

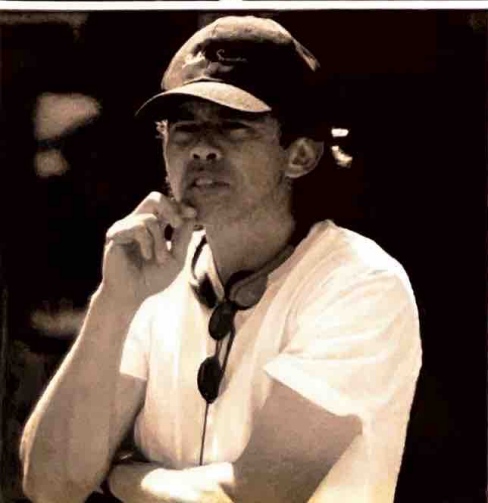


hollywood in

WIDE

angle

HOW DIRECTORS
VIEW FILMMAKING



JACK ROTHMAN

authorial endeavors. But this has changed. New York used to be the single magnet drawing bright English majors who wanted to write books or become journalists, but today Hollywood is a strong rival, luring once and future novelists into the realm of the 112-page set. An Academy Award-winning film is as big an aspiration as the Great American Novel: budding authors are as interested in scripting *American Beauty* as in penning *An American Tragedy*. Screenwriting is a pathway to reach a vastly larger audience and have a staggering impact on the public psyche—while earning infinitely more money.

But for every *American Beauty* there are thirty *Scooby-Dos*, so the deep-pockets-cum-wasted-talents motif continues unabated. Anthropologist Hortense Powdermaker observed that, over the long run, writers absorb the values of executives and producers to a far greater extent than front-office people take on the artistic and cultural goals of writers.²

Late Arrivals Go to the End of the Line

Compared to directors, screenwriters are Johnny-come-lately appendages to moviemaking. It wasn't until 1927, about thirty years after the first film played at the first Bijou, when Al Jolson jump-started talkies with *The Jazz Singer*, that studios suddenly opened their doors to writers. The studios desperately needed wordsmiths to thread dialogue into moving pictures. East Coast playwrights, novelists, and journalists followed a cross-continental rainbow westward to cash in on the Hollywood pot of gold. The word got around after all, and Manky and Ben were joined by the likes of F. Scott Fitzgerald, Raymond Chandler, Dorothy Parker, Clifford Odets, Ernest Hemingway, and William Faulkner. But these writers weren't suited to establishing themselves within the fraternity of Hollywood old-timers. Studio executives pretty much treated all writers like hired hands, essentially hacks and rewrite men for scripts fabricated by other hacks.

It's no surprise that writers formed the Screen Writers Guild (a precursor of the Writers Guild of America) back in the 1920s.³ But the organization received zero encouragement from the studios and basically functioned as little more than a social club and place to exchange information. The Wall Street crash in 1929, together with an eruption of social activism, changed that picture. In 1935, the National Labor Relations Act was passed, and the guild petitioned for an election to establish its authority as a union to represent writers in collective bargaining. The studios, used to a malleable collection of scribes, fought this move, countering through a Screen Playwrights group that they could keep under wraps. But the guild won the election and in 1939 began negotiating for a collective-bargaining agreement. The agreement was finally forged in 1941.

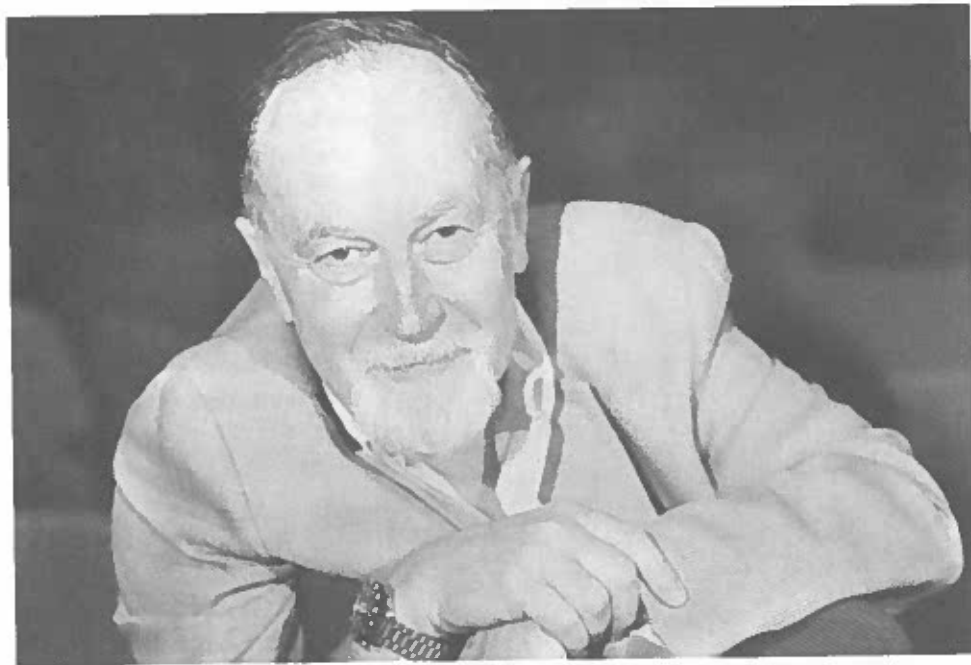
That agreement was the guild's achievement and its Achilles heel. The guild won crucial union representation rights, but the contract ceded the privileges of copyright to the studios. To my thinking, it gave away the store. And that has made all the difference in defining the authority and status of writers. The critical clause stipulated, "The studio, hereinafter referred to as the author." The author is not the *writer*; it is



Nandi Bowe. Courtesy of Bowe



Salvador Carrasco. Photo by Andrea Sanderson, courtesy of Carrasco



Gilbert Cates. *Courtesy of Cates*



Christopher Coppola. *Courtesy of Coppola*



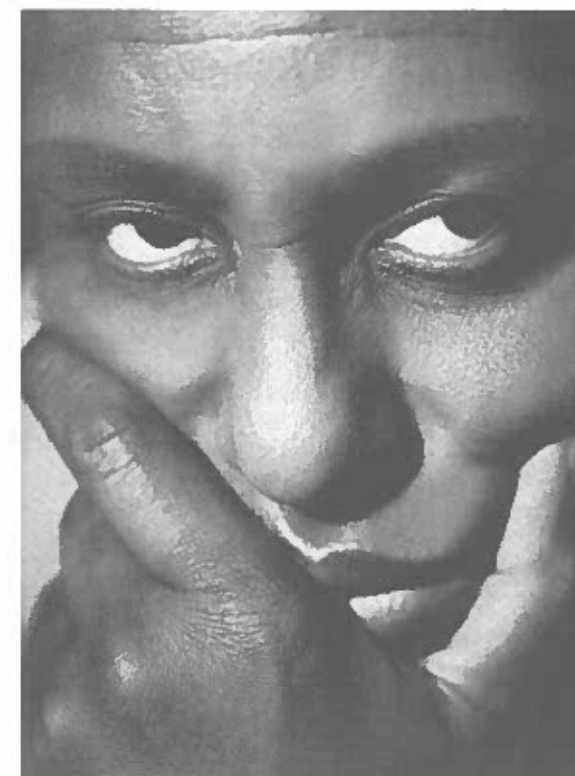
Martha Coolidge on the set of *The Prince and Me*. *Courtesy of Paramount Pictures*



