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The Birth of the Auteur – How the Studio Production Process Kept the Director both In and Under Control

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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 a 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.”¹ Hathaway was an in-house director at Paramount, who worked mostly on low budget Westerns. As he remembered, *Bengal Lancer*

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 America et al. Case No. XXI-R-149, et al., Box 516, Volume Unspecified, October 18, 1937, Record Group 340, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD, 1741-1743 (henceforth NLRB, XXI-R-149, et al.), 1741-1746.

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.”²

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 credits for Waldemar Young, John L. Balderston, and Achmed Abdullah. Here lay the difference. While writers were 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

² The reminiscences of Henry Hathaway, June 18, 1971, in the Oral History Collection of Columbia University in the city of New York, 37-40.

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. However, 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 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. Despite this trend, within this organization 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."³ This disengagement was not the result of their respect for artistic freedom. On the contrary, as this paper 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

³ Phillip Dunne, interviewed by Thomas Stemple, 1970-1971, transcript, Louis B. Mayer Foundation of Oral History, 34.

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.

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 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.”⁴

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 made up of various professions, some of which 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 Frederick Winslow Taylor termed “rule-of-thumb” or “traditional knowledge” and were therefore harder to break-up, supervise, and control.⁵ 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.”⁶ Historian David Montgomery referred to this

⁴ Clinton R Sanders, “Structural and Interactional Features of Popular Culture Production: An Introduction to the Production of Culture Perspective,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 16, no. 2 (September 1, 1982), 69.

⁵ Frederick Winslow Taylor, *The Principles of Scientific Management* (New York ; London: Harper, 1911).

⁶ Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital; the Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), 57–58.

type of knowledge and skill as “the manager’s brain under the workman’s cap.”⁷ 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.”⁸

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.”⁹ 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” from, among other things, “the group ethical code that they developed” and “the organizations they created for themselves in order to protect their interests and values.”¹⁰ 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

⁷ 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).

⁸ David Montgomery, *The Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism, 1865-1925* (Cambridge [Cambridgeshire]; New York : Paris: Cambridge University Press ; Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l’Homme, 1987), 29.

⁹ Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital; the Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*, 54–55.

¹⁰ Montgomery, *The Fall of the House of Labor*, 13.

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 one has to penetrate the means of production by which studios came to leave their directors both in and out of control.

Alone “on the Floor”

It is hard to pinpoint the exact moment the director lost his absolute creative authority. It seems that at least from the early days of cinema in the early 1900s 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.¹¹ Film Scholar Janet 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.”¹² Other historians, like 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 executing specific

¹¹ For information about directors and their status in the early years of cinema see Richard Koszarski, *An Evening’s Entertainment: The Age of the Silent Feature Picture, 1915-1928* (New York: Scribner, 1990); Kevin Brownlow, *The Parade’s Gone By*, 1st ed. (New York: Knopf, 1968); David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson, and Janet Staiger, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985); Eileen Bowser, *The Transformation of Cinema, 1907-1915* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Lary May, *Screening Out the Past: The Birth of Mass Culture and the Motion Picture Industry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies*, 1st ed. (New York: Random House, 1975).

¹² Bordwell, Thompson, and Staiger, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 136–143.

projects.”¹³ 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.”¹⁴

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 is discussed at greater length in a previous chapter, 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.¹⁵ 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

¹³ Kozarski, *An Evening’s Entertainment*, 2011.

¹⁴ Tino Balio, *Grand Design--Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930-1939*, History of the American cinema v. 5 (New York: Scribner, 1993), 79.

¹⁵ 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 Between Steinbeck and Chase National: how Studio Executive-Producers Crafted the Hollywood Golden Age.

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.”¹⁶

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.”¹⁷

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

¹⁶ “Sanity Reaches the Movies,” *Magazine of Wall Street*, 11 November 1933, p.98, quoted in Balio, *Grand Design-Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930-1939*, 79.

¹⁷ NLRB, XXI-R-149, et al. Box 515, Volume II, October 1, 1937, 186-188.

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.”¹⁸

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 rationale for this authoritarianism: “Transferring [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,

¹⁸ Ibid., 188-189.

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."¹⁹

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 rushes, 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."²⁰

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."²¹ 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"

¹⁹ Ibid., 190-192.

²⁰ Ibid., 209-229.

²¹ Dunne, interviewed by Thomas Stemple, 1970-1971, transcript, 11, 41-42.

and “had no choice about which way he was going.”²² 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.”²³ 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.” At Warner Bros., the 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

²² Nunnally Johnson, interviewed by Thomas Stemple, 1968-1969, transcript, Louis B. Mayer Foundation of Oral History, 56-60.

²³ Pandro Berman, interviewed by Mike Steen, August 4, 1972, transcript, Louis B. Mayer Foundation of Oral History, 3-6.

on the cutting.” But, he added, “That is not obligatory ... nor is it the custom in most of the larger studios.”²⁴

Perhaps it was 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.”²⁵

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.²⁶ 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

²⁴ David O. Selznick, lecture given at Columbia University extension film-study group, November 1, 1937, reprinted in David O Selznick, *Memo from David O. Selznick* (New York: Viking Press, 1972).

