Chapter 2

Entertaining the public option

The popular film writing movement and the emergence of writing for the American silent cinema

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> … every man imagines himself a heart-breaker, horse-trainer and an ad writer. It would be wholly true to add that every other man and many women believe they could write photoplays, – if somebody would only tell them how!
>
> (Bagg 1913: 8)

American film production was torn between conflicting tendencies in the 1910s, and writing was the troublesome cause. Fortune and fame in the booming industry seemed within grasp of the amateur writer simply by putting ideas to paper, leading to the submission of hundreds of thousands of story ideas, synopses, scenarios and scripts to film companies. Encouraged through promotion in the trade press, screenwriting manuals, and elsewhere, writing for film was initially advertised as a task for which the industry not only desired, but needed creative input from the public. By the end of the decade, however, film writing had become a largely regulated and institutionalized function within the industry's own production apparatus. As the industry took shape throughout the decade, consolidating into several dominant studios and streamlining and rationalizing production, writing was increasingly assigned to an ascendant class of professionals. By 1917 prospects were bleak for the amateur as the distinction between novice and professional gained definition; the trade journal *Motography* asserted, 'There are only two classes of motion picture scenario writers – a few whose work is in real demand, who collaborate with the producers and get good prices; and a great many whose work is of little or no value and most of whom never will succeed' (*Motography* 1917: 651–2). The diminishing prospects of success for amateur writers reflects the manner in which the newly consolidated American culture industry quickly defined and regulated its boundaries and its interests.

By 1917 script and intertitle writing had become thoroughly institutionalized elements of film production, situating writing at (or at least near) the centre of the creative process. That same year, *Moving Picture World* columnist Epes Winthrop Sargent reflected on the past decade of film writing pointing out that, in the decade

from 1907 to 1917, American filmmaking had changed dramatically. The result of that decade of development, Sargent argued, was that film writing had come full circle. ‘Ten years ago,’ Sargent wrote, ‘we stood just where we stand today in the writing of photoplays’ (1917: 1491–2). What Sargent described, however, was not the relative role of writing in film production, which had unquestionably changed, but rather the way writing had mediated the relationship between the public and the industry. For in some ways, 1917 resembled 1907, when the film industry had been a closed shop, in which filmmakers either wrote their own material or, perhaps more often, did not bother with writing at all. In 1917, though writing had become an important aspect of film production and film form, film production was again largely closed to the general public and the amateur writer in particular.

Yet much like the cinema itself, which gained immense popularity through the proliferation of the Nickelodeon, film writing was born, if not conceived, in the public sphere. Through the widespread solicitation of first story synopses, from 1909 to 1911, and later more complete continuity scripts, the industry exploited newfound channels of creative production not only for story material, but also often for the specificities of film style and form, suggesting a greater degree of permeability with regard to the film production process. Writing would become a central component of film production, however, only after it had been extracted from this dispersed field of cultural production and resituated within the professionalized realm of the industry. The question then remains: to what extent did professional film writing, having emerged through a rite of passage in the public sphere, retain traces of that lineage? What, if anything, can the popular character of early film writing tell us about film writing in general?

While public engagement with film writing was a nationwide phenomenon involving a massive number of participants, it was also relatively short-lived. Those who have previously addressed this movement have tended to highlight this brevity. Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson argue that the freelance film writing movement was more or less finished with the popularization of the feature film (Staiger 1985: 132; Thompson 1985: 166). Likewise, Anne Morey emphasizes that, while the ‘screenwriting craze’ lasted throughout the decade (the 1910s), by 1916 studios were no longer ‘genuinely interested in buying products on the freelance market’ (Morey 2003: 1). Kathryn Fuller maintains that during the 1910s the film industry had successfully ‘truncated most avenues of amateur participation in script production’ (Fuller 2001: 116). By emphasizing the movement’s closure, these accounts characterize amateur writing as a frail and terminal mode of production, destined to be displaced by industrial-scale mass production. This perspective obscures the possibility that, emerging as it did in such an open, participatory context, film writing, though institutionalized in the industry for ostensibly pragmatic, functionalist reasons, retained traces of a popular sensibility. The participatory reputation of film writing would help the industry retain a connection to its popular base even as production became closed to the general public, and moreover granted early film writing considerable cultural influence beyond its impact on studio production.