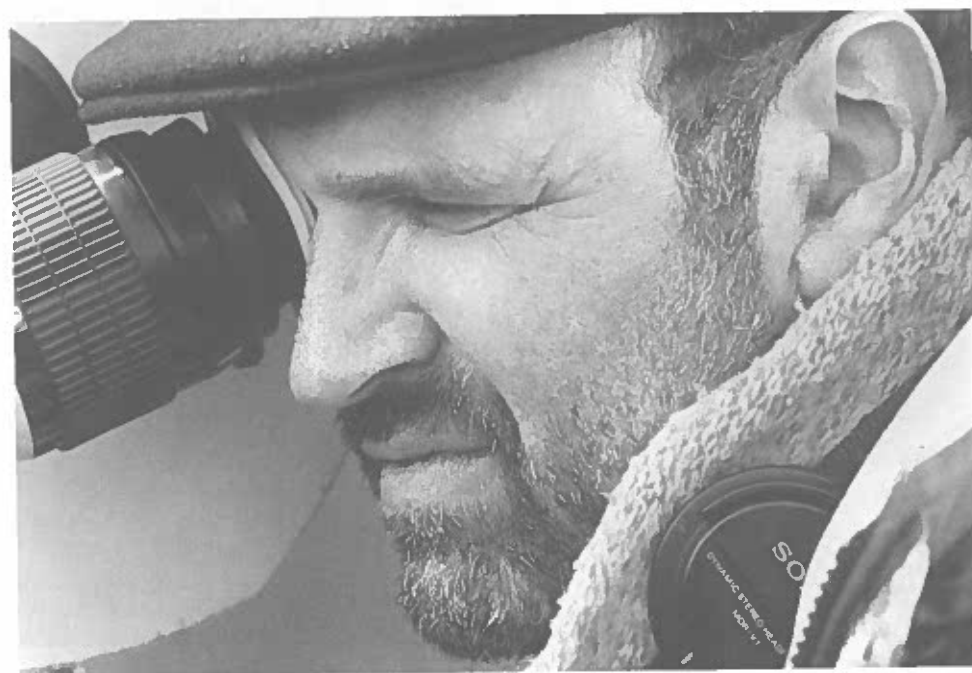
Joe Dante on the set of *The Second Civil War*. *Photo courtesy of Dante*



