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HOLLYWOOD AND THE SCENARIO SYNDROME

'If writers were good businessmen,
they would have too much sense to be writers.'[3]
Irvin S. Cobb[4]

The 2000s are called the New Golden Age of Television. Pay channels (HBO, Showtime, AMC) became a venue for sophisticated character-driven shows such as *The Sopranos*, *Sex and the City*, *Mad Men*, *The Wire* and *Breaking Bad*. *Netflix* took it a step further by creating the possibility of *binge viewing*. These developments in the media market made writers more important than ever. For every auteur there is another hand shaking money in the face. This chapter will address the changing position of the writer in the industry over the years.

The breakthrough

Variety, November 1967: 400,000 dollars was paid for an original film scenario. Author: William Goldman. Title: *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. Back then, in 1963, a trend was set: the scriptwriter is worth money, a great deal of money.
Since then, an interest in screenwriting has emerged among film critics, at film schools and in media literacy classes as well. That is not surprising for scenarios make a great contribution to making an audio-visual product.

'Audiences don't know anyone writes a picture.
They think the actors make it up as they go along.'[5]

3 Retrieved from http://www.wisdomword.info/irvin-s-cobb.
4 Irvin S. Cobb (1876-1944).
5 Quote from Joe Gilles in *Sunset Boulevard* (1950). Writers: Charles Brackett, Billy Wilder & D.M. Marshman Jr. Director: Billy Wilder.

Joe Gillies (William Holden), the embittered and disillusioned screenwriter in *Sunset Boulevard* puts full cynicism into his voice to express the biggest frustration of many scriptwriters: the feeling of being misunderstood. Joe Gillies is a real 'loser'. In this cynical film about Hollywood he vents his displeasure with himself and the glamour world around him (that seems so unattainable) by means of sharp dialogue lines. This provides many wonderful examples of scenario craftsmanship, the work of Billy Wilder, scriptwriter and director of this 1950 film.

The boys, for they were still boys, of *Cahiers du Cinéma* could be right in calling Billy Wilder an 'author.' Funnily enough, they have never studied Wilder the way they studied Alfred Hitchcock, Howard Hawks or Nicholas Ray. The main strategy of their 'Politique des auteurs' that became the vogue in the 1950s was recognising authors (in this case directors and not writers) in commercial Hollywood films. It was called a *Politique* and not a theory because of its strategy, a strategy to put an author's name (the name of the director) on this work of art while it was essentially the work of a team. This movement in film criticism was highly important to the development of film studies. But the unavoidable side effect was that scriptwriters felt very much undervalued for decades.

In spite of it all, interest in being a scriptwriter is growing strongly. Perhaps you could speak of rehabilitation. In order to oversee and explain this well, I will give a brief overview of the position of scriptwriters in Hollywood's history.

Hollywood and the studio system

In the studio system, the scriptwriter was important, but certainly not an 'author.' The profession of scriptwriter was not invented until the 1930s. Certainly in the period before the advent of the sound movie techies or people who were improvising or just messing around a bit, controlled the film. This sometimes yielded very nice films, but it was not a truly efficient production method (see for example, the series *Unknown Chaplin*[6]).

6 Brownlow, K. & D. Gill (1983): *Unknown Chaplin. Documentary.* London: Thames Television.
The clearest example of this working method can be found in the story of the flower stall scene from Chaplin's movie *City Lights*. Chaplin wanted to point out to the audience that a blind girl mistakenly believes that the tramp (Chaplin) is a wealthy man. This will pose a problem because he and the flower girl fall in love. Because it is a silent movie this exposition should only be given visually. Chaplin tried a couple of times, but was dissatisfied about the

The studio followed economic principles to create a more smoothly running machine. One of the principles was division of labour. Whereas Chaplin figured out everything himself (he was actor, director, composer, story line developer, casting director and so on) now specialists were trained in production, directing and writing stories. At the same time, the sound movie gained a firm foothold, which resulted in an emerging need for people who were able to write dialogue lines. The first objective of the studio system was to organise film productions as efficiently, that is, as profitably as possible.

