The Case of the Cream Puffs

FRANCES KROLL RING

FRANCES KROLL RING has been a story analyst at Paramount Studios since 1942. She is the current chairman of the training program of the Screen Story Analysts' Guild.

IN THE 1945 Hollywood strike involving some six thousand motion picture workers, fewer than a hundred people, organizationally called the Screen Story Analysts' Guild, drew attention to themselves for their understanding of the issues involved, their articulate militancy, and their qualities of leadership. The paradox of their numerical size and their prominence in the strike caused a producer's representative to comment, with mingled admiration and annoyance, "Who would have thought those cream puffs could raise so much hell?"

To understand the unique consistency of these human pieces of pastry, and to test the recipe, it is necessary to weigh the ingredients on the scales of the motion picture studios in which they work. Their particular niche is in the Story Department, where they are employed in numbers from six to twenty depending upon the needs and size of the studio. Through the portals of the MGM story department, the biggest in the industry, pass some 20,000 pieces of story material a year: novels, plays, screenplays, books of nonfiction, articles, short stories, screen originals, or just two-page ideas. At other studios a proportionate amount is submitted for possible picture sale.

It is obvious that a Story Editor cannot possibly read all the original material. This task falls to the Story Analyst, who reads and evaluates the original submissions. He selects, eliminates, rejects the mediocre stories, recommends the good ones. If he likes a story he goes to his typewriter, compresses its content to a plot theme, a brief summary, a long condensation called a synopsis, and a comment. If he doesn't like it he omits lengthy coverage (the synopsis) and in the comment gives his reasons for rejection. The form is basically the same in every studio. But it is the Analyst's job to utilize that form—to capture the very essence of the story so that none of its quality is lost in the process of condensation.

Theme.—The first and shortest phase of the synopsis form is the plot theme. Even in these seven or eight lines it is possible to condense a story without destroying its vitality and mood. Here is an example:

"A corporal who has served actively in the U. S. Air Force flies home on leave. He is still seeking a clarification of the reasons for world conflict and human dissatisfaction when he arrives in another era—the Civil War aftermath—and through the life of his ancestors and a beautiful romance learns that he has been looking all his life for love, a weapon men have not yet learned to use well. His body is found in the plane wreck, a smile of peace on his young face."

This brief digest reveals the spiritual quality and gives the complete story in thimble size.

Summary.—In the 40-line summary that follows the theme the leading
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characters are introduced by name, pointedly described, and then moved through the development of the main story line. The Story Analyst does not merely set down a cut-and-dried plot outline. He presents the story. He highlights the conflict and characterization. With a terse description, a choice adjective, a phrase of mood, he dresses up the summary to read like a vignette. He breaks down the story, physically, to three paragraphs comparable to the three acts of a play. The first paragraph presents the springboard or basic situation; the second paragraph graduates the story to its climax; the third paragraph is the denouement. This is no rigid format, but it is a technique through which a story can be clearly told in the limited space of a summary.

There is no better test of a story's true composition than a summary. If a story depends solely upon the author's style for effect, is weakly constructed or inconsistently developed, or is in a perpetual state of immobility, these flaws will be magnified in a summary. Conversely, if a story is well constructed and full of real activity rather than glib verbiage, it will stand up solidly under the Analyst's strip tease of its superfluous clothing.

Synopsis.—The most elaborate step in the process of condensation is the 10- to 25-page synopsis, in which the story line, the dramatic conflict, and the characterizations are both briefed and emphasized. The pattern of the book is followed faithfully; yet everything in the book cannot be condensed chapter by chapter, paragraph by paragraph, or sentence by sentence. The Analyst views the story as a whole and keeps that whole intact. He carefully selects the incidents that are directly related to the development of the plot.

Extraneous detail, excess description, unimportant characters, no matter how charming, are omitted. For in Hollywood a story is not generally considered because of charming minor characters or incidents. A story cannot survive dramatic adaptation on ornaments alone. The studio is interested primarily in the structure. Similarly, the leading characters must actively participate in and be a strong part of the story's structure. They must also have dominant personalities, so that a producer who is in need of a vehicle for a particular star can instantly visualize a role for that star.

