The ‘producer-unit’ system of production (1931–55)

Good pictures are created, not manufactured.¹

*Motion Picture Herald*, 1931

Efficiency experts trained in other industries are usually baffled when they try to fit the making of a movie to their standard rules. The fact is, a movie is essentially a hand-craft operation, a one-of-a-kind custom job—but it must be made on a factory basis, with production-line economics, if we’re to hold the price down within reach of most of the people. The job is to do this without losing the picture’s individuality.²

Dore Senary, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer producer, 1950

In 1931 the film industry moved away from the central producer management system to a management organization in which a group of men supervised six to eight films per year, usually each producer concentrating on a particular type of film. Like other changes in the mode, this introduced greater specialization, in this case in the upper-management levels.

In fact, over the period of the central producer system, specialization in the producer function was already occurring. Dominating the detailed division of labor from 1914 through the 1920s, the central producer system had provided a single controlling manager over the production of a firm’s films. W.C. Harcus described the 1930 typical studio organization for SMPE members: a general manager supervised the production of fifty or so films per year. Under him were the executive manager (in charge of financial and legal affairs and routine studio functions), the production manager (in charge of pre-shooting and post-shooting work), the studio manager (in charge of various support departments), and a set of supervisors to help plan the films. The prototypical example of the central producer at this time was Irving Thalberg at MGM. Thalberg had gradually organized a set of subordinates, associate supervisors, the number of which by the early 1930s had grown to ten men. Each of these men had an area of specialization: sophisticated stories, animal stories, genre films and ‘curios,’ Marie Dressier films, sex ‘fables,’ and sad stories. With a project in mind, Thalberg and the selected associate would assign a writer, a director, and the leads. The associate then took over following the rewrites until a script was ready for Thalberg’s revisions. The associate supervisor’s decisions about cost estimates, sets, costumes, the rest of the staff, and so on were not final until approved by Thalberg. Despite this subdivision of supervision, a strong central producer was still in charge.³
Howard Lewis explains that around 1926 when theater attendance declined some firms believed that the films had become ‘stereotyped’ and attributed the problem to the fact that one individual had charge of producing thirty to fifty films a year. A proposed solution was a system in which a number of producers would supply product and the firm would merely finance the negatives. Lewis writes that the firm considering this was diverted from the change by the sound and merger movements.\(^4\)

In 1931 when attendance dropped off again, Lewis recounts that another company was said to be considering the change, including a profit-sharing program. The reason for the proposal was the belief that central control by producers and directors ‘had a tendency to minimize originality and the transfusion of new ideas.’ The use of a profit-sharing incentive would eliminate pressures of creation by time, and the firm would act almost as an independent facility. It would contract individually with talent for a number of films and would allow the filmmakers to work on its premises with no further interference. Eventually, the company rejected its first plan, but late in 1931 the firm did go to another plan. Lewis notes that one of the first firms to make the move was Columbia in October 1931. In November Fox and Paramount also instituted new management systems.

The trade papers reported part of these activities while they were in progress, helping rapidly spread the concept of ‘unit production.’ In June 1931, the *Motion Picture Herald* wrote that ‘a movement is under way… to band together a number of the industry’s prominent directors for the purpose of carrying out . a plan of unit production…. The group would function… along the lines of the now defunct Associated Producers…’\(^5\) Subsequent articles attributed the idea to David Selznick. Selznick and Lewis Milestone had in mind an independent production system in which a number of producers would each make one film at a time. Selznick promoted the plan on two grounds—‘cost and quality’—grounds dear to Hollywood. He argued:\(^6\)

> Through unit production there is a saving in overhead of between 30 and 40 per cent. The only good reason for factory production in any line of business is to lower cost. Now, the minute you remove the reason for factory production it is no longer useful.

> Under the factory system of production you rob the director of his individualism, and this being a creative industry that is harmful to the quality of the product made.

