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EARLY ALTERNATIVES TO THE HOLLYWOOD MODE OF PRODUCTION
Implications for Europe’s avant-gardes

The concept of mode of production

When unconventional, even avant-garde films get made within mainstream commercial industries, critics and historians often explain the anomaly by claiming that particular filmmakers — especially directors — had ‘more control’ over their projects. But what does ‘more control’ mean? What is the source of that control? My purpose here is to show how the examination of proximate institutions can help confirm that such control has existed in some circumstances and that it had a basis in the specific duties for which directors were responsible.

In studying the relationship between film style and the film industry, the concept of mode of production has proven fruitful. Janet Staiger’s important study of the history of Hollywood’s mode of production offers a model of how an historian could explain Hollywood filmmaking as a system, rather than simply descriptively. In Part 2 of The Classical Hollywood Cinema, she studies Hollywood’s mode of production in the late teens and 1920s. What I would like to do is contrast the system Staiger details with certain aspects of the mode of production of three other important producing countries of the same era: France, Germany and the USSR. Each country used methods for making films which differed in significant ways from that of Hollywood. These differences will, I hope, shed some light on the filmmaking of the three countries; specifically, they may help explain why major avant-garde stylistic movements — French Impressionism, German Expressionism and Soviet Montage — were able to flourish briefly in these three countries, while the possibilities for experimentation were much more limited in Hollywood.

I would like to focus on two aspects of the Hollywood mode of production. First, Staiger emphasizes the continuity script as a ‘paper record’ which was crucial in allowing producers to predict costs and control the various stages of filmmaking. Second, and directly related, is the fact that the introduction of the continuity script permitted a detailed division of labour in the Hollywood studios: tasks could be assigned to specialists who would not necessarily have to work closely together, as long as they all knew from the continuity script what they were supposed to be doing. In the post-shooting phase, for example, an editor could assemble hundreds of numbered shots into a film, often with minimal input from the director, since a thorough paper record of the entire production was available to him or her. The continuity script was standardized by 1914.
According to Staiger’s account, the early teens saw the introduction of a heavy emphasis on efficiency in the American studios. This emphasis became widespread by 1914, the year in which the central producer system of filmmaking was standardized. In this system, the director was no longer responsible for supervising the entire production (choosing the story and personnel, shooting the film, editing it, and so on). Rather, a producer oversaw the film from start to finish. Under this system, the director had some input at the planning and editing stages, but was mainly responsible for the shooting phase. (As Staiger points out, some directors had sufficient power to retain greater control at all stages, and the Hollywood system was often flexible enough to accommodate them. Examples would include D. W. Griffith, Charles Chaplin and Cecil B. DeMille.1)

This move toward efficiency and control led to a greater division of labour among specialists. By the early teens, American studios not only had writing departments but also sub-specialities within those departments. Certain writers’ tasks specifically involved turning stories or treatments in prose form into continuity scripts, numbered shot by shot. Formerly the director had often been responsible for writing up the numbered shooting script. Staiger’s argument is that ‘such a standardizing process undoubtedly controlled innovation and contributed to the overall solidification of the classical Hollywood style’.

At the other end of the process, the assembly phase, an increasingly detailed division of labour was also developing. During the early teens, cutters assembled a workprint based on a simple continuity script. Over the next few years, however, increasingly complicated continuity guidelines and the growing length of films led to greater specialization in the task of editing. By the mid-teens, there were editors as well as cutters; these people could work from the continuity script and the script clerk’s notations of what happened during shooting. In some cases the director would be closely involved in the editing process, but in others he or she might only make a few decisions, or leave the task entirely up to the editing staff.2

If we compare these circumstances with those of the French, German and Soviet film industries, many similarities become apparent. Not surprisingly, all had some sort of division of labour involving directors, designers, camera personnel and so on. Yet one intriguing difference becomes obvious at once. None of the three industries seems to have a significant number of editors in the Hollywood sense, people responsible for following the script and making decisions about cutting. There was usually some sort of assistant, or cutter, responsible for splicing the dailies together and helping the person in charge of editing – the director. Why this lack of editors?

Following this question through along the lines Staiger used with Hollywood, it becomes clear that in all three industries the European director retained more control at every stage of filmmaking than was usually the case in Hollywood. Indeed, the continuity or shooting script was not used in exactly the same way as it was in Hollywood – though each of the three countries had a different approach to scripting. In general, in examining each country, I will be suggesting that the central producer system had not yet caught on in these three European countries after the war. Directors were still responsible for many decisions at the scripting stage. The script itself seems to have constrained the director less during the shooting phase. Directors also still had almost complete responsibility for the editing phase. There are considerable differences among the three countries, of course; Germany’s system was closer to the Hollywood mode of production than were those of France or the USSR. Still, contemporary sources reveal that in all three countries, there was a recognition of a difference from Hollywood, and often a desire to imitate its system.
France: small-scale production

Late in World War I, French filmmaking seems to have been largely organized in a fashion comparable to what Staiger terms the 'director unit' system in Hollywood—a system that had flourished there from roughly 1909 to 1914. A French production company might have several filmmaking units, but each was headed by a director who was responsible for the duties we now think of as the producer's. In addition, many tiny French production firms were formed by individual directors who also acted as producers.

The strength of the French film industry had declined precipitously during the war, due partly to the loss of facilities and personnel to the war effort and partly to burgeoning competition from American films. Thus in the period when the Hollywood studio system was growing, refining its division of labour, and moving into the central producer system, the French situation discouraged parallel developments. There simply were no large, self-contained firms which could create permanent departments for writing, editing and other functions. And when, near the end of the war, Charles Pathé decided to move his company away from its earlier emphasis on vertical integration and film production in favour of a concentration on distribution, he placed further obstacles in the path of a more detailed breakdown of labour. French filmmaking remained on an artisanal level to a greater degree than in other countries. In effect, the equivalent of the director unit system remained in place, and with fewer specialized assistants at his or her disposal, the director remained responsible for more tasks.