²⁵ Frank Capra, “By Post from Mr. Capra,” *New York Times*, April 2, 1939.

²⁶ For more on Capra’s unique status and relationship with Columbia see Edward Buscombe, “Notes on Columbia Pictures Corporation 1926-41,” *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 65 -82.

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]."²⁷ 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 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

²⁷ Bob Thomas, *King Cohn; the Life and Times of Harry Cohn* (New York: Putnam, 1967), 165.

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.”²⁸

²⁸ NLRB, XXI-R-149, et al. Box 515, Volume I, September 30, 1937, 101-148.

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.”²⁹

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

²⁹ Stephen Watts, ed., *Behind the Screen: How Films Are Made* (London: A. Barker, Ltd, 1938), 14–17.

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.”³⁰

Combining all of these versions, it appears the most fitting description of the Hollywood director, is what Thomas Schatz termed a “consummate studio auteur.”³¹ 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 skilful 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.”³² 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

³⁰ Nancy Naumburg, ed., *We Make the Movies* (New York: W. W. Norton & company, inc, 1937), 55–57.

³¹ Thomas Schatz, “Anatomy of a House Director: Capra, Cohn, and Columbia in the 1930s,” *Frank Capra: Authorship and the Studio System*, Culture and the moving image (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998).

³² Johnson, interviewed by Thomas Stemple, 1968-1969, transcript, 159-161.

set.”³³ 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.”³⁴ 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.³⁵ 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.”³⁶ 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.³⁷ The same way big companies divided the work of screenwriters into suggestions, continuities, dialog, and gags, there were probably similar attempts to split-up the directing

³³ NLRB, XXI-R-149, et al. Box 515, Volume I, September 30, 1937, 148.

³⁴ The reminiscence of Irving Rapper, January 3, 1971, Oral History Collection of Columbia University, 1.

³⁵ The reminiscence of George Cukor, June 22, 1971, Oral History Collection of Columbia University, 40.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 2-4.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 40.

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.³⁸

These remarks, made in 1937, echo an anonymous *Saturday Evening Post* director who, in 1916, claimed organization “speeded up” his work.³⁹ 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 script, scheduling multiple conferences about sets, and endless discussions about lighting and camera angles, was conducive

³⁸ Watts, *Behind the Screen*, 14.

³⁹ “Putting the Move in the Movies,” *The Saturday Evening Post*, May 13, 1916, 14.

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.”⁴⁰

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 preferential 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.⁴¹ 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 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

⁴⁰ Naumburg, *We Make the Movies*, 105.

⁴¹ For more on film stock technology see Barry Salt, *Film Style and Technology: History and Analysis* (London: Starword, 1983).

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 \$32,793.⁴² 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?”⁴³ 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. 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

⁴² 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.

⁴³ Naumburg, *We Make the Movies*, 95–96.

put it, a director had to “pull together the work of others” making a film that is a “synthesis” but not “synthetic.”⁴⁴

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.⁴⁵ 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.⁴⁶ 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 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

⁴⁴ Kenneth Macgowan, *Behind the Screen; the History and Techniques of the Motion Picture* (New York: [Delacorte Press, 1965), 391.

⁴⁵ 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.

⁴⁶ Gene Brown, *Movie Time: A Chronology of Hollywood and the Movie Industry from Its Beginnings to the Present* (New York: Macmillan, 1995), 139.

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."⁴⁷ 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 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."⁴⁸

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."⁴⁹ 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.

⁴⁷ Undated Eulogy for Carl Laemmle, file 50.f-658, William Wyler Papers, Special Collections, Margaret Herrick Library

⁴⁸ Wyler to Laemmle, July 3, 1925, file 50.f-658, William Wyler Papers. For more information on Wyler see Axel Madsen, *William Wyler: The Authorized Biography* (New York: Crowell, 1973); Jan Herman, *A Talent for Trouble: The Life of Hollywood's Most Acclaimed Director, William Wyler* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1995).

⁴⁹ Rosten, *Hollywood*, 57.

The minute a fellow would make a picture, somebody would send for him right away.”⁵⁰ 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.

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.”⁵¹ 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

⁵⁰ *Who the Devil Made It*, 82.

⁵¹ Rosten, *Hollywood*, 291.

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 \$50.⁵² 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 directors on the list were Von Stroheim, who earned \$100,000 for his services, and Lubitsch, who commissioned \$175,000.⁵³

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.”⁵⁴ 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.”⁵⁵ 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

⁵² Herman, *A Talent for Trouble*, 81.

⁵³ Memorandum from Paul Kohner to Laemmle, November 8, 1926, reprinted in Koszarski, *An Evening’s Entertainment*, 212–213.

⁵⁴ Herman, *A Talent for Trouble*, 99.

⁵⁵ Wyler to Robert Wyler, April 7, 1934, file 59.f-756, William Wyler papers.

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.⁵⁶

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."⁵⁷

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

⁵⁶ 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.