In editorials and columns, the *Motion Picture Herald* praised the plan, with Terry Ramsaye proclaiming that the idea ‘tends toward a restoration of some part of the individualism which seems to be an essential factor in creative effort.’ The Selznick-Milestone firm was not to test this procedure; Selznick, instead, signed as production head for RKO Radio Pictures within two months.\(^7\)

Meanwhile, other events were affecting the industry; most notably, the depression had started to force economy moves in the studios. One survival tactic was a type of collusion: an acrossfirm truce limited the budgets for the top films to $200,000, and the companies agreed to halt bidding wars for stars. Another tactic was cutting out expensive or non-productive workers. Three directing teams replaced John Ford at Fox, saving 50 per cent of his salary with the potential of three times the output. MGM fired writers in its story department, and Fox eliminated its reading department. Salaries were cut.\(^8\)

In late October 1931, Columbia announced its installation of ‘the unit system of production’:\(^9\)

The associate producers are Sam Briskin, Jack Bachman, Ralph Block, and J.K. McGuiness. Harry Cohn, vice president in charge of production, will confer with each producer on details for each film.
The individual producers will follow their films through to completion, and submit them to Cohn for final consultation. The new system is expected to allow greater freedom of action, singleness of purpose, and consequent better results in production.

When, in the next two weeks, Selznick took over RKO Pictures and RKO Pathe, ‘that company officially adopted the unit system of production championed by Selznick.’ Next came Fox. Winfield Sheehan and Sol Wurtzel would be producers with four associate producers. ‘Sheehan estimates that economies in effect at the Fox studios will save about $1,000,000 annually. He believes a saving of about $20,000 on each picture will result under the unit system, totaling $1,000,000 on the 50 features scheduled.’ Paramount followed in late November. That firm had been extensively considering ‘radical recommendations for elimination of waste.’ As constituted, B.P. Schulberg headed seven associate producers.\(^\text{10}\)

Although the institution of unit production in the studios had a different format than Selznick initially envisioned, his reasons for proposing it do seem to be the motivations of the films. A central producer could not keep as close a tab on day-to-day operations and costs as could a producer supervising one or two films at a time. In terms of quality, the image of individualism in creativity seems compatible with then-current ideologies. Both of these factors (abetted by industry discourse) resulted in a rather rapid changeover in management organization.

Lewis calls this unit system ‘decentralization of production,’ possibly following a current business term.\(^\text{11}\) Yet the elimination of a central producer who made or approved most of the routine decisions and the creation of a set of fairly autonomous producers cannot be equated with ‘decentralization’ since the studios retained centralized physical facilities and labor. In other words, no multi-divisional production operation was set up. (The scale of production did not justify such an action.) The producer-unit system may have imitated approved business standards (or responded to discourses about creativity and the independent artist), but the end result is not fairly termed decentralization.

In a sense, the producer-unit system was a revision of the director-unit system but with the producer in charge and a central staff which planned the work process. The producer-unit system also followed the industry’s earlier tendency toward type-casting and specialization, since these studio producers were identified with certain categories—which might be as illogically divided as Fortune’s 1932 list of MGM’s associate producers.

Studios now had one more management structure as an option, and they could employ it when they found it advantageous. A later section of this chapter will survey the structures utilized by the major studios during the 1930s and 1940s. The central producer had gradually gathered a corps of associates; given their experience in filmmaking, the disappearance of the central producer eliminated a higher authority but did little to change their routine activities. This change to a new system fitted into the dominant production practices, as a brief review of the modifications in those practices will show.

**Further subdivisions of the work in the 1930s and 1940s**

During the 1930s and 1940s, various changes in the work procedures occurred, including the addition of some small steps and the creation of a new department and several management positions. As Chapter 19 noted, when the production system faced new technologies, its solution was adding specialists and new steps in the chain of assembly. The same process is at work here; several of these changes are, in fact, attributable to new technologies, but several are also due to general expansion of the system.
The increased work activities in several departments resulted in further specializations and several new steps in the work order. The most significant of these were in story acquisition, script writing, research, casting, pre-shooting production, cinematography, make-up, and marketing research.