At the same time, however, Charles Pathé seems to have realized that the resulting lack of efficiency posed serious problems for the industry. In 1917, he published an important essay, 'La Crise du cinéma', in which he blamed those problems on a 'scenario crisis'. This idea would be easy to dismiss as some sort of miscalculation of Pathé's—a simplistic notion that better stories would make for better films, and better films would be able to compete against the Hollywood product. Yet it seems clear that Pathé was actually arguing in favour of an American-style continuity script that would improve production efficiency. Most scenarios he had read, he claimed, 'were, in my opinion, insufficiently developed. Nothing should be left to improvisation. I estimate that the amount of work for developing a scenario for a four or five reel film would call for a book of 200 to 250 pages'. Pathé argued that such scenarios would take more time in the writing but save time on the set—exactly what Staiger sees as one goal of the American continuity script. According to Pathé, each shot should be described in detail, and all planning of camera distance, locations, lighting, and so on, should be done in advance. Such a system, Pathé argued, would help the director to make more films, as many as four or five a year. He also recommended that the director not be the author of the script—as directors frequently were in France.

In 1918 Pathé wrote another article in which he discussed the role of the cinematographer, recommending that he create a careful paper record: 'Finally, he must not depend entirely on his memory, and note, in a memorandum book, all the individual circumstances, particularly the lighting, which occurred during the shooting of each shot'. Given the new structure of Pathé's company, however, he was in no position to force the independent producer-directors who supplied many of the films it distributed to carry through on these recommendations.

Henri Diamant-Berger, a mainstream director who produced his own films for distribution through Pathé-Cinéma, seconded Pathé's views. In 1918, he described a meeting of the Ligue Française du Cinématographe, which brought together major French writers and film company officials: 'Opinion held that it was unlikely and materially impossible, in most cases, that metteurs en scène should continue to improvise. They have done it in complete freedom up to now, with obvious results. Scenarios are necessary'. After a 1918 trip to the USA,
Diamant-Berger described the division of labour in the studios there and contrasted it with the French system, where the director is 'a Jack of all trades'.

Another major French director, Jacques de Baroncelli, confirmed this view of the difference between the French and American systems in 1920. Reporting on his recent visit to some film studios in New York, he commented on:

... the 'choral' feeling of the American companies. Each one has his precise place, plays his part with maximum efficiency, speed and conscientiousness, and the whole group can rely upon him without worrying. The human effort, intelligent, flexible, cheerful, and punctual, like a perfect machine, works until the assigned task is achieved. And that is the whole secret as to how a film is shot in America with such astonishing rapidity. We are gravely mistaken in France when we assume that it is necessary to work slowly in order to obtain the best results.

On the whole, however, such recommendations for a scenario practice and a division of labour based on the Hollywood system were not adopted. In the early 1920s Louis Delluc commented on the fact that French directors were usually responsible for turning the scenario into a shooting script; as a result, scripts had good basic ideas, but were not well-written: 'Look at the importance, in America or Germany, of the "continuity writer" [phrase in English]. It is time to realize that an idea for a scenario, however good it is, is not a scenario'. At about the same time, Robert Florey contrasted the efficiency of American production with that in France: 'There are twenty or thirty people just to assist the director, an omnipotent person, whose least desires are executed with an extraordinary speed; forward progression is never stopped over a stupid detail as often happens in France'.

Throughout the silent period, the French director retained a great deal of responsibility – and control – at the scenario stage. In virtually all cases, he or she also continued to edit the film. Raymond Chirat's filmography of features of the period from 1919 to 1929 lists 973 films, of which 42 have editors credited. Of these 42 films, 18 were edited or co-edited by their directors (including Alberto Cavalcanti, Jean Renoir, Jean Epstein, and Abel Gance). Two directors – both in mainstream, commercial situations – seem consistently to have used editors. In twelve cases, Louis Feuillade's films are credited as having been edited by Maurice Champreux (who acted as cinematographer and/or co-director on all twelve). Henry Fescourt also used an editor, Jean-Louis Bouquet, on seven films. (All twelve Feuillade/Champreux films were made for Gaumont, all seven Fescourt/Bouquet films for Cinéromans, suggesting that some of the relatively large companies had a slightly more detailed division of labour.) Five more films of various types were credited as being edited by persons other than their directors. Some editors may have worked uncredited, but in most cases the division of labour did not include editors. Certainly there is evidence that the Impressionist and other avant-garde filmmakers edited their own films. In 1926, for example, critic Juan Arroy described Epstein working at the studio late into the night editing *Mauprat*. As we shall see, others in the group also controlled this stage of the filmmaking process.

The French system did involve an assistant, the monteur. This person was apparently invariably female, and she was responsible for splicing rushes, assembling the negative, and sometimes for executing editing under instructions from the director. (Presumably some filmmakers, working very independently did not have even this much assistance.) As this 1925 description by Arroy makes clear, however, her responsibilities were quite different from those of a Hollywood editor:
The studio employee charged with this task [i.e., sorting takes] is the monteuse. Her work is not absolutely automatic; she must demonstrate a great deal of initiative and critical sense. In America, she must do even more, because the production is divided up in this way: the rights to some literary work are purchased, it is assigned to be adapted by an experienced scenarist, and then the decoupage is assigned to a specialist ‘continuity writer’ [in English], then it is given to a director to be shot, and finally the film passes into the hands of the monteuse. All these functions are absolutely separate, and there is no point of contact among them which would permit each of these artisans to review the work of his predecessors, to apply his critical sense, and to correct their faults. Personally, I do not believe at all in this method, which cannot create anything but mass-produced films, because the unity of the art work’s creation is suppressed.

It is thus a fact that the monteuse in the USA has an authority and freedom which she never has in France. . . . In France, the monteuse has no authority except under the supervision of the director.  

