut spending was to limit the usage of valuables i.e. of actors and film. Preparing a detailed shooting

67 Watts, Behind the Screen, 14.
script, scheduling multiple conferences about sets, and endless discussions about lighting
and camera angles, was conducive to creativity of course, but it also made sure that when
Clark Gable or Greta Garbo punched their card, they were not paid to idle around the set
while the director and producer argued about a line in the dialog. As one assistant director
put it, “artistry, in this day and age, is not by any means a cheap commodity: it demands
time, time is money, and production costs mount with amazing rapidity.”

Another expensive commodity was film. Raw film, film stock, or the material
from which one produces the negative of the picture was a whole technological field with
its own innovations and competition. To begin, very few companies produced raw film,
and the few that did, including Eastman Kodak in the United States, Pathé and Dupont in
France, and Agfa in Germany, often had preferable trading agreements in their countries.
In addition “printing”, that is the development of a negative into a positive or “processed
shot” – the one that is eventually screened in theaters, was also a costly procedure. Lack
of planning or disagreement on the set could cause a waste of film, as takes and scenes
had to be shot multiple times to cover all available options and opinions, until a
consensus was reached.

Whether it was due to time or film, the cost of an inefficient set was definitely
enormous. Take the case of For Whom The Bell Tolls, produced by Paramount between
1940 and 1942. The original budget had an estimated cost of $2,149,000. It included
$150,000 for the rights to Ernest Hemingway’s story, $78,375 for the three writers who
worked on the script, $79,157 for director Sam Wood, and $283,437 for cast fees

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69 For more on film stock technology see Barry Salt, Film Style and Technology: History and Analysis
including Gary Cooper and Ingrid Bergman in the lead roles. The cost was fixed to an estimate of 60 shooting days. In reality, however, production lasted 125 days, and reports from the sets that took place on location in Blue Canyon, Relief Canyon, and the Sierra Nevada mountains, often listed delays due to “slow progress”, “weather conditions,” and “difficult locations.” As a result, the eventual cost of the movie was $2,986,231, $837,231 above the original budget. It is interesting to note that the most expensive result of the delays was an increased cast fee that inflated by $195,226, location and living expenses that required additional $90,000, raw film that cost $42,957 on top of the $89,853 specified in the original budget, and finally Woods’ own paycheck that accumulated by $32,793.70 A sizeable amount of money.

To prevent such misuse of time, money, and film required skill. To answer the question what made a skillful director, assistant director Robert Edward Lee suggested the following considerations: “can he shoot out of continuity … and still get a good picture? Can he jump all over the script, a portion of one sequence here followed by another there, and when the finished product is shown on the screen will it be good box office?”71 The filming process was designed for efficiency, and as a result it was often chaotic. The schedule was set to assure cost effectiveness and scenes were grouped according to location or the actors who performed in them. Players often came on set just for a few days, and the studio did not wish to call them back for another paycheck. The time a company had on a particular stage or off-studio location was also expensive, and therefore limited. A skillful director had to know how to work within these limitations.

70 Inter Office Communication from Robert Forbes to Edward Ebel, October 15, 1941, folder 69.f-2; Production Reports July 3, 1942 through October 31, 1942, folder 73.f-18, in Paramount Picture Production Records, Special Collections, Margaret Herrick Library, Beverly Hills.
To do that, he had to know what he wanted, and how to verbalize his wishes so that actors, cameramen, and other crewmembers will understand. He had to know how to shoot everything that is necessary without being superfluous. He had to do all of that fast while keeping the final product coherent, appealing, and preferably also profitable. As one producer put it, a director had to “pull together the work of others” making a film that is a “synthesis” but not “synthetic.”

This was not an easy task, and indeed there were not that many skillful directors. In the study he conducted of the industry, Leo C. Rosten found that in 1938 there were 244 active directors in Hollywood. That might sound like a considerable number but it pales in comparison to the 800 writers he counted, and the 1,753 class A actors who were members of the Screen Actors Guild at the same time. Taking into account that the same year saw the release of 769 pictures it appears that when it came to running the set, studios no longer trusted simply anybody. In order to be worthy of autonomy a director had to prove he had the necessary skill to, either bring the movie in within budget, or bring in profits that would make up for the cost overrun. Acquiring such skill was not straightforward, but the men who had it enjoyed an unmatched creative freedom within the industry; a position from which they could, and later also would, claim complete authority. To see how this autonomy was practiced on a daily basis, and how its limits were negotiated we will draw on the career of one director who accompanied the business

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73 Leo Calvin Rosten, *Hollywood: The Movie Colony, the Movie Makers* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and company, 1941), 283, 323, 333. Class A actors was a category devised by the Screen Actors Guild and it excluded extras as well as actors that did not receive screen credit.
from its less organized days through the “producer system” and even beyond the studio system as a whole.

“Willy, I Would Be Grateful for Your Consideration…”

Like many others in Hollywood, William Wyler got his break from Carl Laemmle. The head of Universal was a relative, his mothers’ cousin to be exact, and when Wyler was 18 he offered him a job in his film company in New York. William whose given name was actually Willi was born in Alsace in 1902. He came to America in 1920, following uncle Carl’s proposition, which was presented shortly after the two had met for the first time in Zurich. “I owe everything to him,” Wyler commented, writing for Laemmle’s funeral, “he brought me to this country … and started me at $20 a week” working in the mailroom, “from which he deducted $5 in repayment of my passage … he was both generous and shrewd.” As Universal had operations on both coasts, Wyler made his way to California, where he worked as a production assistant until 1925. Then he was given a chance to direct. The chance came since the director he was assisting, Arthur Rosson, got an offer from Paramount and walked out in the middle of production. The movie was a two-reeler titled Underworld, and Wyler asked his uncle to take over the production. The answer was yes, which made the new and youngest director on the Universal lot very excited. He wrote to thank Laemmle saying, “I feel surer of myself this time than in

75 Undated Eulogy for Carl Laemmle, file 50.f-658, William Wyler Papers, Special Collections, Margaret Herrick Library.
anything I have ever attempted … because I frankly believe that I have the material within me to develop some day into one of your best commercial directors.”

It was not unusual for a director to be foreign born. Rosten estimated that by the late thirties, 28.7 percent of directors operating in Hollywood were born outside the United States. The main reason was that, particularly after World War I, directors, like many others in the film business, “found a readier market in Hollywood for their experience and skill.” Or in other words, the American industry had more buying power. As Dwan recalled, “there wasn’t too much we got from [foreign films] – except the people who made them: we got them, all of them. The minute a fellow would make a picture, somebody would send for him right away.” Always in search for reliable filmmakers, it is not surprising the studios tapped all available resources for directors who proved their creative, practical, and commercial ability. Especially, since unlike acting or writing, directing did not require high proficiency of the English language. And so they came: Sennett hired Chaplin already in the early teens, Lubitsch was brought over by Mary Pickford in 1922, and MGM summoned Fritz Lang. The rise of Nazism inspired another wave of German emigration to Hollywood, including directors like Billy Wilder and Robert Siodmack, and, right before the war, Selznick sent for England’s finest, Alfred Hitchcock. Wyler was not hired due to his foreign success, but as a Jewish immigrant with a German accent, he fitted right in.

78 *Who the Devil Made It*, 82.
Exactly because he was not a well-known superstar when he came to Hollywood, Wyler’s career is useful in demonstrating the development of a true studio-made auteur. Though it is hard to talk about a typical career trajectory when it comes to film directors, Wyler’s progress, from two-reel westerns to prestige high-budget features, offers a glance into various and different modes of directorial practice, beginning with remunerations.

Studio directors made a lot of money. As Rosten’s study uncovered, “the amount of money paid to movie directors is a potent testimonial to the importance which the motion picture industry attaches to their talents.” Like their fellows in other branches of filmmaking, most directors were under contract to a studio, which engaged them to periods ranging between the production of one film and seven years. In most cases, contracts included an “option” clause, which enabled the studio, and only the studio, to cancel the contract at the end of every year. Wyler’s first directors’ contract with Universal in 1927, for example, was for five years with a weekly salary of $250 and a studio “option” coming every six months. However, each time Universal decided to “pick up” the option and keep him, Wyler’s wage per week was to increase by $50. This was a modest income in movie-business terms, probably fitting an unknown beginner. A confidential Universal memo from 1926 that lists the market value of “the most important directors,” suggests that established professionals made between $1000 and $2500 weekly, with some like Dwan and King making $50,000 per film. The most expensive

80 Herman, *A Talent for Trouble*, 81.
directors on the list were Von Stroheim, who earned $100,000 for his services, and Lubitsch, who commissioned $175,000.\footnote{Memorandum from Paul Kohner to Laemmle, November 8, 1926, reprinted in Koszarski, An Evening’s Entertainment, 212–213.}

Skill, i.e. experience and success, increased one’s value. In 1931 after he had completed several non-Western feature films including Hell’s Heroes, a very profitable “talkie” from 1929, Wyler’s salary “leaped to seven hundred fifty dollars a week.”\footnote{Herman, A Talent for Trouble, 99.} Three years later, following the release of A House Divided and Counsellor at Law, the director reported to his brother that he “finally signed a new contract with Universal,” allowing for “$1125.00 per week with forty-two week guarantee,” and yearly options that “run as follows: $1375; $1550; $1750; $2250.” If he was to be “laid off” for the remaining ten weeks, he had “the privilege of making one picture in Europe each year.” Wyler was pleased, writing, “I can feel very content and satisfied with this agreement. Very few companies are handing out yearly contracts these days and free lancing, that is, going from studio to studio for one or two pictures is only good for a few big directors.”\footnote{Wyler to Robert Wyler, April 7, 1934, file 59.f.-756, William Wyler papers.}

Though still not one of Hollywood’s top earners, Wyler had moved up. The fact that he was only guaranteed employment for 42 weeks was nothing out of the ordinary, as was the fact that during his layoff period, he was still under Universal’s control. Signing a studio contract implied many personal limitations, however, as Wyler indicated, very few directors, and for that matter writers and actors, were successful enough to afford the uncertain path of free-lancing, and given the option, they almost always chose to avoid it.
Even Capra, who was the most profitable director in the business, was committed to Columbia.84

How did one acquire the necessary skill to land a contract? Judging by Wyler’s career the answer seems to be a mixture of gift, audacity, and the ability to adapt these to studio needs. A director was guaranteed employment if he could produce consistent box-office success. But of course, no one knew exactly how to do that. When a director had some track record one could assess his chances of producing cost-effective pictures. In the case of a new director, however, all a studio had to work with was potential. Wyler had potential. After completing one of his first feature length pictures, The Shakedown, a series of inside-studio reviewers sent their favorable impressions, including one who wrote “excellent picture. Fine ending. Good suspense. Great Fight. Action and drama all the way. Think Willie Wyler deserves a good break after this one. Certainly seems to show high percentage of intelligence in his direction.”85

Laemmle thought so too, and he hoped he could mold this intelligence to Universal’s benefit. In 1932 he wrote to Wyler saying, “you have demonstrated that you know how to make excellent pictures but, unfortunately we have not made money on them.” Uncle Carl was not giving up, he was simply trying to enhance his young relative’s business consciousness: “you are smart and observing enough to see that there is always a good future for a fine commercial director, while the day of the other kind is gone forever.” The head executive was responding to the director’s request to be assigned a new project titled Laughing Boy. Perhaps due to their familial ties he tried the following

84 According to data gathered in 1938, Frank Capra was the highest paid director in Hollywood. His yearly income was $294,166. Among the other 34 top earners were, King, Cukor, Hathaway, Walsh, and Hawks. The latter was one of the few directors who was not under contract with a big studio. Wyler’s name did not appear on the list. Information taken from Rosten, Hollywood, 292.
manipulation, “If you can make [the picture] in such a way as to let us get by with even a small profit, I will be the happiest man in the world because it will not only justify my faith in you as a director but as a commercial success as well.”

Cultivating a new director was not an easy matter, and it proved especially difficult with Wyler. At some point producer Henry Henigson complained to Laemmle that “personally” he thought, “the business of ‘building directors’ is an expensive method of procedure.” If it was up to him, he wrote, “I would rather let the other fellow put them into school and then take them after they have had their schooling.” However, if the process was fruitful, the studio was likely to find itself with exclusive rights to a top-grossing director, who usually still had several years left in the draconian contract he signed when he was nobody. Quite a valuable commodity. To achieve this result the company had to teach the director how to work for it, a process that often required exactly what Laemmle employed in his letter – patience and negotiation.

As mentioned, once the director was released to the set he was in control, therefore the main goal was to imprint the notion that, it was worthwhile for a director to be cost effective. He needed to understand that despite his creative autonomy while shooting, the studio still had the final word with regards to both the movie and the career of its maker. Movie companies wanted their directors to understand that their autonomy, while respected, had clear limits. They wanted them to know that, as George Cukor once put it, “there were certain things a fait accompli.”

86 Laemmle to Wyler, August 2, 1932, file 50.f-658, Ibid.
87 Inter Office Communication from Henry Henigson to Laemmle, December 12, 1927, file 1.f-15, Ibid.
88 Reminiscence of George Cukor, 35.
The easiest place to assert studio authority was during the pre-production phase. While taking into consideration the directors’ will, Studio heads carefully maintained their authority to decide which projects were to be maid, by whom, and with how much. In April 1928 producer William Lloyd Wright informed Wyler, “I am handing you herewith the first four continuities [for] the Laemmle Novelties idea. Please read these carefully then come in and see me.” These Novelties, conceived by the head of the company, were very particular in nature: “we will try to [do] a $750 estimate on a four-day shooting schedule [and] we have only 700 feet top of negative that we can get into this product for they are one-reelers.” Wright wanted the director to cooperate with the writer of the scripts but emphasized that “we must have any changes, which you and [the writer] may decide on … on paper and an estimate taken before we go in production.” To drive the point home the executive added, “this is only business and in conformance with Mr. Laemmle[’s] … ideas of combining art with commercialism.”

Wyler was not excited about this assignment. He wrote back saying, “Although having much faith in the general idea of Laemmle Novelties … I wish to register my opinion that the subjects as written are without cleverness … being assigned to make these, I will naturally do my best, though regretting an honest lack of enthusiasm.” In studio terms that sounded like a threat or at least a challenge. To reaffirm the hierarchy, Wright shot back that same day: “I do not think it is up to you or me to decide what product the organization should make, but it is up to us to be good soldiers and go ahead and try to make as good product as we can, and with the common sense idea of

90 Inter Office Communication from Wyler to Robert Walsh, May 15, 1928, Ibid.
conserving Mr. Laemmle’s money.” He instructed Wyler to keep on working on the Novelties, and leave “the policy of the class of material we are to make [to] be set by those who carry this responsibility and authority.”91 The young director’s autonomy was not extended to story material.

Even ten years later, when he was already a well-known director the chain of command was not much different. In 1938 Wyler already had several commercial successes behind him including *Dodsworth*, which he had made two years earlier. As a result, while no longer working for Laemmle, he had a more lenient contract, which, the director himself recalled, included a clause “whereby I had the right to – after each film I did for Sam Goldwyn, I had the right to do one elsewhere.”92 Then he was “simply asked by Hal Wallis, who was in charge of [Warner Bros.] at the time” to direct Bette Davis in the story *Jezebel*. “The script was submitted to me, and it was already a finished script,” said Wyler. He added, “If I hadn’t liked the story I wouldn’t have done it.”93 That was only because he was working out of contract. When in 1940 Wyler refused one of Goldwyn’s suggestions, the latter “in accordance with contract … deemed [Wyler] suspended for a period of 16 weeks.”94 Almost in all cases, the studio chose the story for the director. As a freelancer the filmmaker had a right to say no. Under contract, even that liberty had a price.

Studio executives were not necessarily out to get their directors, they simply had broader concerns. While a director like Wyler was worried about his own career and the

91 Inter Office Communication from Wright to Wyler, May 15, 1928, Ibid.
93 Ibid., 14.
94 Inter Office Communication Warner Bros. Studio, April 19, 1940, Copy, file 18.f-146, Rudy Behlmer Papers, Special Collections, Margaret Herrick Library.
particular movie he was working on, people like Laemmle and Goldwyn were trying to coordinate a yearly program of features and a whole stock company of employees. When in 1939 Jack Warner decided to “switch assignments” and have Anatole Litvak “do Twenty Thousand Years in Sing Sing … with Raul Walsh doing World Moves On,” it was because the former was “getting nowhere” with his original assignment, and not because a particular grudge he held against the director.95 Furthermore, unless it conflicted with studio interests, in most cases head producers attempted to satisfy their directors. When in 1944, Michael Curtiz told Warner he “would be truly grateful if you could assign me to something else until such time when God is My Co-Pilot is re-modeled into the script we all hope it eventually will be,” his request was granted.96 Similarly, even back in 1931, if Wyler felt strongly against something, like directing a Tom Mix Western, Universal tried to reach an agreement with him. In this case, it was decided he would “direct and have the choice of stories available for the first Tom Mix picture,” however, “at [his] opinion, [his] name will be left off the screen this particular picture.” In addition Wyler was guaranteed “that the company will not ask [him] to direct any other picture of this series,” and that he will “definitely [be] assigned to direct the new Lew Ayres picture.”97 It was a give and take relationship with the power scale tipped in favor of the studio.

When pre-production ended, however, the balance was shifted. Head producers and executives were now at the mercy of the director. During production there was very little a producer could do to manage the way a picture was shot. The director was in charge, and it was up to him to decide how much time to spend on rehearsals, what

95 Inter Office Communication from Walter MacEwen to Hall Wallis, June 14, 1939, Hal Wallis Papers, Special Collections, Margaret Herrick Library.
96 Inter Office Communication from Michael Curtiz to Jack L. Warner, February 25, 1944, Ibid.
97 Inter Office Communication from Wyler to Henigson, February 3, 1928, file 57.f-736 William Wyler Papers.
angles to shoot a scene from, and how many “takes” to shoot until he got the right one.

To be sure, studio executives never left their filmmaker completely alone. They had spies in the form of production assistants, line producers, and scripts clerks. Over at Warner Bros., for example, Wallis was keeping in close touch with ongoing productions, even when he was on vacation. In 1942, while in Europe, he kept receiving daily reports such as this: “I have spoken to assistants and briefly to Hawks, Shumlin and Curtiz, and they all say everything is going along smoothly and well.”

Sometimes the news was not so encouraging. In October 1941, an assistant to the production of King’s Row, sent the following memo:

Yesterday, Monday, this company was called for 9:00 AM shooting on Stage 14, had their first shot at 9:10 and finished shooting at 6:00 PM last night.
This company shot 5 script scenes and finished Sc. 220 in 8 set-ups for a total of 0.25”, over 2-1/4 pages of dialogue, working on the EXT. Tower Home on Stage 14 and also the EXT. Von Eln Estate at Bel Air.
They finished Ronald Reagan and Karen Verne in the picture.
This picture is 22 days behind schedule.
Today, Tuesday, the company is shooting on Stage 14, the Ext. Tower Home, the Int. Tower Home, and they will then move to stage 1 where they will shoot the Int. Drake’s Bedroom, the Int. Cassie’s Bedroom and the Int. Corr. Vienna Medical School.
They will finish this picture.
This will be 23 days over the schedule and very considerably over the budget.
Considering the broken manner in which this show has been shot as regarding sets, cast, etc., I only hope it fits together right. I have never seen a picture shot in such a hurried manner as this picture had been made. Most of these circumstances were beyond our control and the insistence of Mr. Wood that we have Robert Cummings play the lead in this picture.

Such reports, which were all too common, spelled out a very expensive delay, but as we shall see, even in these cases executive producers could not do a lot except plead, or sometimes even beg.

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99 Inter Office Communication from Frank Mattison to T. C. Wright, October 7, 1941, Copy, file 17.7-139, Rudy Behlmer Papers.
Wyler was a master of delay, mostly because he was infamous for shooting every take multiple times earning such nicknames as “once more Wyler.” He saw it a bit differently. “It’s true that is some cases” he shot scenes “too many times over and over.” But, he claimed, “I do until I get it the way I want it … there’s always a purpose behind it and a reason for doing it over.” The various studios he worked for quite obviously respected his creative sensibilities, as they kept hiring him. Yet, whether it was with Universal, Goldwyn, or Warner Bros., producers kept trying to rein him in. This audacious director revealed his penchant for spendthrift very early on. Already in 1927 his uncle wrote to him observing, “You have only shot 73 scenes so far on your picture, spending $46,000.00. Therefore you have only $45,000.00 more to spend and still have 256 scenes to shoot.” There was still hope for the young director, and so Laemmle emphasized, “Willie, don’t forget you are on trial now … please, for your own sake more than for the company’s sake, do your darndest to bring this picture in on estimate and still give us a good production.” Thus began the miseducation of William Wyler.