Though the direct transmission of script material from amateur writers to film screens may have been minimal, the indirect influence of this movement on the development of film writing and American cinema more generally was large. Steven Maras emphasizes that the movement, 'Even if viewed conservatively as a promotional campaign largely conducted by production companies … still forms a context for various kinds of statements … about who can write, and what writing is like for the public' (Maras 2009: 137). For Maras, the early film writing movement is primarily important for the way it established terminology and ways of addressing film writing in general. Yet the movement's impact was not limited to discourse alone. For an industry attempting to expand by catering to as large an audience as possible, the encouraging of productive participation from the public not only helped augment interest in the cinema, but furthermore played a significant role in naturalizing a rationalized mode of production that had not developed organically, but rather was imposed 'from above' by an emerging oligarchically structured industry. The legacy of these amateur writers played an important role in the negotiation of the productive possibilities of film writing for the coming decades, and such a relationship had a resolute impact on film production and film form.

During its formative years, American film writing was held in a tension between the sometimes-similar yet often-divergent interests and desires of film producers within the consolidating industry, amateurs outside of the industry, and professional writers somewhere in between. These parties each had different uses and goals for film writing, and writing accordingly developed in response to the tensions between them. However, writing for film did not respond equally to the interests of those inside and outside the industry. Rather, throughout the 1910s the film industry gradually learned how to best take advantage of popular film writing, without granting outsiders significant access to the industry. While the popular film writing movement framed film consumers as central to film production, and while this framing of the film industry as a semi-public institution would remain, commercial-industrial developments quickly rendered film production anything but participatory and open, and film writing as exploitable labour.

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Despite the role that the popular film writing movement played in the early development of film writing, however, the emergence of writing in the American cinema has received little critical attention. Contemporary understandings of 'screenwriting', or 'the screenplay', moreover, tend to skew perceptions of early film writing by imposing contemporary models of production on past events and working backwards to locate the starting point of a telos. This bias elides the important fact that the social context circumscribing the emergence of film writing is quite different from that which later emerged. Early film writing accordingly should be reconsidered as a historical moment capable of leading to many potential outcomes rather than simply a precursor to the one

(or several) that came to pass. The fact that particular notions of screenwriting and the screenplay tend to dominate understandings of film writing today can then be seen to reflect culturally and economically specific (rather than universal and inevitable) tendencies in the American film industry that have historically occluded the emergence of other possible systems of cultural production.

This bias extends to the fundamental understanding of the role that film writing has played in film history. Maras criticizes the automatic placement of early screenwriting within the limiting binarism of 'conception and execution', whereby screenwriting is conceptualized primarily as preparatory work for what is considered to be the more legitimate or central filmmaking process – a kind of 'blueprint' for filming (Maras 2009: 5, 121, 123). Such a view grants secondary status to film writing with a pen or typewriter, in relation to the supposedly more substantive act of filming with a camera. Accordingly, this perspective tends to consider early screenwriting significant primarily for its relationship to continuity – for the way written instructions rendered filmmaking more efficient and logical.[1] Viewing film writing schematically in terms of conception and execution therefore adopts a functionalist-productivist perspective that confers special, fundamental significance upon the means of production of the end product (the viewable film). Focused as it is on the abstract systemization of production processes, such a position limits understanding of the multiplicity of roles film writing can and has served, and furthermore takes industrial practice at face value, rather than interrogating it for deeper cultural or social meanings. The concept of film writing as a blueprint for production, moreover, fetishizes film writing as the continuity script – a form that served a specific function in the history of the production process, but which, in fact, was only one of many historical iterations of film writing. As film writing emerged from the public sphere as freely exchangeable and commodified labour, its material and discursive forms extended well beyond the development and institutionalization of the reified continuity script.

A more inclusive approach, considering film writing both discursively and dialectically as the product of a labour struggle (however concealed), can modify functionalist-productivist historical understandings by re-evaluating how writing for the early cinema operated as more than simply 'screen' or 'script' writing but rather involved a combination of numerous activities, including story conceptualization, continuity scripting (the breakdown of story material into scenes and shots), and intertitle writing (in myriad forms). Though silent film story, script and intertitle writing are often discussed as separate and distinct categories, such a distinction in many ways compartmentalizes film writing in accordance with the rationalization and division of labour which occurred in Hollywood during the late 1910s, but in fact was previously less well-defined. A reconsideration of the script in the broader context of 'film writing' re-establishes the value of the labour involved both in story creation (or selection) and in the writing of intertitles. Film writing, in the shape of the continuity script, as a fully commodified form (standardized, exchangeable and reproducible) in many ways harmonizes with the demands of later modes of studio film production. However, much of what writing contributed to the cinema

extended beyond the formal breakdown of story material into scenes, and scenes into shots connected through a system of continuity. Writing contributed to films not only structure and efficiency through the continuity, but just as importantly broader conceptual framing in the raw story material of synopses and scenarios, and specific filmic detail in the form of both a mise-en-scène intensified through film writing that had adopted naturalist-style literary description, as well as more complex levels of characterization and vernacularity presented through intertitles. For film writing, then, an understanding of the multiple forms (or genres) of writing that circumscribed its emergence can help illuminate the broader power that film writing wielded within the industry as a whole. An understanding of the social relationship that generated this writing, moreover, can shed light upon the mysterious place from where that power derived.