The procedures of finding suitable story material intensified. Studios embarked upon complete coverage of worldwide publishing. East and west coast editorial departments hired up to fifty employees; scouts talked to agents and famous writers, sometimes gaining access to a manuscript or galleys before publication. The reading staff would prepare ten- to seventy-five-page synopses which the editorial staff analyzed and assessed in a one-page summary. Extensive files with cross-checking by ‘plot structure, the dramatic possibilities, and the characteristic comic or tragic elements of the story’ covered almost everything published. If a studio purchased a ‘property,’ the other studios kept track of it in case they decided to buy it later. In the early- or mid-1930s, story conferences started, with verbal discussions of the possibilities of the stories before treatments were made.\textsuperscript{12}

With dialogue, a new element entered the continuity script, and this disrupted its established format. In addition, the post-sound shooting practice of the master-shot affected the work situation. Each studio adapted the old script format differently. When the Academy initiated its Research Council in 1932, one of the tasks with which the academy charged it was the standardization of script format. The academy summarized its problem and added the directive:\textsuperscript{13}

As a result [of the change to talking films] the placement, order, numbering, and display of the various parts [of the continuity script]—dialogue, action, set descriptions, 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.

The form that eventually became standard (the master-scene) was a combination of theatrical and pre-sound film scripts, a variant of the continuity synopsis used in the 1920s (see figs 25.1, 25.2).

The research department added tasks. It aided the legal department in avoiding accidental use of real street names, phone numbers, and people’s names (which might lead to lawsuits). The studios also added a separate research library for music. That library searched for copyright sources, catalogued music purchased by the firm, and determined authentic versions of older works.\textsuperscript{14}

Casting activities remained similar to those before 1931 although the loans of players were common and agents started functioning to some extent as producers. In a loan situation the renting studio paid the player’s salary plus an additional 75 per cent to the studio to compensate for the player’s unavailability there. Warners loaned Perc Westmore, its head make-up artist, to RKO for \textit{The Hunchback of Notre Dame} for a fee of $10,000. The deals could involve capital exchange rather than outright cash. Jimmy Stewart has said: ‘Your studio could trade you around like ball players. I was traded once to Universal for the use of their back lot for three weeks.’\textsuperscript{15}

Agents, particularly the firms of Myron Selznick and the William Morris Agency, functioned not only as go-betweens in setting up contracts but also as personal representatives, managing a client’s total career. By the late 1930s, with clients working throughout the entertainment fields, some agencies occasionally ‘block-booked’ their talent. They also ‘packaged’ shows by providing a complete set of entertainers for a producer
(often in radio). These activities started moving the agency from functioning as a support firm into producing activities as well.  

An additional step in pre-shooting production was script timing. H.G. Tasker described that work for the Society of Motion Picture Engineers:

A group of now experienced script analysts study the proposed story to determine the playing time of each scene of the production and, from the total, determine how long the picture would run. It is at once shortened to proper release length before filming, thus avoiding the common and expensive procedure of throwing away several reels of completed negative in order to boil the picture down to acceptable length.

What had been common procedure in the one-reel period (to estimate and reduce the narrative to fit release-length restrictions) and in the 1920s (to cut costs wherever possible through careful planning) became in the 1930s, as Tasker put it, ‘a neat bit of engineering.’

The introduction of Technicolor added a camera assistant who was expert in the process. The Technicolor Corporation insisted on this, wanting to insure quality color production (but also preventing access to its patented technology). The new Technicolor assistant concentrated on the camera’s operation, did daily tests, kept the daily log, and handled the slate and the ‘lily,’ a color chart for lab control. He also acted as the liaison with the Technicolor laboratories.

The standardization of make-up in the Academy sound tests (see fig 25.3) not only simplified directions to the players but more importantly insured continuity throughout the entire film. By the early 1930s, the studio make-up department had taken over the major players’ responsibility for selecting and applying make-up although extras continued to do their own. For a major player, the studio would do an extensive initial make-up session in cooperation with the cinematographer. Once everyone agreed on the facial design of powders, paints, and plastics, a chart—another paper record—would outline the areas and makeup codes for reference and continuity between the days of shooting (see fig 25.4).

Marketing research, likewise, became more complicated. While MGM routinely previewed and then extensively reshoot and re-edited, other studios, for more expensive productions, took care to predetermine the effect of a general release. For Paramount’s Night at the Opera, half a dozen scenarists composed a version which was pre-tested in small towns for six months, after which the story was rewritten on the basis of the audiences’ reactions.