A film company would consist of two departments: a financial one, usually located in New York, and a production department in Hollywood. New York arranged the finances for upcoming films and Hollywood produced them. The head of such a studio, the 'executive producer' was fully independent. He had dictatorial power in the studio. And, in fact, he was the 'creative' executive of the financial decisions taken in New York.

The 'executive producer' often chose the story and also the scriptwriter(s), the producer, the director, the actors, and he was often responsible for the editing as well. A famous executive was, for example, Irving Thalberg. Thalberg's quote on scriptwriters is characteristic of relationships at the time:

'What's all this business of being a writer? (…)
It's just putting one word after another.'[7]

Thalberg's power and influence may be a bit of an exception, but the second in ranking was certainly not the director but the 'associate producer.' He was responsible for the actual film production. In order to prevent a flop, the associate producer kept all control of his film in his own hands. If the executive did not interfere, the associate had control of scenario, casting and editing. All in all, writers, directors, actors had little to say. The studio gave nearly all of them seven-year contracts so that they were not able to resign, whereas the studio was able to cancel the contract every six months. Elia Kazan's *The Last Tycoon*[8]

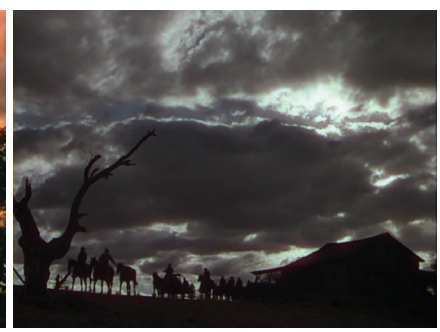
scene again and again. Subsequently, it took 534 days before the scene was finally shot well. Chaplin eventually came up with a fantastic solution (more on this later), but it had cost him very many shooting days. The problem should have been solved in the scenario phase. However, Chaplin's way of working, with continuous improvisations, did not make that possible.

7 Vieira, M.A. (2010). *Irving Thalberg. Boy Wonder to Producer Prince.* Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press. (p. 145).

8 *Harold Pinter* bases the script of *The Last Tycoon* on the book *The Love of the Last Tycoon* by F. Scott Fitzgerald. Did I call it Elia Kazan's *The Last Tycoon*? With names like Pinter and Scott Fitzgerald you can see where it has gone wrong for scriptwriters since the 'Politique des auteurs'.

is based on Thalberg's life and provides an inside view on movie production in those days.
In this system, a scriptwriter was assigned a scenario to be written during office hours, simply from nine to five, based on a novel, play or story. After the associate producer had approved this scenario, he engaged a director, who was only in control on the set. A result of this division of work, which naturally moved in the direction of technical operators and cameramen as well, was that it was easy for the producer to replace parts of a production team. It's all demonstrated perfectly in the film *The Last Tycoon*.
At least three directors, among whom *George Cukor*, worked on *Gone with the Wind*, apart from *Victor Fleming*, who was officially mentioned. The point may be clear: if a film can be attributed to one person in this system, it will, more likely than not, be one of the producers rather than the director or the scriptwriter. In short: *Gone with the Wind* is a film by *David O'Selznick* (executive producer). And if you look closely at the films David O'Selznick produced, whether it is the historical epos *Gone with the Wind* or the western *Duel in the Sun* (King Vidor, 1946), you will see striking similarities, for instance, in cinematography and mise-en-scene.

