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# Blueprints for Feature Films: Hollywood's Continuity Scripts

The manufacture of Hollywood feature films in the 1930s and 1940s included the use of detailed scripts called continuities. These continuities provided a scene-by-scene description of the proposed film: camera angles and distances, action, dialogue, and additional information for production crews. These scripts, of course, were related to the written form of stage plays. However, their relationship to the finished film was much different from that of the drama script to a theatrical performance. The continuity script was a precise blueprint of the film for all the workers.

The continuity script assumed its special format in order for manufacturers to maximize their profits. To achieve optimum profits required production methods which would employ efficient and cost-effective work processes. At the same time, to attract consumers, the product needed to meet a certain standard of quality. Although these two aims were present from the earliest introduction of films, the shift from a one-reel (one-thousand-foot) film to the multiple-reel film increased pressure for a new type of script. In turn, the continuity script as it was organized in later years permitted the style of these films to develop in a particular direction. In other words, the style of the Hollywood film is bound tightly to a certain mode of production.[1] My

1. The mode of production for filmmaking includes far more than the continuity script and planning and writing practices; it includes division of labor, hierarchies of management, work practices, technologies, and physical capital. The linkage suggested is between only one part of the mode and the film product. This linkage was not inevitable since other economic practices or standards of product quality might have produced very different work practices and styles.

project in this essay will be to trace the transformation of the dramatic script into the continuity script and to describe how the continuity script then ensured the stylistic characteristics favored by the filmmakers.

## One-Reel Films and Their Mode of Production

From the first years of filmmaking in the United States, manufacturers used two methods in making their product. The first was generally applied to documentary subjects and news events. A cameraman would select the subject matter, stage it as necessary by manipulating any mise-en-scène and people, select options from available technological and photographic possibilities (type of camera, raw film stock, lens, framing and movement of camera, etc.), photograph the scene, develop, and edit it. In the case of traveling shows, the cameraman might also project the finished product. In this mode of production, the cameraman conceived and executed the filming of a sequence of actions. Advance planning was minimal, and a script as such was seldom—if ever—written down.

In the second method—which was generally used for narratives, variety acts, and trick films—the manufacturers increasingly employed two key workers: a director who took over much of the staging activities, and a cameraman who continued to handle the photographic aspects of the work.[2] In this mode of production, other workers (such as writers who thought up ideas for narratives, scenic artists who painted background flats, set construction and property workers, and costumers) filled out an array of support staff who helped share the work load so that the company could make more films faster. This method of filmmaking approximated theatrical production with the exception of the cameraman's insertion into the division of labor. Scripts if written were bare outlines of the action.

Disadvantages to this system surfaced however. Filmmakers quickly realized that they saved time and money if all the scenes to be shot at one place or on one set were done at the same time rather than

2. During the first years, a single individual—for example, Edwin Porter at Edison—would assume both of these jobs; on Porter's work see: Charles Musser, "The Early Cinema of Edwin Porter," *Cinema Journal* 19 (Fall 1979): 1–38. Production descriptions after 1908 (when trade information proliferates with the appearance of all-film trade papers) suggest that the split was common at that point. I would estimate the split began after 1904–6 as the exchange system and nickelodeon boom encouraged manufacturers to increase product output. Splitting the work allowed faster production with several individuals handling parts of the preparation, shooting, and assembly steps.

photographing them in the order in which they were to appear in the final film. After the crew photographed all the scenes, the director could reassemble them into the proper order. A prepared script became useful, then, to ensure the most efficient shooting order.

Moreover, the director's primary duty in his reassembly process was to structure a narrative in which an initial cause produced a chain of effects which ended in a "satisfactory" resolution. This the filmmakers believed achieved a clear, logical—and realistic—story. For example, in 1904 Kleine Optical Company set out its esthetic standards:

> The first requisite of a perfect film is photographic excellence. No matter how exciting the action, how thrilling a climax or how interesting a bit of scenery may be, it is undesirable if the photography is poor.
>
> The next desideratum is continuous action. There should be no lagging in the story which it tells; every foot must be an essential part, whose loss would deprive the story of some merit; there should be sequence, each part leading to the next with increasing interest, reaching its most interesting point at the climax, which should end the film.[3]

The goal of continuous action (pertinent events only, linked causally through time and space) derived from a belief in perceptual continuity as the basis of causal logic in the physical world. Narrative continuity, verisimilitude, dominance, and clarity (visibility—and later audibility) became primary standards of the well-made product. This conception of quality was at first no problem for filmmakers to achieve because if the film failed in its logic the manufacturer could either pay the costs to shoot an additional plot element or else send out the film as it was—a bit jumbled by standards of the best narrative.

This approach to film production received a setback as film distributors and exhibitors increasingly adopted one reel as the standard length of a film. As the exchange system developed and nickelodeon theaters proliferated, manufacturers turned out films which were priced by the foot and sold in a standard size for convenient pricing and handling. Without a script, it became difficult to provide a narrative with the requisite beginning, middle, and end. A 1911 trade paper critic pointed out that one of the major causes of inadequate narratives was the limitation of reel length: as filmmakers tried to fit the story into the thousand-foot limit, there seemed to be abrupt connections and sudden conclusions. Arguing that the length of the film should

3. "About Moving Picture Films," *Complete Illustrated Catalog of Moving Picture Films, Stereopticons, Slides, Films* (Chicago: Kleine Optical Company, October 1904), pp. 30–31, rpt. in George C. Pratt, ed., *Spellbound in Darkness: A History of the Silent Film*, rev. ed. (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1973), pp. 36–37.

not be standardized so strictly, the critic wrote: "There is too much evidence of 'cutting up' and 'cutting off' to the detriment of the continuity of the pictures, and this slaughtering of the subject only increases the ambiguity of the whole."[4] The problem for the producers, then, was to ensure complete narrative continuity and clarity despite the footage limitation.

