The Twilight Zone of Contemporary Hollywood Production

by Charles S. Tashiro

This essay examines the labor and production policies of contemporary Hollywood in an effort to stimulate an informed criticism of practice.

The “Accident.” In the early-morning hours of July 23, 1982, a film crew working in the Santa Clarita Valley on the outskirts of Los Angeles was shooting a scene for a film set during the Vietnam War. In one shot, a helicopter was meant to hover over the film’s star, Vic Morrow, and two child extras. As the helicopter approached, a nearby hut built for the occasion was to explode. The charge for the explosion was set by professional technicians. The helicopter was flown by an experienced pilot.

After photographing the shot, the force of the explosion proved too great for the pilot to handle, sending the helicopter careening out of control. As it crashed to the ground, its rotors decapitated Morrow and the two children. The pilot survived the crash.

Under California labor regulations in effect at the time, the two children were working illegally, since the shoot took place later than the children were allowed to work. Fines totaling $62,375 were levied against the studio producing the film, Warner Bros., three other companies, and some individuals involved in the production.1 Attention then shifted to assigning responsibility for the accident. Blame increasingly focused on the film’s director, John Landis. Along with associate producer George Folsey, Jr., and unit production manager Dan Allingham, Landis was eventually tried for involuntary manslaughter. All three men were acquitted. The pilot of the helicopter lost his license but was not prosecuted. The completed Twilight Zone Movie included the scene that caused the accident, albeit without the decapitation.

One would expect, given their commitment to political evaluation, that academic media critics would study incidents resulting in the loss of life with at least the same level of interest given to gender and ethnicity. Yet an overview of such academically respectable media studies journals as Screen, with its stated commitment to leftist political causes,2 the Quarterly Review of Film and Television,3 with a similar commitment to “progressive” criticism, and this publication, Cinema Journal, the mouthpiece for an organization that has repeatedly positioned itself on the left of political issues, reveals a peculiar silence on fatal accidents like the decapitations on the set of The Twilight Zone Movie.

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Had *The Twilight Zone Movie* incident been an isolated event, this reluctance would be understandable. Since such accidents are in fact common and integral to the logic of industrial filmmaking, the failure of media studies scholars to address them suggests a rather odd definition of political responsibility. While a plausible explanation for this lack of attention to production realities could be found in the hypocrisies of academic criticism itself, this discussion will focus instead on the consequences of the structure and ideology of contemporary mass-media production. By necessity, this overview must be sketchy and superficial. A detailed study would run to book length. This article can, however, provide the contours for future debate.

**The Problem.** The first problem encountered by anyone interested in describing contemporary production is how to generalize about a system that in many ways seems to be a collection of exceptions. Working on a production or series of them and deriving conclusions from those experiences would be one way to gather information, but, of course, such involvement is neither encouraged nor rewarded by academia. Moreover, Hollywood is a notoriously closed community that does not respond well to outsiders poking their noses into its business.

Unlike media studies journals, the popular and trade publications provide a wealth of information and a good starting point for debate. Whether the even-handed technical descriptions of individual productions in *American Cinematographer* or book-length histories of productions gone awry, like Steven Bach’s *Final Cut: Dreams and Disaster in the Making of “Heaven’s Gate”* and Julie Salamon’s *The Devil’s Candy: “The Bonfire of the Vanities” Goes to Hollywood*, there is plenty of material available for anyone wishing to read between the lines of self-consciously objective description.

The daily press also provides resources. The *Twilight Zone* incident received considerable coverage in the *Los Angeles Times*, for example. The paper reported over several years on the investigation of the accident, the subsequent manslaughter trial, and the fallout from both. Its coverage also demonstrated the limits of such an approach. Treating the incidents leading to the acquittal as a series of atomized events, the various *Times* writers made no effort to understand the accident. Only Randall Sullivan in *Rolling Stone* tried to go a step further by interpreting events. His conclusion, that Landis was chiefly responsible because he was the director, while too limited in scope nonetheless suggests the terms for a discussion.