In the early 1940s, the studios started using more formal methods of market research. By 1946, eleven studios tested their rough-cut films with George Gallup’s Audience Research, Inc. (ARI). By 1949, the Motion Picture Herald reported that independent production companies that had pre-tested their title, script, and cast with ARI met much more favorable loan-request responses from bankers. Leo A. Handel who ran his own audience research company, the Motion Picture Research Bureau, believed that with firms finally renting on a film-by-film basis (see Chapter 26), a pre-estimate of a response was more useful: the firms could better determine what rental fee to charge exhibitors. These two reasons for the institutionalization of marketing research was probably joined by a third. With declining audiences after World War II, knowledge about who was going to films became more important.

Technology produced a new department: during the 1930s, as special process work and composite photography increased in complexity and precision (see figs 25.5, 25.6) the work of such experts became recognized as an important subdivision of the labor process. Although work units with the art and cinematography departments specialized in this during the 1920s, some firms now organized separate, unified departments. Interestingly enough, Warner Bros’ unit in 1929 had the title ‘Special Research
Department’ and resulted from the merger of the special process departments at Warners and First National when the former bought the latter (fig 25.7). The head, Fred Jackman, had ten subordinates, each had his own specialty. In September 1932 RKO reorganized all of its effects workers into a single department; its head Vernon Walker consulted with the art and photography directors. The company justified the move as increasing economy and efficiency and allowing concentrated effort on ‘the highly specialized work.’ MGM retained part of its special effects with the art department until 1936 when it separated that section into an individual unit; that department prepared miniatures, process work, and full-sized composites while another department handled matte paintings and optical effects. In addition, several support companies offered special process work.  

Apart from small added steps and the creation of the special effects department, the principal change during the period was the addition of management positions. The production department added a unit head for each film. The new unit manager split the responsibilities for coordinating the film with the assistant director. Generally, the unit manager handled pre-shooting organization and budget control while the assistant director worked as the aid to the director.  

Similarly, the art department subdivided the work with a supervising art director assigning a unit art director. This unit art director did the layouts, sketches, and planning and checked back with the supervisor for approval of the work. Part of this trend was due to the increased complexity of the art work. Hans Dreier, art director at Paramount in 1937, pointed out that with color and sound, the staff had to consider special camera filters, set paints, and wall construction for resonance. The studio had to follow insurance requirements and state building laws, particularly for parts of the sets which the players used. As a result, it was customary for sketches and set models to consider lighting, camera placement, and lenses, and the staff would calculate lighting, camera, and microphone movements (fig 25.8). If the film was made in color, a Technicolor advisor supervised the coordination of all the colors of sets, costumes, and props.  

Finally, sometime in the mid-1930s, the ‘production designer’ position appeared for a few films. The production designer—the prototype was William Cameron Menzies—assimilated several work areas: he did art direction but also sketched camera set-ups and might even direct the film. Menzies’s control over the look of a film was probably a result of his successes in designing and the introduction of German films and talking pictures in the late 1920s. (For more on Menzies, see Chapter 27.)  

This brief summary cannot detail the work of all the 276 professions and trades which, as of the 1940s, contributed to a motion picture. Later modifications were, in effect, extensions of the earlier practices. Only minor changes occurred, and this supports the conclusion that the effects of advanced capitalism were not felt at the middle-management or specialist’s level in this technological industry. The firms accommodated increased work and changes in technology by adding specialists and more record-keeping to guide the making and assembling of the quality film. This is not imply that there were no variations within production practices; in fact, each studio organized itself a bit differently from the others.

**The studios and their systems of production: 1930s and 1940s**

A look at the seven major producing studios will reveal what management systems were in effect. Three implications of these systems deserve special note.

First, whether a central producer or a producer-unit system controlled the work decisions, all of the department organizations followed the standard structures and work practices. Despite the apparent differences among studios’ management structures, production practices were overwhelmingly uniform across the industry. Description after description of the department heads, their staffs, and work activities are similar, partly because of the industrial discourse’s emphasis upon efficient practices and partly because
of the unionization, which reinforced a uniform subdivision and work procedure. Such a general conformity helps explain the stylistic similarities between films made by many different workers in a number of studios.