The solution was to pay more careful attention to preparing a script which provided narrative continuity prior to actual shooting. In that way the director could make an initial estimate of the footage for each scene and add up all the scenes to check in advance that the scenes would not exceed the footage limit. In the early 1910s, instructions to free-lance writers repeatedly cautioned them to choose stories which could be presented within one reel (and, after 1912, two and three reels). Descriptions of shooting practices in the same period indicate that rehearsals served in part to precheck the scenes' lengths and that action would be compressed if necessary to meet the predetermined footages. One of the work functions of the cameraman was to calculate a precise footage length after every take which was then matched to the length specified by the script. If the scene ran in excess of its limit, it might be reshot. Tricks to get more narrative within footage limits included quickening entrances and exits of characters or "discovering" them in the scene. Intertitles and crosscutting were additional techniques used to eliminate or abbreviate action.[5]

Thus, both efficient production (shooting out of order) and a standard of clear, continuous action governed the preparation of the script. In a 1909 description of the standard film script, a trade paper writer set out its typical format: the title, followed by its generic designation ("a drama," "a comedy"), the cast of characters, a two-hundred-word-or-less "synopsis" of the story, and then the "scenario"—a scene-by-

4. "The Ambiguous Picture—Some Causes," *Moving Picture World* (hereafter *MPW*) 8 (January 7, 1911): 4. Note the implicit standards of a good narrative: "continuity" and clarity.

5. Clara F. Beranger, "The Photoplay—A New Kind of Drama," *Harper's Weekly* 56 (September 7, 1912), 13; Eustace Hale Ball, *The Art of the Photoplay* (New York: Veritas Publishing Company, 1913), pp. 28, 38–39, 52–53; Ernest A. Dench, *Making the Movies* (New York: Macmillan, 1915), pp. 2–3; C. G. Winkopp, *How to Write a Photoplay* (New York: C. G. Winkopp, 1915), p. 9; J. Berg Esenwein and Arthur Leeds, *Writing the Photoplay* (Springfield, Mass.: Home Correspondence School, 1913), p. 200; Frances Agnew, *Motion Picture Acting* (New York: Reliance Newspaper Syndicate, 1913), p. 79; John B. Rathbun, "Motion Picture Making and Exhibiting," *Motography* 9 (May 31, 1913): 405–8; Epes Winthrop Sargent, "Technique of the Photoplay," *MPW* 9 (August 12, 1911): 363–64; Esenwein and Leeds, *Writing the Photoplay*, p. 180. On crosscutting, see note 13 below.

scene account of the action including intertitles and inserts.[6] This scenario script would ensure that the standard of significant narrative action would be met within the footage requirement. It also provided the crew with all the story settings so that shooting out of order was faster, easier, and safer, and, hence, cheaper. With this mode of production, the manufacturer achieved both the aims of efficient production and a quality product.

Although descriptions of, and advice about, this working procedure were common in trade literature, it should be cautioned that the practice of shooting from a scenario script was not a requirement. A "stage director," filming a Civil War story on location in suburban Chicago in 1909, explained:

> I expect to call this piece "Brother Against Brother," but we don't always know until we see how they [the films] turn out. The idea is that the Union captain has taken his own brother prisoner as a spy, and then is compelled to have him shot. I don't know exactly what we'll do with it yet. We may have the Union captain commit suicide rather than shoot his own brother. We'll have to work this out later.[7]

Since at this point in history each narrative event was equivalent to a single shot (or tableau), and since the one-reel film was a linkage of fifteen to thirty shots, it was possible for the director to carry the parts of the story in his head throughout the length of the three- to six-day production schedule. It was necessary only that the director meet the footage requirements and handle the nonsequential shooting order.

If films produced by U.S. manufacturers had remained in this style and at this length, it seems probable that work practices would have continued in this manner with some preplanning incorporated within simple scripts. However, two major changes occurred: first, the idea of quality changed between 1908 and 1917, and, second, the standard length of the film increased during the same period. Both of these changes caused the manufacturers to shift from the scenario script to the continuity script.

## The Quality Hollywood Film, 1908–17

With the formation of the Film Service Association in early 1908 followed by the Motion Picture Patents Company later that year, the attention of the manufacturers shifted from patent litigation to product

6. Archer McMackin, "How Moving Picture Plays are Written," *Nickelodeon* 2 (December 1909): 172–73.

7. W. W. Winters, "Moving Pictures in the Making," *Nickelodeon* 1 (January 1909): 25–26.

improvement and industrial stabilization (by eliminating competition). One result of these industrial events was the emergence of film reviewers in trade papers which took this new medium seriously. These writers, as well as the workers' associations which started in the early 1910s, provided an arena for discussions of filmmaking: general esthetics, innovations, realism, and conventions borrowed from other media. The trade groups functioned to standardize styles of representation. Retaining the initial requisites of visibility, verisimilitude, and "continuous action," the film industry after about 1908 chose new stylistic techniques to achieve these criteria until, by about 1917, the style of the Hollywood film had accumulated a complex set of standard procedures: cut-ins, crosscutting, systems of screen direction, matches-on-action, and so forth.[8] Beginning about 1908, these techniques continued to intensify the need for a written, preproduction layout, a blueprint of the film, in order to ensure that the standard would not be violated. By the end of this transitional period in 1917, the continuity script had become a standard working practice. Three stylistic goals, with the accompanying techniques to achieve them, were to affect the scriptwriting procedures.[9]

### *Continuity of Time and Space*

Connected to the concept of "continuous action" is the implicit assumption that reality is itself continuous in time and space. Hence,

8. Several points should be made about this representation of events. First, uneven development occurred. Thus, the time period of 1908 to 1917 should be seen as a transitional one between the first style (up to about 1908) and the second style—the classical Hollywood film—which was fairly solidified by 1917. Obviously, instances of the shifts I will describe occurred in isolated cases prior to 1908. I am interested here not in "firsts" but in trends. In addition, this is not to be understood as a maturation from a primitive style since the first narrative films had a very particular and distinct style: the first period's films can be analytically described just as the later films can be grouped on the basis of a set of stylistic characteristics. Rather, the historical movement is a transformation from the first stylistic period to a second one. The two periods shared an interest in the overall criteria of "continuous action," verisimilitude, and clarity but diverged in stylistic techniques. Moreover, these stylistic techniques should not be thought of as neutral devises to be plucked from an array of available devices but instead are defined within larger historical and semiotic systems.