A couple of months later, while shooting *the Shakedown*, production was behind once again. “Willie, I must impress upon you the necessity of making these pictures … for sixty thousand dollars,” his producer wrote. “If you cooperate with me on this picture,” he pleaded, “I promise to do my utmost on the next picture you make, and obtain permission to give you a little more leeway.” Such promises were rather useless as Wyler was pretty comfortable taking his own leeway. Sometimes while shooting he would change the script, triggering a request “to have such changes as you may desire to

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100 Reminiscences of William J. Wyler, 11.
101 Inter Office Communication from Laemmle to Wyler, December 7, 1927, file 1.f-15, William Wyler Papers.
102 Inter Office Communication from Henigson to Wyler, February 3, 1928, file 29.f-400, Ibid.
make, submitted to this office for my approval before shooting.” Other times he would be careless with film: “at the termination of each scene it is important that you arrange with your staff to call a signal, preferably the word “cut” … thus saving the film which is being unnecessarily exposed.” Nevertheless, even the mild sarcasm did not help. Nearly a decade later, executives were still “astounded to note that you took one scene 14 times and of these takes 10 of them were complete ones, approximately 1’35” long. The cost of the film alone for these takes is a big sum.” They were still trying to convince Wyler he is “a very good director and no one can tell me you can’t make a scene in at least 2 to 4 takes top and print the one you really know is right.” And they were still begging: “I must ask you again to co-operate with us as you know we cannot spend the time on this picture … Willy, I would be grateful for your consideration.”

One reason for this repeated ceremony of entreaties was that, as much as a director could be wasteful, it was more expensive to replace him. When a film changed directors everything, almost always had to be done over. Take the case of The Wizard of Oz. “Dick Thorpe started it,” remembered producer Mervyn Leroy, but he “just didn’t have the feeling of the [picture].” Then, George [Cukor] started it too, and George is a great director … but he wasn’t happy in what he was doing, so we got Victor Fleming.” It was not really anybody’s fault, “they were all honest.” Nevertheless, “everything that George shot or Dick shot was not in the picture at all.” Cukor himself experienced a similar problem in 1932 when he worked with Lubitsch on One Hour With You. He was

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103 Inter Office Communication from Carl Laemmle Jr. to Wyler, October 21, 1929, file 57.f-737, Ibid.
104 Inter Office Communication from Henigson to Wyler, June 10, 1931, file 57.f-736, Ibid.
105 Inter Office Communication from Jack Warner to Wyler, June 27, 1940, file 19.f-252, Ibid.
106 Inter Office Communication from Warner to Wyler, June 11, 1940, Ibid.
asked to take over the direction duties until the latter finished another picture he was involved with. When the German master returned he discarded most of the work already done. The problem, as Cukor saw it, was that though he “directed quite a lot … it didn’t have the style of Lubitsch,” despite “the best intentions in the world, I was not Lubitsch, and I could not shoot a Lubitsch picture.” The making of a motion picture, it appears, required a coherent vision. In practical terms that meant that, once shooting started, it might be cheaper to contend with an inefficient director than to make a switch.

All of these troubles ended as soon as the shooting process was over. As Capra mentioned in his op-ed from 1939, Hollywood filmmakers did not have the right to compose the “final cut” of their picture. Though they were often involved in the editing process, the decision on what takes to use and in what order, or in other words on how the movie would actually be, belonged ultimately to the studio and its head producer. During post-production it was once again the director’s turn to beg. “You have given instructions to have the “E” sequence cut without consulting me or giving me the benefit to see the sequence assembled and instructing the cutter,” Wyler wrote to his producer in 1933. This correspondence came following the filming of Her First Mate and the director felt the “result is very unfortunate and the first half of “E” sequence … is very disappointing and … almost unrecognizable, for it has lost its effectiveness.” He wanted to “recut scenes in the manner [he] visualized,” an operation he considered “an important part of [his] work.” That said, he acknowledged, “I fully realize, that you [the producer] are in

108 Reminisces of George Cukor, 4-5.
full jurisdiction over the production of this picture and would like to know how you stand in the manner.”

In the same way executives attempted to appeal to their directors’ commercial sense, the latter seem to have phrased their pleas in creative terms. Later in 1933, Wyler was producing *Counsellor at Law*. While viewing the edited version of his footage, he noticed the deletion of one line – “tell him to go to hell,” from the last reel. He wrote to Laemmle Jr., Carl’s son, who took over the studio in the late twenties, “respectfully calling [his] attention to the fact that the deletion … is extremely damaging to the picture.” This was “not because of the humor of the particular line, but because with the deletion the climax of the picture remains unrelieved and we eliminate the only bit of comedy relief in the ending of the picture.” The director believed that the line “was absolutely necessary, in order to obtain the proper change of mood from any audience for the ending of the picture to [include this] piece of comedy relief.” Since the line does not appear in the film, one could assume that, with most executives, the use of creative jargon had about the same effect as using commercial language to speed up directors.

In artistic terms, the end result of all these negotiations was inevitably a compromise. However, Wyler’s career demonstrates that within this collaborative production process, Hollywood directors possessed their own sphere that albeit confined, was autonomous and rather protected. Even when, like Wyler, they tested the boundaries and took them to the limit, studios left the sets in control of their homemade auteurs. Despite the challenges he presented to producers, by the early forties, Wyler became a

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110 Inter Office Communication from Wyler to Laemmle Jr., November 13, 1933, file 7.f-86, Ibid.
very successful and coveted filmmaker. He went on to direct such classics as *The Best Years of Our Lives*, *Roman Holiday*, and *Ben-Hur*, won three Academy Awards for Best Director, and was the recipient in 1966 of the Irving Thalberg memorial award. His long career was due to the fact that, even though his productions were expensive, they manage to attract enough viewers to cover the costs, a fact that was undoubtedly and inextricably linked to his skill, talent, and gift for making motion pictures.

In 1955 French film director and critic Erich Rohmer wrote in the new and influential journal *Cahiers du Cinéma*, that “to see a film by Griffith, Hawks, Cukor, Hitchcock, or Mankiewicz, or even a comedy, a thriller or Western by a lesser-known signatory, has always been enough to reassure me and convince me that for the talented and dedicated film-maker the California coast is not that den of iniquity that some would have us believe.”111 This statement is embedded with the idea of auteurism, a form of film criticism developed by Rohmer and his fellows at the journal, which posits that “it is the director who is the driving artistic force in filmmaking and that to understand a film correctly requires paying close attention to the effects of the director’s creative choices.”112 The theory, which became highly influential by the mid sixties, was applied primarily to directors in the American motion picture industry and celebrated their unique signature on studio productions. Some of the newly proclaimed Hollywood auteurs failed to understand this new analysis. Hawks once remarked, “I listen to them, and I get open-

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mouthed and wonder where they find some of the stuff that they say about me.”\textsuperscript{113} Others, like Capra, swallowed it whole. “Regardless of the origin of a film idea – I made it mine,” claimed the director in his autobiography.\textsuperscript{114}

Regardless of the arguable veracity of this last statement, and setting aside the cooperative nature of production in the studio system, one could see why Rohmer and Capra reached their respective conclusions. The development of the directorial profession in Hollywood suggests that when the world was ready to discuss cinema as art, the director was in prime position to be equated with masters like Bach and Picasso. Among the various creative practitioners in Hollywood producers like Thalberg served in a more supervisory role while writers were stockpiled and forced into cooperation. Directors, on the other hand, were always working alone. As shown, the practice by which the latter were left to their own devices during the filming process was embraced since it was first and foremost commercially functional. However, the possession of such unique autonomy within the studio system enabled one to draw a straight line from pioneers such as Méliès and Griffith to consummate studio auteur like John Ford or Capra. It is, nevertheless, also crucial to remember the context within which their autonomy took place, specifically the fact that it prominently featured boundaries and negotiations. That is not to say Hollywood filmmakers were not innovative and inspirational. They were. It is merely to acknowledge how their particular form of ingenuity was defined and supported by the system they were operating in.

\textsuperscript{113} Quoted in Ibid., 61.
\textsuperscript{114} Frank Capra, \textit{The Name Above the Title; an Autobiography} (New York: Macmillan, 1971), 185.
Margaret Mitchell was a little troubled. The time was October of 1936 and she has recently published her first novel *Gone with the Wind*. It was an instant sensation. Her debut was so successful that it sold 176,000 copies, at three dollars a copy, in just one month. These figures spurred interest in Hollywood and recently she sold the picture rights to the book for an unprecedented sum of $50,000 to producer David O. Selznick. Of course it was not her career she was troubled about. It was Clark Gable. “Life has been awful since I sold the movie rights!” she wrote to one of Selznick’s representatives. “I am deluged with letters demanding that I do not put Clark Gable in as Rhett. Strangers telephone me or grab me on the street, insisting that Katharine Hepburn will never do.” As much as she tried to explain, “it is Mr. Selznick and not [her] who is producing this picture,” Mitchell was still caught in the casting commotion, a fact that prompted her to plead: “I wish to goodness you all would announce the cast and relieve me of this burden!”

Selznick knew casting would be an issue. In fact he almost passed on *Gone with the Wind* because of it. “I do feel that [the book’s] only important showmanship values

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1 Data from Roland Flamini, *Scarlett, Rhett, and a Cast of Thousands: The Filming of Gone with the Wind* (New York: Macmillan, 1975), 12. The rights to the book were sold in July. The price was unprecedented for a first novel.

2 Margaret Mitchell to Katherine Brown, October 6, 1936, file 11.f-106, George Cukor Papers, Special Collections, Margaret Herrick Library, Beverly Hills.
would be in either such star casting or in a tremendous sale of the book,” he wrote to his story editor in May 1936. His independent film company, Selznick International, was established only a year prior and though he was a successful and respectable producer, his operation was much smaller in comparison to studios such as Warner Bros. and MGM. He thought that one of those “larger companies can afford [to] buy it now in the hope or expectation of such casting opportunities and such a sale, but I do not feel we can take such a gamble.” His reservations were not unfounded. The American people wanted to see Gable play Rhett Butler; there was no way around it. Gable was under contract to MGM, there was no way around that either. “L.B. [Mayer] called me today to suggest that they would be interested in buying “Gone with the Wind” together with my services as a producer,” Selznick wired his company’s Chairman, “I believe an announcement would be accepted that we had made [the] deal because of my feeling that the public demanded Gable and we could have him in the film in no other way.” Ultimately, the rights to the book did not change hands but the price paid for the star was high. Selznick agreed to distribute the picture through MGM and cut it some of the profits. Since he already had a distribution deal with United Artists, it also meant he had to postpone production until that agreement expired.

4 Mayer was the Head of Studio Operations at MGM.
6 The exact details of the deal signed in August specified, “MGM would lend Gable to Selznick … and contribute $1,250,000 towards the production costs, in exchange for the distribution rights and a sliding-scale percentage of gross profits starting at fifty percent and going down to twenty-five percent over a number of years. From Flamini, Scarlett, Rhett, and a Cast of Thousands, 106 - 107. See also David Thomson, Showman: The Life of David O. Selznick, 1st ed. (New York: Knopf, 1992).
Clark Gable was also troubled. He did not want to play Rhett. He thought that the role did not fit him, and complained to Metro’s story editor about the fact that “it’s the first time that the girl isn’t sure that she wants me from the minute she sets eyes on me.” Nevertheless, Gable found himself “trapped” by what he considered a “series of circumstances over which I had no control.” Even though he was a Hollywood star, one that this particular movie could not do without, like most other actors in the studio system, his contract with MGM did not accord him the right to turn down roles. If he refused to play Rhett he risked being suspended without pay for the entire duration of production. Whether it was due to the financial strains brought by his ongoing divorce, or due to the rumored bonus of $50,000 promised to him by Mayer, or both, Gable conceded. “It was a funny feeling,” he commented years later, “I think I know now how a fly must react after being caught in a spider’s web.”

Of course, one does not need to feel very sorry for Gable; there are worse things that could happen to an actor than being forced into appearing in Gone with the Wind. However, his situation does bring out the irony embedded in the practice of film acting. While particular stars became as or even more important than the picture product itself, in the daily reality of the industry, despite their value, those same stars commanded very little control over their careers. If a studio felt that the success of a picture required Gable, Gable was required to be in the picture.

In that sense Hollywood movie stars occupied an interesting position within the system, they were both regimented employees and precious commodities. In reality that meant the studios had two seemingly conflicting goals – to enhance players’ value and

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7 Data and quotes from Warren G Harris, Clark Gable: A Biography, 1st ed. (New York: Harmony Books, 2002), 189. A similar version of this story appears in Flamini, Scarlett, Rhett, and a Cast of Thousands.
standardize their employment. They had to find a way to make a player like Gable a unique product, one that theaters would pay a high price to screen, while at the same time make sure his independent value does not exceed that of the company itself, that he will not be able to work outside of it or against its needs. The method they employed included a combination of big salaries, highly strict and demanding contracts, and paternalist care for screen players’ creative development. Hollywood studios signed actors to long exclusive commitments in which they had little or no control over their craft; they could not choose the parts they played. In return the studios compensated the players generously and developed a network of professionals whose role it was to create box office stars and maintain their success. The latter was a sincere mission that included selecting good stories and diverse roles, investing in wardrobes, make-up, and lighting, and supervising publicity. It was a creative endeavor.

Union of Role and Person

Commodification, in the Marxist sense, was not unique to the acting profession. As in most other modern industries, the labor of motion picture craftsmen such as directors or writers was valued according to its contribution to production and based on its usefulness to the system. As was demonstrated in earlier chapters these crafts were subjected to a strict division of labor and alienation from the film product. As employees, that is as screen performers, actors experienced the same treatment. First, the acting profession was divided into extras, bit players, supporting players, and leading players. Second, the lower ranks of this division were what labor historian David Montgomery called “common laborers”: they had “the most elementary form of wage dependence,” whereby
they exchanged what was regarded as simple services for a daily wage.  

Third, at all levels, performers did not own the films they participated in or had any meaningful control over the formation of the motion picture.

For those in the highest rank of players, however, there was an additional and different form of commodification at play. In the case of stars like Gable or Hepburn, they themselves became an object of commerce, not only their labor. They as people were the marketable product. This actor-as-commodity function was different from commodified labor since, while the value of the second was limited to exchange within the production process, the first did not matter much in terms of actual work but it did filter into the distribution and exhibition of motion pictures. The work of screenwriters, for example, had an exchange value only inside the Hollywood studios; the presence of Gable in a picture, on the other hand, carried an external value, to owners of theaters and audiences. The American film industry began exploiting the popularity of screen actors in order to sell tickets at the box office already in the early teens. This dependency on the star-system has only intensified since then and is still apparent today. Specifically, until the late forties, by casting popular players in pictures, the companies that held them under contract could increase the rental fees of their productions and their percentage from box office receipts. To be sure, such casting did not necessarily facilitate or improve the quality of the production process itself. The fact that the actors were stars was not important to the filming process; it helped create the market for the films. Just like the motion picture itself, stars were on sale.

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At first glance, the cult of personality surrounding film stars might even seem contrary to Marxist critique. After all, as sociologist Barry King explains, as opposed “to the proposition that the representation of labour under capitalism is reduced to a state of depersonalized objectivity, the star stands as the resplendent, full centre of a personalized teleology, a place where the distinction between role and person is meaningless.”¹⁹ In addition, while due to their employment contracts, the actors’ labor and image were supposedly under the “legal ownership” of the studios, “it [remained] factually the case that the star [was] ultimately the possessor of the image, because it [was] indexically linked to his or her person.”¹⁰ The role accorded to famous players in stabilizing the market and decreasing uncertainty, would suggest that they held a unique position of power within the industrial structure. However, despite this unique union of role and person, at least during the years of the oligopolistic Hollywood studio system between the early twenties and the early fifties, movie stars did not escape the standardization of their profession.

The reason was twofold. First, the oligopoly of the big picture companies, which controlled the industry via vertical integration, stripped the market of any alternative employment options. Or in other words, if one wanted to become or remain a movie star he or she had to work in Hollywood under the terms of the major companies.

Second, as it embraced the star system, the American motion picture industry also developed a managerial method to handle the human product. It found a way to partially separate the person from the star by signing a contract with the person and lashing the

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star persona to the studio operation. Understanding the challenge star-power might present to their economic control, these same Hollywood producers and executives developed a system of dual treatment by which actors’ encompassing employment conditions correlated to their place in a standardized workforce while their salaries and day-to-day management correlated to their commodity status. Players’ contracts, whether they were stars, potential stars, or supporting actors, restricted them as employees and put them under the complete control of the studios. At the same time, studios paid their stars exorbitant sums and created a network of support whose role it was to develop, maintain, and even increase the value of the commodity. If the star was the “ultimate possessor” of his own image, the studio operation created a situation where it was unclear how much of that image existed or should remain without the support of the company. Big studios like MGM and Paramount were conglomerates of various creative professionals. The expertise they offered and the care they invested in order to look after their star product was very difficult to replace.

The management of players as both employees and commodity applied to women and men alike. Though the attention to the personality of screen players began with female actors, the commodification of male actors followed very shortly after, all in the same year. Through the forties both sexes were subjected to the same contracts, conditions, modification of appearance, and publicity. The latter two often conformed to popular and traditional gender perceptions but were equally applied. Even the attitude of executives, which was often condescending and paternalistic in nature, did not seem to discriminate between men and women. Ashley Mears, who studies the world of fashion modeling, suggests that the careers of people, who work in such industries, all “resemble
women’s historically contingent relationship to the labor market, as goods themselves exchanged in marriage.”¹¹ Mears is primarily concerned with free-lance and project based employees, yet her observation seems relevant here as well. Unlike producers and directors whose work routine resembled that of the traditional masculine professional guilds, film acting, as a whole, followed a more feminine pattern. In their transformation into a dual employee-commodity status, male actors were subjected to a kind of treatment labor markets usually reserved for women.

This chapter looks at the practice behind this dual status. It traces the methods by which actors were regimented as part of the labor force and the ways in which they were objectified. First, however, it needs to be shown how players turned from anonymous screen performers to important and famous picture personalities.

From Team Players to Stars

On March 12, 1910 a large add by the IMP Film Company appeared in the Moving Picture World. It read, in large bold letter, “We Nail a Lie.” An accompanying paragraph told the readers:

The blackest and at the same time the silliest lie yet circulated by enemies of the “Imp” was the story foisted on the public of St. Louis last week to the effect that Miss Lawrence (the “Imp girl, formerly known as the “Biograph” girl) had been killed by a street car. It was a black lie because so cowardly. It was a silly lie because so easily disproved. Miss Lawrence was not even in a street-car accident, is in the best of health, will continue to appear in “Imp” films, and very shortly some of the best work in her career is to be released.¹²

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¹² “We Nail a Lie,” Moving Picture World, March 12, 1910, 365.
Legend has it that this was the moment the star system was born. Until the events surrounding this publication, it is commonly held, although audiences were already “favoring certain players and expressing their preferences,” the “names of their screen idols were unknown.” Film historians like Lewis Jacobs maintain that the reason behind this anonymity was that “manufacturers diligently kept such information secret” believing that “any public recognition of actors received would inspire demands for bigger salaries.” Instead they encouraged a credit system based on either company names or roles played. Actresses were known as the “Vitagraph girl”, “Little Mary”, or “Wife”, and in the case of men “Husband” or “Banker.” When rumors about the death of the “Biograph girl” started circulating, her real name, Florence Lawrence, was revealed by the resulting press coverage and, as author Kevin Brownlow claims, “the anonymity of players was breached.”

It was probably uncommon for a film performer to attract such great attention at the time but other evidence suggests that the birth of the named movie star was not so sudden. In his history of the American film industry prior to 1920, Anthony Slide found that the Essanay actor Ben Turpin appeared under his own name in the Moving Picture World pages already on April 3, 1909. Film Scholar Janet Staiger points to two adds published by the Edison Company, one from September 1909 and the other from February 1910, in which players were mentioned by name and were even presented with

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a short biography. She further indicates that another company, Kalem, featured lobby display cards of performers and their names to be placed at Nickelodeons and other theaters already in January 1910. Viewed within this context, Lawrence’s incident, all of which was probably a publicity stunt orchestrated by IMP, appears less like a watershed and more like a sign of the time.

