

THE FILM PRODUCER AS A CREATIVE FORCE

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Abstract: This article seeks to shed new light on our understanding of the work of the film producer, discussing the creative nature of this craft. It does that by searching for answers to two questions: Firstly, up to what point can we talk about creativity in the producing of films? And secondly, how is that creativity practiced? To deal with both these questions it offers a historical overview of the creative producer and how it is presently considered. Finally, it also briefly addresses the influence of digital revolution in the production process.

The ‘Unsung Heroes’

“Most people have absolutely no concept of what producers do, even people in the film business...”

—BARBARA BROCCOLI (co-producer of James Bond movies).

“Every producer is different —it’s been so different on every movie that I’ve worked on. For me, there is no definition”

—SYDNEY POLLACK (producer and director).

(Quoted by De Winter, 2006: ix)

As the previous quotes illustrate, of all the professions related to the film industry the job of producer is probably the least recognized and, at the same time, the most difficult to define. Richard D. Zanuck, son of the legendary Darryl F. Zanuck and one of the most emblematic Hollywood film producers, responsible for hits like *The Sting* (1973), *Jaws* (S. Spielberg, 1975), *Driving Miss Daisy* (B. Beresford, 1989) or *Road to Perdition* (S. Mendes, 2002), alluded to this reality some years ago:

People outside Hollywood and New York don’t really have a clear idea of what a producer is or what he does. It’s sort of tragic that this important function doesn’t have a clearer image. Most people think a producer is the one who puts the money, which is wrong. If you’re smart, you will never put up the money yourself! (Seger & Whetmore, 1994: 51).

Perhaps this fact explains why most of the newcomers in the film industry want to become directors and screenwriters rather than producers. However, very few screenwriters and directors would have achieved a preeminent place in film history without the support of those professionals who work behind the scenes, anonymously for the majority of the audience. For this reason, various authors have shared the view of David Thomson who emphatically asserted:

The history of production has a better right to be considered the mainstream of American film than do the careers of all of our directors (...). It is a disaster that the theory and practice of production have been so willfully avoided in American film studies. In concentrating on directors, we have inflated most of those reputations and demeaned those other artistic careers thought worthy of academia... Minor directors have books written about them, and yet the great producers are ignored (Thomson, 1982: 35).

Effectively, for film historiography, producers are “the greatly forgotten ones” (Pardo, 2002a: 230)ⁱ; or even more, “the unsung heroes” as Steven Priggé underlines in his book of interviews to famous producers (Priggé, 2004: 1). In some way, this kind of historical ostracism is due to the difficulty of determining what the producer does and, more specifically, to the great variety of theoretical and practical knowledge this peculiar craft demands. As Helen De Winter states in another collection of interviews with well-known producers, “the very term ‘producer’ seems nebulous and evasive, revealing nothing and concealing everything” (De Winter, 2006: 1). And Bruce Houghton, a producer himself, points out:

I know that I have opened a can of worms with the word ‘Producer’ because entertainment entities, both networks and studios, have used the word with such inaccurate profligacy of late that it has lost its power of identification (Houghton, 1991: vii).

From its very beginning the job of producer has covered both financial and creative responsibilities without finding itself —from a conceptual point of view— confined primarily to one side or the other. Only the evolution of the industry itself, along with the aptitudes of those who have held this job, has tipped the balance toward technical knowledge or, less frequently, toward its creative capacity.

The role of the film producer has certainly passed through very diverse stages of development in its first century of existence. Moments of splendour and grand protagonism —the Hollywood studio system era— have been succeeded by others of downsizing and marginalization —with the peak of so-called *auteur* cinema in the sixties. The last three decades, however, have witnessed an increased appreciation of the figure of the producer and, more precisely, the *creative producer*. Some authors underline its exceptionality, as if it were a *rara avis*; others, on the contrary, maintain that producing and creativity have always been synonymous termsⁱⁱ.

This article seeks to shed new light on our understanding of the work of the film producer, discussing the creative nature of this craft. It does that by searching for answers to the following questions: up to what point can we talk about creativity in the producing of films and how is that creativity practiced? Can we properly speak of creative producers? In dealing with these questions it is necessary to offer beforehand a brief historical overview to the concept of the creative producer as well as the way it is seen today. Then, using that as a base, we will focus on the peculiar way that creativity can be exercised, delving into the nature of cinema as a collaborative art as well as the authorship of the filmwork. Finally, as a further step, we will discuss how the digital technology is changing the standards of the production process, and therefore, the role of the producer itself. The core of the ideas I am proposing here was published in an

article some years ago (see Pardo, 2000). As time has passed by, I have been able either to reaffirm some of them, reformulate others and, on top of that, enrich them with new reflections.

Creativity and Film Producers: A Brief Historical Overview

This is not the place to offer a detailed account on the Hollywood studio system, the post-studio era, or the European film industries along the first century of existence. I am quite aware this would require a more nuanced institutional, social and political framework than what this section pretends. My aim here is just to present some ‘brush-strokes’ about the understanding of the producer’s craft along the first century of cinema. It must be underlined at this point the contrast between the abundance of bibliographical sources in the case of the American producers and the scarcity of them in relation to the European onesⁱⁱⁱ.

A succinct review of the history of moviemaking is enough to verify that, since its origins, film production has been tied to creativity. Some film historians as well as critics, together with the producers themselves, have indicated this reality through the years. Two decades ago, for instance, Jean Paul Firstenberg —then director of the American Film Institute— pointed out that “the people who really founded the business were producers, and all very creative people” (Firstenberg, 1987: 67). In fact, if men such as Charles Pathé, Léon Gaumont or Ole Olsen in Europe as well as Carl Laemmle, Samuel Goldwyn, Adolph Zukor, Louis B. Mayer or the Warner brothers in the United States had something in common, it was their enterprising and visionary spirit (Gabler, 1989; Bakker, 2008).

Once the studio system was established in Hollywood, film production was understood as an essentially creative task, ranging from script development and hiring of the main talent (director and cast), to editing supervision. One of the pioneers of the system, Jesse Lasky, described the producer’s role of in the following way:

In his hands lies the supervision of every element that goes to make up the finished product. These elements are both tangible and intangible, the control of human beings and real properties as well as the control of the artistic temperament, the shaping of creative forces and the knowledge of the public needs for entertainment (Lasky, 1937: 1).