⁵⁷ Studio report on *The Shakedown*, November 16, 1928, file 29.f-400, William Wyler Papers.

familial ties he tried the following 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.”⁵⁸

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.”⁵⁹ 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.”⁶⁰

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 made, by whom, and with how much. In April 1928 producer William Lloyd Wright informed Wyler, “I am handing you herewith the first four continuities

⁵⁸ Laemmle to Wyler, August 2, 1932, file 50.f-658, Ibid.

⁵⁹ Inter Office Communication from Henry Henigson to Laemmle, December 12, 1927, file 1.f-15, Ibid.

⁶⁰ The reminiscence of George Cukor, 35.

[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.”⁶¹

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.”⁶² 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 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.”⁶³ 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

⁶¹ Inter Office Communication from William Lord Wright to Wyler, April 27, 1928, file 24.f-336, William Wyler Papers.

⁶² Inter Office Communication from Wyler to Robert Walsh, May 15, 1928, Ibid.

⁶³ Inter Office Communication from Wright to Wyler, May 15, 1928, Ibid.

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.”⁶⁴ 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.”⁶⁵ 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.”⁶⁶ 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 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.⁶⁷ 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*

⁶⁴ The reminiscences of William Wyler, January 9, 1972, Oral History Collection of Columbia University, 1.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁶⁶ Inter Office Communication Warner Bros. Studio, April 19, 1940, Copy, file 18.f-146, Rudy Behlmer Papers, Special Collections, Margaret Herrick Library.

⁶⁷ Inter Office Communication from Walter MacEwen to Hal Wallis, June 14, 1939, Hal Wallis Papers, Special Collections, Margaret Herrick Library.

is re-modeled into the script we all hope it eventually will be,” his request was granted.⁶⁸

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.”⁶⁹ 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 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.”⁷⁰ 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.

⁶⁸ Inter Office Communication from Michael Curtiz to Jack L. Warner, February 25, 1944, *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Inter Office Communication from Wyler to Henigson, February 3, 1928, file 57.f-736 William Wyler Papers.

⁷⁰ Paul Nathan to Hal Wallis, June 24, 1942, file 229.f-2257, Hal Wallis Papers.

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.⁷¹

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.

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 in 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."⁷² 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

⁷¹ Inter Office Communication from Frank Mattison to T. C. Wright, October 7, 1941, Copy, file 17.7-139, Rudy Behlmer Papers.

⁷² The reminiscences of William Wyler, 11.

for the company's sake, do your darndest to bring this picture in on estimate and still give us a good production."⁷³ 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."⁷⁴ 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 make, submitted to this office for my approval before shooting."⁷⁵ 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."⁷⁶ 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 the 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."⁷⁷ 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."⁷⁸

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,

⁷³ Inter Office Communication from Laemmle to Wyler, December 7, 1927, file 1.f-15, William Wyler Papers.

⁷⁴ Inter Office Communication from Henigson to Wyler, February 3, 1928, file 29.f-400, Ibid.

⁷⁵ Inter Office Communication from Carl Laemmle Jr. to Wyler, October 21, 1929, file 57.f-737, Ibid.

⁷⁶ Inter Office Communication from Henigson to Wyler, June 10, 1931, file 57.f-736, Ibid.

⁷⁷ Inter Office Communication from Jack Warner to Wyler, June 27, 1940, file 19.f-252, Ibid.

⁷⁸ Inter Office Communication from Warner to Wyler, June 11, 1940, Ibid.

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.”⁷⁹ Cukor himself experienced a similar problem in 1932 when he worked with Lubitsch on *One Hour With You*. He was 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.”⁸⁰ 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”

⁷⁹ The reminisces of Mervyn Leroy, July 12, 1971, Oral History Collection of Columbia University, 13.

⁸⁰ The reminisces of George Cukor, 4-5.

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 full jurisdiction over the production of this picture and would like to know how you stand in the manner.”⁸¹

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.”⁸² 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

⁸¹ Inter Office Communication from Wyler to Henigson, May 31, 1933, file 14.f-192, William Wyler Papers.

⁸² Inter Office Communication from Wyler to Laemmle Jr., November 13, 1933, file 7.f-86, Ibid.

producers, by the early forties, Wyler became a 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 Eric 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.”⁸³ 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.”⁸⁴ 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-mouthed

⁸³ Eric Rohmer, “Rediscovering America” translated and reprinted in Jim Hillier, ed., *Cahiers Du Cinéma, the 1950s: Neo-Realism, Hollywood, New Wave* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1985), 89.

⁸⁴ Shyon Baumann, *Hollywood Highbrow: From Entertainment to Art*, Princeton studies in cultural sociology (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 83.

and wonder where they find some of the stuff that they say about me.”⁸⁵ Others, like Capra, swallowed it whole. “Regardless of the origin of a film idea – I made it mine,” claimed the director in his autobiography.⁸⁶

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.⁸⁷ 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.

⁸⁵ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 61.

⁸⁶ Frank Capra, *The Name Above the Title; an Autobiography* (New York: Macmillan, 1971), 185.

⁸⁷ For an interesting account of Capra’s career and the problems it presents to the popular perception of auteurism see Thomas Schatz, “Anatomy of a House Director: Capra, Cohn, and Columbia in the 1930s.”