What remains true of all these accounts is that they focus on individuals as the engines of contemporary production. This belief in the possibility of individual expression is shared by every person involved in filmmaking, from studio chiefs to dolly grips, from movie stars to caterers. This myth persists despite the contradictions offered by these workers’ daily experiences, and despite the equally well-known reality that “freedom of expression” is always constrained by studio efforts to maximize market position and profits.

The focus on auteurism is also significant in that this ideology influences material success. Had *The Twilight Zone Movie* been a hit, it would have enhanced John Landis’s position in the industry and raised his critical reputation. This is the concrete, material manifestation of ideology: the financial success, the greater
power, future employment, and critical attention the myth of artistic freedom and responsibility creates. Even if reviewers remain universally hostile to a successful director's work, a mantra like "a film by John Landis" repeated frequently enough eventually becomes self-confirming. It is, finally, not achievement that creates authorship but advertising.9

Accepted fully, of course, this ideology should lead to article titles such as "The Fatal Accident by John Landis" or, as Randall Sullivan expressed it, "The Auteur Theory of Homicide."10 Instead, responsibility for breaking the law or for financial failure is diffused, muted, or deflected to the point of disappearance. This avoidance and obfuscation exonerate the director and hide the culpability of the studios, production company executives, and technicians who may have had a share in the accident. Responsibility gets suspended in the air between people’s intentions and actions, obviously there—three people undeniably died—but conveniently vaporous and vague, still hanging around like secondhand smoke.

**The Structure.** Responsibility hides easily in the nooks and crannies of modern Hollywood production, fragmented, elusive, a moving target. Indeed, the term "movie studio" today is little more than a figure of speech, a descriptive convenience to cover the irrational industrial, financial, artistic, and power practices that pass for rational organization. The companies that inherited their names and prestige from the high-studio days of the 1930s and 1940s may or may not be major "players" on the current film scene, but the only resemblance they have to their ancestors is the hierarchical decision-making practices that continue to predominate. (Most of them, for example, no longer even have physical facilities. When they need studio space, they rent it from other companies.)

Power has been reconfigured and made more complex, but it is certainly not more democratically distributed. Alongside the studios, for example, are the large agencies, which, while holding real power, probably hold less than is often supposed. Agencies depend on their list of clients. Because the larger ones run the gamut of talent from actors to writers to directors, more successful agents can "package" deals that bring these people together. (Whether they will work well together or make a decent movie is a secondary question.) Agents also have the power to see that projects do not get produced. If, for example, a popular actor's agent refuses to read the script for a project built on exploiting the performer's personality, the producers have to either find another less suitable actor or abandon the project.

Still, this considerable influence is limited by the agents' lack of control over budgets and finances and by the inconstancy of their "talent" (i.e., clients). Talent is handsomely rewarded financially and enjoys the double-edged perquisite of public attention in a way that studio executives and agents do not. This situation has the beneficial side effect for the agent and the producer of putting the talent on the front lines of responsibility. If a film is a success, all share in the rewards, including the otherwise ghostly executives poised to consume the fruits of productive labor. If a film is a failure, or if a fatal accident occurs on the set, only the artists are blamed. Their careers are put at risk, while the executives move to another studio.

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Like that of the agencies that represent them, the power of artists is restricted by their lack of control over the budgeting process. While their “noes” can sink a project and their “yeses” can help one get produced, the decision to finance a film ultimately lies outside the artists’ control. This is why so many successful stars, directors, producers, and writers form their own production companies. Particularly after a large popular success, it is common for studios to sign long-term contracts with successful talent, guaranteeing artists a certain number of “green lights” to produce proposed projects and executives financial security. Both guarantees are illusory, of course; one successful project does not assure future popularity, and in fact most long-term production deals are eventually bought up by studios when “hot” commodities prove to be lukewarm long-term investments.

For the most part, independent production companies put together the personnel who actually make films. These technicians and support staff are usually hired on contractual, one-time bases. Top-level contract laborers, such as cinematographers, editors, and designers, in turn subcontract their assistants and crews. For producers who sign guild agreements, all of these staff must be members of the unions that represent the interests of the actors, soundmen, grips, and myriad other filmmaking subprofessions.