The emphasis here on the editing as part of the overall artistic creation of the film recurs in a major 1927 article by Jack Conrad on editing. According to Conrad, the montage of a film:

... is done by professional monteuses under the director’s supervision. Certain directors have their regular monteuse — though not many in France, except for Abel Gance, who is perfectly seconded in this work by Marguerite Baugé [sic, actually Beaugé], his monteuse for ten years now. When all the negative shot has been printed up as positives — and these days each shot is done in ten to twelve takes — they are projected for the director, who chooses the best to make up one, two, three or four negatives. The rest are destroyed. Then the shots are sorted and glued together one by one according to the number of the photographic order which appears at the beginning of each one, and which corresponds to the numbers indicated in the scenario. Thus the final film is created arranged in rough order. This crude film is then projected for the director, who indicates to his monteuse what cuts to make and what re-takes are needed in order to create a truly visual orchestration — if the said cinéaste is a real ‘musician of silence’. The monteuse then cuts the negative based on the final positive version.  

This account makes the editing process seem reasonably systematic — not much different from the way it must have gone in some Hollywood studios.

A 1929 account by industry historian G.-Michel Coissac, however, suggests that, in some cases at least, the director simply received all the footage shot and had to sort through it him or herself; again the emphasis is on the artistic creation which remains to be done at the editing stage:

One who had never participated in the montage of a film can have no idea of the inexplicable riddle which this assemblage [of footage] contains; even the classification of these thousands of strips of various lengths is obscure, since they were exposed without apparent order; one picks them up at random, since, at first glance, they are fished back up from an enigmatic sea.
The *metteur en scène*, however, takes a deep interest in this Herculean task—more so than the photographer watching the development of a negative. He judges and harmonizes his work. From this cacophony he creates rhythm and perfect matches; he is at the phase of orchestrating movement and life; for a second time he creates as he awaits a view of his finished work. The montage is the final gestation, or, to be more poetic, the opening of the flower, petal by petal.

According to Coissac, the director continues this process through numerous screenings and revisions, goes through once to place the intertitles, and retouches the whole thing yet again.

This relatively minimal division of labour may have resulted from the French industry’s continued dependence on small production companies, and upon director-producers making films for major companies. To a considerable extent, the Hollywood studios’ ability to retain so many specialized employees on a permanent basis resulted from economies of scale which the French companies simply could not duplicate.

It seems clear, however, that many French filmmakers and critics considered it artistically important that the director retain a considerable degree of control over the film at preparatory, shooting, and post-production phases. Conrad’s article sums up this view of the compositional importance of the pre- and post-shooting phases:

There are two phases in the technical execution of a film which many still consider secondary, but which nevertheless are centrally and basically important. These two stages, which take place chronologically before and after the direction proper, are the ‘decoupage’ of the scenario and the ‘montage’ of the exposed footage . . .

In every art work—book, painting, symphony, film—the subject is less important than the way in which it is treated— the style. And filmmakers all have a personal style, just as painters, composers and writers do. This cinematic style manifests itself in the way in which the director uses the technical devices at his disposal, in his way of presenting the situations, of bringing the scenes to life, and finally of visually orchestrating and rhyming the images in the final montage, where the different sections of the work are created and come to have no other existence than as part of the whole.

In discussing how a director can control the film of the decoupage and montage stages, Conrad sees a connection between the two:

The montage seems to be minutely foreseen, *a priori*, in the writing of the scenario. After all, Marcel L’Herbier specifies in his decoupages the length of each shot, and this must theoretically be scrupulously respected during the shooting. In actuality this does not happen, because it is impossible practically.

Still, it would appear that L’Herbier was trying to use his scenarios as a means of composing the film as a whole—a process which he would oversee and refine at every stage through to the end of the montage. Conrad also mentions that ‘Germaine Dulac attaches a crucial importance to the montage of her films. It is, she says, the most emotional part of the creation of a film, and it is also the most delicate’. Whatever the cause of the French approach to the division of labour, it is clear that the placement of so much responsibility at all stages of the production fits in with the Impressionist directors’ creative methods.
Germany: development in isolation

The war placed Germany’s film industry in a very different situation from that of France. During a period of nearly five years of virtual isolation, the industry grew hugely. Although there were many small production companies in Germany in the postwar years, the film industry came to be largely dominated by such firms as the Universumfilm Aktien-Gesellschaft (Ufa), Emelka and the like. Such firms had a considerable division of labour, and they used scenarios as a control over the filmmaking process. Yet, perhaps because of its very isolation, the German industry also developed a mode of production that had some distinctive traits. As in France, the differences at the scripting and editing stages suggest that many directors had considerable responsibility for controlling production.

Contemporary sources suggest that the Germans compared their system to that of Hollywood and found the latter more efficient. In 1920 the Lichtbildbühne’s New York correspondent described the mode of production in American studios. The article suggests that the division of labour is more systematized in the USA than in Germany. It particularly notes that in the USA everyone gets a copy of the script and hence knows what to do: ‘System and organization! In our studios, one often finds either too many people, who stand around and get in each other’s ways, or a lack of personnel in all areas. In this we could learn a great deal from the Americans’. \(^ {19} \) In 1921, the same journal published an article on how to estimate negative costs in advance and hence eliminate day-to-day waste of money. The Americans, the author claims, provide the model, and the bulk of the article is taken up with reproductions of an American-style form with boxes for estimating all categories of costs. \(^ {20} \) The form, by the way, is very similar to the typical mid-teens negative-estimate sheet, used by Thomas Ince, which Staiger reproduces in The Classical Hollywood Cinema.