Julie Dash. *Courtesy of Dash*



Bill Duke. *Courtesy of Duke*



Andrew Davis on the set of *The Fugitive*. *Courtesy of Davis*



Gary Fleder on the set of *Runaway Jury* with John Cusack. *Courtesy of Fleder*



Bob Gale. *Courtesy of Gale*



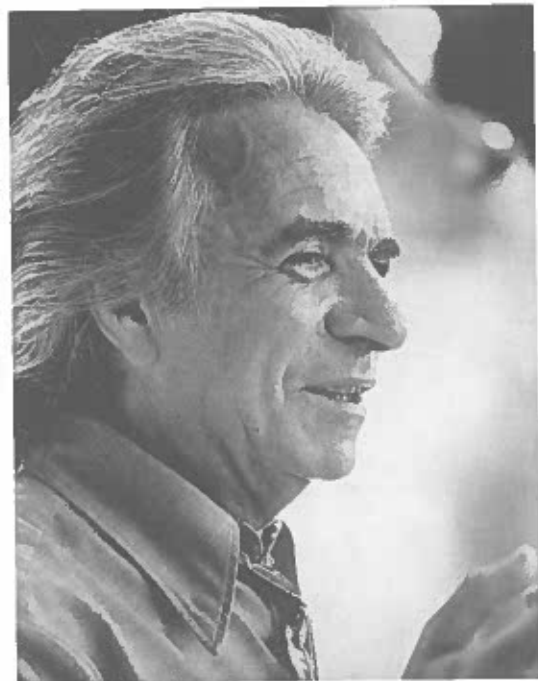
Monte Hellman.
Courtesy of Hellman



George Hickenlooper. *Courtesy of Hickenlooper*



Walter Hill. *Courtesy of Hill*



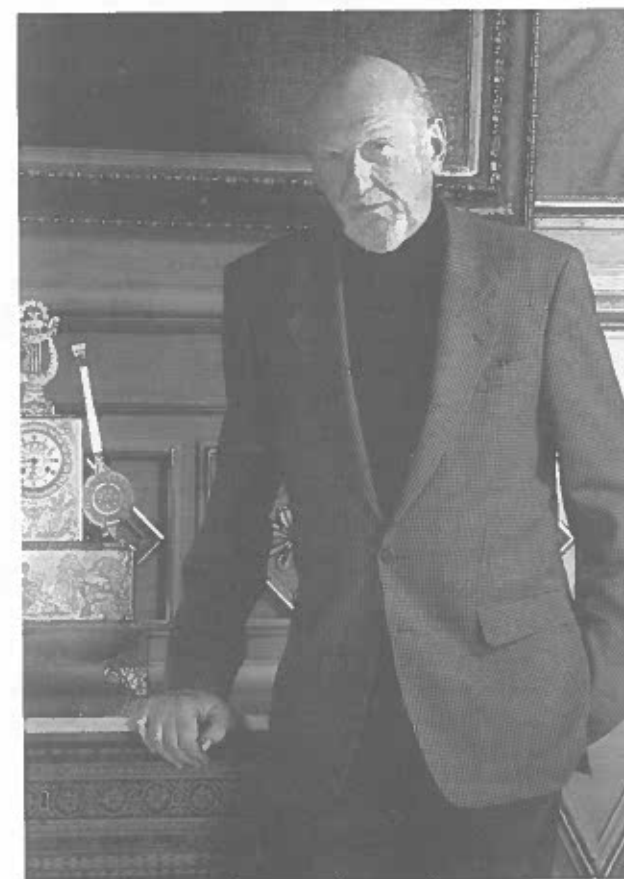
Arthur Hiller. *Courtesy of Hiller*



Henry Jaglom. *Courtesy of Jaglom*



Jonathan Kaplan. *Courtesy of Kaplan*



Irvin Kershner.
Courtesy of Kershner



Randal Kleiser. *Courtesy of Kleiser*



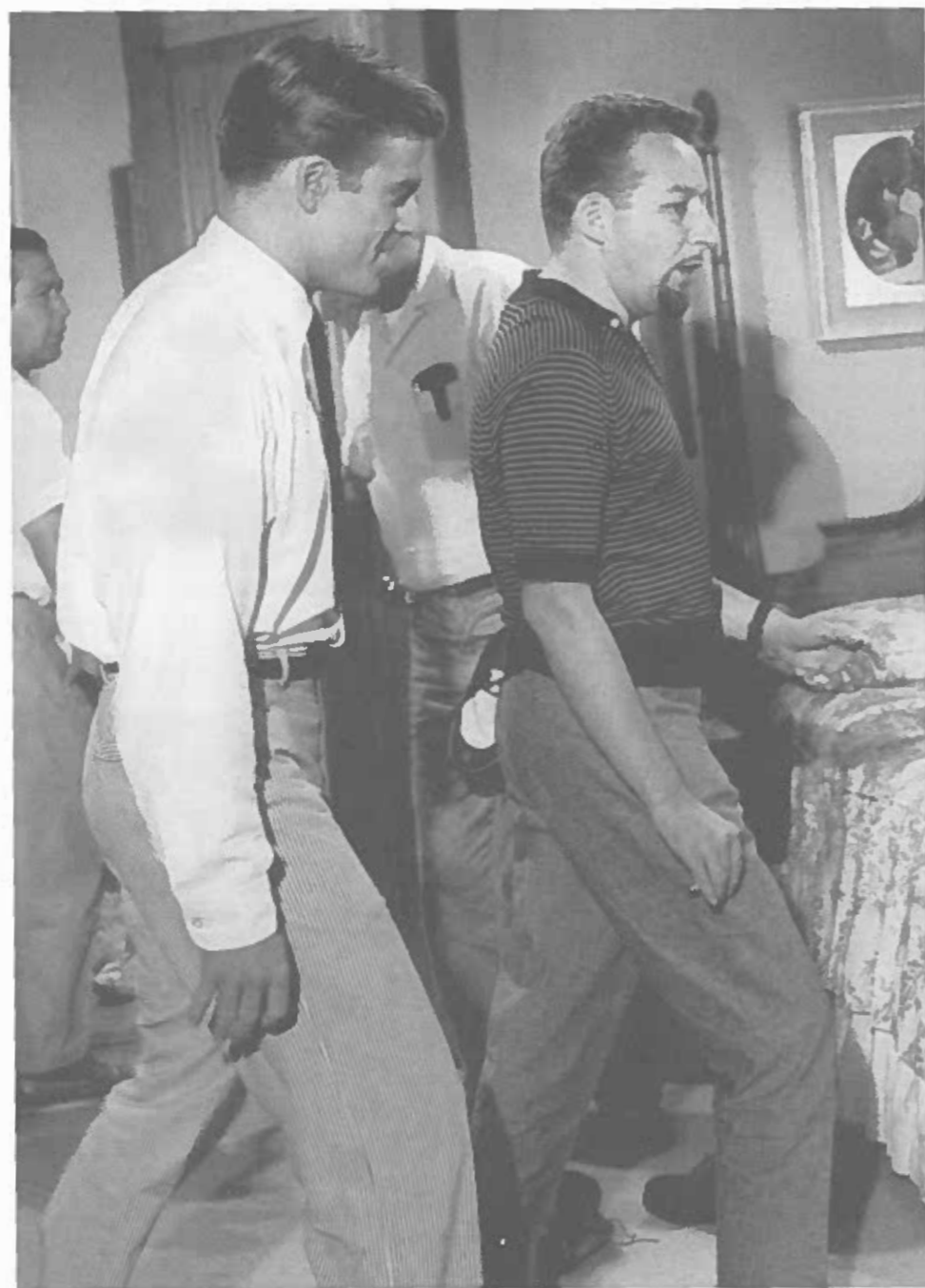
John Landis. *Courtesy of Landis*



Delbert Mann. *Courtesy of Mann*



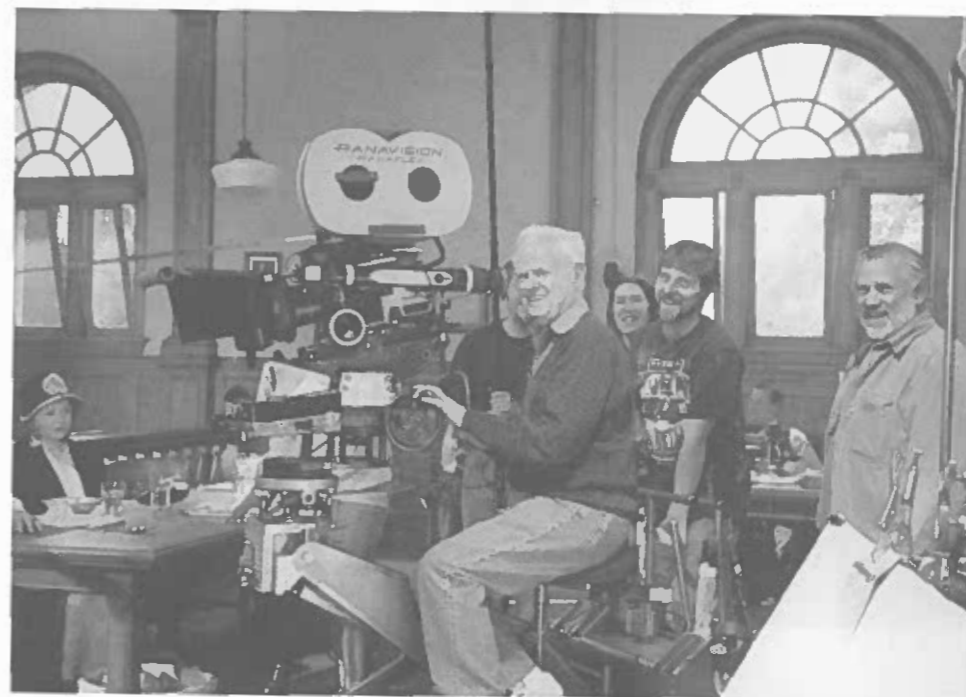
Nancy Meyers.
Courtesy of Meyers



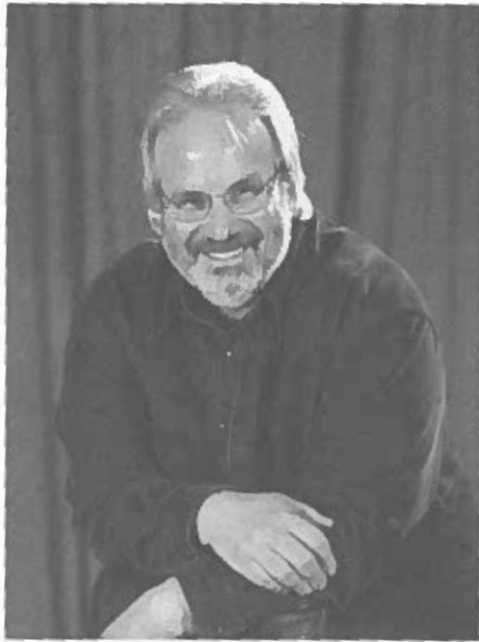
Robert Ellis Miller (right) rehearsing with Robert Redford. *Courtesy of Miller*



Sylvia Morales.
Courtesy of Morales



Daniel Petrie. *Courtesy of Petrie*



Myrl Schreibman. *Courtesy of Schreibman*



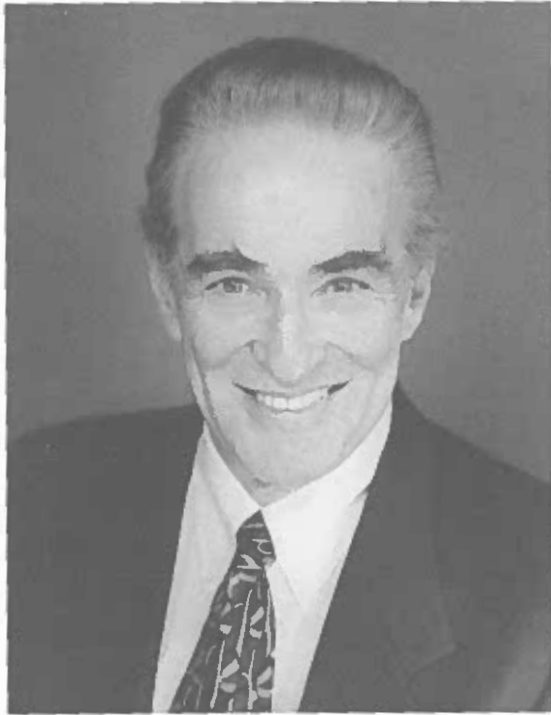
Krishna Shah. *Courtesy of Shah*



Michael Schultz.
Courtesy of Schultz



Charles Shyer. *Courtesy of Shyer*



Elliot Silverstein.
Courtesy of Silverstein



Sandy Tung. Courtesy of Tung

the *studio*. The property, namely the script, belongs not to the writer but to the studio—which is free to do with it whatever it wishes. Writers had signed on to a position of chronic subservience.

Contrast that with playwrights in New York, who hammered out their basic contract with theater owners in 1919 through the Dramatists Guild. There, the writer is the acknowledged creator and owner of the play, with full retention of the copyright. Playwrights license their plays to producers—essentially lease it to them temporarily—and producers can't change a word of the script without getting clear approval of the playwright. Playwrights also have a hand in selecting the cast and the director and participating in the rehearsal process.