Upon concluding its first decade, the cinema business in the United States was going through several transformations, one of which was the simultaneous emergence of the film acting profession and the star system. After all, as one historian explained, “there could scarcely be stars before 1908 or even 1909 because there were few regularly employed actors and no regular production schedule.” Indeed, media scholar Richard deCordova claims that the star system was the result of two processes that took place around that time. The first was economical. The rapid expansion of the industry between 1907 and 1909 introduced a “need to rationalize production and produce larger and more predictable supply of films.” The turn to narrative film discussed in an earlier chapter was one of the responses to this need. Another was the adoption of the stock company model, prevalent in the theater business, which assured a steady supply of trained workers. The resulting sizeable output presented producers with the extra need of differentiating their product “from the hundreds of other films on the market.”

The second process was discursive. DeCordova claims that in 1907 audience “attention began to be focused away from the projectionist and the mechanical capabilities of the apparatus and towards the human labor involved in the production of

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film,” specifically to those appearing in it. It was around this time that the theatrical verb “to act” gained prominence over others like “to pose” or “to fake” in reference to screen performance. Together, these two processes accentuated the role of the performers and marked them as the primary instrument in product differentiation, as DeCordova writes: “films with actors could be differentiated from films without actors, and, as the presence of actors became accepted as the norm, particular actors (their identities) could be differentiated from other actors.” Further changes, like the introduction of the “close-up” shot and the production of longer two or three-reel pictures also contributed to players’ visibility.

Gradually more and more actors began to be featured steadily in pictures and advertized by name. People were noticing them. In November of 1910 a Moving Picture World editorial announced, “the public is getting to know these moving picture players,” and therefore, it suggested that from now on “each picture or reel be preceded by the full cast of the characters in the play, with the names of the actors and actresses playing the parts.” As the “picture personalities” system was being integrated into standard industry practice, producers also began coming up with new ways of exploiting it. Players’ presence was further heightened through cooperation between newly founded studio publicity machines and fan magazines. Those turned star performers into “sights of knowledge” by constantly producing information both about “the professional existence

18 Richard DeCordova, Picture Personalities: The Emergence of the Star System in America (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 46.
of the actor” and towards the twenties also about “the private lives of players.”

Everything in order to increase the performers’ box office draw.

The formation of a well-oiled star system took time. In the meantime, throughout the early years, while the status of their profession was still unstable, screen players were just part of the team. “It was a whole life,” remembered Gloria Swanson. “You had a routine … you get up very early … and off you go to the studio,” then, “by the time you’ve finished shooting, and then you look at the daily rushes, and you get home all you can do it take your make-up off, get some food, go to bed – and look at your lines for the next day.” Blanche Sweet painted a similar picture. “You see,” she explained, “we couldn’t do any of that frivolity during the week, because we were working. You had to be early, you had to get up early, work all day, by the time you were finished you didn’t have time or want to go to parties or things.” Sidney Blackmer claimed that since “there was no union then that restricted the hours,” one “could work till midnight and still be called at 5 in the morning.” According to him, demands were so high that fellow actor Wallace Reid “became physically exhausted and began to resort to some little medical pick-up, and from this got into an addiction.” Other actors saw it a bit differently. Lillian Gish acknowledged, “There were no unions, no hours.” But that was not necessarily a

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23 Reminiscences of Sidney Blackmer, December 1959, transcripts, Popular Arts Project, 3.
bad thing. “We worked twelve hours a day, seven days a week, and liked it,” she said, “because no place was as interesting as the studio.”

Such convivial statements are not uncommon among the pioneers. In his study of the phenomenon of stardom, Alexander Walker reminds that at least until 1913 “the stage pattern of traveling stock companies was reproduced in the early film companies.” This “enforced mobility,” he claims, contributed to a sense of “unity among film-makers, giving them a group consciousness that was important when there was as yet no film ‘capital’.” Actress Mae Marsh referred to it as a “very homey atmosphere.” Perhaps the lack of cultural capital is precisely what made all those who helped build the industry, and its capital, take such pride in it and remember it so fondly. Either way, a sense of camaraderie was undoubtedly helpful in the experimental and not-yet-organized environment of most companies. Actors were expected to fulfill all sorts of roles during production. “When I first got my job with Mac [J. P. McGowan], I had many duties,” recounted A. Edward Sutherland, “I was an actor, and we were doing a railroad serial, so I had to learn how to run a train. Also I was a property man, or an assistant prop man. I was an assistant cameraman.” In those days, he said, “everybody did anything on a picture … if there was a camera to be carried, you carried it.”

Sutherland was not alone. Norma Talmadge used to “assist in the making or mending of costumes.” Florence Turner, who was already one of Vitagraph’s most

26 Reminiscences of Mae Marsh, interviewed by Arthur B. Friedman, date unknown, transcript, Popular Arts Project, 9.
27 Reminiscences of Albert Edward Sutherland, February 1959, transcript, Popular Arts Project, 9.
important players, “helped with the wardrobe and even looked after the petty cash.” It was only natural in a way. Gish, for example, knew “all about lighting,” because “the place where they developed and printed the film was right across from [her] dressing room.” So, when she had time, “I’d be in there with Joe Aller, watching the developing of the negative and then the printing of it.” And Sweet made it clear that all this “wasn’t a case of force. Nobody forced anybody. You volunteered. Or you naturally said “okay.” There was no question of whether you would.” It was just the case that at the beginning, “there was a wonderful spirit,” and “everybody was involved. If somebody had to brush off the stage, somebody picked up a brush and brushed it. It wasn’t that it was beneath your dignity … whatever job there was to do, you pitched in and did it.”

The easy transition from actress to stage-sweeper makes sense in light of the equal facility with which one could turn into a screen performer. Blackmer recalled that he “came to New York,” during his university days to see if he “could break into the theatre.” It was 1914 and he was “down in Union Square.” He saw “a crowd gathering over on the sidewalk,” and thought “it was a fight.” He approached, “to see what the trouble was.” Someone signaled him to step forward and said, “I want you here at 8 o’clock tomorrow morning, in dinner clothes.” Just like that, said Blackmer, “I had been cast in a motion picture!” Stories like that have always been part of the industry and persist to this day. Legends of actresses being discovered next to soda fountains underpin the magic of movies and help blur the lines between players and their fans, between stars and the rest of us. However, as professor Jeanine Basinger reminds, “something closer to

29 Reminiscences of Lillian Gish, 11.
30 Reminiscences of Blanche Sweet, 62.
31 Ibid., 86.
32 Reminiscences of Sidney Blackmer, 3-4.
the truth might have been “Get out there and round up all the good-looking females working in that department store and fix their teeth”.” That said, at least through the early teens, such tales, as Blackmer’s, were the rule rather than the exception.

Take the case of Marsh. As she told several interviewers, her first appearance on film occurred in early 1912. Her sister Marguerite was working for Biograph and one day she took Mae with her to “work with Mack Sennett at Redondo Beach.” While there she served as an extra, “watching Mabel Normand dive into the ocean.” To be clear, she “wasn’t a bathing beauty. I was watching the bathing beauties.”°° Then she simply kept on working as an extra and part of the Biograph stock company. From there anything could happen. In a book she wrote about film acting in 1921 Marsh claimed, “after the beginner has done his extra work, or small bits, if he is of right stuff, he will some day be given a part. He may be unaware of it, but that will be the biggest moment of his screen career.”°°° She had a reason to believe in such chance. Hers came the very same year she started, while D. W. Griffith was producing a picture titled Man’s Genesis. As Mary Pickford, Sweet, and Marsh remember, in this seventeen-minute short, “the heroine must wear a grass skirt that shows her limbs practically from her waist down.” Pickford, who was supposed to play the heroine, “refused to show her legs,” pointed at Mae and said to the director, “you give it to that little kid over there, she doesn’t care if she shows her legs or not.”°°°° The extra turned into a leading lady.

It was not out of the ordinary. Gish and her sister Dorothy also got their start as extras at the Griffith company and climbed from there. Of course, all of these players

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34 Mae Marsh, Screen Acting (Los Angeles, Calif: Photostar Publishing Co, 1921), 51.
35 Reminiscences of Mae Marsh, 7-8. See similar versions in Reminiscences of Blanche Sweet, 33; Reminiscences of Mary Pickford, interviewed by Arthur B. Friedman, 1959, Popular Arts Project.
showed an interest in the picture business, the point is, that during these rough-and-tumble days, the business showed an interest in most of them. Swanson might have said it best when she stated, “Maybe if I had been born ten years earlier or ten years later, I might not have had any of this.” She understood well that “it was timing.” She was simply “born at a time when they were so glad to have anybody stand in front of a camera.” The actress, who started her career as a “guaranteed extra” for Essanay, captured the spirit of vanguard screen-acting stating, “I didn’t stand in line, I didn’t beg for parts, I didn’t write letters to anybody or beg for anything. It all happened.”

Swanson was right in emphasizing her birth date. Though back then it was easier to get one’s foot at the door of film studios, the camera, or more accurately the director, did not take just anybody. It is hard to pinpoint what constitutes a star, but looking back it is easy to see what most early screen actresses had in common. Age was definitely crucial, especially for women. Griffith, for example, knew what he was looking for. “When I consider a young woman as a stellar possibility,” he stated in a Photoplay article in 1923, “I always ask myself: Does she come near suggesting the idealized heroine of life?” He claimed that “in order to have the real germ of stardom,” a girl must suggest, “the vaguely conscious ideals of every man” and “the attributes most women desire.”

In more specific terms, looking at most of the director’s heroines, as well as those of his colleagues, it appears that what man idolized and women desired were young women. So young that perhaps they should not be thought of as women at all. Pickford and Marsh were 17 in their first screen appearance; Dorothy Gish was 14, and Sweet only 13. Not that anyone asked, and if they did the girls might have even shaved some years off. As

36 Reminiscences of Gloria Swanson, 38.
37 Walker, Stardom; the Hollywood Phenomenon, 60.
professor Gaylyn Studlar explains, in those days actresses like Pickford always “registered as an adolescent “girl” or a child-women ambiguously poised between childhood and womanhood.”38

It was not the same for men, although, they too had to endure the scrutiny of directors. Actor Arthur Johnson recounted that when he applied for a role at Biograph in 1908, Griffith told him that he was “too tall” but “if you cut down the heels off your boots you might do.”39 The age requirements, however, were not as stringent. Johnson got a job that year; he was 32.

The demand for some specific physical attributes did not change the fact that, for those who held those attributes, breaking-in to the screen in the early teens was rather uncomplicated. Whether for men or women, the days of the open door policy were soon over. The more producers and exhibitors learned to rely on star power, the less they were inclined to feature unknowns in their pictures. New companies were established, like Adolph Zukor’s Famous Players, which, as its name suggests, relied on its roster of acting talent. When Zukor created his company in 1912 he assigned management positions to two well-known Broadway producers, the brothers Daniel and Charles Frohman, in order to assure the steady flow of bankable names from the stage.40 Yet, with the growing popularity of films, theater cachet was not enough. A screen-star’s identity was created by what deCordova calls “intertextuality”: “the spectator was encouraged to

follow through all of the associations created through a specific actor’s appearance from film to film … the fame of the picture personality was something the audience could feel it was actively participating in. It was a matter of accepting a pre-established cannon.” A one-time appearance by theater star Sarah Bernhardt could not inspire the same personal association created through the dozens of pictures made by Florence Lawrence in one year. Moreover, due to the greater availability of cinema, the popularity of screen stars across the country exceeded that of stage luminaries. As Pickford’s biographer stated, even when the actress returned to play in the theater, “fans at the stage door cried out more often for film’s Little Mary than Belasco’s Juliet.” To distribute its pictures a company needed true movie stars, a fact that Zukor understood rather quickly; soon enough he signed Pickford for $500 a week.

Contracts and high salaries were the next logical step. Five hundred dollars per week was a lot of money for an actress. When Pickford started, only three years earlier, Griffith hired her for five dollars a day with no guaranteed employment. By the end of 1910 at IMP, Carl Laemmle was paying her $175 a week, and at the time of Zukor’s offer, Biograph and Griffith were still unwilling to go above $300. As players were, up to that point, part of the team, they did not earn such distinctive sums. But Pickford kept on making even more. In 1914 her wages were raised to $1,000 a week and they reached the $4,000 mark on March 1915. As film scholar Tino Balio remarked, “her meteoric fame and salary caused trade practices of the industry to be revamped.” Others were soon to

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41 DeCordova, Picture Personalities, 50–51.
43 Information about Pickford’s salary was taken from Ibid., 112–146; Tino Balio, United Artists: The Company Built by the Stars (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1976), 14–17.
44 Balio, United Artists, 14.
follow. As the income of producers and exhibitors relied more and more on the names that appeared on the marquee, those names started understanding their value. Marsh claimed that Biograph was paying her “$85 a week” when in 1916 “Sam Goldfish offered me $2,000 a week for 52 weeks for the first year.”45 When the matinee idol Douglas Fairbanks joined the industry that year, Harry Aitken of Triangle signed him for an initial weekly salary of the same amount.

With these figures the integration of the star system was complete. It is interesting to note that the work itself did not change. Movies were getting longer, but even so it would be hard to imagine anyone working harder than “twelve hours a day, seven days a week,” or necessarily becoming a better actor. The change that occurred between 1909 and 1915 was not in labor practices but in market value. Those actors who became stars were not receiving more money for their work but for their name; they were commodified. To illustrate, in 1915 director Frank Powell and his boss William Fox wanted to save on costs and decided to cast an unknown in their upcoming feature A Fool There Was. They hired Theodosia Goodman for a mere $75 per week, and changed her name to Theda Bara. While star salaries climbed the price for the actual work – for acting – was still very low. Of course, Fox had another plan here. He was operating under the assumption that he could “put the girl [they] choose under contract, as the part will make her.” Instead of letting the market decide the matter for him, he would control the market. Indeed, the picture was a great success and by the time Bara left the company four years

45 Reminiscences of Mae Marsh, 24. By 1916 Sam Goldfish has already changed his name to Goldwyn.
later her value climbed to $4,000 per week. Fox could manipulate her salary only for a little while.46

The Bara tale highlights another effect of the star system – the division of acting labor. As implied by the stories of Marsh and the Gish sisters, until the early teens there were extras and there were players, but the transition from the first group to the second was relatively effortless. Towards the late teens, as all the major studio began “experimenting with the “all star” policy,” the acting category was split. Now there were extras, actors, and a first rank of stars, and “those below the first rank began to feel the squeeze of a saturated market.”47 Writing in 1931 Benjamin B. Hampton, who worked in Hollywood in the early twenties, observed that in 1917-1918 “the industry was so thoroughly obsessed by star frenzy that only a handful of people believed the public would ever accept anything different.” Though he does not offer a source for this data he claims that “the extent of the star craze is demonstrated by the fact that of the six hundred or more features then produced in America each year, not more than five percent dared to seek a market unless bolstered by a real or alleged “box-office name”.”48 Whether that number is accurate or not, it is clear that the picture business has gone a long way from the days Biograph refused to reveal players’ names, when they were all equally anonymous.

For a while it seemed as if star-power was spiraling out of control. Some players, like Pickford, Fairbanks, and Charles Chaplin, gained such status that when they feared Zukor and other producers were plotting to curb their salaries, they created their own

company. In January 1919 United Artist was signed into existence. The new organization was to unite those actors mentioned as well as William S. Hart and Griffith, and “release [their] combined productions through [their] own organization.” Essentially it was a distributing arrangement whose intention was to bypass the growing power of new studios such as Zukor’s Paramount. Big producers did their best to belittle the new company. Richard Rowland, the head of the Metro studio, famously remarked, “So the lunatics have taken charge of the asylum.”

Whether the plot that spurred Pickford and co. into action was anything more than a rumor is unclear. Nevertheless, reactions like Rowland’s as well as actions like the Bara build-up by Fox did suggest that the up-and-coming Hollywood moguls were trying to find ways of containing the galaxy. Though competition among producers played an important role in driving up actors’ salaries, as Hollywood entered the age of standardization, companies were looking for ways to capitalize on the commodity while keeping the employee in check.

**Containing the Galaxy**

Standardization did not occur overnight. It was a long process that in some ways had accompanied the film business since its inception. By the late teens and throughout the twenties, however, oligopolistic expansion expedited the regulation of production practices. On March 1915 Laemmle launched his company’s impressive West Coast studio in Universal City. The following year Zukor’s Famous Players consolidated with the Jesse Lasky Feature Play Company and the Paramount Picture Corporation to create an impressive production-distribution firm. Four years later that firm also started buying

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theaters. William Fox did not stay behind and soon he too acquired several movie houses. In response to the rising power of these producers, an organization of powerful distribution companies from across the United States joined together to form First National in 1917. The Loew’s – MGM merger with its outstanding Culver City studio arrived in 1924 quickly followed by the growth of Warner Bros. and its eventual union with First National. These big companies devised various ways of controlling the motion picture market both individually and in cooperation with one another. Their box-office stars remained a central part of the system.

Despite owning their own theaters, movie companies still used the popularity of screen-performers to determine the market value of their pictures. In his survey of the industry during the thirties, Balio describes the economic rational behind this arrangement:

First, affiliated theater chains were located in different regions of the country, so that to reach a national audience the majors had to exhibit one another’s pictures. Second, the majors rented their pictures to exhibitors a season in advance of production. And third, the majors used a differential pricing policy: flat fees for B pictures and percentage-of-the-gross terms for A pictures.

With regards to A pictures, major companies determined the percentage terms of a film based on the past box-office performance of the actors that were cast in it. Of course, this rationale filtered back into production assuring that most pictures included stars in order to guarantee profitable rental deals. One could say that by the late twenties, “The star system became the prime means of stabilizing the motion-picture business.”

Interestingly, while at first the marketing of performers was one of the basic strategies fueling competition and the expansion of picture companies, as the industry

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became vertically integrated under a few large corporations that controlled production, distribution, and exhibition, the competition somewhat subsided. Already in the early twenties one could see how the employment of stars was going through standardization. Richard Koszarski claims, “filmmaking in the silent era could hardly be thought of as routine.” He singles out in particular the “recruitment and training of new personnel” that, according to him, “remained in a primitive and even chaotic state.” While it is true that, as he says, at least until the end of World War I “accidents and bizarre coincidence seem to have been responsible for a disproportionate number of major careers,” at least in the acting profession entry into the business was no longer that haphazard.51 Despite their centrality to the marketing of motion pictures, the development and labor routine of actors was becoming more and more regimented.

First, as we have seen, many companies already began using exclusive contracts to assure the employment of both established names such as Pickford and new talents such as Fairbanks and Bara. In addition it seems that by the early twenties most studios had developed similar mechanisms with which to identify and sign newcomers. When Janet Gaynor came to Hollywood in 1924 she “made the rounds of the studios … to try to sign up for work as an extra. That meant waiting in the casting office.” It was not a complicated procedure; “you just had your photograph taken, and gave them in through a little window.” One day she got a call back from the office at the Hal Roach Studio. “They made two-reel comedies at that time, and they had lots of little young girls. You never knew what you were doing. You were background. It was extra work. I would get a day, maybe, once in six weeks or something like that.”

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51 Koszarski, An Evening’s Entertainment, 95.
Then she moved to the next stage. After serving as an extra for a while, though this “didn’t go on too long,” Gaynor was “put into what at that time they called “stock” at Universal Studios.” As part of a company’s stock “you were paid by the week $50 … you did extra work, and then maybe one day you’d have a lead, again in a little two-reel comedy or short Western or something like that.” After stock came the contract. “At that time,” explained the actress, “five year contracts were the usual thing if a young player had any possibilities at all: they signed them up for five years, which meant they paid $75 a week the first six month and then could let them go if they didn’t do anything with them.” With this system, she thought, the studios “didn’t jeopardize a great deal of money or time, but at least they gave you an opportunity. You had a little bit of security for six months.” Gaynor got such a contract from Fox in 1926, and she remembers it felt “so encouraging, I can’t tell you. Just to be put in stock made you feel you were well on your way.”

Once again, the experience of this actress, who later stared in such classics as the 1927 silent Sunrise, does not seem to be extraordinary. Joan Crawford remembers things in much the same way. Only she worked for MGM. “This was 1925,” and she was “one of several dozen girls, including Dorothy Sebastian, Anita Page, Gwen Lee and Sally O’Neil, given contracts that year.” It was standard procedure, “every year, a flock of girls and boys were signed by the big companies. If they made good, that was fine for the studios; if they did not, nothing much was lost and they could always be used as extras for the duration of their contracts.” All of them had to do a screen test of sorts. It was not “the painstaking and expensive procedure” it later became; in those days it was more like

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“a moving photograph.” At the beginning she “thought the signing of [the] contract made [her], automatically, a five year fixture on the MGM lot.” However, as Crawford discovered the next day, it was not that simple. First, she was “faced with an unexpected ordeal, that of an ‘acting’ test,” and then “to add to [her] discomfort,” she had been told about “options, those frightening little clauses in contracts which give studios the right to dispense with players at the end of three to six months period.”