9. In the following I will be focusing on explicit statements by the trade about the standards, emphasizing the rationales for the techniques chosen. (Unfortunately, space does not permit discussion of the ideological implications of this discourse.) Explicit statements, however, do not indicate what was actually occurring in the films. For that I am relying on Kristin Thompson's chronology and extended discussion of the standardization of the Hollywood film style, which analyzes these techniques within the films. See her sections in David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985).

the reviewers argued that disjunctive time or space was unrealistic: "Jumpy and abrupt action will destroy almost completely the sense of illusion. It will all seem unreal and unconvincing."[10]

One problem, of course, was that the spectator did not have the days or years to watch the pertinent narrative events in their alleged time and space frame, nor would such a presentation highlight that chain of events. In the first period (1896–1908), condensation and elimination of time and space were standard solutions to consolidating the key action sequences, and prior literary and dramatic techniques were accepted conventions to construct a coded continuity. The early filmmakers translated book chapters and dramatic acts into scenes separated by dissolves, fades, and intertitles. These punctuation devices were often replaced during the transitional period (1908–17) by direct cuts between scenes even though the scenes were not spatially or temporally contiguous. By 1912 explicit conventions existed to cue such deletions:

> One of the most objectionable of these blunders is failure to properly account for lapses of time or distance. The spectator receives a mental shock that is unpleasant and confusing when he sees a character transported in a flash from one spot to another, or from one period of time to another without any caption or exit to prepare the mind for the change. It is some seconds usually before he can readjust his mind to the new situation, and this makes for loss of interest. The fault is so easy to guard against, as has been pointed out many times in these and other columns that it is now almost criminal carelessness on the part of directors to ignore it. The simple expedient of having a scene continued until after the exit of the characters who are to appear in the next scene, if only for a second or two, prepares the spectators' minds for the change to come. Starting the next scene before the transported characters appear in it has a similar effect. When these are impossible, captions should be used.[11]

As the writer noted, intertitles could serve to cover narrative gaps and to signal temporal and spatial deletions, although this critic seemed to prefer solutions based on staging.

Another common problem was to indicate a lateral shift in space. Techniques of matching action and maintaining screen direction became conventional mechanisms to signal continuous time displaced to an adjacent location. For instance, a 1911 *New York Dramatic Mirror* review of *The White Rose of the Wilds* (Biograph) praised its editing:

10. Epes Winthrop Sargent, "The Photoplaywright," *MPW* 25 (July 17, 1915): 479.

11. "Spectator," "Spectator's Comments," *New York Dramatic Mirror* (hereafter *NYDM*) 67 (February 14, 1912): 28.

One of the most striking features of the production, to the experienced eye, is the almost perfect mechanical precision with which each scene is timed; it all goes like oiled clockwork and there are no jarring moments. In several instances the joining of scenes, where an entrance is made through a door and we instantly see the act completed on the other side, the action is so carefully put together that it seems the same movement. This is closely approaching perfection in the technique of picture directing.[12]

Frame cuts (where a figure exits at the frame line and then immediately enters the frame on the next shot) and later matches-on-action became effective cues for continuous time while introducing new space.

A third problem was to show relevant actions occurring simultaneously but in different places. Although split screens and elaborate sets were sometimes used, the technique of cutbacks (the period term for crosscutting) was a cheaper and faster production technique. By 1909 reviewers called for crosscutting to show parallel actions developing in situations other than chases. By the early teens, crosscutting was also supposed to provide emphasis, to avoid censorship problems, to stimulate suspense, to eliminate unnecessary action, and to cover continuity gaps.[13]

With the increasing complexity of a coded continuity, and its association with the "quality" film, the mode of production faced greater demands on its system of memory. Staging entrances and exits, matching movements to adjacent spaces, maintaining conventions of screen direction, and correlating parallel actions were more certain if workers kept a record of what was done. But records done on the spot without considering potential conflicts with succeeding setups were inefficient. Thus, a written script done in advance with descriptions of each shot and its adjacent shots provided a long-term cost advantage. It was cheaper to pay a few workers to prepare detailed scripts incorporating continuity solutions than to let a crew work it out on the set or by later retakes. The fact that in later years these scripts became known as "continuities" is traceable to the emphasis Hollywood filmmakers placed on the script's ability to prearrange the conventional cues to temporal and spatial relations.