None of this artistic possession holds for screenwriters, who forfeit control, absolutely, upon receiving payment for the script. From that moment, it's good-bye Charlie—they have no further formal say in what happens to their script on the way to becoming a film, if it ever becomes a film. It doesn't belong to them anymore.

Development as Disembowelment

Producing a script in the studio context is a dicey business that draws many people beyond the writer into a convoluted process called *development*—or, after a few Dirty Martinis at Musso and Frank's, "development hell."⁴ The original story concept can spring from novels, news articles or public events, the stage, biography or history books—just about anywhere. Even the rantings of the local deli guy. Producers and development executives typically seize on these nuggets and engage a writer or several different writers on assignment to work up outlines, treatments, first drafts, rewrites, polished scripts, and all points between. Producers orchestrate a set of "step deals" with built-in milestones that allow them to change and rearrange writers or bail out altogether anywhere along the way.

So-called creative meetings that chop away at the script can go on for months or years, with notes for changes coming from a squad of producers, executives, creative department staffers, stars, and whoever else manages to get a foot in the door. "Script doctors" get called in to spice up the dialogue, juice up the action scenes, and add romance or jokes. John Gregory Dunne titled his book describing this arcane procedure *Monster*. A director I spoke with described the process this way:

This is the writers' big problem, trying to preserve some sense of authorship for the script. It's because so many scripts are being developed by committees, which means you just keep throwing new writers into the pot. It's just a bunch of ideas and ripped off things from other movies. Add a chase scene like that, put a woman in it, and she should look like Jennifer Lopez. It's all tossed into this hopper, and these writers are supposed to make it into something. Some kind of "high concept" gimmick is supposed to help them organize it.

But the torture doesn't let up, and for most writers the next phase gets even more excruciating.

How Do I Get to the Set?

Writers have less say during filming than in development. Writers I have known who created their own original scripts on spec, or who were the principal author in development, bitterly resent the alteration—read *desecration*—of their scripts as they are carried forward into production. They equally resent their near impotency in being able to do anything about it.

Through the Writers Guild of America (WGA), writers have been politicking for a greater say in the mechanics of actually making movies from their scripts. They want to be on the set, review dailies, sit in on casting, attend rehearsals. As writers go after these goals, directors push back with a vengeance through their own guild (DGA) because, as we've seen, they feel the studios are already strangling their creative rights. The last thing the directors want is further infringement on their authority from players who historically have been given a back seat.⁵

During contentious contract negotiations with the studios in 2001, both guilds clashed on this "soft" issue with a ferocity that matched struggles over tough money matters. In the end, money demands were settled, but skirmishes around artistic control and how to apportion it continue at full tilt. These two parties continue to circle warily around one another, and I suspect that the abrasive quality of the relationship is a mixture of psychological and substantive components. What we have here is a war between different professional groups for power and turf and prestige, waged resolutely through the advocacy organizations representing them. We'll praise the guilds and pass the ammunition a little later.

I Love You, Honey, but Please Stay in the Kitchen

When I broached writer-director relationships with the filmmakers I interviewed, especially the question of writers on the set, they staunchly expressed two views. They say they respect and admire writers for what they do—but they also don't want them staying the director's hand in putting a script to celluloid. First, an appreciation:

I drop to my knees before writers. Writers create the story from nowhere, from the air, sitting alone in front of a computer. The writer's is the most original and basic contribution to the making of a movie. Everyone else has something to start with, a *floor plan*—which the writer dreamed up and made into a screenplay.

Most of my respondents believe that this contribution isn't given weight and that writers don't get the regard they merit. That opinion mirrors the going view in Hollywood—one that hasn't changed in decades. Writers have been called stepchildren, bastard children, battered wives, and low man on the totem pole. Frances Marion was the highest paid writer in the 1920s and early 1930s yet still lamented that "Screenwriting is like writing in the sand with the wind blowing."⁶ A colleague of mine at UCLA, Jorja Prover, interviewed a sample of screenwriters to document their attitudes toward their work. The title of her 1994 book, *No One Knows Their Names*, sums up most writers' overriding perception of themselves—unrecognized, unrewarded, and undervalued.

I can remember the gag making the rounds in L.A. a few years ago about the totally ditzzy starlet who would do anything to get her first part in a picture—so she goes to bed with the *writer*. And I recall the movie portraits of downtrodden scribes like Joe Gillis, the unfortunate fellow floating in the pool in *Sunset Blvd.*, and the pathetically earnest Barton Fink. In viewing the Oscars on TV, I've seen writers neglect thanking fellow scribes who contributed to award-winning scripts. And I know of writers who believe that screenwriting isn't actually writing at all, because it isn't created to be seen by an audience of readers.

The average income of writers isn't anything to crow about. According to the year 2000 report of the Writers Guild of America, the median earnings of a writer was just over \$87,000 a year—meaning that half the members brought home less than that figure, if they had any work that year. The Writers Guild claims that a quarter of its members earn under \$30,000 a year, and not even half earn enough income from their writing alone.⁷ Some writers like M. Night Shyamalan and Shane Black make \$2 million or more for writing a script, and others \$150,000 a week for giving a back rub to someone else's. We hear a lot about them, but they are a small exception. And even the highest-paid writers never share in profits through first-dollar gross. Directors are well aware of this unhappy plight of their fellow artists and are troubled by it.

I am a member of the Writers Guild as well as a director. I have worn both hats. So do writers get the credit they deserve? Probably not, *probably not*. There has always been that attitude toward the "lowly writer," jokes and all. I've often seen actors making fun of the writer on the set, and I wonder where that came from. To me, it's amazing how badly writers are treated. In the New York theater they are like God; here they are like Kleenex.

You see, when writers came into filmmaking, directors and producers had already carved out territories and they weren't going to give them up easily. Writers became second-class citizens. They've been treated shabbily by the ignorant producers. Bright people, which writers have traditionally been, have had to subvert their intelligence and their talent to far less bright people, which producers have traditionally been. Everyone around writers *thinks* they can write, and they can't. This means that for writers, there's been a constant struggle for dignity. They are justifiably resentful of their status, and they should get more respect, but it's hard to say how to accomplish that.

Embraceable You—Replaceable You

Directors were hard put to tell me the path to higher status for writers, but they could spell out reasons for writers being at the bottom of the heap.

Writers Are Interchangeable

Studios will treat people as bad as they can. Writers get the brunt of that, mainly because they can be replaced. There is often a gaggle of writers working on a script, and one can substitute for another. The studio can fire a writer at no risk because another all-too-willing writer can spell a writer easily. And that has no effect on marketing a movie because a writer's name in the credits usually has a *zilch* impact on ticket sales.

They Have Low Visibility

The writer is hidden, off to a side doing lonely and solitary work. They are not center-stage stars (nor are the majority of directors anymore; only big stars are big stars). The more hidden you are, the more you are unimportant, because this is a celebrity-driven town in a celebrity-driven society.

Writers Aren't Very Sexy

Writers crave being at press junkets, but nobody in the press wants to interview them. They are *not very interesting*. Look, which pictures would a newspaper want to print: a photo of a director on the set pointing fingers, telling a bunch of people what to do, or a shot of a writer just sitting there at a word processor.

They Can Get in the Way and Drive Up Costs

It's natural for writers to want to be in on the shoot and see their scripts come to life. But they can interfere and hold up the works. Producers often worry about an economic disaster from having them around, so they keep them at arm's length from everybody.