The beginnings of American film writing

With demand for films growing exponentially at the outset of the 1910s, American film producers struggled to produce original story material quickly enough to meet the demands of an audience eager for novelty. The intense growth realized during the Nickelodeon Boom caused film consumption to increase to such a degree that, in early 1911, trade commentator Robert Saunders Dowst explained, 'Within the last few years there has occurred so enormous an expansion in the motion picture business that the leading companies are searching high and low to unearth clever and original ideas' (Dowst 1911). Sargent described the crisis somewhat differently, suggesting that by 1909 filmmakers 'had stolen about all they dared to steal', and required new material (Sargent 1917: 1491). To augment productive capacity, filmmakers solicited story material from the growing fan base increasingly enamoured of the new amusement. Unlike other areas of film production such as directing, editing or working the camera, writing was early on framed as a type of creative labour open to the public, with little specialized knowledge required. This solicitation initiated a massive amateur film writing movement and possibly the largest movement of public creative production in the history of the American film industry.

Film writing, as late as 1909, was still an ill-defined practice, accomplished (if at all) through a patchwork of freelance work, improvisation and, often, borrowed ideas, operating as a cottage industry, with diverse and irregular production practices.[2] Though by 1911 some film companies had established fledgling scenario reading and writing departments, this general disorganization would persist throughout the early 1910s, leading unprepared film producers facing a crisis of supply to look outside of the industry and into the mass public for creative assistance, rather than inward, or to related 'disciplines' like drama and literature. Film companies had not yet developed self-sufficient means of producing their own story material, and similarly, drama and literature writers were on one hand ill-equipped to write for the specific demands of the cinema, and on the other insufficient in number. The Motion Picture Patents Company,

beginning its regulation of the industry in January 1909, helped establish regular production methods, but ultimately failed to transform film writing into a fully institutionalized practice, such that even by 1911 those newly formed departments had yet to develop a reliable system of self-sufficient production.

In the early 1910s films began expanding from short one- or two-reel subjects to longer running times. With the widespread emergence of the multiple-reel film in 1913, filmmakers began to realize the value of maintaining written instructions on the material to be filmed, as the feature demanded greater clarity within increasingly complex narratives. The increased technical and creative needs of the feature film, combined with a lack of fresh ideas in general, created the perfect storm within the industry for the initiation of a widespread solicitation of the public for assistance. Upon doing so, the industry immediately recognized a valuable yet inexpensive source of creative material in this untapped reservoir of production of scenarios and scripts. Studios responded by engaging and stimulating the public interest in film writing through advertising, contests, screenwriting schools and other enticements. As public film writing expanded, intermediary entities like trade journals, 'photoplay' writing manuals, writing clubs and scenario-reading departments attempted to organize the unruly and undisciplined mass of amateur writers. These intermediary institutions played fundamental roles in the development of film writing, and can provide insight into what film writing meant for the various parties involved and how film writing would be negotiated over the course of the decade.

A call for papers: soliciting the public

Sargent credited the Essanay and Pathé companies with the first public solicitations for material, both companies running magazine ads in 1909 encouraging writers to submit plot ideas. Vitagraph and Lubin were not far behind, and, as Sargent put it, 'after that came the deluge'. These ads instigated such a substantial production of amateur writing that trade journal editors 'had to turn schoolmasters', offering writing suggestions to the newly interested (Sargent 1917: 1491). Studios soon began hiring scenario editors to review the massive amount of manuscript material and continue to solicit new ideas.