Left: *Gone with the Wind*
(Directed by Victor Fleming)



Right: *Duel in the Sun*
(Directed by King Vidor)

The scriptwriter in the studio system

So scriptwriters got assignments in Hollywood. This assignment was often given via a script editor, also named script doctor. Such a script editor often engaged various people for one scenario, without them knowing who were engaged. Subsequently, as a doctor he put pieces of texts together, more or less

at will, he deleted, changed parts, etc. to satisfy all people involved in the production (associate producer, director, and sometimes actors).
In those days, Bill Fadiman was an important script editor, who we are going to hear more about shortly. He was head of the Story Department of Metro Goldwyn & Mayer (*MGM*), the biggest studio at that time. He employed no less than 32 people whose exclusive task was to read, read and, once again, read. Additionally, he also had professional readers in important European cities. Abstracts were made from all the texts that were read: stories, novels, playwrights, which were looked at in the story department to see if there were possibilities for filming them. An estimated 20,000 reading reports were received every year. What's more, the department had some 80 scriptwriters at their disposal that had a permanent contract and transformed the selected stories into scenarios.

Hollywood's literary men

The most important question the producer asks
about the scenario is: will it make money?
The writer, however, is wondering: will it make sense?
Evidently, the scriptwriter gets the short end of the stick.

Hollywood circles, with all the money that was going around, also attracted great writers such as Scott Fitzgerald and Faulkner. Although they had the benefit of knowing how to build a plot, they were not very successful. Journalists or film critics from the literary New York circles wrote the big hits. Famous names like Ben Hecht, Charles Mac Arthur and Howard Koch.
Famous literary names, whose most important motive was money, could not give in to the limitations of the studio system. Scenarios often had to be just right for a certain star – Joan Crawford, Greta Garbo – or had to be made along the established lines of the studio: Paramount mainly made comedies, while MGM made 'slice-of-life movies'.
Another limitation emerged with the *Motion Picture Production Code* (or Hays Code): a set of moral censorship guidelines to oppose loose morals such as showing violence, sex or vulgar expressions, but also actual childbirth or sympathy for criminals.

The Cold War, McCarthy and 'authorship'

During the cold war, Hollywood became the object of communist hunting. Senator McCarthy tried to clear Hollywood and mainly focused on writers. Eventually, the screenwriters were recognised as people with ideas. They were the people disseminating anti-American propaganda in McCarthy's view. Evidently, he also aimed at directors and actors, but it is striking how scriptwriters are recognised for their important task in this period. It is a pity that, cynically enough, this form of recognition was going to ruin them as scriptwriters. Carl Foreman wrote a film about the McCarthy era: *High Noon* (Fred Zinnemann, 1952), a classic western as an allegory for blacklisting in Hollywood in those days. A brilliant example of how creative talent could develop in spite of the strict rules.

Also in this respect, the strange thing is that the '*Politique des auteurs*' tried to detect the personal expressions of the very director in an industrial Hollywood product. In Trufaut's view cinema could not be art if it was a group product. So the '*Politique des auteurs*' was a strategy to designate an 'author', and, according to them, the dominant creative personality was the director. Of course, this approach has proved to be valuable: nobody will deny the personal style of Hitchcock, Lubitsch, etc. But would the same strategy not be fruitful with regard to screenwriters? *High Noon* is a fine example of this.

The times are changing

As early as in the 1940's, the position of some screenwriters began to change. The 'stars' were getting more influential and were going to be selective. Selections were made on the basis of screenplays. This way, a small free market was gradually developing, and screenwriters who were fed up with the limitations of the studio system became freelancers. What's more, the emergence of television was undermining the studio system in the fifties. The factory-like approach was rapidly falling to pieces. Television realism was beating Hollywood sets. New production methods were introduced to Hollywood. The producer was becoming the one who made financial arrangements; his creative role came to an end, and was taken over by director and screenwriter. Ironically the TV industry, as we will see shortly, created a new type of studio system in the 90s. The most important person in this system is the *show runner.* This person is responsible for all creative aspects of the show. And this person is a *writer.*