Writers Don't Own the Script

In film, many times the writer is hired and paid to do specific piecemeal work involving the preparation of a script, like writing a treatment or a story line or maybe polishing someone else's work. They are for-hire functionaries of the studios. With Hollywood writers, the script isn't theirs legally and often isn't theirs artistically. Playwrights in New York write and complete the full play *before* they bring it to the producer. They own it, and they control it.

As you see, the directors I interviewed, to a greater or lesser extent, give homage to the input of screenwriters and appreciate their all-too-humiliating standing. Further, they know that the Writers Guild has been pressing for writers to gain a stronger foothold during production. But these directors—to a man and a woman—reject the idea of writers being on the set routinely during the shooting of a movie. They believe that kind of participation should not be obligatory; rather it should be conditional and under the discretion of the director. This view was unanimous and verbalized with from-the-gut intensity.

A DGA executive told me an anecdote that confirms what I found in my interviews. When writers recently ratcheted up the rhetoric on creative rights issues, the DGA held a series of meetings with A-List feature directors. There were nineteen directors at the first meeting, and at one point one of them asked the others, "How many of you belong to the WGA?" The executive counted seventeen hands in the air. The next question was, "How many of you prefer to have the writer on the set?" This time eighteen hands went up. Finally the inquiring director asked, "How many of you think the writer should have the *right* to be on the set?" Now zero hands went up.

I Need to Make the Music My Own Way

A declaration by filmmaker David Lean seems to be virtual scripture in the directors' community. It was contained in his 1967 cable to a DGA action committee embroiled

in a high-stakes dispute with the Writers Guild on possessory credits. For a long time writers have been fighting the "a film by" designation at the top of film credits. Directors feel they earn it and that writers should stop trying to undercut them.

Lean's declaration used his *Doctor Zhivago* movie as a reference point for laying out the commanding domain of the director: "I worked one year with the writer. Unlike him, I directed not only the actors but the cameraman, set designer, costume designer, soundmen, editor, composer and even the laboratory in their final print. Unlike him, I chose the actors, the technicians, the subject and him to write it. I staged it. I filmed it. It was my film of his script which I shot when he was not there."⁸ Echoes of this far-reaching conception of the director's role sounded throughout my interviews.

Directors told me they need undivided authority to shoot the script as they understand it *cinematically* and to change the story line as the production process unfolds in all its untidy volatility on the set. From the directorial standpoint, filmmakers are to a script as singers are to a song—imaginative interpreters rather than mechanistic transcribers (along with actors). Directors believe that writers often do not grasp the reasons for necessary adaptations. When writers are there in the filming situation, many will stand guard over the sanctity of their specific words and interfere with the process.

The Split Vision

This is a medium that doesn't take well to groupthink at the helm. You know, the director is already orchestrating a thousand people and doesn't need the writer there as a distraction and thorn in the side. A film needs one voice, and two chiefs can muffle that. It's antithetical to the creative process. You can't have actors taking sides on who has the right concept. My position is: "One picture, one director." And that can come down to taste, just taste, which is not negotiable.

The Process

I had a scene that was supposed to be shot in a barbershop, but we couldn't get to it on the scheduled day and had to move to a new location. That site required us to do the scene in a *bedroom*. A writer has to be able to take account of time, logistics, and the will of God in changing the weather, having the sun go down, or making actors sick.

A movie evolves. It can't be stuck in the blueprint that's the screenplay. The directors have to move out of and beyond the writer's concept if they are going to achieve something. The reality of making a movie is that you shape the action based on what actors have done in critical scenes, how the cast has jelled as an ensemble, and how much money you have available to devise scenes, not on what was put down on the page *a year ago*. Other people just can't see the film in their head the way the filmmaker can—shooting a certain way, with certain kinds of coverage, and certain lighting—people just can't see it until they see the finished product. It's very subjective, and intangible, with a kind of *alchemy*.

Oh, Those Words

Writers are focused intently on the words themselves in a way that actually can be either helpful or dysfunctional. I remember working with the writer James Costigan on the TV movie *Eleanor and Franklin* and experiencing how words can have the subtlest of nuances.

An actor speaking to the Eleanor Roosevelt and Louis Howe characters said, "You two *are really* a pair, aren't you?" The writer objected to the order of two words. He wanted the phrase to come out as "You two *really are* a pair." That's more arch, and it's what he wanted to convey. It's a tricky business.

The script is an assemblage of words, and that's the foundation for the film. The screenwriter is an engineer who lays that foundation down. But the director is the architect who designs and constructs the building from it—which is, after all, what people come to see. They don't go to visit the basement. If people are coming to the movie theater to see the script, why not just flash the script up on the screen. That's not what they want; it's the visual representation. If two words are left out, that's OK, if the *intent* and *tone* are there. The actor is supposed to make the words come to life, and there are some words that some actors *can't say*. The point is not the words and sentences, but what they convey and how they get translated into images and actions.

The Interference

The more writers are on the set, the more the actors turn and look at them, and say, "Oh, oh, did I hurt the writer's feelings the way I said the lines?" You find you're getting bad work from the actor, and you wonder *why*, and you see that the writer is making bad faces at the video monitor. This comes out to be a loss of time and money, and a schizophrenic movie. See, you can't have a writer looking over the dailies and telling the director everything he did wrong in misinterpreting the script. I once had a writer who complained to the head of the studio the way the movie was being shot, and another who talked to the actors, telling them how to say the lines. That makes for chaos on the set.

All directors sometimes do something that seems to run against the intent of the script, but it's meant in a roundabout way to draw out from the actor a response that brings out the intent. A writer on the set who's not familiar with the psychology of actors may hit his head or groan and befuddle the actor. As I see it, writers wouldn't like directors looking over their shoulder at the word processor, and directors don't want writers looking over their shoulder on the set.

Scribes and Vibes

Yes, it's a process. Yes, writers can interfere. But in the end all of these comments are only prelude to the crucial question: "Should writers actually be on the set, or will that stay directors' hands in making their music?" The consensus of these directors was, "It depends." Generally, they believe the writer's skills can be a godsend during shooting, but then they pause and speak about the significance of the relationship between the director and the writer—how they communicate, how well they understand each other's expectations. And then they add that the writer's presence shouldn't be *de rigueur*.

The answer to a writer's involvement, these directors agree, hinges on whether or not the writer is tuned in to the complex intricacies of shooting a film, and, in particular, shooting a film from the director's standpoint. Those directors I spoke with all believe that's the director's call. At the end of the day, it comes down to the director's

judgment about whether placing a writer on the scene is going to benefit and speed the creation of the movie or create a nightmare.

There were clues about which writers are more likely to be good collaborators during shooting. Among the bad bets are bright writers who think that directing is easy enough to master and go right ahead getting their hands into it. Or those who see screenwriting as a stepping-stone toward directing and naturally slide on beyond the bounds. Those writers who want to control the specifics of how the story is told can be a disaster and are invited to consider going into directing or into writing novels, where they are free to create their mental world and keep it intact.

All my respondents shared this view: writers have had their turn, sometimes sitting unimpeded in solitude with absolute control over their scripts while writing them—a luxury nobody else in the industry has. Filmmakers want to work with writers who recognize that and are now willing to give directors their turn.

There's also the difficult problem of a *mélange* of writers working on the script. Which one or subcollectivity should be in on the shoot? Directors think it helps collaboration when there is a single writer, including in rewrite, who has branded the script with a consistent point of view that the writer can communicate coherently. If there isn't a single voice in the script, the *director* has to provide it, not some also-ran writer.

Directors believe that some writers don't crave at all to be on the set. They went into writing because they don't relish talking with people. And they're not as creative and productive there, or making as much money around the camera, as they would be at their word processor punching out a new script. Add in writers who simply despise the hassle of making a movie. To them, it's torture to be out in some outlandish place and up and running at 4:30 in the morning. Let them sleep.