To further nurture this public participation, numerous writing contests offered cash prizes and the possibility of having winning scenarios produced. In March 1912, for example, the Photoplay Enterprise Association, of Boonville, Indiana, promised 'Two hundred dollars in cash prizes … for the three best pictureplay scenarios submitted' (Sargent 1912c: 766). Essanay matched the $200 offer in a contest run in a Chicago newspaper, while the Powers Company offered $100 (*Motography* 1913: 450; *Bioscope* 1912b: 407). Throughout the 1910s, prize values increased, such that by 1914, the Chartered Theaters Corporation and 'a New York paper' offered $1,750 for the best two- to three-reel American comedy (*Motography* 1914: 6). The following year, American Film of Chicago promised the winner of its contest $20,000 (*Motography* 1915: 5).[3] While the riches promised,

in all likelihood, rarely found their way to the rightful victors and many began to claim these contests were purely advertising stunts, the proliferation of such contests attests to the expansiveness of the movement.

While some interest in film writing was certainly generated by contests, broader interest was generated by the promise of direct compensation – payment (usually by mailed check) from film companies to writers for submitted material. In 1912, Universal offered 'from $5 to $1,500' for accepted photoplays (*Bioscope* 1912e: 879). The following year, film writing manual author William Lewis Gordon described payments from $5.00 to $100.00, with the possibility of up to $300 for three-reel films (Gordon 1913: section 5). The promise of these profits combined with the fascination of telling one's story to the public through the new medium further fuelled a wildfire of public participation. In July 1911 writer Emmett Campbell Hall revealed annual writing profits of $1,485, earned by spending 'one-half of [his] working time' writing, and having been compensated between $5 and $90 for scenarios (Hall 1911: 109). Such early revelations of large profits gained by leisurely writing for the screen did much to attract amateurs to the field.

To further focus this interest, as early as 1912 trade journals and film writing manuals began listing companies buying scenarios and the kinds of scenarios they desired. A typical ad described the preferred features:

> **REPUBLIC**. (I. Bernstein, Editor) 145 West 45 Street, New York City. Wants light comedies, short farces and full reel farces. Particularly interested in full reel farces. Can use southern dramas of the Civil War in which bodies of troops are not required. Independent.
>
> (Sargent 1912e: 726)

As a corollary to these solicitations, and to satiate public curiosity about what happened to their submitted writing, trade journals began describing the physical passage of submitted story material through the acquisition, development, and production process, detailing how submitted material was received, reviewed and evaluated.[4] These descriptions, designed to simulate and sensationalize public access to private industry, engaged and solicited amateur writers as consumer-producers who, with minimal training, could master the intricate channels of industrial production.

Given these various strategies of conscription, writing for the screen quickly resembled what Edward Azlant has described as a 'swollen public fantasy' – but the movement was more than just fantasy. By early 1912, screenwriting manual author and *Photoplay Magazine* editor Arthur W. Thomas estimated that there were around 6,000 photoplay writers in the country, averaging 30 photoplays each, for a total of 180,000 manuscripts submitted per year, to around 30 companies. Thomas reiterated the belief that 'there are more photoplay writers and would-be authors from the various vocations of life trying to "make good" in that particular field than in any other line' (Thomas 1912: 85). This engagement gripped the country to such a degree that *Photoplay* magazine estimated the industry was

receiving around 1,000 unsolicited manuscripts per day in 1914, and by the end of 1915, Mack Sennett suggested that, 'A large percentage of the population of the country seem [sic] to be writing or attempting to write screen plays' (Azlant 1980: 138; Sennett 1915: 2007).

The trade press, writing manuals and the emergent discourse on film writing

In order for the film industry to successfully nurture and harvest the growing field of freelance production, amateur writers needed instruction on how and what to write. Pamphlets distributed by filmmaking companies, available by mail upon request beginning in 1909, were among the first written materials offering advice. Vitagraph was reportedly the first such company to provide this assistance, and soon thereafter several companies, including Essanay, Kalem and Lubin were offering to send film writing 'instruction sheets' to those who desired guidance (*Moving Picture World* 1911: 541; *Bioscope* 1912c: 559).

Supplementing studio pamphlets, numerous film writing correspondence schools quickly sprang up throughout the country. The schools advertised heavily in the trades:

> **Plots Wanted for Motion Picture Plays**
> You can write them. We teach you by mail in ten easy lessons. This is the only **correspondence course** in this line. We have many successful graduates …
> *They are selling their plays.*
> No experience and only common school education necessary. Writers can earn $50 a week. Demand increasing. Particulars Free.
> **ASSOCIATED MOTION PICTURE SCHOOLS**
> 634 Sheridan Road, Chicago
> (*Photoplay Magazine* 1912: 2)

Initial opinion of correspondence schools was optimistic. As early as 1910, one trade commentator suggested that while 'there are many fakirs', some were legitimate (J.M.B. 1910: 1180). Attitudes towards the schools quickly turned sour, however, and by 1913 trade press writers regularly campaigned against them.[5]