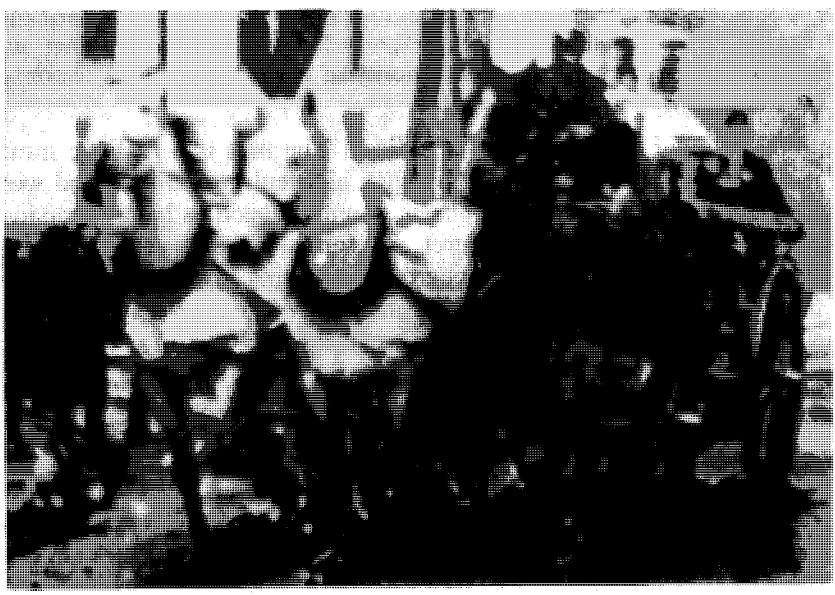
12. "Reviews of Licensed Films," *NYDM* 65 (May 31, 1911): 31. Also see: "Reviews of Licensed Films," *NYDM* 65 (March 1, 1911): 31; Epes Winthrop Sargent, *The Technique of the Photoplay*, 2d ed. (New York: Moving Picture World, 1913), pp. 16–17.

13. Reviews from 1909 excerpted and reprinted in Pratt, *Spellbound in Darkness*, pp. 59–60; Epes Winthrop Sargent, "The Technique of the Photoplay," *MPW* 9 (August 26, 1911): 525; Epes Winthrop Sargent, "The Photoplaywright," *MPW* 18 (December 20, 1913): 1405.

*Verisimilitude*

Logical, temporal, and spatial continuity were, in a sense, already aspects of a standard of verisimilitude. Another aspect of verisimilitude was the matching of character actions and mise-en-scène to ideologically determined conceptions of reality. One of the earliest thrusts of advertising was that films presented realistic images of the world. For example, the 1903 Edison catalogue promoted *Life of an American Fireman* on the following grounds:

> In giving this description to the public, we unhesitatingly claim for it the strongest motion picture attraction ever attempted in this length of film. It will be difficult for the exhibitor to conceive the amount of work involved and the number of rehearsals necessary to turn out a film of this kind. We were compelled to enlist the services of the fire departments of four different cities, New York, Newark, Orange, and East Orange, N. J., and about 300 firemen appear in the various scenes of this film.
>
> From the first conception of this wonderful series of pictures it has been our aim to portray *Life of an American Fireman* without exaggeration, at the same time embodying the dramatic situations and spectacular effects which so greatly enhance a motion picture performance.
>
> ... This film faithfully and accurately depicts his thrilling and dangerous life, emphasizing the perils he subjects himself to when human life is at stake.[14]



Edwin S. Porter's *The Life of an American Fireman* (Edison, 1903)

14. *Edison Films*, Supplement 168 (Orange, N.J.: Edison Manufacturing Company, February 1903), pp. 2–3, rpt. in Pratt, *Spellbound in Darkness*, pp. 29–30.

By the early 1910s, a standard of authenticity in details provoked critics and spectators to point out inconsistencies or lapses in verisimilitude. A 1911 reviewer faulted Biograph's *His Daughter* because "the old father's fall was not convincing, and the girl's intention to leave the town was told only by the subtitle, as she ran out bareheaded and with no traveling equipment." Indians with vaccination marks, heroines that picked up pencils to write notes which were then shown in ink, and soldiers with anachronistic uniforms or improperly displayed insignia and flags were singled out as examples of unrealistic details which if noticed might break the illusion of the narrative story.[15]

A standard of verisimilitude not only contributed to intensive historical research and explicit descriptions of mise-en-scène in the scripts, but also promoted a shift from painted backdrops and general lighting (i.e., lighting merely to achieve proper exposure) to three-dimensional sets and realistic and dramatic lighting. By 1911, reviewers were praising both moves. The *New York Dramatic Mirror* claimed: "Artificial stage methods have been discarded by every successful company. Everywhere the tendency is toward truthful and compelling simulation of real life."[16] Or another reviewer on the lighting for *Five Hours* (Rex):

> A notable feature of this photoplay is the light. It comes from where it should come from. This is a most desirable feature in moving pictures, the high lights and shadows are so carefully adjusted as to perfectly mold the figures, bringing them out in clear relief from the background. They are human beings, not photographs. The photographic superiority of this release and its charm of naturalness make it a veritable gem.[17]

Two elements of lighting are praised. The first is a realistic motivation for the source of the light, such as fireplaces, lamps, and windows. Second, there is an emphasis on effects such as back- and side-lighting which molded the figures and separated them from the (narratively) less consequential background. Shifting from the initial standard of photographic visibility, filmmakers proceeded to adopt lighting schemas which suggested real depth within the two-dimensional photographic image.

Achieving such lighting effects was easy if the set was used only once, but returning to it for other setups required matching the exact

15. "Reviews of Licensed Films," *NYDM* 65 (March 1, 1911): 31; Robert C. McElravy, "The Importance of Details," *MPW* 15 (January 11, 1913): 145; "Doings in Los Angeles," *MPW* 12 (June 15, 1912): 1014.

16. "Spectator," "Spectator's Comments," *NYDM* 66 (December 27, 1911): 28. Also see, for example, "*The Scarlet Letter* (IMP)," *MPW* 8 (April 22, 1911): 881–82.

17. L. R. H[arrison], "*Five Hours*: A 'Rex' Gem," *MPW* 8 (April 1, 1911): 699. Also see: "Eclair Photography," *MPW* 8 (March 18, 1911): 586.

details of the lighting across gaps of work time. In addition, the demand for verisimilitude in character actions and mise-en-scène stimulated research and meticulous attention to set and costume details from shot to shot. Again, the answer was a detailed blueprint—a carefully constructed script.