Writer on the Set? How It Sums Up

Given all these dilemmas and qualifications, I'd like to crystallize, in their own words, the main points the directors made about the writer-on-the-set issue. They were in agreement that writers can be useful—they can help the director bring out his or her music. That said, the relationship between the director and writer is a critical factor in whether that occurs. Ergo, there should be no strict requirements about writers occupying space on the set.

The Scribe as Right-hand Man

I myself love having a writer on the set. When an actor can't do a line, I love being able to turn to the writer and ask whether we can use another line. You see, I prefer not having the responsibility of making new words. Say I'm rehearsing a scene and a beat is missing, or something is not working in the story: it's good to have a writer *right there* to fix it or jump in with me and the actors in fixing it—that's just another part of the collaborative process. I start out wanting to be faithful to the original impulse of the writer because *that's what attracted me to the piece in the first place*, so I like being able to check things out with him or her. As I see it, most directors want the input of writers—the welcome mat is out—when the chances are there'll be a cooperative interplay on the set.

Personal Chemistry Counts

It's obvious to me that everything depends so much on the matchup between the director and the writer, on the give and take and the personalities of the two people. If writers really want to attach themselves to the director and the film and work at it being a good match, *it can be terrific*. A smart writer will try to cultivate good relations with the director and become savvy about how things work during a shoot. Also, in my experience, a lot of potential hang-ups can be solved *beforehand*, in pre-production, by directors and writers having a good, thorough exchange about what the writer intended and how the director wants to bring it to the screen.

Mandated Rules Not Allowed

No director I know of wants to be ordered to have writers on the set and have a *shotgun marriage*. If our egos clash, I don't want that writer in on filming. If it's a Paul Schrader and Martin Scorsese doing *Taxi Driver*, yes, the writer should be around and in the process. In fact, one time I cast the writer John Sayles in a part so that he would be at my side to consult with me—but I don't want that happening with everyone. The writer's participation really ought to be optional and at the discretion of the director. See, the relationship is very individual, and except when there's been a long-term partnership, it has to be negotiated *case-by-case, movie-by-movie*. I myself will accept anyone's suggestion, on or off the set, but I have to have the prerogative to have the final say, and to have a writer who goes along with that.

A few directors spoke in a statesman-like voice that worked at playing down the antagonism and viewing writers as close allies in film industry combat.

I think that generally this whole argument over writers is overblown, because there's much more *in common* and more potential for wonderful collaboration between writers and directors than there is between directors and studio executives. Most studio executives have done hardly any thinking about the movie. Beyond buying the movie and attaching some actors to it to sell it to audiences . . . beyond that, why are they qualified to say what the content should be, who can be the DP [director of photography] and who can't, who can do the editing, who can be the production designer? That is a far more destructive intrusion into the process than the writer. I don't see the writer as the enemy; I see the writer as my *colleague*, my fellow storyteller, a co-combatant in upholding creative values in the industry.

At the guild level, the view isn't as sanguine. There are organizational interests to uphold and members to mobilize for a cause.

My Organization Can Lick Your Organization

"Creative rights" is the terminology directors and writers use to address these matters, and they address them collectively through their respective guilds. What we have is a conflict between two professional groups for power and control, with their respective unions giving voice and muscle to the arguments of both sides. The rather fuzzy and esoteric talk about relationships and creative concerns can be codified in legal

form through official contracts between the studios and the guilds. Tough negotiations set out salary, residuals, and health benefits with one hand, and can tie down creative and artistic prerogatives with the other.

My interviews often focused on creative arrangements for making a movie, but the back story involved who has control of the cinematic tiller on the set and who has the organizational power outside the set to decide that issue. Don't assume my respondents were unaware of the back story.

The Writers Guild and the Directors Guild are adversaries, and they have *always been*. There's an unstable and conflictual situation between them—a power struggle. The whole thing about the guilds is to protect their creative turfs. When writers came along, directors weren't going to say, "Oh, why don't you come onto the set, take the better screen credits, decide on casting?"

The two guilds are close in membership, with the Directors Guild having about 12,500 members and the Writers Guild (West and East branches) coming in at about 11,500. Compared to the 135,000 Screen Actors Guild/American Federation of Television and Radio Artists, the two are fairly small and pretty even in numbers.

The Writers Guild has had a history of militancy, with strikes in 1960, 1973, 1981, 1985, and 1988. During the 1930s, many writers had progressive and left-wing leanings, so the guild later bore the brunt of the horrendous blacklist boycott of "subversives" in Hollywood. The decimated Screen Writers Guild, a predecessor organization of writers, was forced to dissolve and merge into a newly formed Writers Guild of America (West and East).

The DGA, in contrast, doesn't want to hear the word "strike" and, if you will permit me an oxymoron, is exceedingly moderate. It has had fairly stable leadership, whereas the writers' organization had a contentious flip-flop at the top in the mid-1980s and late 1990s. Also, the WGA has a division between high-paid "hyphenate" television producer-writers and other writers who stick strictly to putting words on the page. The TV producer types carry significant managerial responsibilities that, in the uproar of labor disputes, pit them against more radical writers who are free of those binds.

Say Uncle

In general, I see the DGA as the stronger of the two because of its stability and the elevated standing of directors in the industry. For example, newspapers often refer to the DGA as an "elite" organization. But it's a close call. It's clear that directors are the ones who run the machinery of actually making movies. During the heyday of the studio system, towering producers like David O. Selznick and executives like Darryl Zanuck ruled production with an iron hand. With the demise of the studios and of these titans, directors, to some degree, slipped in to pick up the slack—especially during the auteur spurt of the 1970s. But writers feed the entire picture-making apparatus of Hollywood at the front end by inserting scripts into machinery. They can bring everything to a halt by holding back their words.

The militancy of the writers is a potential strength for their union, but it frequently backfires—as, for example, in the 1988 strike where the guild held out too long for too much. They had to accept a humiliating compromise settlement after a twenty-two-week work stoppage that shut down Hollywood and antagonized everyone.

The directors I interviewed generally saw directors as the stronger force.

For me, the reality is that directors can close down the industry and it's harder for writers to do that. So when push comes to shove, *directors* have more clout. Also, directors have power not just because they have taken it. They hold the combination to the safe because they alone have the key to synchronizing an amazing number of different talents to create a compelling vision on the screen. But in coverage of writer-director disputes, the media favors writers. Reporters are writers, and so they slant their coverage toward the writers' point of view. That makes the Directors Guild seem weaker, and some directors are apprehensive about that.

The complex and shifting landscape of union alliances in filmmaking makes me proceed with caution in assessing power authoritatively. You've got a plethora of different skills in filmmaking, both in the art and the craft of the process, and there's a tangle of different unions representing each of these groups. There can be people from more than twenty guilds and unions on the set for any movie—and jurisdictional disputes among all of them abound. During the 2001 writer negotiations with the studios—who bargain in unity through the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP)—writers allied themselves with the actors' union around upping the artists' share of residuals, and actors were signaling that they would throw their weight in support of a writers' strike.

The DGA joined with the blue-collar International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees, with its tens of thousands of workers, to push for early negotiations aimed at reducing the likelihood of a strike action. Those groups were more interested in protecting themselves against the loss of income from a work stoppage than in promoting trade union solidarity. These alliances rise and then re-form unpredictably at different times, making it hard to determine who holds the upper hand.