To supplement the advice provided (or not provided) through schools, more intimate forums for discussions of film writing emerged, in the shape of film writing clubs established in major cities around the country. Epes Sargent relished his role, and the corollary local and national notoriety, managing not only a prominent film writing column, but also marshalling film writing groups in New York. Meeting on a nearly monthly basis from late 1912 through 1914, and later more sporadically, these clubs provided intimate forums for aspiring and successful writers to talk shop.[6] The clubs counted amongst their ranks many of the best-known film writers of the early- to mid-1910s, rendering them important forums

for the discussion and debate of film form. Sargent himself often transferred these discussions to his columns, bringing the discourse both to the industry and the wider public. A tendency towards increasing exclusivity, symptomatic of the larger forces affecting film writing at the time, however, tended to mar the reputation of accessibility of these clubs, and, like film writing itself, major film writing clubs increasingly became the domain of industry insiders.

Perhaps to compensate for the lack of reliable advice to be gained from correspondence schools and the difficulty of accessing film writing clubs, throughout the early to mid-1910s the trade press developed a significant discourse on film writing, providing ample advice on matters of story, scenario, script and intertitle composition to budding writers. *Moving Picture World* contained an unrivalled discussion on the topic, and touted itself as an invaluable resource for writers.[7] At the end of 1911, trade press contributor William Kitchell commented that, even within the past year, compensation for the amateur writer had improved significantly, in part due to the constant advocacy from *MPW* (Kitchell 1911: 811).

Sargent's columns in *MPW* were the central locus for this discourse. A former vaudeville reviewer, film writer and scenario editor, Sargent in many ways served as a barometer for changes occurring with film writing. Though his articles appeared in *MPW* as early as October 1910, Sargent launched his first regular column, 'Technique of the Photoplay', in July the following year, covering writing technique and the general culture surrounding 'photoplay' writing (Sargent 1910: 921).[8] 'Technique,' lasted only until September 1911, but was soon followed by the column 'The Scenario Writer', and then, in April 1912 the more prestigiously named 'The Photoplaywright', which ran until 1918 (Sargent 1911a: 895; Sargent 1914a: 199–200, 238). By September that year Sargent was cited by the British trade journal *Bioscope* as 'the leading authority' on 'photoplaywriting' (*Bioscope* 1912d: 743). Following Sargent, *Scenario Magazine* (later renamed *The Photoplay Author*) provided a more focused format, exclusively dealing with film writing.[9]

The Photoplay Scenario, established in 1914 by A. W. Thomas, was similarly devoted entirely to scenario writing, as was a series of columns run under the same title in *Motography* beginning in May 1916. Sargent's column was something of an ambiguous advocate for film writing, both popular and professional, simply for the breadth and depth of its discourse. Though the degree of Sargent's actual influence is debatable, his column certainly functioned as a crucial discursive site for the emerging field, where tensions underpinning film writing could be aired. While an industry 'insider' himself (if somewhat peripheral), Sargent's columns typically advocated for the interests of the amateur and helped promote writing as a legitimate aspect of film production and film form.

The trades in general offered substantial advice – both general and detailed – on film writing. For Maras, this advice reflects what he describes as 'particularism', or the fashioning of writing technique as a specialized field of knowledge, and therefore a contested sphere of production in which one could only participate with knowledge of the specialized techniques determined by gatekeepers and authorities in the field. As he argues, with the emergence of particularist advice on

Figure 2.1 Epes Winthrop Sargent on the cover of the June–July 1913 issue of *The Photoplay Author*

film writing, knowledge of proper technique begins to function as ‘a key marker of the difference between the aspirant or amateur writer, and the successful scenario writer’ (Maras 2009: 162). ‘Technique’, then, began to serve as a stamp of authentication on particular examples of otherwise similar commodities.

Recommendations for the ideal submission format were one prominent example of this type of particularist advice. Amateur film writing inhabited various forms throughout the 1910s, ranging from brief story synopses to fully developed scripts listing scenes, describing mise-en-scène, and including intertitles and other directions. While some initially felt that (given the relatively improvised production methods of the major studios) a legitimate scenario could be as short as a half sheet of paper, such positions quickly gave way to a preference for the more fully developed script. By the end of 1911, *MPW* noted, ‘Most directors prefer the well-developed scenario’ (*Moving Picture World* 1911: 541). In 1912, Sargent

credited prolific screenwriter Bannister Merwin with developing 'the permanent form of photoplay'. Merwin's scripts included lengthy descriptions of motivation and detail, which, Sargent argued, 'makes for absolute clearness', and promoted standardized production (Sargent 1912f: 926). Such a style not only provided a more complex form with which film writers could busy themselves, but also added a further degree of specialization which those writers with some access to the industry could wield over those on the outside. Amateurs, accordingly, were led to believe that if they did not learn and follow the proper writing and increasingly byzantine submission procedures, their writing would be rejected outright.