The German method of scriptwriting, though similar to that of the Americans in many ways, had some notable differences. The shooting script apparently did not plan out the shot-by-shot details of the production in such a specific fashion. As late as 1926, E. A. Dupont compared the two countries’ systems and found a difference in editing procedures:

The American script is not numbered simply according to broadly outlined scenes, as is most common in Germany – where the director makes as many close-ups and changes of angle as he likes; instead the scenario is broken down as much as possible into notations of close-ups, and each of these close-ups and other changes carries a specific number. Thus, for example, when a scene has twenty-five changes according to the script, then when the director has made twenty-five shots he has also shot twenty-five numbers. \(^ {21} \)

Some of Dupont’s own scenarios, published in his 1919 screenplay manual, confirm his description of German practice. Numbers are given only when the location changes, with all action within a given locale described with little indication as to the visual handling. Dupont distinguishes only between normal and close framings. Occasional notations of close-ups in the middles of scenes are not numbered; indeed, one courtroom scene has an establishing shot, five close shots, and three titles, yet this whole cluster of shots is given only one number. \(^ {22} \) Two other scenario manuals from the period make little or no attempt to describe how a writer might break a scene into separate shots or describe the camera-work; advice on scenario format is limited to how to describe locales, actors’ gestures and other aspects of the staged action. \(^ {23} \)

An examination of shooting scripts for some of the Expressionist films suggests that they also typically used numbers to indicate a change of locale. Thus in Siegfried, the passage
describing the intercutting between Siegfried riding in the forest and the dragon drinking uses a number for each shot; the fight with the dragon, however, consumes three pages with only one number. Similarly, the entire visit of Tsar Ivan to the poison master in Wachfigurenkabinett is assigned one number, even though it goes on for pages and contains two notations of cuts to closer framings. The surviving early draft of Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari follows a similar format.24

Other contemporary descriptions of the German mode of production in the late 1920s suggest that the director often worked on the shooting script and was capable of changing it during the shooting phase. In 1927, Dr. Kurt Mühsam described the division of labour in the studios:

In general, the director’s job begins even before the shooting of the script; this is because the production company, before it decides to acquire a film script, will usually consult with a director closely linked to it, concerning how the outline under consideration would be filmed, how the various roles would be filled, and what costs would be required beyond the normal range of expenses. If the script is acquired, then the director has to take care of it, ensuring that the various scenes are really ready for filming [kurbelreff] – a task which he must himself oversee, since the company in question has only a few scriptwriters at its disposal.25

In many cases the story would be submitted to a company in the form of a synopsis. A specialized scenario writer called a Filmdramaturg might turn it into a shooting script, but that task might be left to the director.

A 1928 magazine article of the ‘script-to-screen’ variety suggests that the director could easily add shots:

Before studio filming begins, the director has made the author’s vision, as set down in the script, his own. In the studio, however, the contact with the three-dimensional decor, with the living actors, and with the lights whirls by his fancy and alters the course of events – partly voluntarily, partly against his will. It was not foreseen that the actor of a leading role would refuse a small but important bit of psychological reaction. The director’s working fancy instantly takes up the problem and obviates it; changing the motif a bit, moving a few pauses here, a small question there, he then brings in a few more close-ups and after some small detours still reaches the goal.26

Dupont’s 1926 article on American filmmaking describes how the script clerk tells the assistant camera operator what numbered shot is to be filmed, and he marks it on the slate along with the number of the take. The result, according to Dupont, is that when the cutter and director edit the film, the director has a list of the good takes, and these shots can be located easily. In Germany, the director sits down to edit unsorted footage; he or she must search through 40–50,000 metres of film in order to choose the desired takes before beginning to edit.27

And indeed it seems clear that it was the director who had responsibility for editing in Germany. Gerhard Lamprecht’s detailed filmography of German silent films lists extensive credits, including the make-up artists and still photographers – but no editors at all.28 Similarly, Mühsam’s study of the production roles in German filmmaking provides a detailed sample budget for a feature film, including salaries for the assistant director, hair stylist, wardrobe person, still photographer; no expenditures for an editor are listed.29
There was a limited division of labour in the editing phase, in that some tasks were done by ‘die Kleberin’. This term literally means ‘the gluer’, and it is feminine. Die Kleberin would be comparable to the job of ‘the joiner’ in the American studios and the monteuse in the French system: these were young women responsible for splicing dailies and positive release prints. In a 1916 essay on post-production work, popular director Max Mack described the Kleberin as performing similar sorts of tasks in Germany. The Kleberin’s duties seem not to have changed over the next decade, as this 1928 account indicates:

In a small fireproof room sits the film’s Kleberin and supervises the many thousand metres of negative and positive. While the director is shooting new scenes in the studio, she arranges the old ones, making from the original reels of a thousand metres usable little rolls; she preserves each of these pieces with a label and assembles the correlated parts, by act (i.e. by reel of the finished film), in cases.\textsuperscript{30}

The Kleberin, then, helped keep track of the footage. She presumably labelled the shots by the numbers in the script, but it is still not clear that every shot would have had its own number. These same sources indicate that from the teens to the late 1920s, the editing of the film was the director’s responsibility. In his 1916 essay, Mack commented:

Seasoned cinema directors know that the most difficult thing about film is the editing. Because the whole scene [i.e., shot] cannot be used for the film exactly as it was shot. Only that part that really creates a significant progression in the action should be retained. For this work are required a sure eye, artistic experience, and a sound sense of dramatic effect. Bad directors cut little. That takes away the film’s tempo, its onrush of events, its inner excitement, making it into an empty spectacle.\textsuperscript{31}

By 1928, the director still was responsible for taking the rolls of film stored away by the Kleberin and editing them into a film:

When the studio and location shooting are over, then the director remains confined for weeks in this joining room. He edits the film. Adjustment by adjustment, one scene after another is cemented together, shown, edited anew, again shown, again corrected – until the whole film grows into large, round reels of two to four hundred metres.\textsuperscript{32}

Thus the German division of labour gave the director many responsibilities for every stage of film production.