Secondly, given the standardization of the product, we need to understand smaller deviations, particularly when they contribute to an innovation which becomes standard. Here we are interested in controlled stylistic change. Industrial discourse encouraged innovations, but these have to be seen in the context of the particular work situations. Production practices are part of the conditions for the existence of stylistic practices. Thus, any assignment of creative responsibility for a film must consider what decisions were allocated to what positions and note deviations among studios. It is at the point of management structures that variations in allocation of effective-decision-making occur. Beyond that, the standard procedures take hold. Furthermore, there were small variations in major decision-making not only among studios but within them. Upper-level management seems to have paid much greater personal attention to the more expensive productions. Certainly the preparations for these extended through more than one production season, compared to the rapid pre-shooting plans of the lower-cost A-product, which might see art direction start only a month or less in advance of shooting. B-product was hardly supervised at all by the first-string managers; most studios considered it the training ground for younger staff.

Thirdly, quality films—as defined by the box office—did not come so much from variation within the management systems but from overall investment in the top laborers, materials, and technology, which is probably why there is variance among studios. Now whether or not we would agree that box office success is a worthwhile criterion for the excellence of a film, it was the case that that was a primary factor for Hollywood (although Hollywood executives continually bemoaned the fact that films considered more prestigious and high-class often failed at the box office). Mae Huettig noted in 1941 that ‘it is a fixed belief in Hollywood and throughout the motion picture industry that the quality of firms is generally commensurate with cost.’ The ranking of the firms with respect to boxoffice successes was: United Artists, MGM, Twentieth Century-Fox, Warner Bros, Paramount, RKO, Universal, and Columbia.26

Certainly this information will not support much hypothesizing, but it does agree with the general consensus on how well these companies met the industry’s standards in quality filmmaking. Furthermore, the top three firms also ranked in the same order for highest expenditures-per-film. What is of interest to us is that box office success did not come only to studios that allowed one individual much control but also to those which used collective decision-making procedures and much mass production. The three leaders all employed different management systems: United Artists used director-units and producer-units; Twentieth Century-Fox, a central producer; and MGM, a producer-unit. This consideration is important for any discussion of one system versus another. In the following survey, as far as possible, the studios are ranked in descending order of management control.

Twentieth Century-Fox

In 1930 Fox had a central producer system in which the central producer Winfield Sheehan seems to have left many decisions in the directors’ realm. Sheehan participated in script and casting selection, knew the financial and production situations for each film, and checked the dailies. The company’s production department head Sol Wurtzel assumed Sheehan’s responsibilities in his absence, and each production had a unit manager. The director generally decided takes and supervised the final cut, which was checked by Sheehan, Wurtzel, the writer, and others.27

In November 1931, Fox shifted to a producer-unit system plan with two producers and four associates. Under this system, by 1933 Sheehan handled about twelve films a year, Wurtzel did the cheaper product, and Jesse L.Lasky, the rest. In 1935 Twentieth Century and Fox merged, bringing in Darryl F.Zanuck and
initiating a modified central producer arrangement. Wurtzel was left in charge of a little less than half the product, had his own set of writers, directors, and associate producers, and reported to Zanuck every week. Zanuck supervised the upper half of the output with greater and lesser degrees of dominance. Zanuck made the story purchase choices, controlled story conference decisions, chose the leads, and took the casting director’s advice on minor players. But while his control was overt in pre-shooting, he generally left his directors alone on the set. According to his assistant, some directors had freedom to shoot as they saw fit while others were required to follow the script or consult with the producer. Zanuck stepped back in during post-shooting production. While watching rushes, he gave instructions to the editor, dictated comments to the director, and chose takes and their arrangements. John Ford apparently was one of the very few directors usually exempted from this control. Zanuck did retakes for photography as well as acting. Zanuck became an independent producer releasing through Twentieth Century-Fox in 1956; until then, the work process he managed followed a strict central control.\(^28\)

**Warner Bros**

Warner Bros employed a producer-unit system with relatively rigorous attention to cost-efficiency production. Until 1933 Zanuck was the major production executive, but when he left, Hal B. Wallis became associate executive in charge of production under Jack Warner, studio head. In 1937, Wallis was using six associate producers, including Bryan Foy (who handled all of the B product). The other producers had specialties: for example, Lou Edelman made ‘service’ pictures and ‘headliners’ (films from events reported in the press), while Henry Blanke handled the more prestigious biography films including *The Adventures of Robin Hood, Juarez, The Story of Louis Pasteur,* and *The Life of Emile Zola.* Wallis devoted more of his attention to the company’s specials, initiated many of the scripts, and approved all of them.\(^29\)