Option clauses were not unique to players and they became a fixture in the careers of most creative personnel including writers and directors. But the appearance of typical contracts, clauses, casting offices, and screen tests suggest the formation of a standardized practice. What more on January 2, 1926, The Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association (MPPDA) established the Central Casting Corporation with the purpose of ordering the employment of extras. As the casting director Phil Friedman explained, “when the studio first needed extra talent, great throngs of people, lured by the promise of good wages flocked to Hollywood … there were always crowds in front of their offices.” Therefore, it became necessary to have one reliable source of extra talent.”

From 1926 onwards, “the studio casting directors” began sending “their orders for extra talent over three teletype machines to Central Casting.” The order was “automatically typed out” and it listed “the date, the time the extras must report, the name of the director, the number of the production, the type of make-up necessary” as well as “the number of extras, their ages, costumes, salaries, and any extra specifications required.” Since pictures utilized many extras, this manager boasted that the Central Agency “has become

53 Gladys Hall and Joan Crawford, “I Could Not Ask For More,” manuscript for a Joan Crawford autobiography, n.d., file 3.f.121, Gladys Hall Papers, Special Collections, Margaret Herrick Library.  
54 The MPPDA was established in 1922 in a consorted effort by the major producer to create a self-regulating body headed by former postmaster general Will Hays, which would prevent the threat of state and federal censorship.
the largest employment agency in the world, giving three hundred and fifty thousand jobs each year.”

Extras were outsourced, they no longer just happened to come to work with their sister. All other players, as Gaynor and Crawford illustrated, were put in stock.

By the thirties studios developed a rather uniform formula to manage their talent pool. Friedman, who served as head of the casting office at Universal, Fox, the Pickford-Lasky Studio, and RKO, elaborated on it: a “studio roster consists of stars, feature and bit players.” The first kind, the “contract player or star” is “an actor or actress who has a term contract for six months. This contains options renewable up to seven years, a guaranteed salary for twenty out of twenty-six weeks, whether or not the player works, and a lay-off period of six weeks.” Friedman added that such a contract “also provides for a rising salary scale” after every option. Of the supporting players, those “considered important in bolstering up a picture, but are not box-office attractions themselves,” the feature players are “contracted for a week at the minimum, while bit players are engaged by the day.” This studio executive made sure to emphasize the constructive aspects of being a stock player, like the “guaranteed salary” and the “rising salary scale.” But the agreements players signed with studios did more than give them a chance at fame. They in fact committed the aspiring performers into a very rigid labor routine; one that assured that behind every potential star was also a disciplined employee.

The devil, as always, was in the details. With the “option contract,” as Balio affirms, the studios in fact “devised an ingenious legal document to control their high

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55 Phil Friedman, “The Players Are Cast,” in Nancy Naumburg, ed., We Make the Movies (New York: W. W. Norton & company, inc, 1937), 110–111. The official website of the Central Casting Corporation lists its opening year as 1925. Since Friedman gives a specific date, which is at the very beginning of 1926, I decided to adopt his version. It could be that the organization was already operating in some form a month or two before.
priced talent.” First, and most crucially, the right to renew an option belonged exclusively to the studio. The infamous clause explicitly stated: “In consideration of his employment hereunder by the Corporation, and in order to induce the Corporation to enter into this agreement, the Artist grants to the Corporation the following options to engage and employ the Artist to render his exclusive services, as an actor, performer or entertainer.” The Artist was not granted the same right. In addition, during the time of employment “Artists” agreed to “act, pose, sing, speak or otherwise appear and perform as an actor in such roles and in such photoplays and other productions as Producer may designate.” However, “there shall be no obligation on Producer to cause or allow Artist to perform any services hereunder.” Essentially, the company was not required to cast the player in any picture while under contract, but if it did, she or he had to appear in it.

Simply put, most actors had no control over the roles they played. “People have the gall to write in to picture people and criticize them for the choice of their pictures,” Crawford once complained. “I think it is very important to put in the story that we have jobs the same as any girl in a ten cent store, and we do what we’re told.” If she ever got a role that she actually wanted it has “only been out of the goodness of Mr. Mayer,” since among the actors, “who have long term contract, none of us have the rights to choose our parts.” She could think of only two exceptions: Greta Garbo and Norma Shearer. The first was undoubtedly MGM’s greatest possession and the second, the wife of the head

producer.\textsuperscript{58} James Cagney felt the same. “Just like a shipping clerk,” he reflected, “I was just a salaried employee. But this was part of the times, for everyone. This didn’t apply only to me; it applied to everybody under contract.”\textsuperscript{59} Bette Davis would have concurred, saying “studios employ many talented people for the sole purpose of finding suitable material for their top players, and only in rare cases is the star permitted to make her own selection.”\textsuperscript{60}

In general it seems players had very little participation in the crafting of the story or the picture. Gable once remarked, “It’s true that actors, today, have only one job to do – and that’s acting. It’s true that we have nothing to say about direction, production, very little to say about a script, very little influence, if any, in helping new talent get a start.”\textsuperscript{61} Indeed, the names of stars hardly ever appear in the pre-production correspondence or script conferences. Leslie Howard, who played Scarlett’s other love, Ashley, on \textit{Gone with the Wind}, once complained that “the conglomerate work” that is the script, “is handed to the actor anything from a few days to a few hours before he reports for work, and even if he is important enough to be allowed to criticize, he will hesitate to add another cook to the many who have concocted the broth.” Considering the fact players were also excluded from the editing stage, Howard added, “so much for the control of the artist over his medium!”\textsuperscript{62}

\textsuperscript{58} Crawford to Katherine Albert, November 14, 1941, file 3.f-123, Gladys Hall Papers. Norma Shearer was the wife of Irving Thalberg, MGM’s Vice President in charge of production.  
\textsuperscript{59} Reminiscences of James Cagney, December 1958, transcript, Popular Arts Project, 44.  
\textsuperscript{60} Bette Davis, “The Actress Plays Her Part,” in Naumburg, \textit{We Make the Movies}, 118.  
\textsuperscript{61} Hall, “Clark Gable Tell ‘How’ – and How!,” article manuscript, November 10, 1940, file 5.f-195, Gladys Hall Papers.  
To be sure, there were exceptions. As Paul Muni said, some actors, like himself, “are fortunate enough to be able to choose their own stories and work with the writer from the beginning, watching the story develop and helping to mold the characters they will play on the screen.”⁶³ Some were even given a choice of directors. Before work started on the picture *Alice Adams* in 1935, RKO’s Head Producer Pandro Berman sent a memo to Katharine Hepburn saying, “as a final check-over I have taken a list of all the directors in the industry and from that list selected those who could … successfully direct a class picture … Strangely enough, the final result brings us right back to a choice between two men – [George] Stevens and [William] Wyler.”⁶⁴ Berman stated that he had to make a choice that same day and asked the actress to “give me a concrete expression of your opinion so that I will avoid doing something which will make you unhappy.” However, throughout the thirties and most of the forties, such cases were few and far in between.

As a rule, players had to do as they were told or suffer the consequences. Those were also specified in the contract. It was agreed that “in the event of the failure, refusal or neglect of the Artist to perform his services in accordance with this agreement, then, at the Producer’s option and without notice, the obligation of Producer to pay the Artist any compensation shall cease from the time of commencement of such default.” Furthermore, “upon the happening of any such default, Producer shall have the further separate rights or options to terminate this agreement as a whole or as to the particular picture with

⁶⁴Pandro Berman to Katharine Hepburn, March 27, 1935, file 1.f-14, Katharine Hepburn Papers, Special Collection, Margaret Herrick Library.
respect to which such default shall have occurred.” Actor Ralph Bellamy explained this clause in his own words. “If there were no provision in your contract for story approval, which was extremely rare, you could be assigned to any picture.” Such assignment, he claimed, “could be done punitively, even, and was. I’ve had it done to me.” In this case, “you’re only recourse is to say, I won’t do it, which means that you go on suspension. If they want to take it to court, they can.”

Suspension without pay became the preferred threat of studio executives. Although, according to many contracts, the studio could actually dismiss a player for “failure to perform his services,” such action carried the risk that she or he would immediately sign a contract with a different company. Withholding funds was much more effective. After his successful portrayal of a police detective in Laura in 1944, 20th Century-Fox wanted Dana Andrews to play a similar role in Fallen Angle. He read the script and “thought it was pretty bad.” He refused to do it and “it got to the point where they were going to put [him] on suspension.” Then his agent reminded him, “you won’t work for a year, probably, or six months.” Andrews played the part. Maybe due to the fact that it was their only recourse, and the fact that many of them could afford it, some actors welcomed suspension. Myrna Loy for example claimed that she was suspended from MGM on more than one occasion. “Well, of course, that sounds dreadful – but it’s part of your contract.” Even though, “sometimes this can get rather uncomfortable on both sides,” on other times, she said, “you have to do it.” In her case, she did it once because she felt overworked; “I thought that I had done too much in one year, and I was

65 See footnote 53.
66 Reminiscences of Ralph Bellamy, November 1958, transcript, Popular Arts Project, 27.
very very tired and wanted to get away and rest.” On another occasion, “I thought I was very wrong for the part and I just said no.”

Stock contracts included even more demands. Players’ services had to be extended to any publicity interviews or photograph sittings the studio deemed necessary. In addition, following scandals such as Roscoe “Fatty” Arbuckle’s alleged murder of Virginia Rappe in 1921 or Wallace Reid’s death by drug overdose in 1923, both of which caused unwelcome public uproar, actors and actresses were also asked to sign a morality clause. These came in various forms but essentially demanded that the player “conduct himself with due regard to public convention and morals,” and that he or she “will not do or commit any act or thing that will tend to degrade him in society or bring him into public hatred, contempt, scorn or ridicule, or that will tend to shock, insult, or offend the community, or ridicule public morals or decency or prejudice.” Once again, if they did, the “Producer may, at its option … cancel this agreement for breach of the provision of this paragraph.”

One more interesting detail to note is that, at least until the establishment of the Screen Actors Guild in 1933, the work schedule remained similar to the one described by the pioneer performers. Cagney remembered that his “first experience” from Hollywood around 1930 “was the hours we worked. We would get on the set at eight o’clock in the morning, and we worked – on a Saturday – right on through till daybreak the next day. How many hours? Eighteen, twenty, hours a day.”

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68 Reminiscences of Myrna Loy, interviewed by Mr. and Mrs. Robert C. Franklin, June 1959, transcript, Popular Arts Project, 20.
69 Reminiscences of James Cagney, 10.
hours at all. Usually you would start to work at 9:00 o’clock and work till 9:00 that night. I have worked a whole day and a whole night through.”

Ironically, the justification for such standardization of actors was the value and importance of their uniqueness. While in players’ contracts, and in that sense also in those of directors and writers, companies took every measure to create regimented employees, inserting clauses like, the Artist shall perform his duties “at all times as instructed by the Corporation, including Sundays and Holidays, and at such places as the Corporation may direct,” they also integrated a clause that explains this discipline as an attempt to preserve distinctive and exceptional abilities. Most individual agreements included some version of the following statement:

It is distinctly understood and agreed by and between the parties hereto that the services to be rendered by the Artist under the terms hereof, and the rights and privileges granted to the Corporation by the Artist under the terms hereof, are of special, unique, unusual, extraordinary and intellectual character, which gives them a peculiar value, the loss of which cannot be reasonably or adequately compensated in damages in an action at law, and that a breach by the Artist of any of the provisions contained in this agreement will cause the Corporation irreparable injury and damage.

Analyzing similar contracts signed by motion picture composers, Hanns Eisler and Theodore Adorno remarked that it is interesting how the corporation, on the one hand, forces an artist such as a composer or an actor to “renounce his artistic independence,” and on the other hand, when that corporation “wants to protect itself against possible breach of the contract,” the abilities of the artist are “suddenly endowed with the traditional dignity of a work of art.” All within the same document.

70 Reminiscences of Janet Gaynor, 21-22.
71 See footnote 53.
To be sure, there was indeed something unique about their services. Players, and particularly box-office stars, were unusually compensated by the studios. In his book *Stardom*, Walker claims that in the 1930s, “behind the grandeur of being a movie star … lay all the gradations of servitude.” Well, perhaps all except the pay. Once an actor or actress was successful enough to become a “contract player” they were usually accorded with a relatively high salary. Personal limitations were exchanged for cash. It is hard to define as servitude a situation where a rising star like Melvyn Douglas earns $900 per week in 1931, an actress like Hepburn receives $1,500 in 1932, and even a young supporting actor like Tim Holt is guaranteed $350 a week as a basis for his “rising salary scale” in 1938. As a point of comparison, the average yearly income per person in the United States that same year was $1,230. Players not only earned a great deal of money they also cost the studios much. An almost guaranteed fixture in the production files of Hollywood pictures is that the cast would account for the most expensive item on the budget sheet. In the 1943 production of *Double Indemnity*, the cast, which included Fred MacMurray, Barbara Stanwyck and Edward G. Robinson, amounted to $319,870 about a third of the overall budget. A similar ratio occurred in *Hold Back the Dawn*, from 1941, where the salaries paid to Charles Boyer, Olivia DeHavilland and Paulette Goddard throughout shooting came to $237,129.43, a little under a third of the $978,000 budget.

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74 Agreement between Melvyn Douglas and Samuel Goldwyn; Agreement between Katharine Hepburn and RKO Studios Inc.; Agreement between Tim Holt and RKO Pictures Inc., December 15, 1938, RKO Radio Pictures Inc., Correspondence. Supporting actors and bit players did not receive such high sums but they also did not have to sign such draconian contracts.
These sums suggest that at least in terms of remuneration actors were not part of the conventional workforce. Their labor was not commodified only according to its value to the production process. These sums imply that, unlike directors or writers, famous actors needed a special incentive to sign a contract. Special because of the additional function they fulfilled in the industry – their status as a product. Therefore while contracts normalized the relationship between the studio and the player-employee, the generous compensation specified in them links to another set of practices that standardized the actor-commodity relations; a set of interactions that made sure the MacMurrays and the DeHavillands maintain an extraordinary value and more significantly internalize the fact that the studio was essential for this maintenance.

“Not Born But Made”

If some actors compared their role in the studio to that of a “girl in a ten-cent store” or a “shipping clerk,” others came up with different analogies. “How it feels to be a star today?” Gable contemplated in late 1940, “it feels like being a safety deposit box in a bank! A box full of gilt-edged securities and high-interest bonds.” He felt that way “because of the terrific sums of money invested in us,” i.e. “the stories bought for us, the production costs that ‘mount’ us, [and] the salaries paid our co-stars and supporting casts.”

Indeed the economic dependence on star-power that was built into the system placed many players in the position of a prized-possession: a valuable commodity that had to be handled with care. This status becomes clearer when one considers the personal

77 Hall, “Clark Gable Tell ‘How’ – and How!"
nature of their appeal. As Leo C. Rosten wrote in his anthropological study, every star “is a monopoly. A Charles Boyer or a Claudette Colbert, has a monopoly on those graces of voice, eyes, manner, attitude which constitute the individual personality.” After all, “there is only one Clark Gable, only one Bette Davis.” Although companies often tried to build up a “Gable type” or a “Davis type,” there was never any assurance the public will be “won over” by the “synthetic substitute.” For that reason companies tried to make stars out of the players they had in stock and use the tried-and-true ones with the utmost efficiency.

Several scholars attempted to answer the question, how does a studio develop and maintain a star? Cathy Klaprat suggests that “because the staple of the industry was narrative films the question should be rephrased” as “how were stars matched to narratives and thus to the scriptwriting, publicity, and advertising strategies of a studio?” Analyzing the career of Davis, Klaprat finds that “in practice, the industry would cast a player in different roles and test audience response to each.” The response would be determined by “fan mail, sneak previews, and exhibitor preferences,” as well as “audience reaction,” and “box office grosses printed in trade papers.” Studios used these in order to assist in the “fitting of player to character.” Once the fit was made and “the correct role was determined,” that is the kind of role producers assumed audiences expected and wanted to see the actor in, “advertising and publicity took over to transform the star’s personal life in accordance with the actions and traits associated with the star’s screen character.” Klaprat shows how at Warner Bros. Davis, who started out playing the “comely coquette,” was later fixed at the role of “the vamp,” after her successful

appearance in the 1934 picture *Of Human Bondage*; a fixture that created a new specific market for her films.  

Part of this process was a more banal but crucial make-over and training. In his study of Hollywood costume design, W Robert LaVine emphasizes, “A star was not born, but made:”

Hair was bleached or dyed, and, if necessary, to “open” the eyes, eyebrows were removed and penciled in above the natural line. Studio-resident dentists, expert at creating million-dollar smiles, capped teeth or fitted them with braces. Cosmetic surgery was often advised to reshape the nose of a new recruit or tighten her sagging chin. A “starlet” was taught how to walk, smile, laugh, and weep. She was instructed in the special techniques of acting before a camera, perfecting pronunciation, and learning how to breath for more effective voice control. Days were spent in wardrobe, situated in separate buildings within the studio communities.  

To this entire operation one might add that, with every new picture project, studios had to pick the right stories, the right screenwriters, the right directors, co-stars, wardrobe, make-up, and the right publicity. A whole expensive machine of specialized knowledge was employed in order to decipher what is the bankable character and then sustain it without wearing it out. This costly procedure was not foolproof; there were many actors and actresses that never became Gable and Davis despite the sincere effort. For this reason, when an actress did become a starlet, the studio wanted to make sure it will get a return on its investment.  

It was a catch-22 of sorts: companies had an incentive to make stars but once they did, they were held hostage by their success. This conflicting dependency of the studios

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inspired a special treatment towards actors within them, during the production process. In the daily reality of the studios actors were, by virtue of their personal value, subjected to two forms of management. First, as mentioned, they were objectified, that is to say, producers, other executives, writers, and directors often treated them as a product rather than participating creative employees. Second, their dual commodity/employee status often exposed contract players to a sort of managerial paternalism: while studios carefully safeguard them, that protection took the form of arrogance whereby those in positions of authority assumed they hold exclusive knowledge with regards to players’ best interests. The latter of these attitudes was unique, the former, unique in its intensity, and both, together with the network of expertise described above, attempted to break the monopoly held by the actor over the star persona. They were all part of an endeavor to tie the valuable star-product to the picture company.

Even a superficial search through interoffice communication in any studio will illustrate the tendency to commodify actors. Take into account how Friedman, the casting agent, described his directory. Players were catalogued according to different categories: “the main classification … are stars and feature players: male and female … other classifications include character men and women, comedians and comediennes, colored people, orientals, musical and specialty talent.” An actress like Gaynor, for example, would be listed “both as an ingénue and as a young leading woman,” while other players may be listed “in four or five classification such as a young leading man, a heavy, a character actor and a foreigner.” During the casting process, “from his directory, the [executive] makes his suggestions for the various players on an assignment sheet which he sends to the producer and the director with his reasons … then all three discuss them
in a conference.” If the producer or director are unsure of the selections made by the casting director they will arrange for a “production test” for the players in question. At least according to Friedman’s experience, it seems that the actors themselves were not involved in the casting process. They were utilized like resources.

Undeniably, players were not the only workers the industry treated this way. Conforming to principles of scientific management and other features of a modern business including a rigorous division of labor, Hollywood studios subjected the labor of writers, directors, cinematographers, and all other personnel to similar terms of exchange. That said, with actors and actresses this practice took an extreme form; it was much more common, front-and-center, and it included physical attributes and personality rather than mere professional capabilities. In other words, it was not their acting ability, their labor, that was the commodity; it was their bare presence, the people themselves. The reason, of course, was that while the producer wanted to hire the best cameraman for the picture, he was not selling the cameraman to the public. Actors, on the other hand, were treated like a commodity because in many ways they were one.