With their exclusionary practices and conservative definitions of craft, guilds are indeed the semifeudal organizations their name suggests. At the lowest level of the power pyramid, union members are the only film workers forced to deal with capitalist realities. As runaway production and low-budget independent work break down their control over employment and film school graduates, trained in the technical arcana that were once craft labor’s source of strength, enter the workforce without loyalties to the guilds, film unions experience the corrosive effects of economic competition that impact other industrial laborers. These unions nonetheless remain powerful, particularly with respect to major studio-financed productions.

However, unions can exercise power only negatively, by disrupting or thwarting a production. They have no control over what is produced. At best, unions can militantly defend their members’ interests, although their behavior in this capacity is often colored by the need to ensure organizational survival at the expense of individual interest. It is common, for example, for unions to punish members for working on nonunion productions. In this sense, the power the guilds exercise over their members reflects the monopoly control exercised by the studios. The two parties are mutually dependent, if often antagonistic, forces. And, to the extent they use their limited power not to change the system but to exclude others and to guard their privileges, the guilds are profoundly conservative institutions.

There is another group of people, below the unions in the hierarchy, who are too low to be considered a meaningful part of the “power pyramid.” These are the unemployed or underemployed staff. Not members of protective guilds, they comprise the eager labor pool, the “line waiting outside the door,” of people being paid next to nothing or literally nothing, hoping for their “big break.” These people go as far as their ambition and salesmanship allow. Some reach the pinnacles of Hollywood power. More lead lives of destitution, dying of hope. Consisting of students, hangers-on, parasites, semi- and no-talents, new arrivals to Los Angeles,
and other hopefuls, these are the migrant laborers of Hollywood. They are just as ruthlessly exploited as their counterparts in agriculture and just as essential to the functioning of the system. The difference is that migrant workers know they are being exploited (and the public knows it too). The Hollywood lumpenproletariat, by contrast, is content to be on a first-name basis with fame and prefers that the public not know how thoroughly unglamorous its work is.

Many of the more successful people in Hollywood are major contributors to the Democratic Party, and most probably consider themselves politically progressive.11 They would no doubt be shocked to hear themselves described as exploiters. In fact, the average Hollywood executive has a degree of control over his or her employees that the most rapacious robber baron would envy, yet few have any compunction about exercising that power. Part of this lack of conscience may result from the fact that many of these “executives” are stars and directors who head their own companies. They are perfectly comfortable cavalierly exercising power, because they are used to getting their way on a set. (For example, director Steven Spielberg was one of the producers of The Twilight Zone Movie, as was John Landis himself.)

Contemporary Hollywood’s abysmal labor practices make the old-fashioned patriarchy of the studio days seem enlightened by comparison. The injustices of the mythical casting couch are nothing compared to the daily, mundane abuse of the average worker. Firing someone in a fit of pique is a regular occurrence, “interns” lucky enough to get paid are usually hired for less than a living wage, and none has a guarantee of a job after the internship is over. Secretaries are expected to work extra hours on short notice with no additional compensation, people who dare to put their private lives ahead of their jobs risk losing the latter, staff often find themselves training their own replacements, and on and on. Most of these practices are in violation of laws enacted by the very politicians these people have helped to rise to power, but no one dares to complain. Hollywood’s code of silence is stricter than the Mafia’s and just as difficult to break.

Most of the labor abuses in Hollywood derive from the thoroughly irrational nature of its business dealings. To give one small example, it is usual for the power elite of Hollywood (i.e., those in a position to make decisions) to take off the week between Christmas and New Year’s. It is therefore virtually impossible for a major deal to be closed that week except, perhaps, on the slopes at Aspen. Thus, the only event likely to happen in the offices of these people, except for those with something in production, is the compulsive hourly phone call from the boss, asking if anything has happened.

Under such circumstances, it would be sensible to give the office staff the week off. Even if something happens, nothing can be concluded until the bosses return, because they have deliberately structured their companies to make their presence indispensable. Instead, virtually all support staff are expected to work. The only objective explanation for this requirement is self-flattery. Executives can tell themselves and others that their staffs are so loyal that they show up during the holidays, or that they recognize how important it is to be there “in case” something comes up, or a million other nonsensical rationalizations. Of course, since just about all executives require this service of their staffs, it’s a meaningless pose, but
then, since it is true of just about every executive, such unnecessary “work” becomes a requirement of the job, even though everyone knows nothing will actually happen. It’s a self-affirming cycle of bluff.