*Narrative Dominance and Clarity*

Intertwined with continuity and verisimilitude was the standard of narrative dominance and clarity. Carefully cued time and space organization, foregrounded figures, and authentic details all promoted the illusion of a natural causality. But because the story dominated the rest of the elements of the film, techniques which facilitated its clarity might supersede these other two standards. It is this higher standard which promoted a shift to "analytical editing" in which a continuous narrative action in one place is, nevertheless, broken up into a series of shots (i.e., an establishing shot is followed by two-shots, close-ups, shot/reverse shots, and so forth).

In the early stylistic period, two violations of the integrity of a unified narrative action were inserts and character visions. In the case of inserts, a closer shot of an object (often a letter) superseded the practice of one-shot-per-scene. In a sense, the narrative advantage of ensuring the visibility of and attention to the object isolated from the mise-en-scène overrode the spatial consistency of the initial setup. Returning to the previous setup reanchored the object within the established tableau. Since the reason for such an insert was to provide the narrative information of what a character saw to the film spectator, often these inserts were point-of-view shots with such secondary cues as a mask simulating a keyhole or binoculars.

Character visions, such as the dream of the fireman in *Life of an American Fireman* (1903), were created by showing the action of the mental image simultaneously with the character who was thinking about it. Visions, whether dreams, memories, or mental constructions of anticipated events, provided narrative information about character motivation and, in the case of memories, about prior narrative events. However, the subjective portion of the image violated the unity and verisimilitude of the original space and time. With both inserts and visions, temporal and spatial continuity and verisimilitude stood aside as narrative clarity dominated the organization of the images.

These two violations of spatial and temporal consistency probably weakened the insistence on the tableau, or one-shot-per-scene, style. In addition, a shift in acting styles contributed to the movement toward analytical editing. Contemporary observers cite a significant change in

acting styles starting about 1908. One of the more important trade critics, Frank Woods of the *New York Dramatic Mirror*, noticed a shift from acting with extravagant gesture to a subtler style based upon the Film d'Art imports. There was also at this time a general change in the acting style in the legitimate theater.[18] By mid 1909 companies such as Edison and Selig Polyscope, as well as the *Mirror*, were promoting a particular acting style:

> We call your attention to the absence in our [Edison's] dramatic productions of extravagant gesture and facial expression, which frequently mar the dramatic effect of a powerful situation or climax.
>
> Intelligent interpretation of a part requires that the play of varying emotions shall be conveyed by correct facial expression and that quiet, tense action shall supplant burlesque gestures and attitudes.[19]

In an advice sheet to its players, Selig Polyscope wrote: "Use your eyes as much as possible in your work. Remember that they express your thoughts more clearly when properly used than gestures or unnatural facial contortions. . . . Do not use unnecessary gestures. Repose in your acting is of more value. A gesture well directed can convey a great deal, while too many may detract from the realism of your work."[20] A *Mirror* review of Biograph's *The Unchanging Sea* (1910) stated that: "Every thought and feeling has been expressed with wonderful force, but with scarcely a gesture and with perfect naturalness."[21] With this emphasis on facial gestures and eyes, compositions framed closer to the player would improve visibility and, thus, narrative clarity.

Within a couple years, filmmakers were composing the film image so as to cut off players' feet. One handbook writer in 1912 remarked about the "American foreground" in which principal characters were framed from the knees or waist: "The American producers were first

18. "Spectator," "Spectator's Comments," *NYDM* 67 (January 31, 1912): 51–52; "Where Honor Is Due," *NYDM* 67 (January 31, 1912): 58. Also see: H. F. Hoffman, "Cutting Off the Feet," *MPW* 12 (April 6, 1912): 53. On contemporary acting styles see: G. C. Ashton Jonson, "A London Theatre Libre," *Drama* 1 (February 1911): 123; I. G. Everson, "Young Lennox Robinson and the Abbey Theatre's First American Tour (1911–1912)," *Modern Drama* 9 (May 1966): 74–89; Sandy Boynton, "The History of American Acting: A Detour," *Yale/Theatre* 8 (Spring 1977): 104–11.

19. Untitled, *Edison Kinetogram* 1 (August 16, 1909): 6.

20. "Pointers on Picture Acting," Selig Polyscope Co., 1910, rpt. in Kalton C. Lahue, *Motion Picture Pioneer: The Selig Polyscope Company* (New York: A. S. Barnes, 1973), p. 63. Edward Branigan points out that the emphasis on eyes as expressing the character's thoughts lays the groundwork for the eye line match. I am very grateful to him for this and other helpful comments.

21. "Reviews of Licensed Films," *NYDM* 63 (May 14, 1910): 20. Also see: "Reviews of New Films," *NYDM* 62 (December 22, 1909): 16.

to see the advantages of concentrating the spectators' attention on the face of the actor."[22] Moreover, filmmakers were inserting "bust pictures" (close-ups). As a trade paper writer explained in 1911:

> Bust pictures, which are enlarged views of limited areas, are useful in determining action that might be obscure in the larger scene. It not only magnifies the objects but it draws particular attention to them. . . .
>
> Many points may be cleared in a five-foot bust picture which would require twenty to thirty feet of leader to explain, and the bust picture always interests. Sometimes in a newspaper illustration a circle surrounds some point of interest, or a cross marks where the body was discovered. The bust picture serves the same purpose and answers, as well, for the descriptive caption that appears under a cut.[23]

The close-up and the restrained acting style complemented and promoted one another. Not only did the subtler gesture suggest a closer view but a closer view encouraged that style. The promotion in the film industry of the star system after 1910–11 should also be considered as a factor in this stylistic change.

It is entirely possible that had the film product remained at the one-reel length the demands for continuity, verisimilitude, and narrative dominance and clarity could have been met without resorting to the continuity script. Matching mise-en-scène, lighting, and action for an eighteen-minute film—even one with analytical editing and cross-cutting—is one thing; doing that for one seventy minutes or longer is another.