In this period the job of the producer was specialized and hierarchically structured. In charge of the studios were the heads of production, whose mission was to match the annual production budget to specific film projects, able to achieve a good percentage of the box office (Davis, 1993; Staiger, 1985). Some of the most famous heads of production were Irving G. Thalberg, David O. Selznick and Darryl F. Zanuck, followed by Hunt Stromberg, Hal B. Wallis, Jerry Wald, Y. Frank Freeman, Dore Schary, Pandro S. Berman and Walter Wanger. These young talents helped to establish the paradigm of the Hollywood film producer, and made possible, in André Bazin’s words, “the genius of the [studio] system” (quoted by Schatz, 1988: 7). Talking about the producer during the Hollywood golden era is equivalent to talking about the creative producer, as it can be seen in the collection of memories written by David Lewis —an associate producer who worked for many of the emblematic names mentioned above— significantly titled *The Creative Producer: A Memoir of the Studio System* (Lewis, 1993).

Among this group of producers, two of them stand out by their own merits: Irving G. Thalberg and David O. Selznick. They became the paradigm of the classic Hollywood producer during the studio system, and both of them had a very clear understanding of the creative nature of their craft. Thalberg, for instance, defined moviemaking as “a creative business...in the sense that it must bring in money at box-office, but it is an art in that it involves, on its devotees, the inexorable demands of creative expression” (quoted in Thomas, 1969: 252). Selznick, for his part, according to an article of the era, “like all creative producers, considered himself an excellent judge of talent and commercial story properties, a capable writer and film editor, and a demanding production executive” (Selznick, 1937; 1988: 473-474). For Selznick the producer was “the man who is most of the time responsible for the creation of the pictures” (ibid). This responsibility included not only decisions of a creative nature, but also business ones, although he placed greater importance on the former, going so far as to defend the need for the producer to have knowledge of screenwriting, direction and editing. He explained it so in a lecture given in 1937:

The producer today, in order to be able to produce properly, must be able not merely to criticize, but be able to answer the old question *what* or *why*. He must be able, if necessary, to sit down and write the scene, and if he is criticizing a director, he must be able not merely to say ‘I don’t like it’, but tell him how he would direct it himself. He must be able to go into the cutting room, and if he doesn’t like the cutting of the sequence, which is more often true than not, he must be able to recut the sequence (ibid.: 475).

Perhaps Selznick’s assessment sounds excessively megalomaniac, but it does illustrate a way of understanding film production.

Another significant example is Mervin LeRoy, who, as producer, gave birth to titles like *Dramatic School* (R. Sinclair, 1938), *The Wizard of Oz* (V. Fleming, 1939) and *At the Circus* (E. Buzzell, 1939). In 1953, he published a book on different crafts in the movie industry, breaking them down into four categories: the creative group, the technical group, the business management team and the skilled workers. Curiously enough, he placed the producer in the first one, along with screenwriters, directors, actors and designers, and not in the managerial one (see LeRoy, 1953: 11-12). In this same volume, when talking about the production process, he distinguished between the “creative producer” and the “business administrator producer,” depending on his or her actual involvement in creative issues or just in financial ones (ibid.: 189). According to LeRoy, the producer, to consider him or herself creative, should make decisions on the key aspects in moviemaking, like choosing the idea, rewriting the script and looking for the right director and cast (ibid.: 187-189). In other words, he or she should intervene in those aspects that will end up intrinsically configuring the filmwork. The same opinion was defended by another producer and screenwriter as prolific as Jerry Wald, in another article about the role of the producer published a few years later (see Wald, 1949: 193-205).

Even more explicit was Hal B. Wallis, producer of *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (M. Curtiz, 1938), *The Maltese Falcon* (J. Houston, 1941), *They Died with their Boots On* (R. Walsh, 1941) and *Casablanca* (M. Curtiz, 1943), who highlighted the equality of meaning that could exist between the terms *producer* and *creator*:

When you find a property, acquire it, work on it from beginning to end, and deliver the finished product as you conceived it, then you're producing. A producer, to be worthy of the name, must be a creator (quoted in McBride, 1983: 17).

The collapse of the studio system from 1948 onwards, the power vacuum left and occupied by talent agencies like MCA, together with the competition of television in the fifties, and, on top of that, the emergence of the *auteur* theory (*politiques des auteurs*) —which exalted the director as the key figure of any filmwork— provoked a gradual decline of the film producer —who became a mere financer or manager. Effectively, the second half of the forties and the beginning of the fifties witnessed the proliferation of small production companies, promoted by actors and directors, together with independent producers, who used their artistic status as leverage to extract lucrative deal terms. These talents needed producers who could provide them with financing and distribution with minimal interference in the creative process (Schatz, 1983; King, 2002; Mann, 2008). Apart from names like David Selznick or Samuel Goldwyn, and later on Sam Spiegel, Stanley Kramer or Walter Mirisch, there were very few independent producers able to leave their imprint in their movies. The consolidation of the director as the main creative talent during the sixties and seventies coincided with the emergence of a new generation of American filmmakers with a very personal touch, like Arthur Penn, Sam Peckinpah, Alan Pakula, Robert Altman, Sidney Pollack, Woody Allen, Francis F. Coppola, Martin Scorsese —all of them figures whose celebrity surpassed that of contemporary producers like Irwin Allen, Ray Stark, Robert Chartoff, Irwin Wrinkler, Robert Evans or Richard D. Zanuck and David Brown.