Indeed, the central producer system does not seem to have been significant in German filmmaking until 1927, when the post-stabilization crisis of the mid-1920s and the near-bankruptcy of Ufa dictated the use of strict economy measures. In late 1927, Ufa announced that it had re-organized its approach to production by introducing several ‘Produktionsleiter’, or ‘production chiefs’. Erich Pommer had headed the entire studio before being forced to resign in early 1926; after an unsuccessful year in Hollywood, he returned to become the foremost of its several Produktionsleiter: The Lichtbildbühne commented: ‘Hence it is clear that the original organizational plans will be adhered to, and that the new, upcoming films – among which are four “Erich-Pommer-Produktion” films – should be allotted among various production heads, on the model of the American supervisors’.\textsuperscript{33} The plan was presumably successful;
of all silent films, there are probably none that so consistently resemble those of Hollywood as the ones produced by Ufa in the late 1920s.

Even at this point, however, the director unit system seems to have remained in existence alongside the new central producer system, at least for a while. Mühsam's 1927 account described the director's position:

Just how important the director's function is in the production of a film, however, is also clearly apparent from the fact that he has taken over all the responsibility to the corporate employer for the success or failure of the film, insofar as a so-called production chief [Produktionsleiter] does not relieve him of this responsibility. As a rule, however, only a large film firm can afford a production chief. Thus it remains the director who concerns himself with the best possible utilization of the capital, in the form of money, personnel and goods, placed at his disposal. 34

Such responsibilities imply a high degree of control for the director, and that control would have been even greater in the early 1920s. In 1972, Fritz Lang commented on how much freedom he had in choosing and developing his own projects:

In those days there didn't exist the job of producer and the director was the top man. I had all the freedom I wanted in choosing what film I wanted to do, with whom I wanted to write the script, which actors I wanted and so on . . . and I am sure the same applied to Murnau and other directors who worked under Pommer.35

One conclusion that can be drawn from all this is that many German directors, including those working in the Expressionist style, had a higher degree of control over their work than did most of their Hollywood contemporaries.

The USSR: the controversy over montage

In the USSR, the issue of the scenario and the division of labour were crucial for the struggling industry in the 1920s. With the loss in 1917 and 1918 of so much of the experienced personnel from the pre-Revolutionary period, the film industry often had to rely on writers who knew little about script formats and other aspects of filmmaking. By 1926, a major debate had arisen concerning the notion of applying efficiency measures in the film studios. Denise Youngblood states that a common complaint about lack of efficiency was that directors frequently departed from or even abandoned their scripts during the shooting phase; Eisenstein's wholesale changes in the filming of *Potemkin* were singled out for criticism.36

From the industry officials' point of view, the problem lay largely in the fact that the script process offered them little control over the director. Because so many films were based on stories by authors unaccustomed to working in the cinema, the director usually received what was called a 'libretto'. It was often the director's responsibility to break this prose synopsis down into a shooting script. Paul Babitsky, a writer who worked in the Soviet system during the 1920s and 1930s, described the situation:

Frequently the director, considering himself the creator of the film, preferred to revise the scenario alone and to permit the writer to see the film only at its final preview, at which time most authors could not recognize their work.
In Soviet studios there was no system of joint scenario writing, by division of the work among specialists on dialogue, plot, trick effects and so on. The entire scenario depended on the invention of a single writer.

In the Moscow and Leningrad studios also, scenario editing became a routine part of the director’s work. Even outstanding scripts were edited and reworked by the film director or by the scenarist himself to suit the director’s tastes and methods.37

Thus the Soviet director had a high degree of control over the scriptwriting process.

Moreover, directors typically edited their films. In 1924, Kino-Gazette’s Hollywood correspondent listed the various production positions that existed in the studios there. This list included two terms given in the original English, presumably since there was no Russian equivalent: the art director and the editor.38 A 1928 Soviet book on the mode of film production describes a production position called the ‘montageur’, but, as with the monteuse and the Kleberin, the duties resemble those of an assistant editor or cutter in the Hollywood studios: sorting shots, splicing the rushes together, and eventually cutting the negative. The director makes the rough cut as well as polishing the final workprint version.39

In 1927, critic Viktor Pertsov described the relation of the scenario to the editing phase and suggested how little the former controlled the latter:

A screenplay, that half-finished literary work, is the sum of the starting and finishing points for the material that is to be shot. The writer’s job in cinema essentially consists in observing how the limits of the material can be drawn more closely and more precisely . . .

Until work is almost completed, right up to the release of the finished film, elements of it, the exposed fragments, are still in frantic motion. What we call the stage of ‘montage’ is characterized by the constant shuffling of these backwards and forwards, from one part to another, taking some out, putting others in, and so on.

This comparatively protracted slow stage of work on the film is the period when at long last you feel certain that one particular combination of fragments is the best and final one. Until this time the film, like an earth-worm, can be cut up into pieces and each piece can acquire a life of its own.40

This conception of editing differs considerably from Hollywood’s approach, where the scenario ideally allowed studio personnel to predict the shape of the final edited version. Indeed, many studio officials, mainstream filmmakers, critics and others found the Soviet system less efficient than the American, and favoured reducing the director’s control. From the mid-1920s on, there was much discussion in the professional literature of an ‘iron’ scenario, that is a scenario which laid out the film exactly and from which the director could not depart. It was numbered shot by shot, down to estimates of the length of each shot; by following it exactly, a director would turn in a set of footage predictable in its costs and in every other respect. Essentially, the ‘iron scenario’ was comparable to the Hollywood continuity script.

In his 1926 book on filmmaking, Ilya Rentz pointed out that the Soviet director was overworked in comparison with his Hollywood counterpart; in the USSR, directors had to examine sets, scout locations, supervise the setting up of the lights, and so on. In Hollywood, the division of labour meant that other people did these tasks. The director, Rentz concluded, ‘ought to have the commanding position only during the filming’.41

A 1926 Soviet scenario manual by Ippolit Sokolov pointed out that in American and German shooting scripts, the editing is worked out in advance:
The scenarist, in a purely directing way, works out the filming and montage of the picture. He determines precisely the size and sequence of the shots.