## The Diffusion of the Multiple-Reel Film

A complete analysis of the economic grounds for the shift to multiple-reel films is not possible here, but some indication of the pertinent causes is important in understanding the changing screenwriting practices. The concept of a "feature" film dates back to the introduction of film as a product in the entertainment field. Edison, for example, advertised *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) as a "great *Headline Attraction.*" The term "feature" was initially a marketing judgment that

22. James Slevin, *On Picture-Play Writing: A Hand-Book of Workmanship* (Cedar Grove, N.J.: Farmer Smith, 1912), p. 86.

23. Epes Winthrop Sargent, "Technique of the Photoplay," *MPW* 9 (August 5, 1911): 282. Note that the appeal is to saving length with this technique and that a comparable function in the newspaper is given as a justification. Also see: "The Reviewer," "Views of the Reviewer," *NYDM* 68 (September 18, 1912): 24, in which the writer, invoking a standard of verisimilitude, argues that the "close view" is "natural, as in life one does not see the entire form of a person with whom he is in close relation."

a film merited special billing and advertising. At first, its definition depended not on length but on a conception of how the film fit into the exhibitor's overall program. The advantage of a feature film was that the exhibitor could advertise its appearance as special and thus could justify a special increase in the admission price.[24]

In striving to satisfy the exhibitors' desire for feature attractions, studios remade famous plays and novels as well as hired famous writers and dramatists. *Passion Play* in 1897 was an early feature film which ran three reels, and Edison produced *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (one reel) in 1903. In this early period, with little attention to copyright, directors and others in the companies freely "borrowed" plots from the masters. Massive exploitation, however, waited until one producer set the example. Pathé released a three-reel version of *Passion Play* in France in 1906 and in the United States in 1907. A success in both countries, it stimulated several films and the formation of Film d'Art, a production company. Film d'Art purchased stories from famous French writers and employed famous players from the Comédie Française and established scenic artists and musicians.[25] An explicit appeal was made to the values of established literature and theater.

The development of the multiple-reel film in the United States is closely related to such adaptations of novels and plays. Increasingly, feature films came in longer than one-reel lengths. In October 1909, Pathé released *The Drink*, a two-reel drama; Vitagraph released in parts a four-reel version of *Les Misérables* over three months (September to November 1909), and then a three-reeler of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in July 1910.[26] In June 1911, *Moving Picture World* cited the following productions as being filmed in two- and three-reel lengths: *The Fall of Troy*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Enoch Arden*, *The Battle of the Republic*, *The Maccabees*, and *Faust*. "We cannot do justice," the article continued, "to the subjects especially worth while in a thousand feet of

24. For a more detailed analysis of the causes of the multiple-reel film, see Janet Staiger, "The Hollyood Mode of Production" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin–Madison, 1981). *Edison Films*, Supplement 200 (Orange, N.J.: Edison Manufacturing Company, January 1904), pp. 5–7, rpt. in Pratt, *Spellbound in Darkness*, pp. 34–36. Also see Kleine's advice to exhibitors in "About Moving Picture Films," rpt. in Pratt, *Spellbound in Darkness*, pp. 36–37. "The Kinetogram," *Edison Kinetogram* 3 (September 1, 1910): 2; W. Stephen Bush, "Feature Programs," *MPW* 14 (November 9, 1912): 529.

25. Ralph Cassady, Jr., "Monopoly in Motion Picture Production and Distribution, 1908–1915," *Southern California Law Review* 32 (Summer 1959): 375–76; Georges Sadoul, *Histoire de l'art du cinéma: Des origines à nos jours*, 3d ed. (Paris: Flammarion, 1949), pp. 71–73.

26. Pratt, *Spellbound in Darkness*, p. 86; "Spectator," "Spectator's Comments," *NYDM* 65 (February 1, 1911): 29.

Norma Talmadge and Maurice Costello in *A Tale of Two Cities* (Vitagraph, 1911)

film. The play, even with the aid of the spoken word, takes from two to three hours to present, and cannot be condensed into a pantomime, which must be rushed through in generally less than thirty minutes."[27] In August the trade papers noticed that two-reelers were more common and the audience would attend them more than once:

The filming of some great opera or a popular literary or dramatic or historical subject requires more than a reel. . . . The larger production likewise makes a deeper impression on the memory and to that extent advertises itself much better than the shorter one-reel affair. . . .

27. "Higher Ideals," *MPW* 8 (June 17, 1911): 1355.

[The best way to raise prices] in the general run of moving picture houses is the two and three and four-reel production. With better and bigger pictures the public will readily see the fairness of bigger prices.[28]

In September in the regular column reviewing notable films all those selected for special attention were multiple reelers: *Foul Play* (Edison, three reels, based on a novel by Charles Reade), *David Copperfield* (Thanhouser, three reels, from Charles Dickens' novel), and *The Colleen Bawn* (Kalem, three reels, from the Irish play by Dion Boucicault).[29] With the trade writers emphasizing the profit advantages of longer films, producers increased their output. The successful importation of *Dante's Inferno* (five reels), *The Crusaders* (four reels), and *Jerusalem Delivered* (four reels) in the same year encouraged a view that length was not an inhibition, but rather a stimulation, to profits. At this point stage stars were also beginning to appear in filmings of their famous performances. In 1911, Cecil Spooner played his *The Prince and the Pauper* (Edison), Sidney Drew directed and acted in his *When Two Hearts Are Won* (Kalem), and Mabel Taliaferro appeared in a three-reel version of her *Cinderella* (Selig). The independent Powers hired Mildred Holland who performed her stage play *The Power behind the Throne.*[30]

One commentator writing in October 1911 stated: "No feature [multiple-reel] film, of which we have any knowledge, has been produced from an original scenario."[31] Although undoubtedly an overstatement, the close connection between the adaptation of a famous play, novel, opera, and short story into film and the increasing length of films is important. The longer film enabled a more detailed reproduction of these classics which were well known to a middle-class audience. With stage stars doing filmed versions of their famous plays, the longer film could nearly duplicate the theatrical experience and, even with higher than normal admission prices, the moving pictures could effectively compete with the legitimate stage.