The studio expected directors to follow the scripts, which in many cases they had little hand in writing. During the early 1930s, the exceptions to this included Jack Warner’s son-in-law, Mervyn LeRoy, who after early box office successes did what he wanted with his own budget, had some players under personal contract, and shared in profits. The other exceptions were directors of the highest budget films: consider, for instance, the making of *Juarez* between 1937 and 1939 (fig 25.9). After Jack Warner and Wallis had chosen a Paul Muni biography picture, Blanke and director William Dieterle picked a head writer and three others. The research department started assembling background material; later the vice consul of Mexico acted as a technical advisor; and Wallis, Blanke, Muni, and Dieterle took a six-week tour of Mexico, following the events in Juarez’ history. Art director Anton Grot and his assistant did 3,643 set sketches and models, and draughtsmen prepared 7,360 scale blueprints. A wardrobe head organized most of the costumes while the studio’s ‘style creator’ Orry-Kelly designed eighteen gowns for the female lead.\(^30\)

For the programmers and B-films, writers, directors, and other personnel had set working hours and a per-day expected piece-rate production. Retakes after shooting was over were most unusual. Under the supervision of Jack Warner and Wallis, directors participated in cutting unless shooting took them away. Studio composers received the film after the final cut. Warners also invested heavily in capital assets, such as its special process and sound equipment (fig 25.10). In the late 1930s, Warners started some special unit productions with producer-directors such as Anatole Litvak, William Wyler, and Howard Hawks, and in the early 1940s began distributing independent productions.\(^31\)
Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer

MGM’s Irving Thalberg functioned as a central producer until his illness in 1932. At that point, Louis B. Mayer hired son-in-law David Selznick to produce a set of films with his own unit. While Thalberg was in Europe, Mayer shifted the studio structure, turning Thalberg’s staff into associate producers. Selznick, Thalberg on his return, Hunt Stromberg, Walter Wanger, Joseph L. Mankiewicz, and others (with Harry Rapf doing the B product) filled out a staff line answerable only to Mayer. While Mayer has been accused of deliberately diluting Thalberg’s power—and that was the change’s effect—it must also be noted that the new structure followed the general pattern developing in the industry. (That may have made it easier for Mayer to justify the change.) After 1933, Thalberg averaged six films a year for MGM until his death.32

After Mayer returned from New York City from the yearly production meetings, he would have a large staff meeting. Then the associate producers were on their own. They assigned unit staff members under each department head to each film, and as far as possible tried to keep work units together film after film. MGM, like Twentieth Century-Fox, Warner Bros, and other studios, had a tendency, however, to avoid consulting cinematographers during pre-shooting work. The company also almost always limited their directors to the shooting phase, with films following one after another. If MGM demanded retakes, as it often did, and if the initial director was in another production, other directors might do the re-shooting.

In 1948, Mayer adopted a modified central producer system with Dore Schary in charge of production. During Schary’s tenure there until 1956, he managed the MGM product of thirty to thirty-five films per year with a set of fairly independent associate producers. The making of An American in Paris (Vincente Minnelli, 1950) during Schary’s control has been documented in a series of interviews with the cast and technical staff. Its production history repeats the Hollywood pattern with the exception of the ballet sequence, which was planned and shot after the completion of the ‘book’ (the narrative) and the rest of the numbers.33

Universal

Universal also had a producer-unit system by the mid-1930s. During the 1930–6 period the company focused on the subsequent-run exhibition market and the B half of the double feature. When Universal’s ownership changed hands in 1936, the policy shifted toward A production. Universal added independent arrangements to its operations in the late 1930s.34

In 1937, to acquaint SMPE members with current Hollywood filmmaking procedures, Universal hosted a conference tour, describing the making of a typical film in their studio. The producer Robert Presnell discussed problems of budgeting a lower-cost A film: since he could not afford higher-salaried actors, he often used new personalities. He had to plan in advance for a specific number of shooting days to meet the budget, so he would instruct script writers to limit the number of sets for the story. Since Deanna Durbin was Universal’s rising new star, the SMPE group watched her pre-record ‘Sunbeams’ for One Hundred Men and a Girl (1937). The supervising art director, John Harkrider, described sketches, blueprints, models, set dressing, and costuming and emphasized Universal’s innovative use of pastel-colored paints on the set: ‘The colors impart the correct atmosphere from the aesthetic, logical, and psychological standpoints.’ Through specialization and integration of the work, Universal’s staff of experts created their motion pictures.