The scriptwriter is practically – the director. Sokolov favoured the 'iron scenario', the development of which he attributed to American and German scriptwriters:

'An iron scenario' is a preliminary working-out of all the production details and montage in the picture. Nothing is extra, nothing is left to chance. The picture ought to be literally preliminarily edited before the filming begins. One should not film a single frame until the entire picture is mentally edited.

Noting that Soviet scriptwriters did not know how to break prose plots down into shots, he added that they should learn: 'The scenes and shots ought to have numbers'.

Although many Soviet books on filmmaking written during the second half of the 1920s recommended the use of the 'iron' scenario, in practice this approach to scripting seems to have remained largely an ideal goal rather than a practical method until well into the 1930s.

In the Soviet debate over efficiency and the division of labour, artists, not surprisingly, favoured the system as it existed in the mid-1920s: with a great deal of control over the scripting and editing processes placed in the director's hands. In his 1926 book on filmmaking, director S. Timoshenko declared:

It will become clear that the American method, in which one person directs the film and another assembles it, is incorrect. This is the same as having one artist draw parts of a picture and having another put them together, determining the composition of the whole, excluding, rearranging, and throwing out various parts which had been drawn by the artist.

It is notable that Timoshenko's book is entitled Art of the Cinema and the Montage of Films. For many filmmakers of this era, including the Montage directors, it was in the editing stage that formal qualities of the film were determined. The exposed footage was not in itself artistic; it became so only through being arranged into the whole. Hence any official attempt to control the montage at the scenario stage was resisted.

For example, in 1928, Eisenstein deplored the current push in the industry to draw more established writers from other fields into scriptwriting:

Comrade man of letters, don't write scripts!
Force the production organizations to buy your commodities as novels.
Sell the rights to the novel.
You must force film directors to find the cinema equivalents of these works. (When required.)

In this way we can conceive of both the renewal and the fertilization of both the formal aspect of and the opportunities for cinema, and not just of the thematic or plot aspect which, in the final analysis, is successfully implemented in other forms of literature.

A 'numbered' script will bring as much animation to cinema as the numbers on the heels of the corpses in the morgue.

'Writing a script is like calling out the midwife on your wedding night'. These are Babel's priceless words from the time when we were doing a script 'from' Benya Krik.
That is, for Eisenstein, a numbered shooting script was an attempt to determine the editing at too early a stage in the filmmaking process.

In 1929, Eisenstein developed on this same idea. The script, he declared, should not be a drama but 'merely a shorthand record of an emotional outburst striving for realization in an accumulation of visual images'. Numbered scripts, he adds, are written by hacks. In place of the shooting script, he favours a prose description: 'In pursuit of a methodology for this kind of exposition we came to the film novella, the form through which we are trying to make statements on the screen with hundreds of people, herds of cattle, sunsets, waterfalls and boundless fields'. Eisenstein cites the lengthy series of shots in Potemkin in the scene when the sailors are under the tarpaulin and about to be executed; shots of the prow of the ship, the sea, and so on, all were inspired by one sentence in an eyewitness’s memoirs: 'A deathly silence hung in the air'. Eisenstein concludes: 'That is why we are opposed to the usual form of numbered detailed script (Dreihbuch) and why we are in favour of the film novella form'. Such a format would allow the director nearly total control during the shooting phase of production.

In a similar vein, in 1926, scenarist and critic Osip Brik wrote an article which proposed a system radically opposed to that of Hollywood:

The screenplay should be written, not before shooting, but afterwards. The screenplay is not an order to shoot, but a method of organizing what has already been shot. And we should therefore ask, not how a screenplay should be, but what should be photographed. The re-working of material in the screenplay is the last stage of the work.

Brik's own screenplay for Pudovkin’s The Heir of Ghengis Khan ran to only nineteen typed pages. The film's cinematographer recalled that 'each scene was described in at most four words. In other words, a real silent film scenario, in the old, admirable way of montage scenarios'. Sequences were added during the shooting phase; the famous scene of the ceremony at the temple did not appear in the original at all.

Such a sketchy prose script fits in with Pudovkin's changing ideas about scenario format. Originally he had embraced the idea of a strong script, but he subsequently rejected it in favour of the emotional summary of the type advocated by Eisenstein. In his 1926 book Film Technique, Pudovkin recommended that the scenarist get as close as possible to the 'cast-iron scenario', in order to promote unity and continuity. Both Mother and The End of St. Petersburg had detailed shooting scripts by Nathan Zharki. Around 1928, however, Pudovkin changed his approach; according to critic and scriptwriter Viktor Shklovsky, 'Two years after Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin made the same discovery'. He began asking for brief scenarios consisting mainly of rhythmic intertitles:

According to Pudovkin, the author of a script must communicate to the director the rhythm of the film but he must not attempt to write the director a montage shooting plan. Pudovkin demonstrates all this in an excerpt from Rzheshevsky’s plot.

Pudovkin’s position sins against production . . . All right, we’ll have jumping and stopping titles and no montage shooting plan. But we need a montage plan in order to shoot. Consequently, between the montage lists of the director and the somersaulting titles there must be some kind of point which will in any case contain an order of scenes and their exact content. Then a script will emerge. Hence Pudovkin, instead of resolving the problem of what a script should be, is resolving another, less pressing problem of who should write the script, and he decides that the director should do it.
To Pudovkin and other filmmakers, however, the problem of who would write the version of the script controlling the montage may well have been a more pressing problem than was what its exact format should be. Shklovsky mentions ‘Rzheshovsky’s plot’, a reference to the sketchy, evocative libretto by A. Rzheshovsky for Pudovkin’s *A Simple Case* (1932). Whether that film’s lengthy production problems and confusing final form had anything to do with this approach to scripting is a moot point; certainly they would have made it easier for studio officials to decry the Montage directors’ views.