Down to Cases

In connection with their 2001 negotiations with the AMPTP, writers made a strong pitch for more visibility in the whole filmmaking process (beyond their economic demands on salary, residuals, and health benefits). They brought out a whole gamut of creative rights: to be present on the set; to watch the dailies; to have their names on the cast and crew lists; to participate in casting, cast readings, and rehearsals; and to attend test screenings, premiers, junkets, festivals, and trade shows. They also continued their uphill battle to eliminate the "a film by" possessory credit (what they call a "vanity" credit), which is a third-rail inflammatory issue for directors.

This stance continued the recent spats of these groups, like the 1970s tiff about control over script changes and the 1980s gambit of the writers to have a say on the hiring of directors. As I see it, the opening gun in the most recent encounter began in 1999 with a fiery candidacy statement by TV writer-producer John Wells (who earns more than \$35 million a year) when he ran for, and later won, the WGA presidency. He wrote that the creative rights limitations on writers were "intolerable," "a disgrace," "unpardonable," and "unconscionable." Wells skyrocketed the level of rhetoric on matters that writers had been grouching about for a very long time. He added, vaguely, that these creative issues should "be fully addressed" in upcoming negotiations with the AMPTP on the MBA (Minimum Basic Agreement—which is the mutually accepted WGA-studios contract). And he added ominously that if these aims cannot be achieved in negotiations, they would be achieved "on the picket line."

The Directors Guild was provoked and responded by drafting a set of "preferred practices" on creative issues in place of the WGA's "pattern of demands"—practices that would be agreed upon voluntarily through the two guilds, rather than officially through the AMPTP. In this formula, writers would be able to participate on the set, but with the approval of the director. *DGA Magazine* laid out the rejoinder of the directors by stating bluntly that what writers want are "new contractual rights . . . mandating that a writer . . . be allowed on the set." They said that this would "strip directors of decision-making power," and also jack up production costs and cause chaos. They declared the mandatory feature a scheme by writers to "reinvent the movie business" by putting production control in their own hands.⁹

In a return-fire article in the WGA magazine, *Written By*, WGA officers Phil Alden Robinson and Tom Schulman insisted that they were offering voluntary proposals that "encourage, but not mandate" participation by screenwriters. Concretely, the language specified that the writer participates, "absent an objection" by the director or the company. The authors insisted that these proposals are "moderate" and "reasonable" and don't saddle directors with anything of which they don't approve.¹⁰

So what's going on here? The WGA is adamant that its provisions are essentially voluntary, and the DGA counters that they are bluntly mandatory. Every director I spoke with, without exception, believed the WGA was out to set mandatory rules, which the directors resented bitterly. For them, this is a first-order issue and one that at least some are willing to go out on strike over. They see the writers' campaign, in part, as a power grab, led by guild TV producer-writers, who are dominating "show runners" on episodic TV series with total control there—like David E. Kelley (*Ally McBeal*) and Dick Wolf (*Law and Order*). Many directors believe that show runners have tasted power and want to establish the same kind of model for writers in the feature-film business, using creative rights as a way in. With two-thirds of the WGA members as TV writers, these people have real influence in the writers' group.

Hollywood mavens I spoke to thought the writers started out by asking for mandatory requirements but retreated to accepting voluntary guidelines or "preferred practices." Some cynics were of the view that the WGA tried to put one over on their

members by claiming they had negotiated something they hadn't. As best I can tell, the WGA current language does have a voluntary caste. But directors I spoke with see that as a guise, a sly foot in the door. Once the language of participation on the set and elsewhere is officially in writing in the contract, it can be built on, expanded, and argued through the AMPTP and in the courts.

So when the WGA says "voluntary," the DGA *hears* "mandatory." Using the WGA formula, writers have automatic right of entrance to the set, except when there are specific objections from the director or studio (and it's clear which of the two and under what circumstances). Directors want right of entrance to the set to be pre-negotiated between director and writer on a picture-by-picture basis.

From the directors' point of view, the prevailing open interplay between professional organizations would become defunct in favor of more legalistic mechanisms with outside organizations calling some of the shots. For directors, this is a serious backslide, because in the going relationship between the guilds, they have the upper hand and are in much better control of their standing and status.

One of the directors I interviewed thought there is an irrational element in this whole entanglement, carrying psychological rather than political baggage. He believes that because of a history of past grievances, writers are angrily overstepping the bounds of the possible in their try for unattainable rules.

I think there's a core of people at the Writers Guild who really don't want to come to some conclusion with this. They're really mad about something that happened to them in the past and they want revenge. I can't do anything about how they've been treated by some other directors in the past. They were treated much, much more badly by the studios. We can't rectify that background for all these writers; we can just try to make a better environment for the future. But their approach—they're going to *legislate this . . .* it's never going to happen.

Sizing It Up, Peering Ahead

The upshot of the recent negotiations was that writers made respectable gains on economic issues but got nowhere on the creative front. AMPTP just didn't want to take on this hot potato and play the heavy with the writers. They shifted the problem right back to the two guilds to battle through between themselves.

The guilds agreed to set up joint creative rights committees to work out solutions and committed themselves to publishing an annual article on successful collaborations (one in film and one in TV) in their respective house organs. Also, symposia on creative partnerships were instituted. But the meetings have gone on haltingly with the sound of grinding machinery and the smell of pro-forma in the air. Ominously, the ground rules specify that either party (think DGA—they insisted on the clause) has the right to exit the joint meetings.

This drawn-out match between directors and writers is labeled "inter-professional competition" by sociologists who study these matters. For a long time, sociologists analyzed professions by focusing on their social structures and viewing professions, more or less, as benign public interest groups serving a particular need of society (like physi-

cians healing the sick). Andrew Abbott, a professor at the University of Chicago, turned that notion around abruptly and virtually single-handedly in the 1980s. In his ground-breaking book *The System of Professions*, Abbott argued that professions are about claiming a monopoly in their area of activity in the workplace.¹¹ They aim to control the important conditions of work, including the labor process and the labor market, and in that way increase their occupational power and status.

In the language of the theory, professions regularly strive for jurisdictional dominance through claims of singular expertise and knowledge, and consequently the study of professions is actually the study of jurisdictional disputes (what the rest of us typically call "turf battles"). The director-writer fracas is an obvious case in point falling under Abbott's theory.

Conflict theory gives us some handles for understanding this dispute at a deeper level.¹² Disputes in formal organizations (like the studios) come to the forefront when three conditions exist.

- First, there's a breakout of functions, such as sales, manufacturing, and accounting in industry. In film, in the early days, directors were like three-handed painters carrying out almost all the functions; then the talkies arrived and screenwriters were imported to take on the function of writing the scripts.
- Second, tasks of different working groups rub up against each other and lead to role conflict. That leads people in the different functions (or divisions) to declare authority over the same work. Both writers and directors think they're responsible for the telling of the story,
- Third, a scarcity of resources inflames the conflict. There is a limited pot of money for making a movie. Paying writers to be on the set and expanding the time for production (so writers and directors can work through their differences) devours money that can be directed elsewhere, like for set design, special effects, and marketing. The studios balk at that, and so do directors.

Conflict theorists tell us that disputes can be substantive in origin—related to ends (what kind of picture to make) or means (who should do what in making the picture). Disputes can also have an emotional component—anger, resentment, or fear. It's obvious that writers are gushing pent-up anger and resentment, and directors are in abject fear of losing a portion of what they believe is rightly theirs.

In a classic book called *The Functions of Social Conflict*, sociologist Lewis Coser turns up some surprises about how conflict operates (including in the director-writer imbroglio).¹³ Conflict may have purposes that are totally out of the awareness of adversaries. An example is the group-bonding elements of conflict. John Wells may well have thought that his high-octane declaration before negotiations would be the opening volley of a march toward real gains for the WGA. But I think that backfired. His statements put the DGA on guard and just caused them to dig in—and drag out their big cannons. Mainly, Wells's pronouncements brought WGA members closer together in their discontent, but it didn't change their concrete situation for the better.