The casting of Gone with the Wind once again serves as a great exemplar. Selznick International, the producing firm, was not part of the major companies. It was essentially a production operation with no distribution and exhibition branches. As a result it did not have the resources to maintain a large stock company and relied to a great extent on loaning players from other studios. Exempt from the need to build-up talent and match contract-actors with the right characters, the production team could discuss possible cast members only in terms of its own needs. “What are your feelings about

Vincent Price?” Selznick asked George Cukor.82 “I have no strong feelings,” he answered, “I think maybe we can do better.”83 The producer and then director had many such discussions.84 “It might interest you to know that Frances Dee reads absolutely thrillingly with great temperament and fire. She is a most accomplished and technically efficient actress,” wrote Cukor, “I have only one reservation about her for Scarlett,” he added, “has she the shallow external minx quality that Mrs. Chaplin realized so brilliantly in private life?”85

Throughout 1937 and 1938 such exchanges between Selznick and his team were frequent. “George darling have found perfect Tarleton [twins] in London famous English aristocratic family but can be whipped into Southerners at drop of hat,” specified one telegram.86 “I am forgetting about Estelle Winwood because … I understand that she is not looking very well, and if her looks have gone off any I’m afraid she’s scarcely the very chic and attractive woman that we want for the part,” declared another.87 One undated copy of a casting options form simply stated, “1. Sussan Carnahan: Pretty – not very experienced – gay and appealing 2. Ann Gillis: experienced – pretty 3. June Lockhart: Wistful – rather appealing 4. Marilyn Knowlden: Very good for type – little hard 5. Betty Moran …experienced – not very appealing.” And a note at the end added,
“none of these ideal for Blossom … in every case their speech is unladylike and not correct for the part.”

Just to be clear, this treatment was not reserved only for women; the discourse in the studios was the same for male actors. “As to [the part of] Frank Kennedy,” wrote Selznick, “I feel very strongly that much the best type physically is Conrad Nagel. He is exactly thin-blooded enough looking for the part, and fits perfectly the description, “an old maid in trousers.” Even his baldness is of value; he is obviously a gentleman; and just weak enough.” With regards to the role of Ashley, he thought, “[Melvyn] Douglas gives the first intelligent reading of [him] we’ve had, but I think he’s entirely wrong in type, being much too beefy physically.” Granted, physical appearance and personality were relevant features in a screen performance, yet they often seemed to gain prominence over the professional qualifications of actors. Cukor was worried that Dee does no possess as much minx as another actress did in her “private life.” Her ability to act minx was not under discussion. In contrast, while considering other craftsmen, the discourse hardly ever stirred away from their formal expertise: “the more I think about [cameraman] Lee Garmes, the more I feel that he might be the best man for us, especially in view of his skill with angles and his ability to get the sort of effects which are so essential to our picture.”

The objectification of players was also visible in the studios’ habit of trading in them. Like the option contract, another famous component of Hollywood agreements was the loan-out clause. It stated, “the Artist hereby expressly gives and grants to the

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88 Copy of Casting Options for the role of Blossom, undated, Ibid.
89 Selznick to Cukor, January 14, 1939, Ibid.
91 Selznick to Henry Ginsberg and O’Shea, December 19, 1938, reprinted in Ibid., 200.
Corporation the right to lend any of the services of the Artist provided for herein to any person, firm or corporation for any motion picture or pictures in connection with which the Corporation may be entitled to the services of the Artist hereunder.”92 Such loan-out agreements were made among the companies, not directly with the actors, and “all checks in payment of the Artist’s services” were exchanged exclusively between them. They were “made payable to [the lending company] and … delivered to [it] each week at [its] studios.”93 These compensations almost always exceeded the weekly salary of the player in order to, as Friedman explained, “reimburse his studio for carrying the actor during his idle period, because when he is loaned to another studio it may interfere with his home studio commitments.”94 In other words, there was a profit involved and generally the studio pocketed most if not all of it.

Once again, this practice applied to other creative employees as well, although in the case of actors it seems to have been more frequent. Besides, a loan-out of a player was different since it was more than an efficient use of the company’s labor resources; it was an investment in the star product and had to be treated as such. A different casting agent by the name of Bill Grady, who headed the casting department at RKO as well as MGM claimed, “Another source of worry without praise is the loaning out of our contract players to other studios.” It was a source of worry since “whenever this happens, the

92 See footnote 53.
script must first be read carefully, to see if the role is suitable for that person,” as there is always the worry that “an uncongenial part might do him more harm than good.” Here we begin to see the paternalist aspect of the management at play. Studios generally treated loan-outs of personnel as best practice, the lending of players, however, was thought of in terms of value enhancement.

Producers kept a close watch on the films they loaned their players to. In 1944, for example, negotiating with the production team of the movie Love Letters, Selznick “has made as a condition of … going any further with the [Jennifer] Jones and [Joseph] Cotton lending agreements, that the part of Dilly be not cast with Ann Richards but cast with some younger character actress, in order not to rob or detract from the worth of the role of Singleton,” which Jones was intended to play in the picture. In addition, Selznick wanted “to make known that the part of Roger must not be portrayed by too young and handsome a boy,” as it might harm Cotton. Producer Hal Wallis, who was the intended recipient of the previous letter, had much the same concern when he was about to loan Joan Bennett to Walter Wanger. “I finally got around to reading The Blank Wall,” he wrote in 1948, “and I think it will make a very good starting vehicle for Joan. It will, of course, require some developing of the leading male characters as they are pretty sketchily portrayed.” Unlike the trade of any other employee, when a player was leased his or her home studio became involved in the external-production. The loaned players were more than just hired hands they became part of the property that is the motion picture, and it in turn became a part of their star-property.

95 Bill Grady, “Casting,” Watts, Behind the Screen, 65.
96 Daniel T. O’Shea to Hal Wallis, October 6, 1944, file 222.f-2175, Hal Wallis Papers, Special Collections, Margaret Herrick Library. Richards did play the part of Dilly in the picture.
97 Wallis to Walter Wanger, October 26, 1948, file 225.f-2232, Hal Wallis Papers. The picture in question was eventually released under the title The Reckless Moment.
Both with regards to loan-outs and in-studio work, producers often felt they knew best when it came to choosing the right role for their contract players. People like Wallis, Irving Thalberg, or Darryl Zanuck assumed their experience in the business, and their economic as well as creative investment in their stars, made them the absolute experts about the latter’s career paths. Consider this long letter sent by Berman to Hepburn in 1936. The actress was apparently uninterested in fulfilling her latest assignment, the picture *A Woman Rebels*. She thought neither the script nor her part was well developed. Her executive producer was quick to put her in place. “Dear Kate … I think you are making a big mistake in this whole matter,” Berman wrote. “If you will recall there has never been a picture you have made about which I have been honestly enthusiastic from my own opinion that has turned out badly,” he exclaimed. The producer then proceeded to enumerate his right decisions with regards to her career: “I have strongly advocated production of *Morning Glory*, *Little Minister*, *Alice Adams*, and *Mary of Scotland* … needless to say each of them has extraordinary merit.” He reminded Hepburn how there were “arguments over *[The] Little Minister* and *Morning Glory* both of which I persuaded you to do.”

Then he pointed out the perils of disobeying him by bringing up her flops: “I never had any enthusiasm for *Break of Hearts* as you well know,” and about *Spitfire*, “which you were keenly desirous to do … I tried to unsell [sic.] you from making it.” Berman claimed he was “not trying to avoid responsibility,” but emphasized, “I have never been wrong when I have been personally convinced insofar as your productions are concerned either from box-office angle or from angle of pleasing the most people with you.” Finally, turning to the picture at hand, he argued that it “falls into category of those
picture about which I have … my own enthusiasm … is box office sympathetic in character. Different from anything you have done in that it gives you opportunity to display another side entirely.” Berman ended by stating, “I earnestly recommend you put aside all these discussion and come here immediately to make this picture and I close with the confidence you will thank me for this wire within six months.”  

He was confident that he had the better judgment.

Actor Joel McCrea received a similar scolding from Selznick. “I have your note about Our Betters and will be glad to consider your complaint against the part,” he wrote when he was still serving as RKO’s head producer, and immediately added, “Although you must believe I would not cast you in it unless I had given very serious consideration to what it would do to your future.” Selznick was apparently less disturbed by McCrea’s objection to the part. For that he had a clear answer: “you are under contract, Joel, you are receiving a weekly salary and decisions as to what parts you will play will be made by us, and not by you.” No, the producer was more offended, not to say, “surprised and disappointed,” by one particular sentence in the actor’s letter that stated McCrea had “no intention of ruining [his] future,” by participating in Our Betters. Selznick charged at the actor, “your advance since this administration has been many, many times greater than what you achieved in your previous years in pictures, and I cannot conceive how you can have other than complete respect for and faith in our judgment.” If there was ever any doubt, the producer wanted to affirm, “if you are cast in Our Betters, it will be because we think it will further you and not hurt you, and at the same time serve the best interest

of the picture and the company.” He concluded by referring to McCrea’s qualm as “a ridiculous Hollywood attitude.”

In his letter Selznick too was expressing a common Hollywood attitude, one that often carried beyond casting and into the players’ private lives. As Klaprat points out, studio publicity departments were constantly busy “fusing character and actor,” by manipulating the public image of the star as an individual. Sometimes in order to maintain such fantasy, the paternalist regard for an actor’s professional course included recommendations about his personal business. “The build-up, in the studio, of people they were interested in was very calculated and very interesting,” said Myrna Loy, “it was quite remarkable … to become this kind of ‘fabulous person’ that they manage to create through this constant publicity.” Though, she added, “you had to deliver … it was very, very interesting – and also very destructive for the person herself, I think.” In her particular case it was the name. Originally, it was Myrna Williams, and she “liked it very much,” but “at that time everyone felt there had been a Kathleen Williams … they were looking around for a sort of different name, and someone came up with the name Loy.”

Crawford remembered that her given name Lucille LeSueur “sounded affected, and was difficult to pronounce,” so “the [MGM] publicity department then conceived the idea of arranging with one of the motion picture magazines to conduct a contest, a prize to be given the person finding an acceptable name for [her].” Finally, producer Harry Rapf sent for LeSueur and “told me that my name was Joan Crawford.”

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99 Selznick to Joel McCrea, December 6, 1932, file 21.f-213, George Cukor papers.
101 Reminiscences of Myrna Loy, 5-7.
102 Gladys Hall and Joan Crawford, “I Could Not Ask For More.”
The best story probably belongs to Dana Andrews, who “had gone to Mr. Goldwyn’s vice-president in charge of the studio and told him [he] wanted to get married.” The man answered, “Look, you haven’t worked in pictures yet and we need a little publicity. What about squiring some girls around town to the nightclubs, so we can get a little publicity for you, which will help you along? I would suggest you wait a while.” Andrews did as he was told and when he tried again a couple of months later, Mr. Goldwyn himself said, “I’ll think about it and let you know.”

103 The moral clauses discussed above were another measure taken to direct the course of famous players away from ugly scandals, which were harmful to their popularity.

One could always ask whether all this attention to players, both on and off the set, was truly in their best interest. Bette Davis once said that while she believed “actors and actresses are notoriously bad judges of story material,” it does not “follow that the studios are always right.” She reminded that while under contract, players “must be paid whether they are working or not; and when they are not working they are a worrisome item of expense.” Therefore, “if the studio has scheduled nothing suitable for the star at such a time, she may be requested to go into this production even though they know it is unjust.”

104 Or in other words, with all their fanfare about “furthering” their stars’ careers, head producers and executives did have other, more material, concerns than an actor’s artistic development. The paternalist language, though arguably sincere to some extent,

103 Reminiscences of Carver Dana Andrews, 12.
could also serve to soothe egos and mask what was essentially fiscal efficiency. Lauren Bacall once referred to this as “Svengali-ing” the player.\textsuperscript{105}

Then again, one has to remember that in many ways the system worked. Many actors, who made it into the contract player category, had very long careers. Reginald Owen, a British stage player, who began his film career in Hollywood in the late twenties and was never a leading man, admitted, “From the actor’s viewpoint … the years have never been like it. I was under contract for sixteen years with Metro, which is a long, long time for anybody to be under contract.”\textsuperscript{106} Looking back, Cukor, who was privy to backstage star handling, also observed that overall they were treated very well by the studios: “they were given pictures that were, in fact, vehicles to show them to their best advantage, or to try sometimes to show a different facet of their talent. As a result, these people had long, long careers.”\textsuperscript{107} Davis might have had a point about unjust casting, but the concerns of Wallis and his team at Warner Bros. were definitely broader than mere profitability. “I am returning to you the Ben Hecht story,” wrote one of Wallis’ advisers. “It is brilliantly written in the very best Hecht style, but when you boil it down I am afraid it is too morbid of a movie.” The problem was Davis; it was not good enough for her. Maybe “if [she] never played Of Human Bondage and we were badly in need of a story for her, this could have worked out.” Even then, “the girl [character] is such an out and out slut, and she seems too horrible to bring sympathy.”\textsuperscript{108} The script was not suitable for their star-property; therefore, it was not good for the studio.

\textsuperscript{105} Reminiscences of Lauren Bacall, interviewed by Mr. Benton and Mr. Greene, June 29, 1971, transcript, Hollywood Film Industry Project, Oral History Collection of Columbia University, 3.
\textsuperscript{107} George Cukor, interviewed by Henry Ehrlich, circa 1975, transcript, file 64.f-941, George Cukor Papers.
\textsuperscript{108} Paul Nathan to Wallis, August 24, 1942, file 226.f-2240, Hal Wallis Papers.
Perhaps it was just too complicated to determine where the player’s benefit ended and that of the studio began. If Davis was Warner Bros. biggest star, then the company’s profits depended on her, which means that in some ways her career was indeed at least as important to Warner as it was to the actress herself. Studios often made mistakes and it should be pointed out that box-office success was not necessarily identical to what a professional actor might consider quality or career development. Yet, artistic disagreements aside, the managerial methods devised by Hollywood executives suggest that despite the draconian contracts and the paternalist attitude, studios had an interest to keep their stars theirs but also shining. As we shall see in the next chapter actors often decried the terms of their employment. Producers, in contrast, often tried to belittle the role of stars or their ability to break out without their help. All in all, if as Davis claimed, “Once you’re in the profession fame is your tangible reward,” it had to have been a symbiotic relationship.\footnote{Gladys Hall, "I'll Tell On Myself, Says Bette Davis - And Does," undated, circa 1938, file 4.f-142, Gladys Hall Papaers.}

MGM executive producer Irving Thalberg believed he worked in a “creative business.” He thought one could not “say definitely whether picture making is really a business or an art.” As he claimed in 1933, “It is hard, as a matter of fact, to explain the whole motion picture business situation to a banker – or to anybody else,” for that matter.¹

Indeed, reducing Hollywood companies to either business or art often appeared very difficult, not to say limiting. It was especially so for producers like Thalberg. The work of screenwriters was a case in point. In 1935 as part of the negotiations for a National Recovery Administration sponsored Code of Fair Competition for the Motion Picture Industry, studio management felt it was essential to stress the industrial position of writers. The latter were trying to incorporate into the document regulations concerning the fairness of their employment. A committee of producers, including MGM’s vice president in charge of production, responded to these claims by stating that writers “are to be classified as employees and not as employers.” As a result, they “are not in competition with the producers [and] as a general proposition, conditions among the writers or conditions in the writers’ relations with the producers, are not within the scope of the code.” According to them “such rules could be adopted into the Code only upon application of the group which originally applied for and agreed to the Code itself,

¹ Irving Thalberg and Hugh Weir, “Why Motion Pictures Cost so Much,” The Saturday Evening Post, November 4, 1933.
namely, the employers.” And they, as employers, did not wish to adopt them.\(^2\) The lines were clearly drawn; Hollywood was an industry, producers were its management, and writers were part of the workforce.

That was 1935. A year later the situation seemed to have changed. It was April of 1936 and the writers, now operating within a professional union, were protesting for their right to collective bargaining. They demanded that the studios recognize their Screen Writers’ Guild. The producers once again rejected their demands, this time for a different reason. Not that they had a problem with labor unions. As they claimed in a public statement, signed by representative of all companies, “for years they have cooperated with the unions and fully sympathized with their proper functions and legitimate objectives.” However, as they saw it, there was “a wide distinction between labor unions properly organized as such, and organizations of creative employees.” Writers might have been employees, but of a special kind, since “not by a widest stretch of the imagination can a writer, whose ability and value cannot be even remotely standardized, place his interest and problems on a place with the man who joins a union … to establish standard wages, working conditions and hours of labor.”\(^3\)

Thalberg himself even took it a step further. About a month after the above statement was released, on May 2, 1936, he held a meeting with all the screenwriters

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\(^2\) Legal Arguments Against the Proposed So-Called Rules of Fair Practice Governing the Relations between Producers and Writers, February 5, 1935, in the Official Report Proceedings before the National Labor Relations Board: Hearing in the matter of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios and Motion Pictures Producers and Screen Writers Guild of the Authors’ Guild of America et al. Case No. XXI-R-149, et al., Box 517, Board’s Exhibits 166-314, Record Group 340, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD (henceforth NLRB, XXI-R-149, et al.)

\(^3\) Official Report Proceedings before the National Labor Relations Board: Hearing in the matter of Universal Pictures Inc. and Screen Writers’ Guild Inc. and Screen Playwrights Inc. Party to a Contract et al., Case No. C-1055 to C-1063, Box 1725, Volume X, August 23, 1939, Record Group 1460, National Archives, p.923 (henceforth NLRB, C-1055-C-1063).
under his employment. As one of them, Charles Brackett, testified, “Mr. Thalberg addressed the writers present more in sorrow than in anger … he stated, in his opinion, that writers had no business to belong to anything like a union; that they were artists and should not be members of any organization.” Thinking back to his comment from 1933, maybe this mid-level executive found the status of picture-making so “hard to explain” because the way he perceived it was so context dependent. When he was dealing with the NRA, Hollywood was more of an industry and writers were part of its workforce. Faced with the demands of organized labor, he thought it better to think of movie-town as an artist colony.

Then again, perhaps it was not complicated at all. Perhaps Thalberg was invoking the lexicon of “exceptionalism” in order to mask what was in essence a very conventional position. Even when studio bosses suggested their screenwriters were not regular employees, all they really meant is that they were not the kind of employees that could lawfully unionize. That, of course, was a typical managerial tactic. When faced with organized labor, many factory owners tried to imply their workers were not in fact “workers.” For Hollywood moguls, the “artistic” argument was simply the most obvious legal recourse. All in all, they attempted to silence their writers the same way any other industrial executive would have.

These incidents in the producer-writer relationship are meaningful. As we have seen, on a day-to-day basis the American motion picture industry relied on its ability to balance a modern rationalized production operation with an unstructured creative process. For the most part, maintaining that balance was in the economic interest of all parties involved. However, in times of crisis, when the harmony was interrupted, the
artistic element was often surrendered. The fact that Thalberg, whose position it was to broker between management and creative personnel, sided so unequivocally with the former, serves as marker here. When the Hollywood system of creative labor encountered problems, it tackled them as a conventional American industry.

The word American should also be emphasized. Throughout its existence the motion picture business was framed by the larger socio-political reality it was operating in, whether it was New York censorship laws or California’s open shop policy. Yet, particularly during the thirties, the policies and legal changes brought about by the New Deal had a significant influence on Hollywood and the reshaping of its labor relations. The rise of creative guilds, i.e. the Screen Writers Guild, the Screen Directors Guild, and the Screen Actors Guild, their struggles, the way they chose to pursue them, and the attitude embraced towards them by producers, were all molded by the makeup of the Roosevelt era. They followed the course set by the intersection of a liberal federal government and a rising labor movement.

This chapter traces these moments of rupture in Hollywood’s work relations within their specific geographic and temporal context. It demonstrates how certain privileged sectors of the industry, including company managers and the creative talent, interacted with the federal programs and institutions aimed at improving the lives of workers, which were made available through the thirties. However, while taking advantage of such programs as the National Recovery Administration and the courts of the National Labor Relations Board, these sectors also kept their distance. Producers like Thalberg were no different than actors, writers, and directors, all of whom held on to the ambiguous status of their industry. They all maintained the banner of a creative business -
aligning with traditional industrial or labor causes only as long as it served their immediate goals. The same way management flip-flopped on its position towards writers, screen players went back and forth on their intention to support and participate in the struggle of back-lot studio workers. They exhibited only partial support for this particular model of state monitored labor-management relationship.

Nevertheless, even if the participation of the Hollywood talent guilds in the New Deal coalition was limited, the formation of that coalition served as a powerful enabling factor. While maintaining their “creative differences” the motion picture people used the federal institutions of the thirties to solidify a strong and enduring, albeit conservative, labor movement; one that would outlast many of the policies that supported it.

The Field and the State

Bourdieu suggests that taste-guided industries such as moviemaking are “at all times the site of struggle” between “two principles of hierarchization: the heteronomous principle, favorable to those who dominate the field economically and politically,” e.g. studio owners and managers, and “the autonomous principle” or that of “art for art’s sake,” whose advocates “are least endowed with specific capital” and “tend to identify with degree of independence from the economy.” In the film industry, the sectors that might fit most closely to the second principle are writers, directors, actors, and perhaps other creative labor such as composers or cinematographers. As mentioned in a previous chapter, according to the French sociologist, even an industry that veers closer to the standards of the autonomous pole, “continues to be affected by the laws of the fields that encompasses it, those of economic and political profit.” Thus, any field of cultural
production is embedded within a larger “field of power,” which, in turn, is embedded in the overarching “field of class relations.”