At the top of this heap of contradictions sits the “auteur” of industry, the multi-millionaire entrepreneur who, because of the state of development of media companies, possesses power unusual for a large corporation. Journalist Emma Duncan notes:

Few chief executives can match Rupert Murdoch, Ted Turner, or Sumner Redstone for guts, bloody-mindedness, and sheer aggression.

There are two reasons for that. One is that show business naturally attracts big egos. The other is that the global entertainment business is still at the entrepreneurial stage of development, with companies run not by hired bosses, but by men who created them.12

Not surprisingly, the service class and contract workers receive the fewest financial rewards under this system, despite the repeated refrain that overpriced labor leads to excessive budgets. In fact, the real reason for the skyrocketing production costs is the “above-the-line” fees paid to directors, stars, writers, and producers, who demand such upfront payment because they expect the studios to cheat them out of their fair share of any profits.

Studios and the people who control them, while receiving little publicity from this or that hit, reap huge financial rewards, maintain copyrights over products, and control all distribution and exhibition.13 To put financial realities in perspective, consider the example of the “disastrous” Bonfire of the Vanities. Warners’ prestige release of 1990, Bonfire cost between $45 and $50 million to complete. Its box-office failure caused much public hand wringing by studio executives about “out-of-control” budgets. Nonetheless, that same year, Warner Bros.’ studio head, Steven Ross, was the highest-paid executive in America, with reported earnings of $78.11 million (i.e., more than 50 percent more than the entire budget for Bonfire).14 With compensation like that, talent and staff could be paid nothing and budgets would still be out of control.

By downplaying their stake in individual productions, studio executives exercise control, reap the greatest financial reward possible, and avoid responsibility for catastrophe when it occurs. By sanctioning, even exaggerating, the contributions of artists, studio executives shield their own activities from public scrutiny. They are thus rarely held as accountable as their equivalents in other corporations, since they can always point to the waywardness of talent as the reason for their failures.

Studio executives risk very little by playing up the “art” of film production. Even if artists increase their power and asking prices by being involved in successive hits, studio executives retain the ultimate power of “yea” or “nay.” A film is “by” someone only if a studio finances it. The artists’ degree of creative responsibility is secondary to the corporation’s control of its assets, to its political and economic power.

The War. When people gather finally to make a film, one of the most common and accurate analogies used to describe their activities, made by participants and onlookers alike, is to a war.15 For example, consider Julie Salamon’s description of the first day of principal photography on the set of The Bonfire of the Vanities:
Despite the apparent casualness of the troops . . . the film world was as rigidly hierarchi-
cal as the military. Richard Sylbert had been right when he’d said that moviemaking was 
like war. The perfect war, in fact. There were uniforms and regiments and communica-
tions on walkie-talkies in code, middle-of-the-night maneuvers under grim conditions,
and an overwhelming sense of mission. But all that got shot was film.16

This is more than dramatization about an industry addicted to hyperbole. It is 
a nearly literal description of the attitudes film workers shooting a film have to-
ward the inconveniences of a physical world ceaselessly exploited in the service of 
spectacle and fiction. The war analogy nonetheless misses the extent to which the 
command structure on a set mirrors the overall hierarchy working behind the scenes.
Brian DePalma may have been calling the shots in New York, but he was at most 
the field commander in a battle directed from Hollywood HQ. Salamon’s descrip-
tion also provides no reasons for why filmmakers view the world antagonistically 
and the potential consequences of their attitudes.

Movie corporations have a double investment in the kind of large-scale spe-
cial effects used in The Twilight Zone Movie. To distinguish its impersonally-pro-
duced commodities from more distinctive fare, studios invest in pleasurable, 
spectacular surfaces to dress up recycled content. These spectacles then become 
the technical standard against which more individually compelling work is mea-
sured and found lacking. Since only corporations with access to mass capital are in 
a position to produce such images, the spectacular surface becomes one of the 
chief supports of the industry. (Ironically, in trying to distinguish these commodi-
ties from one another, both industry and criticism repeatedly emphasize what is 
theroughly unoriginal about them, their literary content.)

