

## CARRIE RICKEY

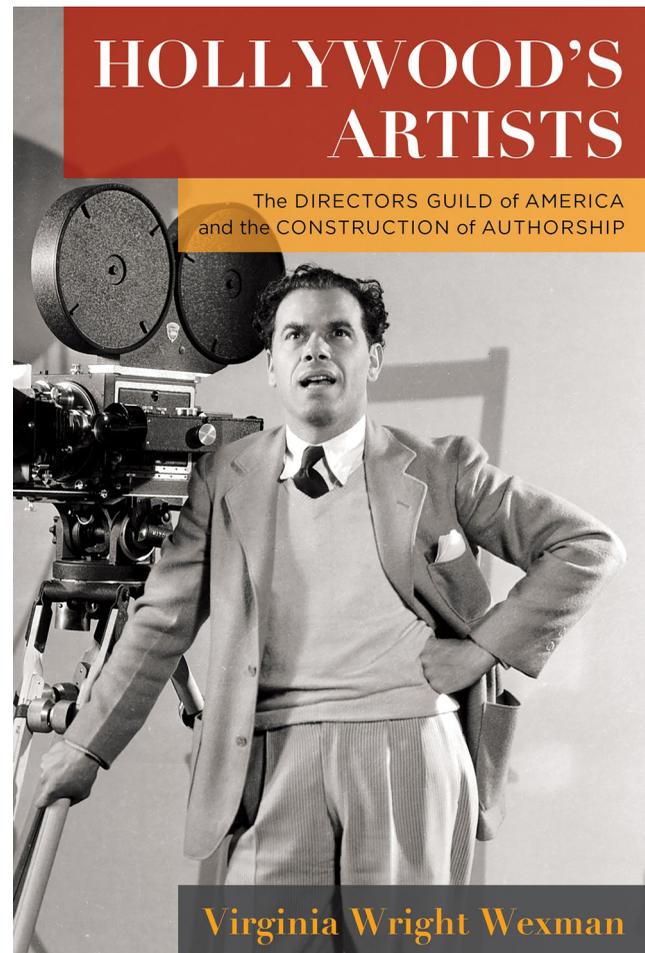
*Hollywood's Artists: The Directors Guild of America and the Construction of Authorship* by Virginia Wright Wexman

In her concise and lucid history of how the Directors Guild focused upon the authorship of film, Virginia Wright Wexman recounts John Ford's recurring nightmare. He dies and rises to heaven only to read a sign above the pearly gates that reads "Produced by Darryl F. Zanuck" (65). Like his colleagues, Ford was haunted by the frequency with which producers claimed credit for the director's vision and decision making, and Wexman proceeds to provide an evenhanded argument about whether, say, producer Harry Cohn, director Frank Capra, or author James Hilton should get credit for heaven—that is, Shangri-La, in *Lost Horizon* (1937).

Today, when organized labor shows diminishing membership among blue-collar workers and increasing numbers among the skilled professional and technical classes—from academia and journalism to health care—it is instructive to recall the history and goals of the Directors Guild of America (DGA), originally founded in 1936 as the Screen Directors Guild (SDG). It wasn't America's first white-collar union. The then-moribund Screenwriters Guild (now the Writers Guild of America) revived itself in 1933, and the Association of Federal, State, and County Municipal Employees (AFSCME, a union for both white- and blue-collar membership) was founded in 1932.

During the Great Depression, some members of the newly formed Directors Guild earned as much as \$100,000 annually. Yet from the time of its inception and for the next eighty-odd years, compensation wasn't its primary concern. While it would engage in significant battles over credits, Communism, and colorization, the DGA primarily "focused on the goal of positioning Hollywood directors as artists" (2). Indeed, the most thoughtful passages in Wexman's account concern not guild politics, but its aesthetic conception of the director as the visionary artist overseeing a massive atelier, with a rank above that of the writer and key craftspeople like cinematographers and editors.

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Frank Capra, the Oscar-winning director of *It Happened One Night* (1934), whose pictures helped elevate the Poverty Row studio Columbia Pictures to the ranks of the "majors," provided the key element in the guild's creative-rights program: "One man, one film" (2). His slogan encapsulated the belief that art is the work of a single person, "and he challenged the DGA to apply this principle to Hollywood cinema" (3). (Anyone who has read his autobiography knows that Capra preached the gospel of auteurism before the term ever existed.)