Moreover, Bourdieu explains that there are “homologies” between the fields. That is, “the struggles going on within the inner field are always overdetermined and always tend to aim at two birds with one stone.” Specifically, he suggests that “cultural producers,” those who control the industry economically, “tend to feel solidarity with the occupants of the economically and culturally dominated positions within the field of class relations.” Such alliances, he claims, “May give rise to ideological effects which are produced automatically whenever oppositions at different levels are superimposed or merged.” To put it a different way, there is an alignment between the classes in an industry of cultural production and those of society as a whole, and ideological struggles at the encircling fields are often reproduced in the industry level. In such cases, the owners of production companies tend to be closer to the sources of power outside of their particular field, assuming those are the wealthy classes that traditionally govern industrial societies.

That was indeed the case in Hollywood, except that during the thirties the balance of power in its overarching fields was shifting. “Liberals, labor, and the left successfully captured the flag during the 1930s,” claims Nelson Lichtenstein. He explains that traditionally, “the most convenient attack, certainly by those in power, has been to subvert the legitimacy of [organized labor] by asserting that conflict and instability are a product of internal corruption, outside agitation, or alien ideologies.” However, following

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5 Ibid., 325.
the Great Depression, a new dominant “ideological and institutional dynamic” was formed, one that saw an “amelioration of the labor question” as “inexorably bound up with a structural solution to the crisis of American capitalism itself.” Organized labor became patriotic. As a result, marks Lichtenstein, “between 1933 and 1937 American unions recruited about 5 million new members, at least half coming during just a handful of months in 1937.”6 The sectors and institutions dominating the power and class-relations fields were fluctuating and were no longer confined to big-business owners.

There was an empowerment of organized labor during the New Deal and it took a particular form. As Lichtenstein suggests, unions gained strength and membership under the auspices of the federal government. Scholars such as Christopher L. Tomlins stress that the Roosevelt administration reformulated the country’s industrial relations while reserving an important role for the “new liberal bureaucratic-administrative state” it was fostering. During the thirties, he claims, workers’ right to organize was tied to the state: Labor organizers who “sought to redress grievances and to achieve a measure of power,” were strictly contained “within the regulatory frameworks established by state institutions,” for instance the NRA and the National Labor Relations Board; and Unions were now considered “not as entities with rights but as instruments or agents, designated as representatives by employees through the medium of government-supervised elections.”7 The state became an instrumental part of labor relations, and as Eileen Boris


emphasizes, “New Deal lawyers [and federal officials] expanded [its] power to regulate economic freedom.”

Hollywood took part in this New Deal. Media scholar Douglas Gomery argued that “in terms of labour organizing what occurred after 1933 [in the studio system] was no different from the struggles in Detroit (automobiles) or Pittsburg (steelmaking).” Still, this claim only tells half the story. It was not only that the movies were acting like an industry, but also that the kind of industry they were becoming was formed according to the specific economic model emergent at the time. From the announcement of the Bank Holiday in March, the motion picture business opened its doors to the federal government. Between their participation in the Blue Eagle campaign and multiple hearings in the NLRB courts, American film companies, including their managers and workforce, took part in President Roosevelt’s new liberal administrative state. That state and the vision it fostered shaped the nature of the Hollywood labor strife by supplying the ideologies and institutions with which to carry it. In addition, similarly to its function for American society as a whole, at least in terms of labor, the New Deal marked a break from the order Hollywood was accustomed to.

It is to that older order we shall now turn, but before we do let us also insert a grain of salt into the Hollywood-America homology. When Bourdieu discusses relational positions between fields he stresses that they are “partial.” In fact, he says, “Such alliances, based on homologies of position combined with profound differences in

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condition, are not exempt from misunderstandings and even bad faith.” Indeed, having surveyed the positions within the creative field in Hollywood, one would be hard pressed to equate them with the traditional proletariat. The most “profound difference” of course is their remuneration, which was exceptional in working class terms, to say the least. Bourdieu points to “rapprochement” between the “literary avant-garde” and the “political vanguard,” two groups that, if nothing else, shared the experience of being the underdog in their respective fields. Hollywood actors, directors, and writers were working in the heart of the cultural consensus, and perhaps due that fact, despite their authentic difficulties within the studio system, their rapport with the American working classes was always somewhat lacking. The homology was not complete and therefore the alliance was fruitful only in those moments the Hollywood creative class did not have to wander off too far from the mainstream.

Clear Skies, Open Shop

Filmmaking started in the East Coast. Since the invention of cinema at the turn of the century and throughout most of the teens, New York and its suburbs were the center of production. Chicago was second in command. By 1910, however, the climate of these Northern cities had become a severe limitation. Nickelodeons were booming across the country and the demand for film was increasing. To stay in business, companies had to keep up with the growing market, a task that was proving difficult through the long winter months, especially since many of the studios were stationed on rooftops, some were outdoors, and almost all did not feature artificial lighting. As a result, the industry began looking for lucrative shooting locations in other parts of the United States and

beyond. Film historian Eileen Bowser explains, there were “detours on the way to Hollywood;” producers were dispatching their crews practically everywhere. She mentions that Colonel Selig sent touring companies to New Orleans and Mexico, Vitagraph went as far as Jamaica, the Columbia Film Company was shooting in Oklahoma, and IMP sent Thomas H. Ince to direct in Cuba. During the winter of 1908-1909 Kalem led an expedition to Jacksonville, Florida, which was so successful that, as Bowser claims, for a time the city pronounced itself the “World’s Winter Film Capitol.”

Despite these detours “by 1911 it had become evident that Los Angeles and its surroundings would be an important permanent film center.” At that time, all major companies, including Selig, Essanay, Lubin, Kalem, Éclair, and Lasky already established some presence there. The winter of 1911 also marked the date in which Nestor, the western extension of the Centaur Film Company from New Jersey, brought the industry into the actual town of Hollywood. In 1915 Carl Laemmle opened Universal City in the San Fernando Valley, which marked the first permanent setup built to completely replace an eastern studio. Finally, wartime coal rationing measures passed in the winter of 1918-1919 forced even more companies to “consolidate operations” in the Los Angeles area, until by 1922 “Hollywood’s share of American production stood at 84 percent.” By then the term Hollywood was already beginning to serve a synecdoche for the motion picture industry, though in fact an ordinance passed in the mid teens prevented this suburb from becoming a real center of filmmaking. What more, it is

12 Ibid., 159.
important to point out that only the production facilities were relocated to the West. The executive headquarters of all companies remained close to the stock market and financial centers in New York.

Why did they all end up gravitating towards Los Angeles? First, because of its convenient weather. The warm climate of Southern California “provides 320 days for good photography, out of the 365,” proclaimed a reporter for the *Moving Picture World* in 1911.\(^\text{15}\) A second motive was the varied landscape accessible from the city. Only a short ride away, one could find urban city streets, sunny beaches, mountains, a desert, and even some snow and forest trees; scenery against which to film any possible story. Another reason was the fact that land was abundant and inexpensive. Companies could easily purchase vast lots to build big production facilities on, like the one constructed by Laemmle. Last but certainly not least was L.A.’s reputation as the nation’s principal nonunion city.

Keeping unions out was more than a reputation; it was a stated mission. General Harrison Gray Otis, publisher-owner of the *Los Angeles Times* and an avowed proponent of “open shop” wrote already in 1910 that the city was “steadily approaching that magnificent goal for which brave and few men should everywhere contend.” That goal was industrial freedom, or “the right firmly established for every citizen to freely pursue, under the law, any honest avocation or employment of his choice, and to be protected in that right from disturbance, menace and maltreatment by the whole power of the law.”\(^\text{16}\)

Otis and his allies, the most powerful of which was an organization called the Merchants’


and Manufacturers’ Association (M and M), pursued this mission vigorously. They flagged it and lured people like Henry Ford and Harvey Firestone to bring their factories to Los Angeles and turn it into an industrial center. Their boosterism was successful. Forming a coalition of bankers, employers, and Otis’s powerful newspaper, they turned the city into what historian Mike Davis referred to as “a paradise of the open shop,” with “militant anti-unionism” combined with “scientific factory planning, low taxes, abundant electric power, warm weather, mass-produced bungalows, and a racially selected labor force.”17 Or, as the United States Commission on Industrial Relations reported in 1914, a place where labor “freedom does not exist either politically, industrially, or socially.”18

Owners of motion picture companies undoubtedly found this atmosphere appealing. Robert Sklar argues that, “though no Hollywood memoir chooses to recall it,” as movies were getting longer, more elaborate, and more expensive, “they needed skilled craft-workers – carpenters, electricians, dressmakers and many other specialists – and lower costs became an increasingly important factor.” Weak unions and a steady supply of new residents in search for work kept wages around Los Angeles very low. How low? Sklar claims that as much as “a fifth to a third below the prevailing rates in San Francisco, and in some cases half the wage levels of New York.”19 There are some indications that film producers sought to “replicate [this] profitable labor-management

19 Robert Sklar, Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies, 1st ed (New York: Random House, 1975), 68. Some memoirs and older histories of Hollywood often list as an important reason for the transition to Los Angeles the attempt of independent producers to escape the spies and legal pursuits of the Motion Picture Patent Company. There is little evidence to support this claim particularly since Trust members like Biograph were among the first to send their own companies to Los Angeles. If anything the presence in California might have helped to stall some of the legal battles. For more see Bowser, The Transformation of Cinema, 1907-1915, 150–152.
policies,” particularly, their establishment in 1917 of the Motion Picture Producers Association (MPPA). Seventeen of the studios in the West Coast, including Fox and Universal, joined this organization, which film scholar Laurie Pintar labels a “class-based” alliance. There is reason behind this claim. The MPPA “set uniform labor policies for its members,” and those members “worked together to combat unionization and to keep wages low.” Pintar points especially to a written warning sent out by the association’s Secretary in the Spring of 1920 “regarding the possible infiltration of studio labor by members of the Industrial Workers of the World.”

Nevertheless, while wages remained low some unions did managed to infiltrate the studio lots. The eastern history of most producers, as well as their somewhat loose ties with the interests of the more traditional downtown Los Angeles businesses, made labor organizers hopeful about their chances. First among them was the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IA). Established in 1893, this union “developed into a horizontal combination of locals of crafts closely related to the building trades, plus a few other groups such as the motion picture machine operators, the property men, and grips.” By 1908 the IA opened a local in Los Angeles, but due to the overlap between the film-stage setup and other forms of construction, soon it was competing over jurisdiction. Two of the city’s trade unions, namely the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, saw an opportunity to strengthen their position versus the Otis alliance, and started sending their men to work at the studios. Pintar argues that throughout the twenties organized labor in the picture

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business was so ineffective exactly because, while “producers were able to unite as a class, studio workers were deeply divided by craft, rival union affiliations, and gender.”

This division was clearly felt during the three strikes organized by the IA in 1918, 1919, and 1921. In each one of these, studio heads managed to defeat the picketers by locking them out and hiring nonunion men. The companies also received support from the *Times* and the M and M. Incidentally these conflicts corresponded with the nationwide labor unrest that escalated during World War I and the 1919 strike wave following the Armistice. The IA and other AFL affiliated locals, including musicians, did manage to form a united front in 1926 and forced companies into signing the first Studio Basic Agreement, which recognized most unions, granted the eight-hour work day and overtime payments, and formed a committee to settle labor disputes. It did not guarantee a closed shop, however, and was not immune to bickering among the organizations that signed it. In general, the struggle of what one may call the “back-lot” unions throughout the twenties failed to gain meaningful concessions from film companies. Nevertheless, as historian Murray Ross claims, these associations of the studio craftsmen were the “veterans” of Hollywood’s labor movement. The creative talent, including actors, writers, and directors, “merely followed in the footsteps of their less glamorous brethren.”

The struggles of the back lot soon found an echo among other studio employees. The year 1919 saw the rise of the Actors’ Equity Association. Established a few years before, it was only after WWI that the organization achieved its first big victory in Broadway and was accorded the jurisdiction of film acting and Hollywood by the AFL. Of course, as several scholars pointed out, “this affiliation, did not indicate enthusiasm

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for unions on the part of film actors.” Indeed, Equity had several factors working against it. First, many Hollywood actors started their careers on the screen rather than on the stage and did not consider a vertical players’ union a natural alliance. Second, in the words of Danae Clark, a “process of fragmentation worked … to create and sustain differentiated labor in the sphere of production,” between stars and lesser players.23 Third, until 1922, when the MPPA turned into the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association (MPPDA) under the leadership of Will Hays, the studios had no official bargaining unit to which a union could turn. Still, despite these problems, following Hays’ nomination, Equity made several attempts to negotiate a standard contract for Hollywood players.24 In 1920, attempting to strengthen its claim, this actors’ union also encouraged the formation of the Screen Writers Guild, which managed to draw some membership.25

A meaningful organization of the creative guilds sounded threatening to producers. Therefore, as a protective measure early in 1927, a few months following the signing of the Basic Agreement, a group of industry people led by Louis B. Mayer incorporated the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences. The first stated purpose of this organization was “to aid and encourage the development of the production branches of the motion picture industry, by co-ordinating the forces of the five major

production branches of the industry in constructive and cooperative action.” These five branches included producers, writers, director, actors, and technicians.

The accepted scholarly view of the Academy depicts its first incarnation as a model company union. However, during its first years, the organization engaged in a mixed bag of activities. On the one hand, its membership was far from democratic and was reserved only for a select few, who were invited to join by the chartered members. In addition, it was actively working to keep independent labor unions out of the industry. This effort carried a decisive impact since, as Sean P. Holmes explains, “by keeping contractual disputes firmly under wraps,” the Academy “reinforced a discourse of popular entertainment that diverted public attention away from the sphere of production and denied screen actors [and other creative employees] a collective identity as industrial workers.” On the other hand, the organization successfully negotiated a basic agreement for extras and bit players and provided a form of protection for creative employees through the Academy Conciliation Committee, which included members from all the participating branches. Furthermore, when in June 1927 sixteen of the largest studios announced a ten percent pay cut for all workers earning over fifty dollars a week, the Academy passed a resolution that objected the “blanket reduction,” and encouraged the adoption of other reforms. Consequently, the cut was postponed and then abandoned altogether. In light of these achievements, Ross suggests that one could also think of this company union as “an outstanding example of a successful industry-wide employee

26 Article of Incorporation of Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences, March 4, 1927, NLRB, XXI-R-149, et al., Box 518, Petitioners’ Exhibits 1-24.
representation plan,” and one that gave actors and writers “their first taste of the fruits of collective bargaining.”

The problematic status of the Academy, as a body representing employees, was drawn out most clearly by one of its organizers. Frank Woods was among the founders of the Screen Writers Guild in 1920. Seven years later he joined Mayer’s initiative and served as the Academy Secretary during its first four years. Woods insisted this project “started out in May, 1927, with rosy dreams for an idealistic future,” and was “in no sense a concerted plot of the producers to put one over the talent classes.” He claimed there was a sincere hope “that friendly contact would accomplish more good in the long run than would militant conflict.” Unfortunately, he bemoaned, there quickly came a “sad awakening;” beginning with the negotiations to eliminate the 1927 cut, in which, he recounted, the producers bargained in “bad faith” and used the Academy as a “smoke screen.” In 1935, this founding member conceded, “that conciliation only within the Academy is inadequate for craft settlements.”

By 1937 Woods was already willing to testify that Mayer’s whole plot was to prevent an “organization that was antagonistic to the producers,” and settled “all differences between the industry itself, without washing the dirty linen.”

Woods’ reevaluation of the Academy symbolizes the transformation undergone by the Hollywood labor movement from the twenties to the thirties. Pleased and proud of their industry’s good fortune, studio employees and particularly those involved with the creative side of production did not wish to stir up trouble. Even if they had their

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28 Ross, Stars and Strikes, 215.
30 NLRB, XXI-R-149, et al., Box 516, Volume V, October 6, 1937, 673.
suspicions about studio bosses and their intentions, actors, writers, and directors preferred to play along. In line with other industrial employees in the country the “general prosperity of the decade,” division among union ranks, a “hostility of most employers” to unionization, as well as their turn to measures of “welfare capitalism” such as company unions, “remorselessly thinned the ranks of organized labor.” All that was about to change. As David M. Kennedy remarks, “when the Crash came, the transient generosity of employers was starkly revealed as a shabby substitute for the genuine power of collective bargaining that only an independent union could wield.” That revelation did not skip the film industry.

Mr. Cantor goes to Warm Springs

“The dangerous year for Hollywood, as it turned out, was not 1929 but 1933,” wrote industry historian Lewis Jacobs in 1939. He explained that originally box office had been unaffected by the stock-market crash, but two years later demand was falling, theaters were closing, and profits were diminishing rapidly. RKO, Paramount, and Fox went into receivership and Warner Bros. suffered heavy losses. Only MGM managed to stay afloat though its earnings shrank considerably. Companies had to find ways to cut spending, and so when, on March 9, President Roosevelt signed the Emergency Banking Act, a great opportunity presented itself. “Motion picture producers announced tonight that ‘97 per cent’ of the contract film players had agreed to accept a reduction of half their pay

checks for an eight week period,” reported the New York Times.33 “The order for the salary cuts came from the home offices … of the different studios and was described as being the only means of keeping open at all,” exclaimed the Los Angeles Times and added, the measure was “to aid in tiding over the [majors] during the financial stress caused by the Presidential banking holidays.” The paper declared, “Stars, directors, writers and other contract people as well as stenographers and smaller paid workers [heeded] the decree without an objection.”34

The industry’s workforce remembered this occasion far less triumphantly. In its review of the Bank Holiday measure, The Screen Guilds’ Magazine offered the following chain of events:

When the banks closed in 1933 the producers proclaimed loudly that money could not be moved from state to state and that therefore they would not receive their accustomed receipts during the bank moratorium. Without waiting for any proof that this would be true, they bluntly told the talent members of the board of directors of the Academy that if they did not order their brothers in the industry to accept a fifty percent cut, they would be held responsible by everyone for closing down the entire industry and throwing thousands out of work … There is no proof to this day that the producers needed the money.35

Several writers remembered studio meetings, in which they were asked to take the cut, as acts of emotional blackmail. At MGM, “L. B. Mayer played the role of a man in torment, looking sleepless and unshaven. He asked his employees to help him save the studio,” recounted Francis Goodrich, “everyone got very pious and scared about the possibility that the studio might shut down.”36 Actor Kenneth Thompson stated “a little pressure was

34 “Film Workers Accept Pay Cut,” Los Angeles Times, March 9, 1933
35 “The Academy Writer-Producer Agreement … Another Attempt to Destroy the Guild,” The Screen Guilds’ Magazine 2, No. 8 (October 1935): 8
used in some cases … so that was the situation under which the cut was accepted voluntarily.”\textsuperscript{37}

Since it was negotiated by the Academy, the measure was undeniably voluntary, though its implementation was made possible only after “a week of bickering, charges of stampeding, and accusations of bad faith.” The details of the eight-week program specified that union labor and employees earning $50 a week or less would be unaffected, those receiving between $50 and $75 would take a reduction of 25 percent, and only the salary of those earning over $100 would be cut in half. The members of the Academy executive committee were the ones who suggested that “the high-salaried employees, executives, directors, stars and writers assume the loss,” in order to pacify IA leaders who were adamant in their objection to any wage reductions.\textsuperscript{38} Under the circumstances it was probably the noble thing to do, still, it left many in the creative ranks discontented and feeling discarded by their supposed representatives. At the culmination of eight weeks most companies resumed the regular pay rates. Warner Bros. was the only studio to extend the cut for one more week, a step that triggered the resignation of its executive producer Darryl Zanuck.\textsuperscript{39} Despite the reinstatement of their salaries, writers and actors remained with an acute feeling that “the Academy was the medium through which wholesale theft was committed under the guise of necessity and parliamentary processes.”\textsuperscript{40} In contrast, they saw how the IA protected the back lot workers from such thievery.

\textsuperscript{37} NLRB, XXI-R-149, et al., Box 516, Volume XI, October 15, 1937, 1418.
\textsuperscript{38} “Majority of Players Accept Film Pay Cut,” X3
\textsuperscript{39} “Zanuck Resigns from Warners,” Los Angeles Times, April 15, 1933, 1.
\textsuperscript{40} “The Academy Writer-Producer Agreement … Another Attempt to Destroy the Guild,” 8.
In the month following the announcement of the pay cut the organization of creative labor received two shots in the arm. In April the old Screen Writers Guild (SWG) was reorganized under a new constitution and bylaws. It immediately signed up one hundred and seventy-three charter members, and elected John Howard Lawson as its president.  