Another point Coser makes is that when relationships among people are relatively close, conflict is relatively intense. It may be that because directors and writers, cinematic co-professionals in the same work environment in the same town, have formal and informal contacts in pre-production, on the set, and in the filmmaking community generally, there is a level of familiarity between them that heightens disappointment and antagonism when disagreements come to the surface. There's an analogy here to the heated emotional flare-ups that we see in close families.

Conflict theory lays out a set of different options for dealing with conflict. Competition, or fighting it out, is the main MO we've seen operating here. There's also "authoritative command," which turns the dispute over to some legally constituted entity to decide. The writers tried that unsuccessfully with the AMPTP. The parties also can enter into bargaining or negotiation—which they did. Add avoidance—the option of looking the other way—which I think the directors, with the status and power advantage they have and don't want to lose, would really prefer. Finally, there's the rare and super-idealistic problem-solving approach, where the parties rely strictly on objective factfinding and impartial analysis to resolve the issue. That's a more likely script for a Mr. Deeds movie than for this wrangle.

My bet is that this process will move from bargaining, where it is now, to avoidance (or withdrawal) by the directors, and back into competition through WGA pressure. Then, whenever new cycles of contract negotiations come up, the writers will try to latch on to the authority of the AMPTP again to advance their cause.

I want to interject here that directors are not lockstep in castigating writers alone for generating this dispute. Some directors are more conciliatory, acknowledging that directors share blame for the acrimonious climate of the conflict.

I believe it's a bit of a tempest in a teapot and this latest rhubarb is being pushed by certain people in the Writers Guild whose careers it helps. But, look, on the directors' side also this whole issue is being inflamed way, way beyond where it should be. I can't see any objection to writers wanting some more say in what's going on. A bunch of us directors know that this keeping them on a leash is nonsense. I'm a director, but I'm not going to defend the pretentious auteurs who come on the set with their hands on their brow saying, "It's my vision, get out of my way." That's just *crap*. It's a collaborative medium, and we all know that.

Hearing this director made me cheer internally, "Hooray for voices of moderation." But the issue is tangled and tortured and, alas, won't be solved alone by virtuous straight thinking and good will.

If the Hairdressers Can Do It

The reality in contemporary filmmaking for me is that a balance of power, a kind of détente, has evolved whereby producer-writers take charge of episodic television and directors control feature films. Is this the best arrangement artistically and commercially? That's hard to say. Arguably, it would advance the quality of film if writers were

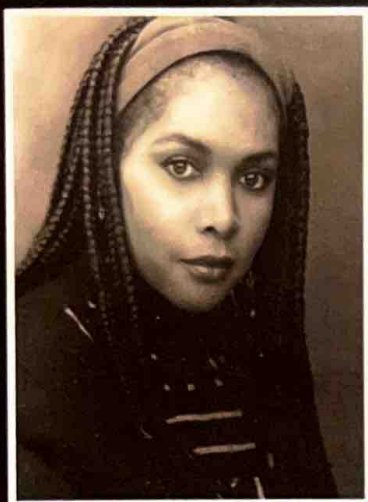
co-equal with directors on the movie set. I've heard it said that the writer is the only truly original artist on the filmmaking team, all others, including directors and actors, being derivative and interpretive. Be that as it may, the truth is that someone has to be in creative charge; ultimately and historically, directors have had that role. I think the growing number of upcoming talented writer-directors like M. Night Shyamalan, Wes Anderson, Paul Thomas Anderson, James Mangold, and respondent Nancy Meyers serve as a hopeful bridging development.¹⁴

Writers like to bring up Louis Malle's comment that if there can be someone on the set for the hair, why not screenwriters for the words. Actually, I sense that many directors would love to have writers on the set if they behaved more like hairdressers. That means respectfully following the wishes of directors, working within a bounded scope—and not constantly broadcasting that they gave birth to the spine of the film and jousting to keep it as originally conceived at all costs.

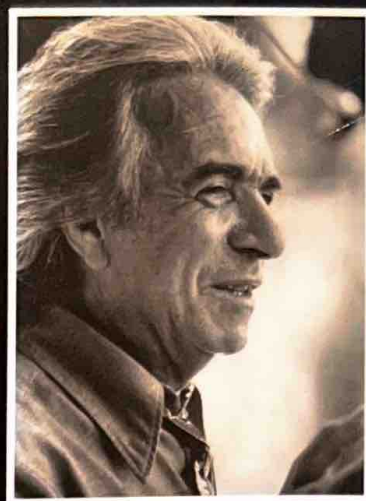
But that kind of supine role for writers is not in the cards. The writer-director relationship involves inherent friction and creative tension, and from my vantage point, that's inherently a big plus for filmmaking. But there have to be ways of fomenting the interplay, on the one hand, and on the other, containing the friction and resolving the differences. We can wonder whether the going arrangement in film, which puts the control lever squarely in the director's hands, is fair to writers, and that's a disquieting question.

But this is the way the system has evolved, and it is not going to change soon. Directors are passionate about not wanting writers on the set *automatically*, and writers' low status in the Hollywood culture will make it possible for directors to keep them off if they want, at least in the short term.

Nonetheless, these things shift historically. In the 1930s and 1940s, film was an actors' and producers' medium, and the director's name was often smaller in the credits than actors, producers, and even writers. These definitions of relative position change over time. That hasn't been the case for writers so far; they've been stuck near the bottom. But we've seen flunky computer nerds rise up to become instant billionaire CEOs during the dot-com craze, so the salad days of screenwriters may yet come.



in the film industry, directors stand at the fulcrum—between actors, writers, editors, and other craftsmen on one end and the cadre of bottom-line executives on the other. Because directors have a comprehensive view of the filmmaking industry, they have often been interviewed for their insights on movie making. Until *Hollywood in Wide Angle*, however, their responses have never been so revealing.



More than thirty film directors were interviewed by Jack Rothman, a social scientist who guaranteed their responses would remain anonymous. Rothman analyzes the uncensored comments from these ideal informants to give readers an inside look into the process of filmmaking, as well as an understanding of the wider sociological forces that both limit and facilitate such endeavors. The result is an intimate and candid portrait of work within the film industry, both on and off the set.

Among the directors interviewed are:

- | | |
|---|---|
| Gilbert Cates (<i>I Never Sang for My Father</i>) | Arthur Hiller (<i>Love Story, The In-Laws</i>) |
| Martha Coolidge (<i>Rambling Rose, Real Genius</i>) | Tim Hunter (<i>Tex, River's Edge</i>) |
| Joe Dante (<i>Gremlins, Inner Space</i>) | Henry Jaglom (<i>Festival in Cannes</i>) |
| Julie Dash (<i>Daughters of the Dust</i>) | Irvin Kershner (<i>The Empire Strikes Back</i>) |
| Andrew Davis (<i>Holes, The Fugitive</i>) | John Landis (<i>Animal House, The Blues Brothers</i>) |
| Bill Duke (<i>A Rage in Harlem</i>) | Delbert Mann (<i>Marty, Separate Tables</i>) |
| Gary Fleder (<i>The Runaway Jury</i>) | Nancy Meyers (<i>Something's Gotta Give</i>) |
| Walter Hill (<i>The Long Riders, 48 Hrs.</i>) | Michael Schultz (<i>Car Wash, Cooley High</i>) |

Hollywood in Wide Angle will be useful not only to students but also to new and aspiring directors and other industry professionals. Indeed, this book will intrigue anyone truly interested in both movies and the complex industry behind them.

JACK ROTHMAN is professor emeritus at UCLA, School of Public Policy and Social Research. He is the author of more than twenty books applying social science.

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