At the same time, all films, in order to persuade, must convince as compelling 
illusions of real space. It is that capacity, structured in time, that distinguishes 
cinema from other media. Thus, the “great special effect,” no matter how it is 
achieved, is so because of its capacity to persuade viewers momentarily that the 
event the effect represents “really” happened. That impact can be created only by 
measuring the manufactured effect against real space.

If the car must truly crash, if the building really has to collapse, or if the explo-
sion must actually set the helicopter off course, then filmmaking is in a real war 
with the physical environment. That war is controlled and circumscribed, to be 
sure, but physical destruction is still the purpose of the exercise. Filmmakers pro-
ducing such effects may not set out to kill people, but no one should be surprised 
if they do. Such “accidents” are a logical consequence of flirting with death, the 
promise just nearly averted. If we do not believe someone could be killed in these 
elaborate games of Chicken, the effects cease to compel as spectacle and thereby 
cannot provide exchange value for mediocre content.

The Alternate Version. Consider, then, this alternative description of the events 
leading to the deaths on The Twilight Zone Movie. A large movie company, seek-
ing profit, wants to distinguish its product from that of its competitors. While it 
could diversify into alternative modes of production and expression, habit and 
proven success lead it to continue to invest in narrative-based two-hour spectacles.
Since the spectacular image requires professional technicians, a large budget is required to produce that image. To ensure profit from such a potentially large investment, the studio hires “proven” writers, directors, and actors as a quasi-guarantee of its investment. Because of their demonstrated capacity to generate revenue, these workers insist on higher salaries, thus raising the budget that much more. This expense requires even more neutering of content and expression to attract the widest audience possible.

Given that both the studio and the audience have an ideological investment in the “realistic” image, if the script for The Twilight Zone Movie requires scenes of war, then, to a certain extent, the conditions of war will have to be reproduced on the set. If the script further describes an outdoor battle, then those conditions must be staged outdoors, probably on location. Once outside the controlled physical environment of a studio, physical hazards increase with the unpredictability of wayward environmental conditions.

On location, the crew photographing the scene is directed by someone who has been encouraged to believe he should create the most spectacular image his imagination and budget will allow. Indeed, he has a responsibility to create such an image, since special effects will help to distinguish his product from its competition. Since one law (forbidding child labor after hours) has already been broken, the precedent for ignoring constraints has been set. Not that such a precedent is necessary: in an environment in which participants view themselves as soldiers in a war, even if only a war to get the “best shot,” legal niceties are not high priorities. In any event, actors, special-effects technicians, and pilots are, like the director, paid to do what they are told.

When an “accident” occurs and fatalities cannot be hushed up, there is an effort to fix blame. Because of the indifference of the critical community, this effort becomes strictly formal and legal, rather than moral or political. Thus, instead of trying to understand how and why three people were put in a position that resulted in their deaths, efforts were made to determine if laws were broken and, if so, who was legally responsible for the decision to break them. Where there is no contest, as in the fact that the children were clearly employed at a time when they should not have been, punishment is meted out within the guidelines established by statute.

Fines cover the breaking of a labor regulation. A criminal court determines responsibility for deaths. Since the ideology of singular creation and responsibility structures the thinking about film workers and studio executives and is fundamental to the legal system itself, the search for blame is directed toward finding the individuals responsible for the “accident.” Since, thanks to auteurism, high-profile directors are most in the public eye, they logically become the major focus of any inquiry about criminal responsibility for activities on a set. This focus overlooks the structural dynamics that positioned individuals to be involved in such a situation. It contains responsibility by failing to shed light on the overall hierarchy of corporate command.