Brian Marlow, who was one of the reorganizing members, confirmed that the “revitalization of the existing organization grew out of the 50 per cent cut.” He explained, “A group of about 15 or 20 [writers] got together … at the Knickerbocker Hotel, because they felt that the Academy was not competent to handle their interest … they decided to form another organization.” During a speech he gave a few years later, the then President of SWG, Ernest Pascal, also reminded his fellows “the Guild was born of the 50% cut.” In July 1933 the newly founded Screen Actors’ Guild (SAG) joined SWG. The conditions were similar. When asked, “what did the screen actors in Hollywood do after [the cut]?” Thompson, the Executive Secretary of SAG answered: “Actors attended Academy meetings during the cut, for the purpose of seeing if there was any way the necessity for the cut could be investigated,” and “they protested at those meetings against the cut,” finally “[they] held a series of meetings, out of which the Screen Actors’ Guild was formed.”

The 50 percent cut was perhaps the immediate catalyst for the formation of the talent guilds, but it was accompanied by an overarching political change. On May 17, Roosevelt announced the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA). The measure included the famous Section 7(a), which accorded industrial workers the right “to

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42 NLRB, XXI-R-149, et al., Box 516, Volume VIII, October 12, 1937, 924-925.
44 NLRB, XXI-R-149, et al., Box 516, Volume X, October 14, 1937, 1312.
organize and bargain collectively through representatives of their own choosing.”

Eddie Cantor, President of SAG, proclaimed in 1934 that it was measures like this that “gave the actors of Hollywood the concrete encouragement and the proper political setup.” He emphasized that both SAG and “the Screen Writers Guild – were born of this appreciation” for the President’s “warm sympathy for all employees of the nation and his definite determination to improve working conditions.”

If there was still a doubt, he declared, “The New Deal is responsible for the organization of the Screen Actors Guild.”

To be sure, Cantor was a personal friend of Roosevelt’s. Still, his language here reminds one of John L. Lewis and other organizers who tried to link their effort with that of the administration saying, “The President wants you to join a union.” Even without the explicit language, founding their guilds in the spring and summer of 1933, actors and writers joined “whole categories of workers with no previous record of activism” that “sought unionization.” Their inspiration to act corresponded with that of the thousands who joined the United Mine Workers of America, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers’ Union, or the AFL ranks.

Even if it was initially only implicitly responsible for their formation, soon enough the NIRA had a direct impact on the talent guilds. One of the professed goals of the Act was to achieve recovery through cooperation between the federal government and industry. The National Recovery Administration (NRA) was the agency assigned with the mission of setting up “government-sanctioned industrial compacts,” in which “production

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45 Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*, 151.
in whole industries would be controlled, and prices and wages would be raised."

Starting around July, NRA chief Hugh S. Johnson was working with leading business owners to devise formal “codes of fair practice” for their respective industries.

Hollywood moguls, who were accustomed to aligning their interests with the national effort, were quick to jump on the bandwagon. By early September they have already prepared a draft for their own code, with the aid of Sol A. Rosenblatt, the agent in charge of the NRA’s Amusement Division. Indeed, as Kennedy explains, in actuality, in most cases the New Deal code authorities “amounted to nothing less than the cartelization of huge sectors of American industry under the government’s auspices.” Large and powerful producers devised these codes according to their needs as they “ignored the antitrust laws with impunity and enforced production quotas and price policies on their members.” It was a successful cooperation between the homologous dominants.

True to form, the proposed motion picture code assured the oligopoly of major producers. Focusing primarily on the relationship between production, distribution, and exhibition, the owners of Paramount, Loew’s, and the other vertically integrated companies assured their continued dominance of the market by warranting such practices as the block booking of pictures and discrimination in theater admission prices. With regards to their creative employees, company managers attempted to introduce some price control. They incorporated three provisions aimed directly at actors, writers, and directors. The first stated that “to avoid the payment of sums unreasonably in excess of the fair value of personal services which results in unfair and destructive competition,”

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48 Kennedy, Freedom from Fear, 151.
49 In her book, Schwartz makes the interesting claim that Rosenblatt was in fact the brother-in-law of Lester Cowan, who in 1933, served as deputy in the Academy committee responsible for representing the talent groups in the NRA negotiations, see Schwartz, The Hollywood Writers’ Wars, 28.
50 Kennedy, Freedom from Fear, 184.
the code Authority could “investigate whether [a producer] agreed to pay an
unreasonably excessive inducement to any person.” In case they found such transaction
did take place, that producer would pay a fine of up to $10,000. A second clause
specified the formation of an “agency committee” that would in essence license talent
agents, and a third provision, referred to as the “anti-raiding” clause, prohibited the
practice of luring away talent from their existing contract by offering higher salaries.\footnote{National Recovery Administration, Code of Fair Competition for the Motion Picture Industry, November 27, 1933, in NLRB, XXI-R-149, et al., Box 518, Petitioners’ Exhibits 1-24, 236-240.}

With these measures producers attempted to put an end to what they considered
the “most serious unfair trade practice,” in Hollywood. Growing in tandem with the star
system, the “enticement of talent by competitors” and the intervention of agents deeply
troubled the pockets of company managers. A studio would have a “long-term contract
with an actor at a salary of $1,000 a week,” explained RKO president Benjamin B.
Kahane in a public hearing on the NRA code held in September. Then, “as much as three
years prior to the expiration of the contact another producer approached the actor through
an agent and made an offer of $3,000 a week.” He noted that on some occasion offers
would go up to “ten times the existing salary.” The enticing company would add that “if
[the actor] can get out of [the] present contract sooner, we shall be glad to have you.”

With regards to agents, Kahane portrayed them as “unrestrained trouble-makers engaged
in stirring dissatisfaction among their clients,” and playing “upon the fears of employing
producers by misrepresenting the offers of others.”\footnote{Ross, Stars and Strikes, 91–93.}

Moguls such as Kahane accompanied their NRA campaign with publicity. Not
that they were eager to expose the inner workings of their business. On the contrary, as

\footnote{National Recovery Administration, Code of Fair Competition for the Motion Picture Industry, November 27, 1933, in NLRB, XXI-R-149, et al., Box 518, Petitioners’ Exhibits 1-24, 236-240.}
\footnote{Ross, Stars and Strikes, 91–93.}
mentioned, studios worked tirelessly to suppress representations of Hollywood as a conventional industry and instead promoted its image as a glamorous world of entertainment. But with the 1933 labor disputes threatening to eclipse this image, as Clark has demonstrated, “studios rewrote labor discourse in ways that accentuated the producers’ moral leadership or patriotic commitment,” while framing workers’ actions, and particularly those of talent and stars, as unpatriotic. They were superimposing their own adversaries with those of the state. Focusing on popular charges of “exorbitant salaries,” trade papers and fan magazines were suddenly filled with articles and advertisements arguing that “the star’s refusal to reduce their salaries indicated a greed and impropriety that was out of step with the national recovery program.”53 One noteworthy piece was published in the November issue of Screen Book and featured an anonymous fan letter to an anonymous actor. “I don’t begrudge you your fine salary,” wrote the fan, “but don’t you think all big salaries might be lowered – maybe to $1,000 a week? If what the paper says is true, you earn in one week five times what most of us earn in a year.”54 Considering the influence studio heads carried in such publications, the cloud of anonymity surrounding this exchange makes its authenticity somewhat suspect.

Though they did not possess an equal sway over the press, the new working class affinities of the current administration entailed that by identifying themselves as laborers, actors and writers could find their own homologies with the federal government. Since the Academy and the talent representatives in it “participated in the framing of the first draft of the proposed code,” it now appeared, as Cantor proclaimed, even more “inimical

53 Clark, Negotiating Hollywood, 70–71.
to the interest of actors.” 55 A more accurate way of phrasing it would have been, more inimical to the interest of starts, as all the contested clauses pertained to those in the higher pay brackets. Still, such stars held the necessary power to turn the actors union into a meaningful threat. Indeed, in early October, immediately following the appearance of the draft, actors of all classes made a “mass exodus” from the institution and boosted the ranks of SAG, including such prominent stars as Paul Muni, Robert Montgomery, and the Marx brothers. Then, working together with SWG, the two guilds began “waging unremitting war on these provisions” mentioned above. This war consisted mostly of mass gatherings and correspondence with government official, but also the surprising aid of the Hearst newspapers, to which Cantor mentioned, “All of us owe a debt of thanks.” 56

The pinnacle of the effort was a wire drafted by the guilds that was sent to the president in mid October.

The wire, which was probably drafted with the help of Laurence Beilenson, the attorney for both SAG and SWG, was steeped in New Deal inspired language. “The professional people of the stage and screen are patriotic Americans,” it began. “They have never failed to respond to any appeal in war or peace.” Pointing to the intent, specified in the code, to limit “unreasonable” salaries, the guilds explained it would not only hurt them but “every employee from the electrician to the star.” They charged that “the purpose of this plainly illegal usurpation of power is to do exactly what the NRA forbids: to fix maximum rates of pay.” They called the measure “un-American” and emphasized that “the direct result of this attack on the creative element will be to lower compensation of actors and writers in the middle and lower salary classes.” With regards

55 “…The Menace of the Academy…” *The Screen Player* 1, No. 2 (April 15, 1934): 1.
to the “so-called anti-raiding clause,” declared the letter, it “tried to accomplish the same thing in another way. It is not to prevent raiding, but to lower salaries.”

The guilds shifted the responsibility for the industry’s financial troubles to the producers. These managers wanted to limit what artists may receive, but, they asked in the letter, “if the artist draws a large sum at the box office and receives a small compensation … who gets the excess? Not the public, but the producer.” They asserted “without fear of successful contradiction that motion picture companies have not been bankrupt by salaries.” Rather, “it was “the purchase and leasing of theatres at exorbitant prices, caused by the race for power of a few individuals desiring to get a stranglehold on the outlet of the industry.” SAG and SWG warned the president that “the same individuals who bankrupt the major companies by these policies still control them … are writing the motion picture code and will directly or indirectly be the Code Authority.”

The parties were clearly aligned; it was the patriotic professionals, the employees, the lower classes of the industry, against the few and the power seeking.57

The wire hit the right nerve and shortly after Cantor, the President’s friend, was invited to spend Thanksgiving with the Roosevelts in Warm Springs, Georgia. Perhaps unsurprisingly the SAG representative found “the President warmly sympathetic to our problems, a delightful gentleman, and a real friend of every man who works for his living.”58 Consequently, when the Motion Picture Code was published on November 27, it featured a presidential executive order suspending the salary limitation and anti-raiding clauses “pending further report from the Administrator, after investigation, as to whether

57 "The Wire to President Roosevelt and the Executive Order,” Ibid., 4, 16.
58 “Text of Eddie Cantor’s Speech at Annual Meeting,” 9.
such provisions should be indefinitely suspended, or modified, altered or changed, or become effective.”

Strictly speaking, it was a pure victory neither for the producers, whose code was incomplete, nor for the talent guilds, which were still officially unrecognized by the studios. If there was a clear winner in this round, it was the administration that managed to implement its political vision of an “administrative state” and position itself as part and parcel of the industry’s labor relations. Actors and writers were so convinced by the government’s commitment to help workers that they agreed “to proceed to attempt to negotiate a fair minimum basic agreement with producers,” not through their own organizations but in the newly formed “Five-Five Committee of the Motion Picture Code [Authority].” In addition both guilds put aside any notion of a strike, believing that “the slower method of negotiation will be far better for everyone concerned.” Industrial peace was maintained.

It did not add up to much. The producers, “who did not really want to bargain collectively,” and who understood that engaging in negotiation with the Five-Five Committees would inevitably lead to formal recognition of SAG and SWG, stalled the appointment of their committee members. That delay lasted months, “during which [the guilds] bombarded Washington with letters, telegrams and telephone calls urging the appointment.” Finally the producers yielded, appointing as their representatives executive producers such as Thalberg, Zanuck, and Hal Wallis as well as company owners Samuel Goldwyn and Harry Cohn. These men listened to the demands of talent representatives,

59 National Recovery Administration, Code of Fair Competition for the Motion Picture Industry, 216.
60 “Text of Eddie Cantor’s Speech at Annual Meeting,” 12.
61 “….Abuses Must Be Rectified.,” The Screen Player 1, No. 3 (May 15, 1934): 1.
which were no longer just about upper salary caps, and included written contacts for short-term engagements, clear arbitration procedures, and a clause prohibiting the practice of hiring from general booking agencies.\textsuperscript{63} They responded, “that they were opposed to any attempt to regulate such matters under the code.”\textsuperscript{64} By late November 1934 the actors were prepared to declare a “deadlock” and by February 1935 the writers claimed they have “exhausted the possibility of negotiation.”\textsuperscript{65} The sides continued shadowboxing until May when the Supreme Court struck down the NIRA by declaring it unconstitutional.

It was an interesting moment, one in which a shift in the ideological and practical preferences of the overarching field, i.e. the federal political field, scrambled the traditional power structure. In many ways, the stagnation of the Five-Five Committees reflects what Daniel Rodgers referred to as the New Deal’s “monumental confusion.”\textsuperscript{66} Even if in hindsight it appears that during those years Washington was working towards expanding its administrative power, many scholars forcefully argued that, in the words of Alan Brinkley, “the New Deal was, in fact, awash in ideologies,” and lacked “any single principle to bind its many diverse initiatives together.”\textsuperscript{67} It was a hodgepodge of policies, adopted on a trial and error principle, anything that could bring about economic recovery. Such ideological uncertainty helps explain the peculiar standoff in Hollywood, in which

\textsuperscript{63} “Writer-Producer Committee disagrees,” The Screen Guild’s Magazine 1, No. 11 (February 1935), 3, and Legal Arguments Against the Proposed So-Called Rules of Fair Practice Governing the Relations between Producers and Writers, February 5, 1935, NLRB, XXI-R-149, et al., Box 517, Board’s Exhibit 166-314. General booking agencies were akin to human resources companies and they ultimately worked in favor of their owners and studio management, as opposed to personal agents and managers, who negotiated better deals for their clients.

\textsuperscript{64} “Deadlock…,” The Screen Guilds’ Magazine 1, No. 8 (November 1934): 10. See also note 2.

\textsuperscript{65} Ibid.; “Writer-Producer Code Committee Disagrees.”


two opposing patrons representing different sets of interest, both assume their claims would appeal to the sources of influence and legitimacy. Facing off in the Five-Five committees, both studio management and the talent guilds believed their interests aligned with those of the administration. Both believed it would eventually rule on their behalf. It was a moment when a creative industry encountered a creative government. Unfortunately, when the state was prepared to interfere in favor of labor, it was the exceptional and monumentally confused nature of the Hollywood creative workforce that prevented the materialization of a broader and stronger alliance.

“An Organization Unto Himself”

During the thirties, when a door closed for organized labor another one opened. The insistence of the guilds only strengthened their reputation among their jurisdictions, and as they grew in numbers they also continued to look for ways of achieving exclusive bargaining agreements for their members. This was also when their roads converged. As the creative labor disputes moved to the next level, the character of each profession and its place within the system weighed in and manifested themselves in the different trajectory followed by the respective unions.

Once again the federal government came to their aid. In July 1935 Congress passed and the President signed the National Labor Relations Act. Commonly referred to as the Wagner Act, this “Magna Carta” for the labor movement “guaranteed workers the right to select their own union by majority vote, and to strike, boycott, and picket.” It also “enumerated a list of ‘unfair labor practices’ by employers, including the maintenance of company dominated unions, the blacklisting of union activists, intimidation and firing of
workers who sought to join an independent organization, and the employment of spies.”

Back in Hollywood, in an article titled “The Wagner Bill – Reality or Prophecy?” guilds’ attorney Beilenson quickly affirmed that it was the former; the meaning of this act was “that collective bargaining is the policy of the United States.” He assured his clientele that “if the constitutionality of the Act is upheld the Guilds will gain greatly,” and “producers will have to bargain.” With that, it appeared the three sides – talent, management, and government – were ready for another round.

Yet, in a suitable fashion for Thalberg’s notion of a creative business, the next steps taken by the guilds were not very easy to classify, at least not in terms of class loyalty. As a standard response to complaints filed against them following the Wagner Act, producers always claimed the plaintiffs, be they directors, editors, or script clerks, were not employees under the definition of the law. This claim often appeared awkward as lawyers struggled to prove that “writers don’t get wages, so far as I know; they get salaries … they don’t get salaries. They get paid for their work, and it is divided into weekly payments.”

Still, regardless of its veracity, studio position was in line with the conventional managerial stand that questioned the government’s right to decide “when it was appropriate for a group of distinctive craftsmen, or specialized workers, to be considered as a separate unit.” Picture companies’ executives joined other “business and corporate groups,” who resented the Wagner Act for “interfer[ing] with traditional labor-

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68 Lichtenstein, State of the Union, 36.
70 NLRB, XXI-R-149, et al., Box 516, Volume XI, October 15, 1937, 1430.
management relationship.” But while brokers like Thalberg and Zanuck chose a clear side, it was the talent guilds that now assumed a somewhat intermediate position.

In the next couple of years the creative employees of Hollywood participated in the struggle of industrial organized labor and appealed to its new federal resources in a utilitarian, rather than ideological, fashion. The actors, for example, played it both ways. Even before the NIRA’s demise, SAG acted as a professional craft union. It became a member of the AFL, the California State Federation of Labor and the Los Angeles Central Labor Council. Both in 1936 and 1937 it made an official request to be included in the Studio Basic Agreement, receiving zero support from the producers or the other craft unions. In April 1937, following the ratification of the National Labor Relations Act by the Supreme Court, the actors appealed to the MPPDA to accept its standard contract, once again to no avail. As their attempts to affiliate with the craft unions seemed futile, SAG decided to try a different tack.

The upholding of the Wagner Act strengthened the ranks of another Hollywood back lot union, the Federation of Motion Picture Crafts (FMPC). Despite its name this organization was more akin to an industrial union as it clumped such varied workers as painters, plumbers, cooks, and set designers under the same roof. On April 30, 1937, to the dismay of both executives and the IA, the 6,000 FMPC employees, walked out of studio lots demanding recognition of their union. SAG leadership chose this exact moment to amplify its own confrontation with studio management. “Stars and meteorites of the motion picture colony, 4000 strong, voted last night to wait until next Sunday to

71 Zieger, American Workers, American Unions, 39–41.
72 For more on this strike see Ross, Stars and Strikes, 191–212; Perry and Perry, A History of the Los Angeles Labor Movement, 1911-1941, 320–337.
decide whether they will paralyze a $255,000,000 industry by joining members of [FMPC] in their strike,” reported the *L.A. Times* on 3 May. On 5 May, the same day that the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) announced its support for the protesting studio workers, the guild contributed $500 to the FMPC strike fund. A few days later, on 7 May, Aubrey Blair, SAG’s business agent, declared, “the actors have voted nearly 100 per cent in favor of the strike … unless the [MPPDA] accede to their various demands,” the most important of which was for a “Guild Shop.” The headline for the following morning: “Actors’ Guild Demands Met.” Producers agreed to recognize and negotiate with SAG, an agreement that threw a “stumbling block in the path of striking studio craftsmen.”

Signing a separate agreement and abandoning the FMPC was a symbolic act. As industry historian David F. Prindle explains, “If the events of that year were ever made into a movie, the IA would certainly be the villain.” By 1937 the union was markedly different then it 1926 version. For one, it had become an enormous power that could shut down the industry. In addition, it had been taken over by Al Capone, who, in 1934, placed two of his men, George Browne and William Bioff, at the head of the organization. Bioff, an ex-pimp, quickly orchestrated a working relationship with studio bosses, whereby he was “accepting suitcases full of cash in return for guaranteeing a steady supply of docile workers.” In its struggle for recognition, the FMPC was in essence challenging the IA’s authority over the back-lot, an initiative that immediately “attracted the sympathies of all the leftists in Los Angeles.” That being said, it was a

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75 “Actors’ Guild Backs Film Craft Strike,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 9, 1937.
weak union, one whose struggle with the studios dated back to 1932. The April escalation was a hopeful attempt to capitalize on the passage of the Wagner Act, an attempt whose chances seemed even greater with the support of the actors. As it happened, most actors were not really in the mood to strike for the rights of painters and makeup artists.77

Shifting its loyalty from the IA to the FMPC and back, fully aware of the heavy weight it carried; SAG essentially took advantage of a dispute among workers’ ranks. In 1939 the organization did it again as it announced its intent to sympathize with the CIO affiliated United Studio Technicians Guild, only to back out when the IA agreed to quit its attempts to unionize Hollywood extras. As Prindle said, time and time again SAG “demonstrated that theirs was a union of conservatives, and that they were quite ready to use the Left as a stalking-horse in any fight for power.”78 By using other industry unions in such a way, actors also distanced themselves from a true alliance with either of the voices speaking for the working class.