One should be wary, however, of considering trade press discourse as indexically related to the film industry or film culture more generally. The film trade press addressed exhibitors, distributors and suppliers of exhibition materials and hardware, and tended to cater to their needs and interests more than to those of the general public. Sargent's advice, moreover, should be taken with a grain of salt. As a lesser film writer (generally with Lubin) and film writing manual author himself, his advice often served his own needs, desires and tastes, and occasionally contradicted itself, at times bordering on the arbitrary whims of journalistic dilettantism. At the very least, however, the substantial discourse on film writing in the trade press reflects a growing crisis in film production and the appeal to both industry and public to address it. Debates and contradictions in that discourse can likewise reveal tensions regarding how the crisis could and should be resolved. Trade press writers might not have been disinterested parties or objective commentators, but their discourse nevertheless reveals the important roles being negotiated in the film industry at the time.

While journals such as *MPW* and *Motography* tended to speak to industry insiders, to meet the growing demands of eager amateur writers, a substantial volume of manuals instructed novices on proper film writing technique. Frederick A. Talbot's 1912 *Moving Pictures: How They are Made and Worked*, for example, was lauded in the trades as 'a work for the general public, more than for the man behind the scenes' (*Bioscope* 1912a: 183). By offering advice on everything from format and presentation to generic and moral constraints, these film writing or 'photoplay' manuals helped promote, orchestrate and regulate the massive movement of independent writing, negotiating proper and ideal writing protocol and form for roughly 11 years, from 1911 until around 1922. During this period over 90 film writing books were published in English – a collection that Azlant speculates to be 'the largest body of instruction in an aspect of film production within the materials of film history' (Azlant 1980: 134). The bulk of these manuals were issued from 1913 to 1916, reflecting both the emergence of and a sustained public engagement with writing as a viable and important aspect of film culture.[10]

Like trade journals, manuals dealt with myriad aspects of film writing. Both journals and manuals, for example, devoted considerable space to negotiating the ideal use of intertitles, with many manuals devoting a chapter to the writing of 'leaders' (as they were called). Discourse on the topic ranged from discussions on the basic nomenclature for these devices to their specific usage, as well as

the broader theoretical and phenomenological questions they introduced to the medium. For some, the absence of intertitles represented the vanguard form, while an abundance of titles was archaic. For others, a minimal use of titles was preferable, yet the absence of titles was impossible. For yet others, dialogue titles were more cinematic than expository titles, despite the theatrical heritage of speaking characters, and for others still exposition had become a cornerstone of film narration.

Again, Maras's application of particularism is valuable here, as screenwriting manuals helped to establish a kind of hierarchy amongst writers, whereby manual authors spoke with the authority of the industry, and were able to define what was considered legitimate and modify those definitions to control access to production (Maras 2009: 25). Given the diverse authorship of these volumes, taken collectively they often produced vague, contradictory and at times superficial suggestions, and one should be cautious of simple confusion and charlatanism. Despite this caveat, however, the synthesis of the diverse advice found in manuals and trade journals presents a complex discourse that offers more than simply an example of journalistic opportunism, but rather a window into a chaotic moment in American cultural production. The disorder that this discourse reveals eventually required forces of authority to impose shape and definition, enabling film writing to develop the consistency of commodifiable labour, in turn allowing writing to function desirably as a useful and exploitable endeavour.