In 1946, when Universal merged with International, a new production manager, James Pratt, took over the department, instituting lengthy two-day meetings in which every production worker on a film came in and discussed the project. The intent of the meetings was to foresee every problem before shooting started. As Pratt recalled:35
It takes the whole team, it’s a collaborative art that requires the efforts of all, every son of a gun from the doorman to the front office guy, you know. And I tried my best to actuate that, to create a respect, a mutual regard between the so-called creative group and the so-called backlot group.

Like the other studios, Universal worked to integrate its disparate craftspeople into an efficient, organized labor-force.

**Paramount**

Throughout the 1930–50 period, Paramount had a looser organization than other studios. The studio used a director-unit system with a central producer system of planning and departmental centralization. From 1928 through 1931, under Lasky and B.P. Schulberg, a set of associate producers ‘advised’ the directors who had a greater amount of decision-making and coordinating powers than in other studios. In fact, the associate producer and a unit manager were often assigned to a production after the director was chosen. The director, his assistant, and the editor assembled the final cut.36

In November 1931, Paramount moved to a producer-unit system with seven associate producers. In 1935, the organization had run through a series of production executives, including a 1935 team of Ernst Lubitsch and Henry Herzbrun. Lubitsch supervised a few films, leaving the other productions on their own. When the board of directors changed that year, the new president put William Le Baron in charge. Joseph Kennedy’s 1936 investigation of Paramount revealed cost overruns, random shooting schedules, and inefficient use of players and stars, and, again, the company replaced the top production management—this time with Adolph Zukor as studio head. Zukor, like Mayer and Jack Warner, acted as the liaison with New York management and as major purchaser of talent, but remained a broad decision-maker. Zukor supported Le Baron as production head and George Bagnall as studio manager, which helped secure conformance to schedules and budgets. Half the total output was assigned to B-product and a single producer with his associates, and the management left him on his own. For the other half, about twenty-six films for 1937, two systems operated under Le Baron. One system was a variant of the director-unit system, giving the director-producer charge of his production: once he had a story and cast idea, he cleared it with Le Baron and received a budget. The other system was a producer-unit one in which a producer acted in a supervisory manner over a director. For all of these, Paramount maintained a staff in sixty departments. Paramount also followed an earlier policy of releasing films produced by independents, such as the early 1930s films by writers Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur. Despite subsequent changes in studio top-management, most of the middle-line executives remained constant throughout the period.37

**RKO Radio Pictures**

RKO had one of the most changing histories of top-management control, but employees at the technical level remained fairly stable. During the early 1930s, RKO’s policy was the high-cost film, with independent producers supplying a number of additional films. There was also a program of B-product. When a new investment group bought minority control, RKO shifted to a double system: as at Paramount, part of the top management staff were producer-directors; the other part, a group of producers. As RKO president from 1938 to 1942, George Schaefer eliminated independent production with his director-unit and producer-unit systems and generally allowed the units their own control after initial decisions and approval. RKO followed standard practices with centralized departments, unit managers, and unit art directors. It had one of the best special effects departments in Hollywood and many of the remarkable shots in *Citizen Kane* (Orson...
Welles, 1941) were due to its work. In 1942, Charles Koerner took over as production head, and RKO returned to a policy of renting space in the studio to independents. In the mid-1940s under Senary, the firm made higher- and moderate-budget films and released the work of independents. When Howard Hughes took over the company, production schedules disintegrated and independent releases became dominant.\textsuperscript{38}