All what we have mentioned so far refers to the evolution of the role of the producer in the American film industry. What was happening meanwhile in Europe? Due to the lack of a regular industrial infrastructure, film production in Europe has always been more ‘personalized,’ that is to say that it has usually been an industry based on single filmmakers rather than on consolidated production companies —although these one have also existed (see Jäckel, 2003: 35-36). After World War II, as Martin Dale assesses, “the reconstruction of the European cinematographic industries was led by the producer,” in such a way that in our continent “each national cinematographic industry has its list of famous ‘creative producers’, like Pierre Braunberger and [Anatole] Daumon in France; Alexander Korda and Emeric Pressburger in Great Britain; or Cecchi Gori and Alberto Grimaldi in Italy” (Dale, 1994: 9). Regarding Korda, for instance, it has been said that he “possessed that peculiar combination of power, personality and imagination that made [him]... the one British producer that the moguls in Hollywood took seriously” (Drazin, 2002: xiii). Similar qualities could be granted to the rest. Still, in view of the lack of adequate infrastructure and the preeminence of the cult of the *auteur*, these big European talents, according to David Thomson, “were replaced by a new generation of producers whose principal role was raising funds in place of contributing to the creative side,” such that their function has been reduced to serving as “mediator between the author and organisms of financing” (Thomson, 1982: 32).

This situation persisted without noticeable changes until the eighties, when a new generation of producers emerged on both sides of the Atlantic. They acted as the origin and inspiration of projects and contributing to the restoration of industry confidence in this craft —although not on an exclusive basis. Some economic fiascos like *Heaven's Gate* (Michael Cimino, 1980), which led United Artists to bankruptcy, alerted Hollywood studios against placing too much trust in some *auteur's* dreams. From then onwards, Hollywood majors sought to ensure their investments by relying on the professional competence of film producers.

It must be noticed, however, that some scholars too supported this gradual transformation. During the eighties, some articles appeared in important American magazines calling for the reconsideration of the role of the producer^{iv}. There are two among them that stand out given their significance: “The Missing Auteur,” written by David Thomson and published in *Film Comment* in 1982, and “The Producer: The Person with the Dream,” written by Jean Paul Firstenberg and published in *American Film* in 1987 —the very year The American Film Institute paid tribute to the figure of the film producer. Both authors coincided in affirming that film scholars have often underestimated the role of the producer. Similarly, they agreed in establishing a causal relationship between the difficult situation the American film industry was suffering at the beginning of the eighties and the impoverishment of the figure of the producer —whose legitimate competence had often been usurped by directors and actors. As Thompson concluded, “if one factor augurs the death of the movies, it is the absence of effective producers” (Thomson, 1982: 36)^v.

Precisely during the eighties and nineties, a new generation of those “effective producers” came to renew the American and the European film industries. In the first case, there are outstanding names like George Lucas, Steven Spielberg (when working as producers), Peter Guber and John Peters, Don Simpson and Jerry Bruckheimer, Arnold Kopelson, Art Linson, Scott Rudin or Joel Silver. Among their European counterparts, we could mention Carlo Ponti, Dino De Laurentiis and Franco Cristaldi in Italy; Claude Berri, Alain Poiré or Marin Karmitz in France; Bernd Eichinger and Dieter Geissler in Germany; David Puttnam, Ismail Merchant and Jeremy Thomas in the United Kingdom; Elías Querejeta and Andrés Vicente Gómez in Spain (Dale, 1997: 289; Jäckel, 2003: 35-40; Elsaesser, 2005: 314-315).

Thanks to their enterprising and visionary spirit, they contributed to relieving the movie business from the apathy it was suffering, and contributed to restoring the trust in this craft. This re-emergence of the figure of the film producer wasn't something completely new, according to Frank Mancuso —by then president and CEO of Paramount Pictures: “You have a rebirth of something that existed many years ago in the industry, when the producer had a strong creative input and really put his stamp on the movie” (quoted in Ansen & McAlevey, 1985: 85). On its part, the weekly magazine *Newsweek* confirmed:

The old fashioned, creative producer is back, and he is a hot commodity. No mere check signer, this hands-on new producer models himself on the likes of Selznick and Dore Schary and Alexander Korda and Sam Spiegel, producers who put their imprint on a movie, producers whose names often surpassed the directors they hired and fired... (ibid.: 84).

And the critical magazine *Stills* corroborated:

The eighties have become the decade of the producer, and entrepreneurial craftsmen such as Steven Spielberg, George Lucas and David Puttnam have seized the creative reins in Hollywood, wielding them with a power honed on repeated success (Hanson & Hanson, 1986: 21).

The Creative Producer Nowadays

As we have just seen, the professional profile of the cinematographic producer has historically undergone different periods of relevance, from his pivotal role during the Hollywood studio system era to become a figure shadowed by the director during the splendour of the so-called ‘auteur cinema’. The last two decades, however, have witnessed an increased appreciation of the role of the producer and, more precisely, the *creative producer*, both in the United States and in Europe.

It is significant, for instance, that Martin Dale, in his analysis of the European film industry published in the early nineties, dedicates an entire chapter to talk about the creative producer. “The real role of the producer should combine strong financial sense with creativity,” he states (Dale, 1991: 77). Another expert of the European film industry, Angus Finney —later a film producer himself— points out that:

The film industry tends to divide film producers into two rather vaguely defined camps: the creative producer and the financial producer. Few people are uniquely talented in both fields. Theoretically, an effective producing combination is one where two people —one creatively skilled and one financially inclined— work together on developing and producing projects (Finney, 1996a: 10).

This same opinion is shared by most of film producers nowadays. Eric Fellner, for instance, who runs the production firm Working Title together with Tim Bevan —both of them regular partners of Richard Curtis, Paul Greengrass and the Coen brothers among others— concludes: “You need some creative insight to make the right choices, and you need business acumen to set out the whole [project] properly” (De Winter, 2006: x).

Little by little, this new professional profile has consolidated itself within production. Linked to the existence of producers like those mentioned above is an effort by different authors to coin and spread the expression *creative producer*, although the phrase becomes, up to a certain point, redundant, as Martin Dale, for example, notes: “the producer pure and simple...is a ‘creative producer’” (Dale, 1991: 73). This very opinion is also defended by Art Linson, the producer behind hits like *The Untouchables* (B. De Palma, 1987), *Dick Tracy* (W. Beatty, 1990) and *Heat* (M. Mann, 1995), who states:

We all want to be thought of as creative producers. Is this a contradiction in terms? Does Robert De Niro have to refer to himself as a creative actor? No. Everyone knows he is. But if you’re willing to look closer, you will realise that there is abit more to producing movies than good salesmanship (Linson, 1993: 11).