It naturally falls to the Analyst to write up the synopsis in a way that accentuates the strength of the story and the characterizations. The synopsis must be paced so that conflict, suspense, high comedy—whatever the mood and composition of the story—are sharply exemplified but are neither overemphasized nor distorted. Story defects should not be concealed. They should, in fact, be exposed, for if the Analyst neglects to point them out, or at least imply that they exist, the Producer or Story Editor who purchases a story from a synopsis may find, after purchase, that he has bought a vehicle full of problems he did not know it had.

Thus the synopsis is the abbreviated story with dramatic values accented and literary values restrained. The synopsis highlights the merits of a story for picture production, not for its quality as a good book. What people outside the industry may consider a perfect story for motion pictures may in effect be poor motion picture material because of its introspective character. In a screen adaptation of a novel in which
the quality lies in the writing rather than in the conflict and movement, so much rewriting might be necessary that it would hardly be worth purchasing. Further, something of the intrinsic value might be destroyed by so much tampering. *Brideshead Revisited*, by Evelyn Waugh, is an example of this type of story.

It is also the Analyst's job to recognize best-seller possibilities in this or any other type of unpublished or just published novel he may be covering. Similarly, he must guess at an unproduced play's possible Broadway hit potentialities, for a studio's interest is automatically stimulated by such values.

**Comment.**—The Analyst's opinion of a story, his recommendation or rejection of it, is a couple of paragraphs or a page long, depending upon what the story warrants. Motion picture values are of prime importance in evaluating the material. The Analyst reads with a microscopic eye and examines stories as a scientist might. He pokes at the plot to detect weaknesses. If the basic idea is good despite a gaudy exterior, a static development, or a lack of excitement, the Analyst points out that such an idea might be rescued and effectively developed. He is constantly looking for a new angle, an unusual treatment even of an ordinary theme.

Censorable aspects in sex and politics are noted in the comment. The Analyst, along with progressive writers, directors, and producers, would like to see "controversial" subjects and human relations handled intelligently and normally on the screen. He is, however, aware not only of studio policy but also of local censorships that influence studio policy.

In considering stories with a topical idea he attempts to determine whether the material will withstand time. With political history making rapid changes, a story with a topical background may be exciting today and dead, dramatically, six months from now. The Analyst is aware that it takes from six months to a year—sometimes even longer—before a picture based on material he may recommend is produced and ready for audiences.

The Story Analyst often recognizes and directs attention to exploitation values—the angle of a story that the studio can sell easily to the public: historical background, a title, a famous or infamous character. Sometimes the Analyst suggests a new form of treatment for this material. For instance, if an idea is too slim to stand up as a full-length picture, perhaps it can be considered as a short subject, or as a musical-short. Sometimes a simple historical novel lends itself to musical treatment—e.g., *The Harvey Girls*.

It is the job of the Story Analyst to look deep into the heart of a story for whatever values it possesses and to produce a synopsis + comment that literally becomes a salesman for the story.

**Oral submission.**—Oral submission is a manner of story presentation that is a lazy and unique Hollywood habit. An author tells an idea to the Story Editor in lieu of writing it down on paper. The Analyst listens instead of reads, and then writes in synopsis form what he listens to. Sometimes he coordinates the material so fluently that the author who may obtain a copy of the synopsis is amazed at how coherently his story is told in so little space. It is a great source of satisfaction to the Analyst when an idea is purchased on the basis
of this synopsis—the only available written material incorporating the idea.

Is it possible that an Analyst may pass up a good story? Yes, it is possible, but not very probable. For there is a check on the Story Analyst’s judgment. He is only the first in a line of assistants, story editors, producers, and others who decide whether or not they may like a particular submission. But as the first, as the judge who approaches a story without benefit of an agent’s pep talk or pressure, his opinion is significant because it is an “original” one. His reaction not only makes him decide whether or not he shall give the material extensive coverage, but it launches the story in a definite direction.

Because pressure of time and competition is so acute, the Editor or Producer is often forced to judge and consider purchase of a story on the basis of a synopsis. When that happens, the Analyst is the only person who reads the original material before it is purchased. The Analyst cannot ignore this responsibility, since purchase of a story involves from tens of thousands of dollars upward.