Directors played a similar game, though perhaps due to their status in the industry they did not have to resort to such manipulative tactics. Fewer in number than writers and actors, and on the whole better compensated than everyone but the biggest stars, Hollywood directors were slow to organize. It was only on January 22, 1936 that the industry’s leading directors, including Henry King, King Vidor, and John Ford, left the Academy and established the Screen Directors Guild (SDG). In a public statement they claimed, “organization is necessary as a protective measure against growing tendency of studios to attempt reduction of directors’ importance and earning power.” Their

77 Prindle, *The Politics of Glamour*, 27–28; Bioff and Browne were convicted on charges of extortion in 1941, following the testimony of one studio executive, Joseph Schenck, who implicated them in order to lighten the prison sentence he received for tax fraud. For more on this story see Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System*, 186–189.

membership amounted to 125 by the end of the month. This was not a conventional union; its members were more concerned about respect than about work conditions. As a testament, in a move *Variety* described as “conservative in a big way,” SDG voted “no affiliation, working agreement or connection with any other talent or craft organization.”

Despite these lofty attempts, the studios maintained their regular stand and refused to recognize the guild. It should be pointed out that the directors were not one hundred percent exclusionary. They did join forces with assistant directors and unit managers who had already formed their own union in 1931. Company executives excused their snubbing of the guild by claiming this association did not constitute an appropriate bargaining unit. Luckily for SDG it was no longer the studio’s call to make. By the summer of 1937, the Wagner Act had empowered the newly reformed National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) to decide whether a group of workers could be considered a unit for bargaining purposes, and to supervise the elections by which this unit chose its representatives. As more peaceable measures, such as boycotting the 1936 Academy Awards ceremony had no effect, SDG turned to the government for help and in August 1938 NLRB hearings on its case began.

Simultaneously, the newly appointed president of SDG, Frank Capra, who was also the Academy’s president, made another attempt to negotiate directly with the producers. Annoyed by the run around treatment he received from head of MPPDA Joseph Schenck, Capra decided they must move “quickly, gamely, and lethally.” On February 15, 1939 the head of the guild resigned from the Academy and announced the

79 “New Directors Guild Votes Against Any Ties with Other Screen Bodies,” *Variety*, January 29, 1936.
entire SDG will once again boycott the Oscar ceremony, which he was set to host. In addition the guild called a strike commencing the following day. An agreement was reached during that same night, which recognized the guild, specified conditions for assistant directors, and granted the senior directors’ requests to participate in script preparation, cast selection, and editing. The unit managers were left out of the bargain and forced to form their own union. All this before the NLRB made its ruling. For directors the institutions of organized labor were just a safety net. At the moment of truth they preferred a peaceful narrow agreement, catering mostly to the artistic aspirations of a select few, than one negotiated by the government that might have benefitted actual work conditions for a larger sector of employees.

The relatively quick battles of SAG and SDG correlate to the position these groups of employees held within the Hollywood system. As we have seen, when it came to directors and star actors, the big companies developed a complex system of control and nurture. In both cases, while binding the talent into draconian contracts and limiting their creative freedom, the studios also fostered a sense of belonging and solidarity. With directors it was through the spheres of autonomy they were accorded during the shooting stage, and with actors via the network of experts, who nourished and maintained the star persona. The big film companies invested in these practitioners because each of them possessed a unique capability, i.e. a complex skill or commodity status, which was deemed necessary for efficiency and profits. For this reason it is not surprising that studio management avoided any real confrontation. Furthermore, the nurturing relationship

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developed by the companies might also explain why the two talent groups were so eager to settle their claims and return to the safe spot under the studios’ wing. Such a convivial resolution was not readily available for those whose creative contribution was perceived to be slightly less unique.

The talent group that came closest to a traditional proletariat was the writers. Unlike the two other creative guilds, SWG was unable to force the producers’ hand on its own, and it was only after two separate appeals to the NLRB that the studios finally recognized it. By the same token, the struggle with SWG exposed the producers at their most employer stereotypical behavior. This was undoubtedly due to the screenwriters’ status in the system, which was devoid of the personal power possessed by skillful directors and box office stars; they simply were not as threatening. After all, as a monograph about collective bargaining in the industry explained, “a strike of actors immediately halts all photography; a strike of writers does so only after the backlog of previously prepared screen plays has been exhausted.” In addition, the report also reminded, “producers probably [had] greater reason to desire free access to the market for story material than for acting talent.” With these reasons holding back producers and writers growing more and more frustrated, compromise was harder to reach.

The long showdown began with the screenwriters’ attempt to vertically integrate their union. Discouraged by their failed attempts to gain recognition since 1933, SWG leaders had come to the realization that “the only difference between this labor organization and any other labor union is that we are, under present conditions, unable to cut off the supply of man-power and material.” Still convinced that “without Guild Shop

[they] remain a purely defensive machine, with the danger of disintegrating through sheer inertia,” the guild devised a new plan of action. In April 1936 they announced their intention to amalgamate with the Authors’ League of America in order to “consolidate all writers in all fields into one strong and unified organization, strong and able to protect writers against the invasion of his rights and to fight for and win what is rightly his.” Amalgamation on its own could not guarantee recognition, therefore SWG board also proposed a new article for its constitution, article no. 12, which ordered members “to refrain from contracting for their services or material” beyond May 1938. These two propositions were to be voted on by the guild on 2 May.82

That got the producers’ attention. After ignoring the guild for three years, suddenly, in the days leading up to the vote, SWG was all studio bosses could talk about. The dispensability of writers stemmed from the relative ease with which studios could replace them, an advantage they stood to lose if the amalgamation plan went through. Almost in every company writers were called to meetings in which they were addressed by management with regards to the proposed amalgamation and Article 12. “I called them together to tell them we are faced with a demand by the [guild] to represent them, and I wanted to know how they felt about it,” recounted Jack Warner. “I wanted to have a little talk with them, as I felt that there would be a slowing down. It was a sort of general pep talk … because, as in any industry, where there is friction there is a slow-down of the progress of the work.” He wanted his writers to remember, “We had all been working here under very favorable conditions, very high salaries.” In light of that fact, with

82 Ernest Pascal, “One Organization for ALL American Writers,” The Screen Guilds’ Magazine 3, No. 2 (April 1936): 15-17. As a previous chapter argues amalgamation appealed to writers for additional reasons than the fortification of their guild.
regards to article 12, Warner explained, “We signed people to seven years,” and “it is impossible to sign people for two years because you may work on a story as high as eight, nine or ten months. You write one or two stories and your contract is over.” He acknowledged, “We like to retain our writers,” but only “at the right wages, agreeable to them.” Stressing the first person plural, for Warner it was all about harmony.\(^83\)

Kahane held a similar meeting at RKO, in which he wanted “to meet with our writers who worked for us and talk this thing over in a sensible and sane fashion.” He emphasized, “[writers] had the same interest as we had; they were interested in earning a livelihood out of the motion picture industry and that certainly they were not disposed to wreck the industry to make it impossible for [the] studio to carry on.” Contrary to past record, he claimed “there was certainly no objection to a guild,” and that “if their purpose was to straighten out any grievances they might have, we were glad to listen to them and try to straighten them out.” He called SWG leaders “misguided,” and clarified that since it was his duty to “protect the stockholders and their huge investment in theaters, studio and facilities,” he had to “resist with every legitimate recourse … any attempt on the part of writers to control man power and bottle up supply of material,” which would be the result of the proposed amendments.\(^84\)

Speaking over at 20\(^{th}\) Century-Fox, Zanuck too paid close attention to the amalgamation and said he was “personally opposed to dealing with a group of writers who were under the control of another group of writers who hated [the] moving picture business.” He thought, “They were foolish. If they wanted an organization, they could have an organization, but let it be an organization that they could themselves control.”

\(^83\) NLRB, C-1055-C-1063, Box 1725, Volume VI, August 7, 1939, 240-246.  
\(^84\) NLRB, C-1055-C-1063, Box 1725, Volume VII, August 18, 1939, 333-387.
Pointing to his early writing career, he explained that he “looked at it from the writers’ viewpoint,” and that he “certainly wasn’t going to have [his] future as a writer jeopardized by a group of people who had obviously shown their hatred of Hollywood.” Zanuck stated that authors and playwrights were simply “endeavoring to get a lot of writers under their control,” since they “hate the salaries that were made by screen writers because screen writers received 10 times as much money for a picture as they received for a hit play.” It was a coherent message. Producers and writers were like an industrial family; they had the same interests. Authors and playwrights were not part of this family and did not have its best interest at heart.\textsuperscript{85}

Once again, memory of these events differed according to position. The screenwriters remembered the speeches given by their bosses as carrying a far less familial and far more intimidating and threatening tone. Several writers remembered Kahane as being “very belligerent,” saying things such as “if you want to fight, we will fight, and the fight will start Monday morning at 9:00 o’clock.”\textsuperscript{86} James Gow testified that in the meeting that was held the Saturday before SWG meeting, “Mr. Kahane said that there would be a blacklist,” and that the “Guild was being led by a bunch of radicals with Russian ideas.” He said, “Some of these people should go back where they came from.”\textsuperscript{87} Anthony Veiller swore that the exact phrase was “you fellows talk a lot about a blacklist. If this thing goes through, I will show you a blacklist that will blast you out of the business.”\textsuperscript{88} With regards to Warner, Dalton Trumbo recalled his boss saying “our leaders were Communists, radical bastards, and soap box sons of bitches,” and that “there

\textsuperscript{85} NLRB, C-1055-C-1063, Box 1725, Volume IX, August 22, 1939, 629-655.
\textsuperscript{86} NLRB, C-1055-C-1063, Box 1724, Volume XI, August 24, 1939, 1139-1140.
\textsuperscript{87} Ibid., 1014-1016.
\textsuperscript{88} Ibid., 1185.
are a lot of writers in the business who are active in the Guild now who will find
themselves out of the business and it wouldn’t be a blacklist because it would all be done
over the telephone.” Lucy Ward claimed Warner also added, he “happened to know that
the Department of Justice are investigating certain Guild members and there are going to
be a lot of cooked geese in Hollywood who will never work in pictures again.”

Despite these admonitions, SWG membership voted in favor of both amendments.
As a result two things happened, neither of which involved studio recognition. First, on
the very next day, May 3, 1936 a group of dissenting screenwriters including James K.
McGuinness, Grover Jones, and John Lee Mahin resigned from SWG, and quickly after
established a rival organization called the Screen Playwrights. This more conservative
union received the support of producers, headed by Thalberg, who according to
McGuinness said, “when you are ready to sit down at a table to talk, let me know and
representatives of the producers and myself will sit down with you.” By April 1937 the
Playwrights even managed to sign a deal with the major studios. As Jones stated proudly,
“I think what shocked them was that we asked for so very little.” That said, the
Playwright’s agreement was a sweetheart deal only in the sense that it helped
factionalized SWG and eradicate any plan for amalgamation or constraining of talent
contracts. With regards to the betterment of work conditions the conservative
screenwriters were sincere in their intents and achievements. Their contract with the
studio included “minimum wage, standardized contracts … notice, on request, on
whether other writers were working on the same material, no speculative writing without

89 NLRB, C-1055-C-1063, Box 1725, Volume IX, August 22, 1939, 684-685.
90 NLRB, C-1055-C-1063, Box 1725, Volume X, August 23, 1939, 757-761.
91 NLRB, C-1055-C-1063, Box 1725, Volume VII, August 18, 1939, 490-500.
92 NLRB, C-1055-C-1063, Box 1725, Volume IX, August 22, 1939, 550.
payment, and participation in the credit allocation procedure,” all conditions that spoke directly to the writers’ main concerns.93

The second development was the disintegration of SWG. The producers did not lay down their arms. Encouraged by the formation of the Playwrights, following the 2 May vote they increased their in-studio pressure on writers. On several occasions managers “disapproved formally of the action taken at the screen writers meeting,” and offered resignation slips from the guild, suggesting that “those writers who are willing to withdraw sign those slips.”94 The scare tactics worked and by June 1, 1936 membership had shrunk from 422 active members and 521 associate members, to 211 active and 169 associates.95 Interestingly, this decline did not correspond with an increase in Playwrights membership. Nevertheless, SWG was inactive for a while until, in a similar fashion to SDG, after the validation of the NLRB in April 1937, it appealed to the board to supervise an election for screenwriters in the motion picture industry.

The studios backed by the Playwrights objected to such elections. In the hearings held by the NLRB, they claimed filmmaking did not engage in interstate commerce, and therefore the “National Labor Relations Board has no jurisdiction of this matter; That there is nothing affecting commerce that has been shown by the evidence … That the people referred to as screen writers are not employees,” and they too “do not come within the contemplation of the Act, nor does their relationship to the producers of motion pictures come within the contemplation of the Act.” Finally, the studios also asserted that

94 NLRB, C-1055-C-1063, Box 1724, Volume XI, August 24, 1939, 1008-1009.
95 These numbers are quoted in Ross, *Stars and Strikes*, 181.
the Authors’ League is not a proper bargaining unit. Since the witnesses were all members of the industry, the dry legal speech was accompanied by more colorful arguments, like the one delivered by Playwrights member Howard Emmett Rogers:

Writing is not a standardized form of work. When a bricklayer falls off a scaffold the foreman calls a local and asks for another bricklayer. I can understand why that man should have an organization taking care of his economic problems, because $4 a week difference … may mean the difference between having a car or sending a boy to college. If Mr. John Lee Mahin or Mr. Charles Bricker, or several other topflight writers in the picture business, were to start a story tomorrow and take ill and die, the producer could not call any organization for a writer and say, “We have lost a writer. Send us another one.” He would have to match John Lee Mahin or Charles Bricker or the writer that died. That, to me, is very important in this case. Writing is not a standardized form of work. It is creative and the writer himself is an organization unto himself.

This description conveniently ignores the practices of writing on committee, reassignment of scripts, and the constant replacement of writers, all concocted by the studios exactly in order to standardize the profession. Nevertheless, echoing Thalberg’s remark’s from May 1936, people such as Rogers saw screenwriters as artists that do not belong in the ranks of organized labor.

On the other front stood people like Marlow, Frank Woods, and Charles Bracket, who insisted they were employees deserving the right to collective bargaining. On June 7, 1938 the NLRB sided with them. Perhaps it was unsurprising. As Boris wrote, though the institution was staffed with “expert – theoretically non-partisan – administrators” at least in the first few years, “radicals, Communists, and industrial union partisans initially staffed the Board, belying the neutral patina of expertise.” In the screenwriters’ case, Trial Examiner William R. Ringer ruled in favor of SWG and an election was set for June

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96 NLRB, XXI-R-149, et al., Box 516, Volume XI, October 15, 1937, 1689-1691.
97 NLRB, C-1055-C-1063, Box 1725, Volume IX, August 22, 1939, 662-664.
28. Regardless of persuasions, the ruling seems to have been in place. Despite the irony of hearing writers earning $1000 per week testify that they were regular employees, as was demonstrated in a previous chapter, most writers did not fit in that pay bracket. Moreover, SWG’s overwhelming four-to-one victory over the Playwrights, suggests most Hollywood writers were indeed united in their goals.99

These results were not enough for producers to admit defeat. They continued stalling and refused to end their agreements with the Playwrights. Finally in 1939, SWG filed a complaint with the NLRB charging 18 studios with unfair labor practices. Only after that were producers willing to recognize the guild and start serious negotiations. The first SWG-studio contract was signed on May 1940 and included 80 per cent guild shop. By 1945 a second agreement specified 85 percent guild shop, a minimum pay of $125 per week, labor arbitration committees, and guild control over the assignment of credits.100

Of course, even with the heated hearings at the NLRB the writers’ struggles still varied from more conventional labor disputes. First, despite the fact it took them over six years to get studio recognition, screenwriters never really threatened with a strike. Perhaps it was because a strike might not have been effective. As mentioned, studios often had a surfeit of prepared screenplays. Then again, perhaps, as Playwrights’ attorney suggested, “strikes are not going to be indulged in by the writers who are getting $3,000 to $5,000 a week.”101 Even though such wealthy scribers were a select few, their support was a crucial element in whatever power SDG held. Furthermore, throughout this extended conflict it appears studio productivity was completely unaffected.

99 For a detailed account of the elections see Schwartz, The Hollywood Writers’ Wars, 123-130.
100 Ibid., 173; Perry and Perry, A History of the Los Angeles Labor Movement, 1911-1941, 356.
101 NLRB, XXI-R-149, et al., Box 515, Volume II, October 1, 1937, 302.
labor strife seems to have been unrelated to the actual labor. Writer Philip Dunne admitted, “There was a lot of intimidation,” and even the bargaining sessions were “really a shouting match, because Zanuck was the chairman of the producers’ negotiation committee.” The head producer of 20th Century-Fox was Dunne’s boss, and as the writer said, “he only knows one way to fight: to go in with boots, teeth, elbows, everything else, and that’s the way he did it.” At the same breath, added the screenwriter, “There’s no big deal there. He was no worse than anybody else.” In fact, “at the very same time that he was fighting the Guild, we made How Green Was My Valley, which after all, was a very powerful statement in behalf of labor organizations. We talked about it very frankly.” Making movies about the troubles of the working class, in Hollywood it was business as usual.102

Of course one should not belittle the achievements of the talent guilds. By the early forties all three of them had signed long lasting contracts with the big studios that featured major concessions including increased wages, minimum wages, arbitration of disputes, and most importantly an extensive guild shop which covered between 90 and 100 percent of studio employment. These achievements become even more impressive from a distance. In his book about the deterioration of the American working class, Jefferson Cowie writes that by the late seventies “the rate of successful organizing efforts had fallen from about 80 percent in the first ten years of the Wagner Act to 61 percent in the 1950s to only 46 percent by 1977.” In addition he explains that “the Wagner Act had lost its teeth, transformed from a mechanism for “encouraging” unionization and

collective bargaining to a legal cul-de-sac from which workers never emerged, falling
victim to delay tactics, intimidation, and aggressive employers.” 103 Quite the reverse, in
Hollywood the triumphs of the New Deal era lasted through the seventies and beyond.
SAG, SDG, and SWG remain powerful organizations even today, orchestrating and even
strengthening their hold over a labor force that now extends to other industries such as
television.

This suggests that ultimately, creative talent was a special kind of workforce. A
labor force more akin to a traditional craft organization, for which, as Tomlins writes,
“collective bargaining remained a fundamentally private activity,” and “problems of
economic control and government” were to be resolved “within the particular ‘going
concern,’” rather than via federal interference. 104 Or as Hugh Lovell and Tasile Carter
explain, it was a group of workers, who unlike others, “tend to have a direct interest in
the artistic and financial success of the film to which they contribute, because their future
employment opportunities depend on their professional reputation.” It was a workforce in
which many of the members were “able to secure through individual bargaining far more
favorable terms of employment than those incorporated in the standard guild
contracts.” 105 The practice of suspension, for example, was repealed only following the
individual struggle of actress Olivia de Havilland, which made it possible for all screen
players to “sit out” their contract. 106 Therefore, it was a labor force that, because of the

Press : Distributed by Perseus Distribution, 2010), 289.
106 De Havilland sued Warner Bros., for unreasonable suspension policies, her case reached the California
Supreme Court which ruled in her favor undercutting the studio practice of suspending stars for refusing to
play a part and then adding the suspension time to the length of the contract. See Charles Higham, Sisters:
The Story of Olivia De Havilland and Joan Fontaine (New York: Coward-McCann, 1984). Other cases of

interests of its members, did not fit neatly into the conventional definitions of industrial jargon.

Still, for a time they did. As unique as they may be, even writers, directors, and actors made use of the federal assistance that became available to organized labor during the thirties. It was only during that time these groups managed to erect the powerful organizations that would serve them so well, the same guilds that would eventually outlast the national institutions responsible for the atmosphere that enabled their formation. Before 1933 the dominant opinion within the Hollywood studios held that “the beneficiaries of the industry generally should not allow greedy and selfish cliques to kill the prolific geese which have laid such marvelous golden eggs for all.” Asserting its commitment to the working people of America, the Roosevelt administration enabled “the creative talent of the studios” to “stand up and deny this foul slender,” and proclaim: “this golden goose is a myth, a ghost, to haunt the timid.” It was the national attitude towards business that empowered the creative workers of the American motion picture industry to “cook the goose”, convincing them it was possible to both fight for their rights and keep the golden eggs.107


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