For another prestigious professional, the British producer David Puttnam —responsible for films like *Chariots of Fire* (H. Hudson, 1981), *The Killing Fields* (R. Joffé, 1984) and *The Mission* (R. Joffé, 1986)— creativity is an inherent trait of the job of producer, although not in a predictably generalized way:

A lot of producers aren't remotely creative. The corollary of that is that anyone who believes that they are creative doesn't want to produce. They want to direct and they want to write because they feel that's the way they're going to be assessed as 'creative'. I'm proud of my job, and it gives me a satisfactory level of creative involvement (quoted in AmericanFilm, 1984: 17).

Today this is such a widely admitted reality that John W. Cones, in his dictionary of film production and distribution terms, includes the term *creative producer* and defines it in the following way:

A term used by some in the industry to distinguish between a producer who is significantly involved in artistic aspects of producing a motion picture as opposed to an executive producer who may be primarily responsible for obtaining production financing and in related business matters, and on the other hand, a line producer who is more directly involved with the logistics of actual production (Cones, 1992: 119).

Having achieved this point, we will focus our attention now to the main question of our debate: up to what point can we talk about creativity in the producing of films and how that creativity is practiced.

Creativity in Film Production

The previous opinions and declarations show to some extent the existing consensus about the creative nature of film production on both sides of the Atlantic. Cinema is at the same time an industrial and commercial art, and is conditioned therefore by an intricate process of elaboration. The human, financial and material resources are so complex and demand such a level of artistic and technical skills that every filmwork is the end result of a collaborative effort. Therefore, the capacity to give birth to an audiovisual work demands controlling not only the creative aspects but also the production process itself. For this very reason George Lucas admits: "I'm very aware as a creative person that those who control the means of production control the creative vision" (quoted in Lane, 1996: 125). In other words, those who deal with the production of a movie, have the key to creatively influence it. For this very reason, it has been an increasing phenomenon of assumption of the producer's role by other artistic talents, such as writers, directors and actors (Goodridge, 2010). Many other authors share these same ideas. David Draig, for example, the author of a dictionary of jobs in the film industry, explains the word *producer*:

The producer's creative contribution may be very great or very small. The producer who takes an active part in the supervision of casting, writing, design, and editing may exert a considerable influence on the style and content of the finished production; other producers may concentrate on administrative and

financial responsibilities and leave the creative decisions to others (Draig, 1988: 81).

With significant coincidence, American and European authors have underlined creativity—in one form or another—as an inherent quality of the film producer, defining him or her as a “creative visionary,” endowed with a great “artistic temperament” or “creative and imaginative power” (Katz, 1979: 223; Mörtzsch, 1964: 115; Dadek, 1962: 59). Perhaps for this reason, Dino De Laurentiis, when asked about the qualities any producer should have, he remarks:

To become a great producer you must have something inside of you that I cannot teach you... You need an artistic feeling inside you, something that divides artists and non-artists” (quoted by Adler, 2004: 106).

In this same sense, Larry Turman, producer of *The Graduate* (M. Nichols, 1967) and head of the prestigious Peter Stark Program at the University of Southern California (for training executive producers), when numbering the virtues of any good producer points out “the creativity of an artist” as the very first of all (see Turman, 2005: 150).

Another interesting comment comes from someone who approaches the film production from outside, and who can be considered somehow ‘free of suspicion’. This is the case of the Literature Nobel Prize winner Gabriel García Márquez, also a screenwriter himself, who has been teaching in the Cuban International Film School. In his handbook for screenwriters, he states:

Almost every screenwriter dreams of being a director too, and I agree with that because every director should be able to write a script. The ideal situation would be the screenwriter and the director writing together the final version of the script. And if we are talking about a duet, why not a triplet? I am referring here to the producer. I have insisted this International Film School should include in its curricula a course on Creative Production. It is generally assumed the producer is who is watching over the director, trying to stop him from spending too much money—Absolutely false. The producer must be aware he or she is not a mere entrepreneur, a mere financier. His or her job demands imagination, initiative—a dose of creativity without which the whole movie suffers (García Márquez, 1995: 22-23).

To a great extent, the creativity of the producer is demanded by the nature of the craft itself, as we have indicated before. This is such an important quality that David Putnam defines the film producer simply as an “assembler of talents” (quoted in Pardo, 2003: 63). In other words, being able to work with creative talents demands creativity. In this same sense, Bruce Houghton points out: “a good producer, as an inspirer of creative, must be himself creative” (Houghton, 1991: vii). And he adds:

[The producer] guides and helps hundreds of people toward an objective that becomes increasingly clear-cut as the work proceeds from an idea... He knows what good people can do in the important production areas, and presses them to do their best..., making sure that all hands serve a common purpose. He is a majority force in the hiring of every artist who works the picture... This demands selective creativity from the producer (ibid.: viii-ix).

The producer therefore —in the words of Jesse L. Lasky, one of the first Hollywood film producers— could be considered a kind of “demigod creator” (quoted in Martín Proharam, 1985: 17), a quite eloquent figure that leads us to recall the existing synonym between the verbs *to produce* and *to create* in the majority of languages^{vi}.

In summary, and as I have pointed out on previous occasions, we can assert that:

Thus there exists what we can call fundamental creative stages or moments of film production over which the producer exercises —or can exercise— a decisive creative influence. Standing out among these are the search for and choice of the original concept; the selection of a writer and the supervision of the script; the choice of a specific director; the approval of the artistic crew; and later, the control of editing and even the promotion and sale of the cinematographic work (Pardo, 2000: 240).

Two immediate consequences can be drawn. On the one hand, the creativity of the producer is exercised not in a direct fashion through decisions that affect the actual production of the film—as in the case of the director—but rather in an indirect way, through the selection and supervision of the creative personnel that participate in the film; and, on the other hand, that his or her global control of a film assures a large measure of intervention at the beginning and end of the process, during pre-production and post-production (ibid.: 241).