Historically, three reasons can be given for why the screenwriter developed from doormat to star. The first reason is that film productions have become very, very expensive. Nowadays a few very expensive films are made, while in the days of the studio system, many cheap films were produced. The screenplay is the first completed phase on the basis of which a decision can be made to produce the film.
Secondly, it was getting more important to have a star cast. Films are billed with stars: Robert De Niro in … Leonardo DiCaprio in … Ryan Gosling in … . Stars are a guarantee for box-office success. Whether a star wants to make a film no longer depends on his contract with the studio, but his own free will. Stars choose their roles – on the very basis of the scenario. Actors can read what character they need to represent, whether it fits their image, etc.
Thirdly, the executive producer's authority has disappeared. The screenwriter is no longer put to work, but instead makes suggestions for a scenario or delivers a complete script to be sold. William Goldman, for example, sold the Oscar-winning scenario *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* for 400,000 dollars. There was no director, no casting yet, but a sack of money was already paid for the scenario. Nowadays everyone is in search of the perfect scenario as it forms the basis for a profitable film adventure. In 1999 M. Night Shyamalan received $ 2.5 million for the script *The Sixth Sense* and $5 million for *Unbreakable*. These very heaps of money underline the invaluable importance of the screenwriter's work in film production.

Television

In view of the above, it comes as no surprise that the production of television drama, for example, *ER*, bears a resemblance with the studio system of the golden age of the Hollywood movie industry that started in the 30s and ended in the early 60s. While in the movie business the producer was the dominant person, in the TV industry the writers, more specific the show runner is in charge. They refer to him (until recently most of them were men but times are changing)[9] as writer-producer or executive producer. Famous show runners such as Larry David (*Seinfeld*), John Wells (*ER*), Aaron Sorkin (*The*

9 Weijers, A. (1997). *Tricks of the Hollywood Trade. Dagboek notities van een rondgang langs Hollywoods meest succesvolle schrijfteams en producers van tv-series en sitcoms.* Hilversum: KRO.
Recently female show runners entered the pitch. Most famous is Lena Dunham (1987), the show runner of the HBO comedy: *Girls*. Dunham is more than a show runner: she is a writer and director of the show and plays the main character.

West Wing), and David Chase (*The Sopranos*) are not only responsible for the final draft of a script but also for the execution of the scenarios into an episode ready to be aired on TV. In the credits the show runner is referred to as *executive producer*, the one who is in charge of everything related to the production of the show. Scenarios should be written in such a way that they can be produced within budget. Most of the time this person is also the head writer. The executive producer is ultimately responsible and is often the creator of the show. Established show creators with writing credits will be referred to as executive producers as well. The first years of *The West Wing* John Wells was an executive producer, while Aaron Sorkin was the show runner. Later Wells became *The West Wing*'s show runner. Today's TV credits contain a lot of executive producers, supervising producers, producers and co-producers and sometimes a writer ('written by'). But don't be fooled; all these producers are writers and differ in seniority and power. Traditional producers who are responsible for planning, physical facilities, props and so on are given the credit: *produced by*.

Television is a writer's medium. The executive producer or show runner manages a team of writers. Every single writer writes for a rewrite. Most of the time the rewrite is executed by another member of the writing staff and finally – if necessary – by the executive producer. The executive producer also hires the key staff of the show. First of all, the director of photography: he will stay on the show for all the episodes. Directors instead will come and go. Famous movie directors are sometimes hired to shoot the pilot (first episode) of a TV series. Martin Scorsese directed the pilot of *Boardwalk Empire* and his main task was to sculpture the characters and to establish the visual style of the series. After the pilot the directors of the episodes will follow in his footsteps. Episode directors are sometimes referred to as *traffic cops* who ensure that crew members are in the right place and actors know how to get from A to B. There is no improvisation whatsoever on the set. There is a detailed scenario of some 50 pages for each episode, which, in principle, is not departed from.

Over the years writers have been an essential part of every audio-visual production. In the movie industry they still feel a little undervalued because most of the credits are for the director. But in the TV industry writers have worked their way up. Nowadays writers are the most creative and the most credited force behind every TV show. But still 'audiences don't know anyone writes a picture'.