Despite the considerable latitude allowed several of the Montage directors, and particularly Eisenstein and Pudovkin, there was still a push toward tighter controls within the film industry. When the First Five Year Plan was applied to the cinema in early 1928, one of the main goals was to improve efficiency in the Soviet studios and increase the output of films. During the late 1920s, directors were thought to be turning out too few films. According to the head of Amkino, Sovkino’s New York office, during the Plan’s second year, directors were expected to be up to one and a half films; in the Plan’s fifth year, the average was to reach two films a year.51 (We might recall at this point that the 1918 French debate over scenario practice also involved the idea of increasing directors’ outputs.) One discussion of the mode of production written at this point mentions a ‘representative of the studio administration’ who would supervise the production of a film, keeping the work on schedule, checking the scenario and set designs, and coordinating the technical departments and the financial offices. This person would monitor the budget and the use of electricity. His basic job was to keep costs down.52 It would appear that, even as early as 1928, the Soviets were trying to institute an equivalent to the central producer system as part of the Five Year Plan.

In order to improve directors’ efficiency, government and industry officials sought to relieve them of control over both the scripting and editing phases. The First Party Conference on Cinema, held in March of 1928, was a crucial event in the attempts to work out a Five Year Plan for cinema. Among its resolutions were several relating to scriptwriting:

The shortage of highly qualified workers is still exerting a very negative effect on cinema activity. This circumstance has found its most vivid expression in the so-called ‘script crisis’. A number of cinema organizations explain that they cannot make films that are ideologically consistent because of the absence of script material. This reason is not insuperable and is to a significant degree conditioned by the inadequate activity of the cinema organizations themselves, by their amateurish handling of the script problem and by the absence of planning in the elaboration of themes for cinema which has, in the majority of cases, an unsystematic and fortuitous character . . .

With the aim of greater productivity in creative cinema work we must maintain a much closer link between the writer, the scriptwriter, and the director.53

At the beginning of 1929, Sovkino published a resolution on its ‘new course’, declaring that the script crisis was not yet over and making some recommendations for solving it:

- that the best literary sources be grouped around the film studios and they be used to devise plots;
- that each studio should organize a group of qualified specialist scriptwriters to prepare scripts for particular directors;
- that we should start developing script resources in the studios, strengthening the existing script workshops and adopting them to the needs of production.54
It is worth recalling that in this same year Eisenstein was calling upon writers to refuse to write scripts. The forces that were to help bring about the end of the Montage movement can be found in these debates over the mode of production, as well as in the more familiar ideological and formal controversies surveyed by recent historians.

Again these various recommendations were difficult to implement quickly. The debate intensified, however, in the early 1930s. In an important book written in late 1930 and published in 1932, Vladimir Sutyrin, production director of the new centralized firm Soyuzkino (and second in command under chairman Boris Shumyatski) stated the official view. Sutyrin refers to the idea of reducing filming time. Until recently, he claims, the average production time on a feature film was ten to twelve months. He hopes to reduce this to five-and-a-half months by a further division of labour, creating permanent production ‘brigades’, each with its own scriptwriter. The director would have no involvement in the scripting stage.\(^5\)

Sutyrin also discusses editing as another phase at which production time could be saved. This discussion is worth quoting at length, since it demonstrates the link between changes in the division of labour and attempts to control the Montage directors:

But let us try to go further along the road of the division of labour. Let us imagine to ourselves the following case . . . (I ask in advance the forgiveness of directors for the foolish and somewhat blasphemous example.) Let us suppose that the director is freed not only from writing the scenario, but from . . . the montage. I know that this idea is foolish, monstrous. Nevertheless, it is indisputable that the amount of time that the director spends on a picture would be shortened by the time it takes for editing. At a minimum this would be about a month, and actually, on the average, a month and a half . . .

However, is the idea of freeing the director from montage work so ludicrous, monstrous, and blasphemous?

We know that in the American industry, the over-whelming majority of pictures are edited not by directors, but by special workers. I asked Joe Kaufman about this in detail. He not only confirmed the existence of such a division of labour, but expressed the rather original thought that American film people feel that the qualities of a director-producer are incompatible with those of an editor [montagera]. A director, he said, ought to have fantasy, temperament, liveliness, nervousness. An editor, on the other hand, should be of a quiet nature; he should have a methodical way of working and be able to sit at his table for long periods of time. Many directors are unsuited for such meticulous, and in a certain sense, exhausting work, the kind of work which editing entails. This comment of Mr. Kaufman merits attention. The qualities that he sees in the psychology of a director and an editor may be arguable. What is important here is that various cinematic specialties require people with special qualities . . .

We have become accustomed to considering that montage is the main thing, that montage is the basic thing in creative work. We must look critically at this way of thinking. We shouldn’t forget that the theory of montage was taught to us either by pure formalists (for example, Shklovsky and Kuleshov) or theorists coming from formalism, but not carrying its heavy baggage (for example, Eisenstein as the author of the theory ‘montage of attractions’).

Let us refresh our memory about the formalists’ or semi-formalists’ [leftists’] reasonings about art.
Sutyrin goes on to summarize the ‘formalist’ ideas about art, which deal with principles of the organization of material from the world into formal structures.\textsuperscript{56}

After describing the theories of Montage filmmakers, Sutyrin attacks them, rejecting the notion that editing is the key phase of filmmaking and that content is created after shooting:

In film production, when the editor, strictly speaking, is not able to change the composition of the montage material — that is, to add to it, and so forth — the favourable outcome of the montage of course is determined by the filming period, and the more complicated that montage becomes — and complicated not even in the sense of refinement — the more the editor becomes dependent upon the director-filmer.