However, as can be deduced, being creative is not an obligatory attribute for all film producers, because, as Firstenberg underlines, “just how much creativity a producer exercises on a project often depends on the extent to which he involves himself in each of these stages” (Firstenberg, 1987: 67). Put in other terms, “the creativity of the producer must be judged according to the importance of his or her contributions to the film, contributions that take effect through the specific decisions that he or she makes in each phase of the film’s creation” (Pardo, 2000: 240)^{vii}.

Creativity and Authorship in Filmmaking

Speaking of creativity in this context obliges one to talk about the authorship of a cinematographic work. This is one of the most debated issues of the last few decades. Affirming the creative capacity of the producer —and of any other creative talent working behind the camera—implies starting from the premise of film as a group creative labour, as against the postulates of the so-called *politiques des auteur* (the *auteur* theory). I would like to stress in advance that I am not in favour of any of them, but I defend a sort of midway position between both theories —as I will try to explain in the following lines.

As it is well known, the French magazine *Cahiers du Cinema* in the late 1940s and 1950s developed the idea of the director as the main and even sole author of the film (Hillier, 1985). This basic assumption —successfully introduced in the United States by Andrew Sarris— has been supported since then by some scholars and refuted by others. David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, for example, explain at this respect:

Most people who study cinema regard the director as the film's 'author'. Although the writer prepares a script, later phases of production can modify the script beyond recognition. And although the producer monitors the entire process, he or she seldom controls moment-by-moment activity on the set. It is the director who makes crucial decisions about performance, staging, lighting, framing, cutting and sound. On the whole director has most control over how a movie looks and sounds (Bordwell & Thompson, 2001: 33).

In contrast, Alan Lovell and Gianluca Sergi, for instance, explain that the *auteur* theory was based on two arguable intentions: first, "to give the cinema a sort of cultural legitimacy, to put it on an equal footing with the traditional, high-prestige arts.... Their starting position was that great art was a form of personal expression... Filmmakers whose works had this quality were *auteurs*," and second, "to give the cinema distinctiveness as an art form... [where] the director was the key figure, not the writer" (Lovell & Sergi, 2005: 9). Although these authors consider that "[i]n the context in which they were developed, *Cahiers*' ideas were undoubtedly liberating", they assess at the same time that "they have left a legacy of problems that ought now to be confronted especially for anybody interested in Hollywood cinema. The most obvious one is that the commitment to the individual artistic discourages interest in the collective nature of film production" (ibid.: 10). On top of this, they point out that "[in] most forms of cinema, but especially in Hollywood, there are a variety of well-known constraints on personal expressiveness" (ibid).

In his famous article about the cinematic art — originally published in 1947 — Erwin Panofsky affirms at this respect, which "a film [is] called into being by a co-operative effort in which all contributions have the same degree of permanence". In addition, he underlined the "commercial" nature of the cinematic art, an "art whose primary intention is not to satisfy the creative desires of its author, but the demands of a patron or customers" (Panofsky, 1947: 167). In my view, this nuance is crucial to understanding —in a positive sense— how the enormous economic requirements attached to any film production affect the creative development and demand in many cases the consensus of multiple points of view regarding authorship.

This way of understanding cinema as a collaborative art is the most extended view among the professionals and experts in the film industry nowadays (Scott, 1975; Chase, 1975; Seger & Whetmore, 1994; Lovell & Sergi, 2005). These last two authors, after studying the cases of a number of contemporary Hollywood movies, strongly defend the terms "collective authorship" and "collective expressiveness" in filmmaking. In particular, regarding the first one, they state that "[t]he authorship of a film always has to be established, it cannot be taken for granted. It is likely to be collective". And they add: "the most likely candidates for inclusion are director, producer, star and writer" (Lovell & Sergi, 2005: 116). In relation with the second one, they remark: "Personal expression is always strongly mediated through interaction with other filmmakers. That mediation often blocks or reshapes the personal expressiveness of a director (or writer, actor, cinematographer or others)" (ibid.). In my opinion, these statements reinforce one of the core issues mentioned above: the necessity of measuring the contributions of the different talents involved in the making of a movie in order to establish the creative responsibility of the end-result.

However, in defence of the postulates of the so-called *politiques des auteur*, the consideration of filmmaking as a collaborative art does not oppose the idea of a predominant mind that infuses every film with a particular vision or certain style. In this sense, as George Charensol indicates in one of his essays, collective authorship does not imply the “depersonalization” of the cinematic work (see Charensol, 1963: 28-38). In this same regard, Jean Mitry further explains:

Since the cinema is industrialized, all films is the product of a combined effort; but through different technicians have to solve certain particular problems, the overall question is always directed by an individual —guiding in the direction he wishes to take. To say that a film is produced by teamwork, implying thereby that its auteur is that team, is absurd. It is to mistake one thing for another (Mitry, 1998 (orig. 1963): 5).

If in the majority of cases the director fulfils this function of creative agglomeration, at times the singular influence of a producer, a scriptwriter, or even an actor can be perceived. Mitry notes the relation existing between creativity and personality as the key to explaining the process of filmmaking creation:

Whatever the case, the strongest personality will always impose itself. It is personality... which distinguishes the directors of real talent. It allows them access to freedom of choice, conception and treatment in the cinema. Given the opportunity, they turn into genuine creators. [But this can be understood as the exception] (Mitry, 1998 (orig. 1963): 8).^{viii}

It must be remarked though that Mitry does not consider the producer as one of the *auteurs* of the film.^{ix} Nevertheless, applying this duo of creativity and personality to the case at hand, the French producer André H. Des Fontaines wrote during the very decade when the *auteur* theory came into force that, “a producer can bear witness to his personality and (...) through the link between authors and makers, express his own taste,” (Des Fontaines, 1963: 127), that is to say, imprint his creative stamp. These words echo others written many years before by Jesse Lasky in a collective book about filmmaking. Talking about the creative role of the producer, he assessed:

Since he has chosen the workers and inspired and directed them, the product of those workers inevitably bears the stamp of his personality and his mind. Yet the wise major executive understands the artistic temperament enough to permit it to have its way within reason, so that the product bears not only the trademark of the mind of the general producer but contains the results also of the creative forces that work under him (Lasky, 1937: 2).