**Columbia**

The last of the seven, Columbia, was the first to move to a producer-unit plan in which it concentrated on lower-budget films until the firm had several box office successes in 1934. One of the most careful planners of production schedules, the studio throughout the period invited short-term independent production deals with successful directors, the best known of which was Frank Capra.\textsuperscript{39}

This review indicates the variance among the studios in their allocation of top-management decisions regarding the films. However, when cinematographer Lucien Ballard responded to an interviewer’s question as to whether there were differences among the studios, he said, ‘No; when you’re a professional, you know what you’re doing, and it shouldn’t make a difference whether it’s at Paramount or Fox or Warners. But after [Josef von] Sternberg left [Columbia], I was under contract to Columbia, and, you know, the biggest pictures there were eighteen-day pictures!’\textsuperscript{40} On the one hand, while cost allocations made a difference in production time and production value, it is more difficult to find cases in which the management structure made any specific difference in standard work practices.

On the other hand, some management structures may have inhibited alternative shooting techniques. Arthur Miller recounts an instance at Twentieth Century-Fox in which director Edmund Goulding tried to shoot each scene for *The Razor’s Edge* in a single take. Studio head Zanuck apparently stopped this, however, because ‘Zanuck wanted medium shots and plenty of closeups to play with when the time came to edit a picture.’ Since Zanuck took strong control of the post-shooting work, the practice of the long take would work against his ability to rearrange and rework the film.\textsuperscript{41} This may also have been the situation at Warners. Director Vincent Sherman recalled:\textsuperscript{42}

> Having seen many of John Ford’s pictures, I can imagine that he does a lot of cutting with the camera. We couldn’t do that at Warner Brothers. If we started doing that at Warners, we would have been in trouble right away. We knew that we had to cover a scene from many angles so there would be a choice, so that Wallis and Warner would have a choice of what they wanted. Now, sometimes we wanted to have a choice ourselves on these things.

Here, desire by management for control of the film’s look and sound seems to have hindered any stylistic options. (But recall, too, that Sherman accepts the most probable alternatives within the classical paradigm.)

It might not be just top management who worked to sustain the classical style. MGM editor Adrienne Fazan reported that Editorial Supervisor Margaret Booth expected her to go to close-ups, although Vincente Minnelli might intentionally not have provided them: ‘Minnelli sometimes fell in love with certain sequences, and he didn’t want them to be broken up or shortened. So he shot that way [no close-ups and long takes with camera movement] on purpose so that it could not be changed in the editing room.’ But studios satisfied their desire for close-ups by blowing up frames during editing—so even if a director tried to outsmart the studio by avoiding close-ups, technology provided a solution.\textsuperscript{43}

As Booth had an impact on editing procedures, MGM production manager Walter Strohm may have controlled experimentation with large camera movements. In recalling the studio’s filming practices, Strohm said that he believed the use of a camera boom had to be watched: Many directors ‘became very awkward
and mechanical, and you became conscious of a boom and not of the action… You just couldn’t have a
boom put on a shooting schedule without my approval, and I didn’t give it often.’ For Minnelli, however,
Strohm readily granted his permission because he believed that Minnelli knew how to make acceptable
camera movements.44

It should be clear that Hollywood’s criteria of the quality film usually guided individual decisions, no
matter what position or which worker had the power to make them. Together, groups of craftspeople
worked on a film project, collaborating on the commodity. Furthermore, Hollywood’s mode of production,
despite its modifications and minor variations through the 1930s and 1940s, continued to specialize the
work tasks and to function with standardized production practices. Many workers felt positive about the
collective work process. As Schary remarked later about the period:45

One of the lost things you can look back on in that era and say was good was the system of patronage
that enabled us to keep together a group of highly talented people and let them function rather freely
and profitably.

Serial manufacture of a standardized product resulted in a collaborative work situation in which
craftspeople jointly mass produced a great number of remarkable (and, admittedly, not so remarkable)
films.
Specialization continued & intensified with Producer-Unit system Central producer replaced by a number of producers (associate producers) Desire to decrease costs; with a smaller number of films for each producer to supervise, he could keep tighter control over costs More different kinds of movies produced; producers made movies within their specializations Individuality & creativity increased PRODUCER-UNIT SYSTEM. Producer-Unit system adopted by all Big 5 studios Allowed them to make even more films, more efficiently, than