I believe that experience forces us to admit the indisputability of the following: a picture is edited not after filming and not even in the process of filming, but before filming, in the so-called preparatory period. In this preparatory period, the editing takes place, too. The filming and editing periods are only stages in the materialization of the picture, which is created in the preparatory period. With such an understanding of the process of the creation of a picture, the freedom of the editor — that is the possibility of varying montage constructions — is nothing other than a result of the imperfections of the director. The ideal director has nothing to do in the editing room. Ideally, filmed material is already edited material. All that is necessary is to glue it together.\textsuperscript{57}

Sutyrin ridicules directors’ desire to work in the editing room, treating this simply as a romantic image:

I remember the cover of some brochure that we published at ‘Teakinopechat’: Pudovkin at the editing table — an exotic figure, dressed in a luxurious boa of countless montage pieces which curled in various directions. (‘Here it is, the holy of holies of the director’\textsuperscript{158})

Sutyrin goes on in this vein, and clearly the purpose was not simply to propose a new division of labour, but also to associate Montage directors with the old, inefficient system that equated artistic creation with the director’s control over editing.

Indeed, in 1936 Shumyatsky finally systematically introduced American methods into Soviet film production in order to improve efficiency. These methods were based on work groups. Babitsky has described them: ‘Each was assigned a production chief, similar to an American producer, who was responsible for the film as a whole. This step simplified the work of the film director’.\textsuperscript{59} Presumably this new approach was comparable to the central producer system in Hollywood. Even at so late a date, however, it failed in the Soviet Union, as the low production levels in the late years of Shumyatsky’s control suggest.

**Implications for commercial avant-garde filmmaking**

The differences among the modes of production in the three European countries and the USA may help explain why directors were able to make what we today consider avant-garde films in the three European countries. Hollywood made many extraordinary films, and these often are attributable to what we call auteurs — DeMille, Griffith, Lubitsch and others. Yet, as Staiger has suggested, the Hollywood mode of production only allowed for a limited degree of experimentation.\textsuperscript{60}
The systems of France, Germany, and the USSR, I would suggest, briefly allowed for more. I do not wish to imply that extensive control by directors explains precisely why such movements as Expressionism, Impressionism and Soviet Montage arose between 1918 and 1933. Such control does not invariably result in avant-garde cinéma movements. There are assuredly many other factors involved. Certainly these distinctive traits of filmmaking practice do not explain the particular directions in which these three national styles developed. Still, given that these stylistic movements did exist, we can reason backward to see what might have fostered them.

Similarly, I am not trying to argue that the director is the sole artist who creates a film. Other filmmakers undoubtedly had a great deal of input into the creative process. For example, in Germany the set designer was an unusually prominent production role, and certain designers often worked consistently with major directors of the Expressionist movement (e.g. Otto Hunte’s collaboration with Fritz Lang). My point is simply that the division of labour in all three countries was less likely to produce the standardization of style that had resulted from Hollywood’s approach to filmmaking. Assuming that a director wanted to deviate from mainstream filmmaking styles or to foster the ideas of an innovative colleague – say, a scriptwriter, designer or cinematographer – he/she would have more option to do so under these three systems.

Notes

Translations from French and German are by the author; those from Russian are by Jim Brown.

2. Ibid., pp. 146, 152.
3. Most historians do not discuss Pathé’s ‘crise du scénario’ claim. Sadoul summarizes Pathé’s argument briefly but treats it as simply an attempt at improvements incidental to the re-organization of Pathé-Frères into Pathé-Cinéma in 1918. (See his Histoire générale du cinéma Vol. 2 [Paris: Denoël, 1952], pp. 44–45). Richard Abel dismisses the issue in one sentence: ‘For Pathé, disingenuously, the only crisis facing the French film industry was a “scenario crisis”,’ presumably implying that Pathé was using it as a smokescreen to hide his real concerns. (See his French Cinema: The First Wave 1915–1929 [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985], p. 12.) If I am right in suggesting that Pathé saw changes in the scenario as a means of altering the mode of production, then the ‘scenario crisis’ issue becomes part of Pathé’s larger attempts to re-organize the French industry.
4. Charles Pathé, ‘La Crise du cinéma’, Le Film 102 (25 February 1918): 7–8. This citation is, by the way, to a reprint of Pathé’s early 1917 article; the original was so much in demand that the issue sold out and Le Film had to print it again.
18. Ibid., p. 125.
22. Ewald André Dupont, Wie ein Film geschrieben wird and wie man ihn verwertet (Berlin: Reinhold Kühn, 1919), p. 76.
23. See Frank Testor, Film Ideen: wie man sie schreibt und erfolgreich verwertet! (Magdeburg: Burg Verlag, 1919) and Felix K. Bernhardt, Wie schreibt und verwertet man einen Film? (Berlin: Bauer-Verlag, 1926).
24. I wish to thank the staff of the library and script departments of the Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek for their help during my visit to examine these scripts.
25. Dr. Kurt Mühsam, Film und Kino (Dessau: Dünkharpert Verlag, 1927), p. 36.
28. See Gerhard Lamprecht, Deutsche Stummfilme (Berlin: Deutsche Kinemathek, n.d.).
29. Mühsam, Film und Kino, p. 40.
34. Mühsam, Film und Kino, p. 37.
41. Ilya Rentz, On the Set (‘Na s'emke’) (Moscow: Kinopechat, 1926), p. 23.
42. Ippolit Sokolov, Film Scenarios: Theory and Technique (‘Kino-stsenarii: Teoriiia i tekni’i’) (Moscow: Kinopechat, 1926), p. 69.
43. Ibid., pp. 68–69.
52. V. Shneiderov, The Technique and Organization of Film Production, p. 9.
56. Ibid., pp. 58–59.
57. Ibid., pp. 61–63.
58. Ibid., p. 64.