And concluded:

The finished motion picture is a collective artistic endeavor; it bears the signatures of perhaps ten artists, each of whom has contributed something to the whole. Yet the most important signature of all is the one least noted, the signature of the associate producer who has fused a thousand elements into a unified whole for better or worse (ibid: 15).

The same opinion is defended by Tim Adler, author of a recent book on creative producers, who states:

Film is a collaborative medium but the myth of the director as auteur is still being promulgated, mostly by directors themselves... However, if some filmmakers do clearly have a recognisable style or theme, then some producers can be auteurs as much as directors (Adler, 2004: 6-7).

And to illustrate the truth of this assessment, this author mentions among others the exemplary cases of David Selznick, Sam Spiegel and David Putnam. Those who know the behind the scenes story of notorious films such as *Gone with the Wind* (V. Fleming, 1939), *On the Waterfront* (E. Kazan, 1954) or *Chariots of Fire* (H. Hudson, 1981), should admit that the creative responsibility is equally shared by their directors and producers.

Effectively, Selznick not only rewrote some scenes from *Gone with the Wind* personally, but carefully selected the cast, supervised the art direction and costume design, followed up the shooting on a day-to-day basis and hired as much as three different directors (George Cukor, Victor Fleming and Sam Wood), apart from having the final say on editing and music scoring. In a similar way, in the movie *On the Waterfront*, Sam Spiegel worked hand-in-hand with the screenwriter, Budd Schulberg, and made some substantial changes in the dramatic structure and in the development of some characters. Undoubtedly, the main merit is given to Elia Kazan, but the movie wouldn't be the same without Spiegel's contributions. The same happened with David Putnam and *Chariots of Fire*. He originated the idea, hired the screenwriter, developed the script and only when the project development was almost completed did he look for the right director (Hugh Hudson). Curiously enough, all these three movies obtained a number of Oscars® —the one for Best Picture among them (see Vertrees, 1997: 1-20; Pardo, 1999: 77-87; Fraser-Cavassoni, 2003: 157-176).

Something similar could be referred in the case of other remarkable producers, like Dino De Laurentiis, Marin Karmitz or Jeremy Thomas — all of them interviewed by Adler. They reassemble in one way or another the figure of the classical Hollywood producer during the studio era. In this regard, this author says about one of them: "De Laurentiis believes, like Selznick, that a movie must be a one-man operation, just as the studios used to be in golden age of MGM boss Louis B. Mayer or Darryl Zanuck at Warner Brothers" (Adler, 2004: 104-105).

These filmmakers have produced many of their famous films alike —being creatively supportive—to the point that we can talk about a personal touch or creative imprint. They are indeed quite exceptional cases, but illustrate how much the producer can contribute to the end result, being as responsible for the filmwork as the director or the screenwriter. Lovell and Sergi conclude: "Certainly one of the most straightforward discoveries we made was how much producers contributed to filmmaking" (Lovell & Sergi, 2005: 112). It is understandable then that some authors had used the term *producer-auteur* for the filmmakers mentioned above and for few other producers (see Thomson, 1982; Petrie, 1991: 178; Adler, 2004: 7).

At times, however, it happens that the question of whom the dominant creative vision belongs to becomes a little blurry, especially in the case of those directors and producers who possess genuine creative talent and a marked personality. Proof of this is the appearance of the category of *producer-director* used for defining both directors (Capra, Wilder, Hitchcock, Preminger, Pollack, Spielberg or Eastwood) and producers

(Selznick, Kramer or Lucas), whose common characteristic centres on their role as the principal authors of their films, beyond the specific work of direction or production that they have fulfilled. In a lesser grade, the same could be said about some European filmmakers like Luc Besson, Wim Wenders or Fernando Trueba. What's more, what this concept highlights, in the opinion of David Thompson, is not so much the ability of some producers to act as "quasi-directors," but rather the capacity of some directors to assume the work of production and thus assume total control over a film. In this sense, what this author comes to suggest is that the work of production, when it is truly creative, can acquire greater importance than even the act of directing by itself (see Thomson, 1982: 36-39)^x. Movies like *Poltergeist* or *Young Sherlock Holmes*, for instance, though directed by competent craftsmen (Tobe Hooper and Barry Levinson respectively), are essentially Spielberg's films. Similarly, no one thinks of the *Empire Strikes Back* and *The Return of the Jedi* (directed by Irvin Kershner and Richard Marquand respectively) as anyone's but George Lucas' films. The same could be applied —to a lesser extent— to Dino De Laurentiis, David Puttnam or Jerry Bruckheimer.

For this reason, another noted filmmaker like Robert Evans —producer of *Chinatown* (R. Polanski, 1974), *Marathon Man* (J. Schlesinger, 1976) or *Urban Cowboy* (J. Bridges, 1980)—, reflecting on the relationship between directors and producers from the creativity-personality perspective, affirms along the same lines:

A motion picture is a collaborative art form. Throughout film history, with rare exceptions, the best work done by directors has been done in collaboration with strong producers. It is the producer who hires the director, not the other way around... In an effective collaborative mix, which has to do with personality as well as creativity, one must be inquisitive and have a challenging attitude. This sometimes leads to a very heated arguments. But pictures have a better chance of turning out well when they are born of conviction and passion (Evans, 1983: 15).

A well-known European filmmaker, Jean-Jacques Annaud, explains this same idea:

In Europe we say it's the director alone, in America they say it's the producer alone. The truth doesn't lie on one side or the other, but in a harmonious mixture and understanding between the two. Most of the artistically and commercially successful movies ever made have been undertaken by a producer and a director who understand each other, and have fought for the making of the movie for the same reason... Only the people who've created the movie know what it's going to be like —the writer, the producer and the director. If they fight each other, they'll never get anywhere. It will be a disaster (quoted by Finney, 1996b: 221-222).

Nevertheless, to ensure a sort of creative balance when two or more egos are working together on a particular movie is really a difficult task. It is no strange thing that friction occurs when making decisions about the same issue. For this very reason, creative producers are not always welcome by directors. Alan Parker, for instance, whose first movies were produced by David Puttnam, argues very bluntly on this issue:

I'm very strong when it comes to making a movie and nobody tells me what to do. Nobody. One of the frustrations that David has working with me and why he'll probably never work with me again is that it's my film and no one else's.