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Yet while the popular screenwriting movement had such a dominant role in American culture that, as Sargent suggested, 'From 1910 to 1914 it seemed as though every American above the age of ten was writing for the pictures', this creative energy was extinguished as film writing was gradually absorbed into an industry rapidly expanding and institutionalizing its production apparatus (1917: 1491). The reification of film writing practices during the 1910s was part and parcel of the broader institutionalization occurring in the industry, and the increasing dominance of the script in film production and intertitles in film form. Trade journals had hinted at this future as early as 1910:

> The producers of moving pictures will welcome the time when only bright and accomplished writers will contribute to their repertories. In none of the arts are there so many amateurs and poorly equipped aspirants for distinction than in play writing, persons who are depending upon natural ability, chance or accident to make a hit and be recognized, mere junk producing ink slingers.
> (*Moving Picture World* 1910: 335)

In many ways, the insufficiencies and impracticalities of the movement that prevented the industry from fully realizing the potential of amateur film writing provided the industry with clues as to how best to regulate its own practices, initially

compensating for the deficiencies of amateur production, and later supplanting it altogether. Some companies, as early as 1912, attempted to curtail the submissions of the scenarios they had quite recently sought. Essanay reportedly mailed the following notice to its contributors in 1912:

> We thank you for submitting enclosed scenario for our consideration, but at present time we have a very large stock of same on hand, yet to be produced, and, as we receive about five hundred scenarios a week, we feel that we cannot bestow upon each one the careful thought that we would care to, and is due to the author. Therefore, we will not solicit any more scenarios for several months, at which time we shall be glad to hear from you again.
>
> (Sargent 1912d: 1163)[11]

By the end of the decade, the industry had turned its back on the massive body of amateur writers in favour of professional writers, inciting Sargent to proclaim, 'Photoplay writing is no longer the toy of the multitude. It is a profession' (Sargent 1918: 1136). As writing became increasingly central to the cinema, studios began developing in-house writing departments for story ideas, continuity scripts and intertitles, and accordingly pulled back on the reins of public involvement in these aspects of film production. Writing departments allowed studios to maintain stables of writers able to write proprietary material in-house and likewise rework purchased material to meet studio desires. With these developments, amateurs were increasingly edged out of the picture. Vitagraph, in 1912, was one of the first studios to create specially defined positions of 'title and sub-title draughtsmen' as adjuncts to scenario writers, and by 1915 the need for such specialists increased dramatically (Staiger 1985: 146). At the same time, studios culled talent from the ranks of the literary establishment, including the theatre and the press, as well as those few amateurs who had succeeded. Sargent described the process as a 'gradual absorption of real writers by the studios', whereby many amateur contributions were ignored and many writers simply gave up (Sargent 1917: 1491–2). By 1917, outsiders were effectively blocked from participating in production.

Conclusion

Though the popular film writing movement was a relatively short-lived phenomenon, while it endured, it burned brightly – brightly enough that, despite the increasingly rigid borders of the industry, even a relative insider like Sargent was sceptical of film writing becoming entirely closed to the public. Predicting future writing possibilities in September 1912, Sargent wrote:

> We do not believe that any company will ever succeed in writing all its own plays, and making good, no matter how clever may be the staff members. It was because of the inability of the directors to supply fresh ideas that the first call for outside scripts was made, and the only companies that we know of

> that make all their scripts in the studio are doing poor work because of the sameness of the idea. There is not more than one writer in a thousand who can write two good photoplays a week for a year and repeat his performance.
> (Sargent 1912h: 1073)

While industry concerns would certainly dominate the later development of film writing, they would always be tempered and in many ways underwritten by popular influence. The legacy of amateur film writing, in fact, continues to loom large today with the profusion of screenplay manuals, romantic success stories of screenwriters who 'made it', and screenwriting courses offered in colleges around the country, still promising to divine market demands and convey them to eager novices.

Though the number of complete scripts written by amateur authors during the movement and directly transformed into films is ultimately undeterminable, it is likely that without copyright protections for amateur writers film companies were often able to incorporate material from submitted writings more or less as they wished, with or without compensation or credit given. Contempory accounts nevertheless suggest a minimal direct influence; in 1910 *MPW* noted that Vitagraph accepted only 2 per cent of submitted manuscripts (*Moving Picture World* 1910: 335).[12] Similarly, Giles R. Warren, scenario editor at Lubin in December 1910 complained that only two-thirds of 1 per cent of the total script submissions over the past six months (33 of 5000) was found to be suitable for production (Warren 1910: 1424–5). By 1916, Sargent asserted, 'probably eighty per cent of the [submitted] scripts do not pass the first reader'. However, considering the sheer magnitude of the body of writing being submitted, even this remaining 20 per cent could have a profound impact (Sargent 1916: 7). Moreover, if one considers the 33 suitable scripts Lubin procured over a six-month period, one can estimate that an amateur writer directly influenced up to one Lubin production per week. And such figures would not include those scripts inspired by amateur submissions, but rejected by the studio, and later transformed by studio ghostwriters. Hinting at this practice, June Mathis, then script editor at Metro, explained away plagiarism suspicions by claiming that similar ideas derived from 'an unconscious, "wireless" network of inspiration that vibrated throughout the land' (Palmer 1922: 190). Whether amateur film writings generally made it directly to the screen or not, it is certain that the great bulk of amateur-submitted photoplays provided the film industry with ample 'inspiration'.