With longer films, production times lengthened into weeks rather than days and the number of scenes multiplied per reel. The necessity

28. "Facts and Comments," *MPW* 9 (August 19, 1911): 436.

29. "Reviews of Notable Films," and W. Stephen Bush, "Standard Fiction in Films," *MPW* 9 (September 30, 1911): 954–56, 950–53.

30. W. Stephen Bush, "Do Longer Films Make Better Show?" *MPW* 10 (October 28, 1911): 275; "Another Step Forward," *MPW* 9 (July 22, 1911): 102; "Mabel Taliaferro on New Years," *NYDM* 66 (December 13, 1911): 29; "Mildred Holland in Pictures," *MPW* 10 (December 16, 1911): 881.

31. W. Stephen Bush, "Do Longer Films Make Better Show?" *MPW* 10 (October 28, 1911): 275.

to maintain continuity, verisimilitude, and narrative dominance and clarity for the five- and six-reel film while keeping down costs and production time intensified the need for a more detailed script. The scenario script used casually by filmmakers for the one-reelers became a prerequisite for efficient multiple-reel production. Had the manufacturers been less interested in full profit maximization or had the industry standards of "excellence" been otherwise, then the manufacturers might have developed some other scriptwriting procedure. But with those economic and ideological practices, the continuity script became the most acceptable work process.

## Multiple-Reel Films and Their Mode of Production

The detailed continuity script was standard practice by 1914. Continuity scripts and associated paperwork varied little from studio to studio owing to their standardization through trade paper discussion of the formats. As a result, continuities from the New York Motion Picture Company are typical.[32] Each of this firm's production scripts had a number assigned to it which provided a method of identifying the film even though its title might shift. A cover page indicated who wrote the scenario, who directed the shooting, when shooting began and ended, when the film was shipped to the distributors, and when the film was released. The next part of the blueprint was the "Complete Picture Report" which summarized production information in more detail. Following that was a list of titles and intertitles and an indication as to where they were to be inserted in the final print. (Intertitles were usually rewritten after editing and printed separately.) At the end, the entire cost of the film was broken into a standard accounting format. The aim was to monitor the production for efficiency and economy.

A location plot preceded the script. This plot listed all exterior and interior sites along with shot numbers, providing efficient cross-checking and preventing lost production time and wasted labor. The cast of characters followed. Typed portions listed the roles for the story, and penciled in were the names of the people assigned to play each part. After a one-page synopsis of the action, the shot-by-shot script began. Each shot was numbered consecutively; included were the shot's

32. Aitken Brothers Papers, 1909–39, boxes 1–9, Scripts and Scenarios, TS and MS, State Historical Society of Wisconsin and Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, Madison. Thomas Ince's studio (one of the studios of the New York Motion Picture Company) is a good example of the use of the continuity script coupled with a division of labor; see Janet Staiger, "Dividing Labor for Production Control: Thomas Ince and the Rise of the Studio System," *Cinema Journal* 18 (Spring 1979): 16–25.

location and a brief description of sets, properties, and costumes. Camera distances were specified, as well as any unusual effects in the lighting or cinematography. Scenes were broken into separate shots, and cross-cutting was fully detailed. All action was specified. Temporary intertitles were typed in, often in red ink, where they were to be inserted in the final version. Since these scripts were often used on the set, penciled over each shot was a scribble marking the completion of that shot, and sometimes on the side was a hand-written number—probably the actual footage taken. The continuities also included postshooting instructions such as cutting and coloring directions.

The writing departments of the companies prepared these scripts. By at least 1911, all the licensed and the major independent firms had a writing department turning out original material as well as a scenario editor and staff to read and select free-lance submissions. Although they were never entirely shut off, reliance on free-lance submissions decreased after 1912 as the regularized, institutionalized sources of stories from adaptations and in-house writers became standard. (Also important were judicial decisions in 1909–11 which made companies liable for copyright infringement. Thus, firms preferred to deal with recognized authors rather than risk purchasing a plagiarized script from an unknown.)

About 1913, another division in writing responsibility became common: a separate set of technical experts began rewriting all the stories. Although the companies might hire famous writers to compose original screenplays, their material was then turned over to these technicians who put it into continuity format. These writers knew not only the continuity format and stylistic demands of the film but also the particular needs of the individual studios in terms of cost of sets, standing sets, star and stock personalities, directorial and staff areas of skill, and so on. Such a tactic provided the studio with a standardized script whose format was familiar to everyone and which was most likely to utilize the studio's physical capacities and labor force to best advantage.[33]

The division of writing responsibility around 1913—some writers specializing in creating stories, others in rewriting—produced experts in further subdivisions of scriptwriting. For instance, Vitagraph described its scenario department in 1912: "Several experienced writers are employed besides the Scenario Editor, to furnish original plays or reconstruct those accepted from outside sources. In addition to the

33. On the standard rewrite, see: "The Technical Difficulties of Scenario Writing," *Reel Life* 3 (November 15, 1913): 3; "Noted Authors to Write for Mutual," *MPW* 19 (January 3, 1914): 29; "The Listener Chatters," *Reel Life* 4 (April 18, 1914): 6; Epes Winthrop Sargent, "The Photoplaywright," *MPW* 23 (January 23, 1915): 510.