From the foregoing description of the Analyst’s work it may be assumed that he is highly skilled and that his position within the Story Department is vital to its proper functioning. It is startling to note, therefore, that he is among the lowest paid workers in the industry. The salary ranges from $52.40 a week, or $1.31 per hour, to $78.40 a week, or $1.96 per hour, after five years of employment.1

Why the Analyst receives proportionately low pay in an industry notorious for its high salaries can be explained if not excused. In the process of picture making, excitement and recognition center around the actual production: the stars, the director, the people involved in staging and shooting the film, the writers, and the finished script. The Analyst holds what is known as a pre-production job. His work is done after he reads and recommends the story. Even though the story, once bought, may warrant and get a million-dollar production, the Analyst has no part in the making of the film. By the time shooting starts, he is a forgotten man in relation to the story in production.

The Analysts were not always in the low-income bracket. Back in the 1920’s, when they were known as Readers, many were paid as high as $125 a week. In 1933, when the industry felt the blow of several years of depression, workers in the industry took a cut generally. The Analysts—one of the unorganized groups—made a tailspin salary dive to $25 a week. They suffered this financial slap until organization of their Guild gave them recuperative powers on a long but solid road upward, which they are still traveling with considerable vitality.

Despite their progress, the Analysts have not yet left behind the impression that they are small-fry wage earners in the motion picture industry. It is not difficult to understand, therefore, why in an industry where employees are valued primarily according to their income the Analysts were classified in the mind of that producer’s representative as cream puffs.

Who are the Story Analysts? What are their qualifications for a job in which they are specialists—in which

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1In the recent two-day labor-management incident the Analysts, along with other Hollywood workers, benefited by a 25 per cent salary increase.
they weed out some 90 per cent of the material submitted to a studio and recommend the 10 per cent of healthy plants that may ultimately blossom into successful pictures?

The Story Analysts come from diverse backgrounds. Some were teachers; some were language students; others were connected in one form or another with the theater. Several were writers' secretaries, others worked in newspaper offices or in an editorial capacity on magazines. Some worked in labor organizations. Despite the different sources of their experience, they all can cover any type of material competently, but some prefer mysteries, others are specialists in "woman" stories, others prefer action stories. If it is possible, the head of the department allots the work according to the Analyst's particular tastes.

Of course, at least half of the Analysts are aspiring writers, regardless of their previous or current profession. They quickly learn that a job as a Story Analyst is no short cut to a writing job. If they have the ability, they continue to write and submit their efforts to the studio, and may eventually get their break. Several have become writers, well-known writers—for example, Dalton Trumbo, Lillian Hellman; not because it is an inevitable promotion from the ranks, but rather because of their indisputable talent.

There is no doubt, however, that the training as an Analyst is helpful to a writer. The constant evaluation of another's work, the constant analysis of story construction as well as story content, cannot but affect and improve the writer's technique and sharpen his critical acumen toward others' work and toward his own.

Training program.—In order to keep the quality of work up to the present high level of its membership, the Screen Story Analysts' Guild has instituted a Training Program which is an innovation in modern unionism. It is reminiscent of the early days when craft guilds fostered the abilities of their apprentices. The interesting feature of the program is that each guild member volunteers his services without pay. There is no charge to the trainee. Only one basic lecture in the fundamentals of story analysis and synopsis writing is held for a small class. Then each member of the class is assigned to an individual analyst to be schooled in the preparation of sample synopses until his work conforms to the Guild's standards. The trainee can then seek a job with complete confidence and the certification of the Guild. Proof of the success of this plan is evident in the figures. More than 80 per cent of the Analysts hired in the past year and a half were trained and recommended for their jobs by the Screen Story Analysts' Guild.

Despite the inner strength of their union, the relative importance of their work to the studio, and the admitted integrity of their membership, the Story Analysts realize that their immediate effect on the box office—the motion picture industry's thermostat—is nonexistent. For this reason the klieg lights will probably never shine upon their sex appeal; the newspapers and magazines may never repeat their witticisms; and their names will never make the list of screen credits. If, however, the story they recommend ultimately gains Academy recognition, can they be blamed for awarding themselves a mental Oscar?