Thus, amateur film writing can and should be evaluated for its role in production, where it had direct and indirect influences on film form and content, rather than simply as a popular hobby or pastime that served only as a corollary amusement for film fans. These writers and their work furthermore played symbolic roles in industry discourse, often as a counterweight to the demands of potentially unruly productive labour. Amateur writing functioned importantly as a contested terrain within the strategies of industry elites, as a site where popular access to film production could be limited by making the procedures

necessary for participation more difficult. But the amateur film writing movement retained significance even for those more professional writers who mastered the increasingly complex demands of film writing. As professional writers began to realize their value within the industry, making demands for screen credit or pay increases, studios could check such demands by raising the possibility of flooding the industry with unskilled amateurs. Film companies could thus wield popular participation in the industry as a menacing spectre threatening to overwhelm the already reduced position of writers in the industry ('there are thousands who would kill for your job'). In this respect, public screenwriting, as a reservoir of surplus labour, could be reserved as an antidote for the potentially destabilizing threat to management posed by the prospect of skilled writers gaining the weight and influence of organization.

This movement, moreover, represents a highly participatory moment in the history of popular film culture. While many point out the limited tenure of the screenwriting craze as an indication of its inefficacy, in another respect, the movement dominated film culture during one of its most formative eras. Amateur screenwriting had limited influence only when viewed from the standpoint of the industry, measured in terms of amateurs credited for actual films produced, and according to the end needs and not the creative acts of labour involved. Viewed from within the discourse of its own time period, this movement reflects an industry whose identity was in turmoil, discovering how its boundaries could or should be exploited and regulated. The instability of the amateur writing movement not only allowed the industry to test those boundaries, but also naturalized film writing as the product of popular, free labour in the process. The movement, therefore, is perhaps more significant to film history for what it can tell historians about the relationship between film producers and consumers 'before the industry' and labour relations in the emerging industry, than it is to functionalist questions of film production. Whether or not the amateur public ever actually contributed significant intellectual material to film production is less important, therefore, than the fact that film writing initially emerged from within the province of the public sphere as part of a massive popular movement of writing. As film writing became increasingly important, to the extent that by 1915 William Fox argued, 'The scenario is the basis of all good pictures', its legacy of public engagement would persist, and while the amateur status of film writing would gradually disappear, traces of the popular influence on film production would remain (Fox 1916: 1155).

Notes

1 See e.g. Staiger 1985: 125, 137–9.
2 One prominent exception was Roy L. McCardell, hired in 1897 by the Biograph Company as a staff author, editor, producer and 'press man', to write material for its mutoscope films. See Hamilton 1990: 3; Azlant 1997: 230–4. For more on pre-1909 instances of film writing, see Loughney 1997: 278–80.
3 This was truly a substantial sum, equivalent to the buying power of over $400,000 in 2010. $100 in 1912 had the buying power of approximately $2200 in 2010.

4 See e.g. Sargent 1912a: 32; 1913a: 44; Condon 1913: 147–52.
5 See e.g. Sargent 1913b: 458 or Ball 1913: 33–4.
6 Two of the most prominent New York clubs were the Inquest Club and the Ed-Au (Editors-Authors) club. Alongside the New York clubs, other branches were founded throughout the country, in places like Chicago, Boston, Pittsburgh and Ohio.
7 Sargent encouraged his readers to keep abreast of current production trends by reading the 'Stories of the Films' column, suggesting that his advice provided the key to their success (Sargent 1911b: 981).
8 Listed as 'Epes Winthrop Sargent (Chicot)'. Sargent was writing as 'Chicot' for Film Index at the time (Azlant 1997: 246–8).
9 Established by Thadee Letendre, the journal ran from 1912 to at least 1914 (Sargent 1912g: 650).
10 Thadee Letendre, who would later work for Universal and edit *The Photoplay Author,* reportedly issued the first book-length work on photoplay writing. Letendre's book was likely published in 1910 or 1911. See Sargent 1912g: 650; 1914b: 425.
11 *Biograph* issued a similar statement, and by 1912 many others would soon follow suit. See e.g. Sargent 1912b: 200.
12 An account from the following year listed the acceptance rate at 1 percent (R.V.S. 1911: 294).

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