I'm very egocentric and megalomaniac about that. I believe that the director is the one who makes the film, and no one else—not the studio executives, not the producer, no one (Yule, 1988: 71)

And he continues expressing his mixed feelings about it and, paradoxically, recognising the talent of Puttnam as a creative producer:

David hates the auteur theory, but curiously re-invented the idea of the producer as auteur. That's fine for him, but as a theory and a system it's incredibly dangerous, because there are very few people who have David's ability to understand the mechanics of film and the sensitivities of the creative side. Producers in control are usually a recipe for disaster. Perhaps arguably, for David to be in control it's different, because he is unique and extremely talented, but I call his the Mussolini school of filmmaking (ibid.: 196).

In this regard, the Spanish film producer José G. Jacoste explains: “the creative producer has been considered, rightly or wrongly... the great executioner of the director, thanks to his or her final say in the film production process”, although “when the director deals with a creative producer it creates more favourable conditions for dialogue than when he is faced with the type of producer whose motives are totally outside of the artistic sphere.” In any case, this author insists, “in both cases a force appears that affects the work of creation of the director.” And he concludes, “That is why the creative contribution of the producer must only go to a certain level and take certain forms.” He however admits at the same time that “in actual reality, it becomes very difficult to find the right level of creative input and the best way to exercise it” (Jacoste, 1996: 16-17).

In an attempt to combine the creative responsibility of the producer, on one side, and respect for the necessary autonomy of the author (director or screenwriter) on the other, Martin Dale proposes a terminological distinction:

The authors of the film—the writer and director—remain the original creative input and must be respected and given sufficient freedom. The producer, even when initiating ideas is an ‘enabling mechanism’: the creative but not the creator. To use an allusion, the author gives birth to the child, but the producer is the midwife. Without the midwife, the child and the creator are at risk (Dale, 1991: 84).

This same analogy is used by Tim Adler, paraphrasing the words of the French producer Marin Karmitz: “The director is the mother while the producer is the midwife—before, during and after the process—and also the paediatrician” (Adler, 2004: 218).

This means, therefore, making a clear distinction between the terms *creator* and *creative*, between the creational or inventing faculty and the creative faculty. The first makes reference to the act of fathering a story and characters from scratch (creation *ex nihilo*), and the second is the capacity to realize contributions that substantially improve this creation (a sort of ‘secondary creation’ from pre-existing material). In this way the term *creator* is reserved for that mind that gives birth to an idea, story, or film (normally the writer, the director and—in the case of the music—the composer); and the term *creative* classifies that talent that acts upon that original material, developing it or helping it become transformed into images and sounds (producer, director of

photography, production designer, editor, etc.). A film producer like David Puttnam, for instance, uses this idea of two different levels of creation to explain how he configures the key figures working behind the camera:

The... essential creative contributions on a movie exist on two tiers. On the first tier is the director, writer and composer, followed by the trio of production designer, editor and cameraman [director of photography]. What you see on the screen is an amalgam of their work, and the producer's job is to ride herd on them (Puttnam, 1992: 41).

Producer's Creativity in the Digital Revolution

A further question to address —very relevant at the present moment— is how much the digital revolution is affecting the production process and, therefore, the producer's creative role (Longwell, 2007).

As seen, producers have not historically been more or less creative depending on technology, but on their own talent and personality. If they left their imprint on their movies —in a similar way as directors did—, it was due to their personal involvement in the creative stages —mainly scriptwriting, preproduction and postproduction—, making decisions that, ultimately, affected the end-result. Of course, for those producers who are creative, the advances in technology have helped them to push their ideas further away and make their vision come true —as it happens in the case of directors and other members of the creative team (Ohanian & Philips, 1996). British film producer Jeremy Thomas summarizes this substantial change in the following way:

The manufacturing side of filmmaking —acting, stories, cinematography, design, costumes, etc.— all that remains. Good is good, whatever era it's from. But what has changed is the technology. I think we're coming to a golden age for independent filmmaking. Digital technology is revolutionizing the way our films are getting to the public and I hope it will help us operate in a more efficient way (quoted by Pham, 2006).

It is quite evident that digital technology has extended in an unsuspected way the limits of creativity for directors, directors of photography, production designers, sound designers, visual effects artists and, of course, writers ('now, your only limit is your imagination'). Regarding the producer's creativity, digital technology has enormously facilitated the manipulation of images and sounds to get the right (and perfect) look of the picture, becoming an essential 'tool' for the control of the end-result. Nevertheless, in my opinion, the main impact of digital technology in film production should not only be addressed from the creativity point of view but from the production variables' one (cost, time, quality) and the production process itself. The standard production phases (pre-production, production and post-production) are changing, and the entire filmmaking process with them. The increasing amount of digital effects is blurring the limits between principal photography and post-production. As a consequence, pre-production is not longer just the preparation of the shooting, but of post-production as well (Figgis, 2007; Vickery & Hawkins, 2008; Finney, 2010). John Landau, producer of *Avatar* (J. Cameron, 2009), the most revolutionary film production at this respect up to date, explains:

It's interesting because on this movie, the blending of pre-production, production and post-production was complete. We started post-production the day we started production. We started post-production the day we started pre-production. So we'd have a day of photography or a day of capture, and at the end, we'd go meet with the visual effects company (quoted by Nicholson, 2009).

Digital revolution is therefore demanding further knowledge on technological process to the entire creative and production team in order to control this whole new world of possibilities. Under this scenario, it seems that the words from George Lucas previously quoted —“those who control the means of production control the creative vision”—, get its meaning reinforced.

Conclusions

It is time to draw some concluding remarks in reference to the questions we have been trying to answer on these pages. Up to what point the job of the producer can be considered ‘creative’? How is this creativity exercised? Is the concept of *creative producer* redundant or does it reflect an overly exceptional quality? Does the digital revolution add more creative possibilities to the producer?

