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## Whose film is it anyway?

By Scott Galupo  
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You think you're not appreciated at work?

Try writing for the movies.

"I'm a screenwriter, working in an industry — the Industry, we call it — erected on the backs of mostly unpaid labor by talented and diligent hacks cranking out free pitches and spec scripts," lamented the pseudonymous "David Kahane" in a postmortem Oscars write-up for National Review Online. "Above the line but always low man on the totem pole. That's the price we pay for anonymity ..."

Long-suffering viewers of this week's grueling Oscar ceremony no doubt caught the montage of movie clips paying tribute to the nerve-racking plight of writers, for whom nothing is scarier than a white page and a blank brain.

Then, after ransacking those brains for the ghost of a story, chucking away balled-up scraps of paper and pulling all-night sessions of composition and revision — if, after all that, they're lucky enough to see their work on-screen, it's credited first and foremost to the director.

Equally vexing, according to David Mamet, the playwright-turned-filmmaker and author recently of "Bambi vs. Godzilla: On the Nature, Purpose, and Practice of the Movie Business," a collection of dyspeptic essays about said business, is the profusion of producers and financiers whose tangible contribution to movies is often minimal at best. The European Screenwriters Manifesto is a pretty good sign of just how desperate things are becoming (even controlling for the fact that on the Continent every frustrated human aspiration is considered a human rights abuse). Circulated by the Federation of Screenwriters in Europe, the "manifesto" proclaims that "the screenwriter is an author of the film, a primary creator of the audiovisual work" and that, furthermore, the use of the so-called "possessory credit" — as in, "A film by Martin Scorsese" — has been "indiscriminate."

Such declarative language — a vision of reform as much as it as an assertion of fact — is an attempt to push back the regnant assumption that directors rule the medium.

One of the signatories of the manifesto is Oscar-nominated Mexican screenwriter Guillermo Arriaga. He has been so relentlessly vocal about the indispensability of screenwriters that Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu, the director with whom Mr. Arriaga collaborated on the acclaimed trilogy "Amores Perros," "21 Grams" and "Babel," barred him from the premiere of the latter movie at last year's Cannes Film Festival. According to the Los Angeles Times, Mr. Inarritu was "miffed that Arriaga claimed much of the credit for the critical success of '21 Grams.' "

If my 2003 interview with the screenwriter is any indication, Mr. Inarritu may have a point. "The structure you watch is the structure I used," Mr. Arriaga said at that time, referring to the fragmented, interconnecting story lines that are the hallmark of the trilogy. "I wrote it that way."

Was Mr. Arriaga overstating the case — in effect, hogging individual credit for symbiotic work?

Even proponents of the "auteur theory" associated with the venerable cineaste Andrew Sarris will acknowledge that filmmaking is nothing if not a team sport. Neither the auteur

theory nor its alternative — critic David Kipen's "Schreiber Theory," an attempt to substitute the primacy of writers for that of directors — is evenly applicable to every given film.

Still, it's remarkable what a difference a good script can make — even for the world's greatest directors.

Little remarked on in the run-up to Martin Scorsese's long-overdue victory at the Oscars was the fact that "The Departed," while not his best movie, was his most "written" movie. (Small wonder that screenwriter William Monahan won an Oscar himself.) No other movie in the Scorsese oeuvre depended so much on the interplay of language or the intricacy of a plot.

Still, the talk was all Marty, Marty, Marty.

Virtually the only screenwriter who generates excitement of his own is Charlie Kaufman. His scripts aren't merely raw material for directors or that notorious class of anonymous "script doctors"; they're more like novels, at least in the sense that their contents are seen as his distinct creations. (Jim Carrey once said the industry views him like Moses coming down from Mount Sinai with God-etched tablets.) But Mr. Kaufman upped his profile in part by the audacious act of inserting himself into one of his movies ("Adaptation").

Screenwriters can be forgiven for feeling like pilot fish cleaning the teeth of sharks in exchange for not being eaten.

They can be forgiven, too, for not noticing that this year's Oscars was perhaps their finest moment in years. Before the Oscar for best original screenplay was announced, we saw clips of each film as the presenters read from their respective shooting scripts. One could vividly see how the descriptive, literary language matched the contours and composition of each shot at every beat.

Primary author? Heck, yes.

Then the moment vanished: The winner in that category, "Little Miss Sunshine" scribe Michael Arndt, thanked the "true authors of the film," husband-and-wife directing team Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris.

"True authors." What a gracious touch.

And go figure that those who act like pilot fish are treated like same.

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