Thus, it makes legal sense to have tried Landis, Folsey, and Allingham as the individuals most directly responsible for the event. Having delivered a “not-guilty” verdict, the legal system becomes silent. It does not make moral sense, however,
for the process to have stopped with the verdict. If we accept the logic of ascribing blame to individuals, and if Landis et al. were not guilty, who was? Unless attributing events to Divine Will (something the legal system may be willing to accept but that materialist critics should not), responsibility has to be located somewhere on earth and in human actions. And if the “not-guilty” verdict should be read as a recognition that individuals cannot be held responsible for accidents resulting from corporate decisions, why has the legal system not been reformed to allow corporations to be held criminally responsible? (Corporations already enjoy many of the legal privileges of individuals, such as the ability to hold copyright. Why then do they not have the same legal responsibilities?)

There is little likelihood that the legal system will be restructured to make corporations or the individuals who head them criminally responsible for actions performed while creating their products, except, of course, in the case of such economic crimes as fraud or embezzlement. One does not have to be a cynic, just a realist, to recognize that in a capitalist society laws are structured to benefit corporations and individuals with massed capital. If we doubt this, we should consider that exactly two years after the Twilight Zone accident, and reportedly partially inspired by it, the state of California’s Department of Industrial Relations announced revisions to child-safety rules. Although spelling out in detail what was not permissible and considered dangerous, the new rules increased the number of hours children could legally be employed. The rationale for these revisions, as expressed by California Labor Commissioner C. Robert Simpson, was “to induce producers to stay in California.”17

What the courts may not touch, we the critical community ought to consider. Therefore, to determine political responsibility for the Twilight Zone or any similar movie set accident, we need to ask some questions:

(1) Who stood to gain the most?
(2) Who authorized the project?
(3) Who had ultimate authority for activities on the set?
(4) Who continues to make money on distribution of the film?

As for our responsibilities as critics, we should ask:

(1) Why are the deaths and maiming of film industry workers and the industrial practices that cause them less important than issues of representation pertaining to “political” criticism?
(2) What degree of complicity does silence establish between the “critical” community and those responsible for such actions?
(3) Is the most potent ideological deconstruction to be found in representation or in the attitudes of production itself?
(4) To what extent does our nearly exclusive attention to industrial, commercial filmmaking as a subject help to perpetuate its coercive control over audiences and to suppress potential alternatives?

If such a call for an analysis of actions seems naive, consider the postscript to the Twilight Zone story. Six years after the accident, long after the publicity for the
manslaughter trial had died down, the only concrete expression of responsibility in the entire affair, the fines levied by the State of California's Occupational Safety and Health Administration against Warner Bros., Landis, and others were reduced from the initial total of $62,375 to $1,350.18

Divided by three, that's $450 per head.

Who's being naive?

Notes


2. See, for example, Sam Rohdie's editorial in Screen 12, no. 2 (summer 1971): 4–6.


4. For a look at some of the incidents in the early 1980s, see Michael London, “Safety First, Last, or if Ever?” Los Angeles Times, February 6, 1983, 1+. For a discussion of why such accidents are integral to Hollywood expression, see my Pretty Pictures: Production Design and the History Film (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998).

5. Much of the following description of individual abuses is derived either from personal experience working in “the industry” or from anecdotal information relayed to me by others.


8. It is debatable how accurate auteurism ever was as a description of classical Hollywood, but it has never been less accurate than it is today. Only a handful of contemporary American filmmakers have anything approaching a distinctive visual style, and only a few more have consistent thematic concerns. The rest are highly paid executors who rely on technicians and a lot of money to cover their basic lack of imagination. Many are graduates of film schools.

9. Films like The Twilight Zone Movie, with no distinction but their negative publicity, create unique marketing problems. See Jim Seale, “The Untouchables,” Los Angeles Times, June 19, 1983, 1+, for a discussion of the difficulties publicity departments face in selling such films.


11. See, for example, ‘Lexington,’ “The End of the Affair,” The Economist, August 19, 2000, on the relationship between Hollywood and the Clinton administration.


13. The studio chief’s anonymity may be giving way to the temptations of fame. See “Mr. Bronfman in Tinseltown,” The Economist, November 21, 1998, 66–67, and particularly “Business as the New Rock and Roll,” The Economist, November 28, 1998, 70. The latter article points out some of the dangers for executives who acquire too visible a public profile.

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