In my view, as I have previously explained, film producing allows creative work, “not as an artificial or condescending add-on, but rather as part of its very nature (*to produce* is *to create*)” (Pardo, 2000: 247). The inherent responsibilities of the office of producer thus include not only organization, planning and financial control, but also creative aspects that affect the final result —like the concept, the script, the director, casting, editing, digital effects or music— over which the producer has a say.

At the same time, it must be underlined that “the creativity of the producer is exercised in an indirect manner, through decision-making over these creative aspects” (*ibid*). The creative responsibility of the producer depends on the scope of his contributions, creating the possibility of the case of a film where the producer has the right to be considered as much the author of the finished work as the director or the writer. However, this can only be understood through a consideration of cinema as the creative work of a group, a collaborative art —whenever the producer’s decisions have had significant repercussions on the end-result. In this regard, digital technology is expanding the creative boundaries for filmmakers (producers included), but at the same time is demanding specialized knowledge in order to control the final look of the picture.

For this purpose it is useful to differentiate between the concept of *creator* (creation *ex nihilo*) and *creative* (creation from pre-existing material). While the first category can be applied to the traditional authors of a film (writer, director and —to some extent— composer), the latter corresponds to those that contribute to giving that creation its definitive form. In my opinion, “the producer must always be *creative*, and only in some cases —depending on in what measure the movie responds to his vision— can he or she also be considered *creator*” (*ibid*: 248) —and therefore ‘author,’ even though when he or she is not legally recognized. At the same time, it is worthwhile underlining that the fact that producing includes a creative side does not mean that every producer will be creative, at least to the same degree. Creativity supposes an

inherent talent that the producer must possess, along with a strong personality. All creative producers have shown signs of possessing marked personalities.

In summary, despite the risk of redundancy, we can speak of “creative production and creative producers, a term that should be reserved for that producer who, starting from inherent talents (*personality*) contributes his or her creative vision (*creativity*) to the filmmaking, in concert with the contributions of the rest of the creative team” (*ibid*: 248). It must be stressed, however, that this is not a common type of producer; and not just because of the demands of the job, but also because of director resistance. As seen, where creativity and personality converge great egos arise.

Nevertheless, as Lovell and Sergi suggest, “conflict and tension can be productive, generating energy and inventiveness” (p. 116). In fact, there are a number of successful partnerships between directors and producers, as is shown by the tandems of James Ivory and Ismail Merchant; Krzysztof Kieslowski and Marin Karmitz; Neil Jordan and Steve Woolley; Steven Spielberg and Kathleen Kennedy; Ron Howard and Brian Grazer; and lately, James Cameron and John Landau. In words of an American independent filmmaker, “there is nothing more rewarding for a director than being able to collaborate with a creative producer, and there is no better marriage... than that of a producer and director who collaborate brilliantly” (quoted in Schreibman, 2001: 1).

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NOTES

ⁱ All the translations into English from texts written originally in other languages have been made by the author

ⁱⁱ The absence of unanimous criteria makes it difficult to define the profile of the producer and, unlike scriptwriters, directors or qualified technicians (directors of photography, film editors, art directors, etc.), producers lack a common professional identity. The Producer Guild of America (PGA) is a case in point. Being an organization created to safeguard the professional rights of producers, was not recognized as a body defending the collective rights of its members for a number of years. In 1983, for instance, when the PGA attempted to raise its status, it was denied by the National Committee of Labor Relations, who ruled that producers couldn't form a trade union since their job consists essentially on directing and managing. Since then the PGA has substantially improved its status, representing, protecting and promoting the interests of all members of the producing team (see www.producersguild.org/about/).

ⁱⁱⁱ Being this the case, it is also true that in the last decades have been published some biographies about well-known European producers: Elías Querejeta (Angulo, Heredero, & Rebordinos, 1996), David Putnam (Pardo, 1999), Ismail Merchant

(Merchant, 2002), Alexander Korda (Drazin, 2002), Marin Kartmitz (Karmitz, 2003) and Dino De Laurentiis (Kezich & Levantessi, 2004), among others.

^{iv} See, as examples, Longstreet, S. (1980), "The Producer: an enigma wrapped in a riddle", *American Premiere*, July: 22-24; Ansen, D. & P. McAlevey (1985), "The Producer is King again," *Newsweek*, 20 May: 84-89; Hanson, S. & P. King Hanson (1986), "The Coca-Cola-Kid," *Stills*, November: 20-23.

^v This author further explains: "When producers are weak or inexperienced, or when directors are required to police their tendencies toward extravagance and digression, then the picture business has nearly fallen outside the process of production... As the business lost its audience, so the producers became rarer in their most cherished form of full-time managers... As actors and directors became producers, and as ex-agents, ex-lawyers, and ex-accountants were drawn in the field, so more and more ignorance and inexperience were entrusted with the highly technical problems of managing a movie." (ibid).

^{vi} According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, for instance, one of the meanings of *produce* is: "To bring into existence for its raw materials or elements, or as the result of a process", which is very much synonymous with *create*.

^{vii} It is interesting to notice that most of books about film production, audiovisual management or movie business published in the last two decades in the US and Europe have generally assumed the creative role of the producer, and address directly or indirectly the need of creative judgment in the decision-making process. Some examples are: Houghton, 1991; Dale, 1997; Lee, 2000; Levy, 2000; Schreibman, 2001; Pardo, 2002b; Epstein, 2005; Cones, 2009; Finney, 2010.

^{viii} For an unknown reason, the last sentence [between brackets], present in the original text in French, has been omitted in the English translation.

^{ix} In a previous paragraph, he states: "One might conclude for this—as people have—that the creator is the producer. Indeed, the producer is—at least in intention—the initial creator, the instigator of the work. But by *himself* he has created nothing. He has launched a combined effort, a film that owes its existence to him perhaps but whose qualities are quite independent of his personality. The producer gives orders, but is not creative" (Mitry, 1998 (orig. 1963), 6). It is important to notice that Mitry, in the original text in French, uses the term *createur* and not *creatif* at the end of this paragraph. Nevertheless, the English translator employs the word *creative* instead of *creator*. This mistranslation is important because the meaning of the sentence varies substantially.

^x We could also speak of the *writer-producer* figure (and sometimes also *director*), epitomized by Judd Apatow or David Mamet.

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