Scenario writers, title and sub-title draughtsmen are an adjunct." In 1915 the call for such intertitle specialists increased, with one scenario writer suggesting as a source "the trained newspaperman or woman, one preferably skilled in the difficult art of writing head lines."[34]

The story department soon took over the director's authority for much of the story selection, writing, and rewriting. In 1913 and 1914, the shift began seriously to reduce the director's input in those areas. Lawrence McClosky, scenario editor for Lubin in 1913, said that "now the director does not see the scenario, until it is handed to him for production, complete in every detail. . . . Under our system a script goes to a director in perfect form. He can immediately go to work on it. Four or five experts of our staff have read and discussed every phase of the script and every effort has been made to eliminate any flaws of structure." Lubin also split the department into three sections dealing with submission, reading, and technical rewriting. McClosky emphasized that a director could argue about and have the script's material changed before it went into production and that the director still had power to shape the project. He called the purpose of the procedure "to pave the way for the director."[35]

It is important to remember that the continuity script was also used by the production managers and other technical experts as a blueprint to plan sets, costumes, locations, and labor force. Detailed preshooting preparation in these areas became standard procedure by 1914. Once the producer, director, and story department selected a story and the continuity writers put it into continuity format, the assistant director in cooperation with the production department used the script to construct a scene plot, a costume plot, and a players' plot. This design "breakdown" allowed individual departments to plan their work and on that basis to estimate costs. The individual estimates were totaled, and if they exceeded the budget for the film, expenses were trimmed accordingly. Once the budget and related sets, costumes, and labor supplies were approved, work on construction and hiring could start.[36]

34. S. M. Spedon, *How and Where Moving Pictures are Made by the Vitagraph Company of America* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Vitagraph Company of America, [1912]), [p. 29]; William E. Wing quoted in William Lord Wright, "For Photoplay Authors, Real and Near," *NYDM* 74 (July 14, 1915): 30.

35. Frederick James Smith, "The Evolution of the Motion Picture IV: From the Standpoint of the Scenario Editor," *NYDM* 19 (June 4, 1913): 15; E. W. S., "Changes in Lubinville," *MPW* 16 (May 24, 1913): 790; "For Those Who Worry o'er Plots and Plays," *Motion Picture News* 7 (June 21, 1913): 16.

36. This move was part of a larger, complex centralization and specialization of the management and work structure of the studio. See Staiger, "Hollywood Mode of Production." For a period description of the change, see "Putting the Move in the Movies," *Saturday Evening Post* 188 (May 13, 1916): 14–15, 96–98, 100–101.

The Hollywood film as it developed required the continuity script to allow it to expand its length while maintaining production efficiency and ideologically determined stylistic practices. Had the Hollywood film not increased in length or taken on the style that it did, the continuity script might have been unnecessary or else taken a different form.

Finally, it should be noted that the continuity script which seemed so vital to the sound period of the 1930s and 1940s actually was a well-established procedure by at least 1915—in conjunction with the diffusion of the multiple-reel film. Interestingly, when filmmakers added dialogue for the sound film, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences included as part of its Research Council's projects the task of standardizing the new continuity scripts. It wrote in 1932:

> As a result [of the change to talking films] the placement, order, numbering and display of the various parts [of the script]—dialogue, action, set description, camera instructions, etc. vary widely among the studios and are constantly subject to change. This unnecessarily complicates the work of those who handle the scripts during production. . . .
>
> Proposed: To conduct such surveys as may be necessary to establish the basis for the various present practices. To correlate this information and secure general agreement on a recommended form of script that will be most legible, graphic, and convenient in practical use by actors, directors, writers, executives and the various production departments.[37]

Thus, Hollywood—as it had from the mid-teens—once again acknowledged the crucial function of the continuity script within its mode of production and style of film practice.

37. "Proceedings of the Research Council," *Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Technical Bulletin*, Supplement no. 19 (December 23, 1932).

# *The Movies as Big Business*

With so much attention given to the film as art, it is not easy to view the motion picture business through the eyes of those who saw it as nothing more than a business opportunity—a chance to invest with the promise of high returns. Yet, even the art of the film was influenced by investment houses, banks, and lawyers—for artists often lived or died on the success or failure of these institutions—and no one can come to a full understanding of the history of film without understanding how the business was financed. This is exactly what the next selection explains. It is a prospectus prepared by the investment house of Halsey, Stuart & Co., and its purpose was solely to attract investors to the securities of the leading motion picture firms. In this light, the movies were placed on the same level with the oil or steel industries.

The Halsey, Stuart & Co. prospectus provides a good indication of the structure of the industry at the apex of the silent era. When this document was published the industry had stabilized, and even the most conservative banks—National City, Manufacturers Trust Company, the Irving Trust Company, and the National Bank of Commerce—had established commercial banking relations with the soundly managed movie concerns.

The well-known investment banks, observing the burgeoning movie industry, vied to handle new security issues of the major companies. The great expansion of the industry during the 1920s was facilitated by the underwriting of stocks and bonds by Wall Street and La Salle Street financiers and their purchase by the public. Among the investment banks most prominently involved in the movie business were J. & W. Seligman and Co.; Bankers Trust Company; Kuhn, Loeb & Company; Goldman, Sachs & Co.; Hayden, Stone & Company; and Dillon Read & Company.

The Halsey, Stuart prospectus describes those characteristics of the movie business most admired by financiers—characteristics that encouraged the massive infusion of capital into the industry during the 1920s. It tells much about the economic climate of the country also, reflecting the optimism of those bull market days when only endless expansion of enterprise was seen on the horizon.

The prospectus is an interesting document in many respects, some-

times amusing and at other times annoying. It links the growth of the industry not to the creative efforts of Edwin S. Porter, D. W. Griffith, Charlie Chaplin, and the artists who won the hearts of the public, but to industrialists like Thomas Edison and George Eastman. The prospectus praises not film's value as a medium of human expression, but the industry's vertically integrated structure, assembly line production techniques, efficient worldwide distribution system, air-conditioned movie palaces, and conservative accounting practices. In its enthusiasm, the prospectus inflates attendance figures, ignores the nefarious ways of some of the industry leaders in capturing control of the business, and glosses over the implications of America's domination of the world's screens. But similar criticisms could be made of prospectuses describing other industries. Here, the movies are seen as a business, pure and simple. And since financing played an inexorable role in the growth and direction of the industry, it must be understood.