Wexman investigates how the DGA fought for the director as artist on several fronts. First, by "gaining ever-greater control for directors over the entire filmmaking process, mounting public-relations activities to shape the way they are perceived, and controlling the configuration of movie credits" (3). In the post-video/DVD streaming universe, the guild has lobbied for legislation that would extend directors' control over their films after theatrical release.

In exploring the DGA's pursuit and protection of the artistic status and allied goals of its membership, Wexman begins with its prehistory, previously unknown to me: "From 1915 to 1926, a group called the Motion Picture Directors Association (MPDA) flourished" (13). This was not a union and, in fact, rejected affiliation with the American Federation of Labor. Its goal, wrote member J. Searle Dawley, "was to be of some service to the motion picture art" (13). It even had its own song, with the lyric "I'm an artist with a capital A; / I'm a member of the MPDA" (13.) Yes, it is hard to imagine D. W. Griffith, Lois Weber, and Cecil B. DeMille singing that verse in unison. Different times, clearly.

When the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS) was organized in 1926, Wexman reports, "most directors shifted their allegiance to the new organization and the Motion Picture Directors Association was dissolved" (14). The issue that galvanized directors to form the SDG was not money but creative autonomy (16). When sound was adopted in 1927, dialogue directors were hired, and fought with directors for authority. Then came the Great Depression. The assembly-line systems of moviemaking adopted during the bank oversight of the studios further eroded the authority that directors had previously enjoyed. Helmers like John Ford inveighed against filmmaking by committee.

"The successful directors who formed the core of [the guild] and would lead it in years to come were rich men for whom bread-and-butter union concerns were largely irrelevant" (17). Studio lawyers argued that directors couldn't unionize because they were well compensated, citing a recent ruling by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) denying recognition to the Chrysler Motors engineers union for this very reason. That the guild was branded "Hollywood's \$100,000 a year Union" did not help its cause. Still, its lawyer countered that directors were not management because they lacked the power to hire and fire.

The guild's masterstroke was to invite assistant directors (ADs) and unit managers to join its ranks as junior members. The assistants and managers, who were responsible for budgeting and scheduling, had legitimate wage and overtime issues. Once traditional union issues became part of the guild's mission, NLRB ratification followed. Wexman's interpretation: "One can readily assume that the directors must have understood . . . that their ability to negotiate the creative rights agenda that lay at the heart of their move to organize would be greatly strengthened if carried out under the umbrella of a struggle for fair wages and humane working conditions" (18).

This alignment made for a vertical guild in which directors negotiated on behalf of junior members, giving its senior members power both on the set and in the wallets of the less-powerful ADs. "The leadership role . . . strengthened the directors' dominance over the filmmaking process at the same time it provided them with a recognized forum for advancing the cause of their own positions as artists" (20).

After World War II, the rise of television presented both a new opportunity and challenge for the guild. In 1947, the New York-based Radio and Television Directors Guild (RTDG) was formed. In 1950, the Los Angeles-based Directors Guild announced its intentions to represent TV and radio directors, too. Unlike its elevated status today, television was then thought of as a lesser cultural form, the domain of writer-producers who protected dialogue rather than of artists who telescoped the visual and verbal aspects of the screenplay.

"TV directors have not historically harbored the creative-rights aspirations of their cinematic colleagues," notes Wexman (21). They were more interested in the bread-and-butter issues associated with a traditional union than with those offered by a guild. The eventual merger of the Directors Guild with its broadcast counterpart was both ideological and geographic. At one point in the war of words, suits, and countersuits, the DGA accused the RTDG of being Communist-dominated (22). Nonetheless, in 1960, the two merged.

The most compelling aspect of Wexman's book is her research into how the guild and studios framed a for-profit industry as an art and the directors of films as artists. This "positioning" (Wexman's well-chosen word) began well before the DGA's creation. "From the earliest days of cinema . . . Hollywood . . . [has positioned] prestige productions as legitimate artistic enterprises rather than vulgar amusements" (24). The making of these products took place in "studios."

From the 1920s through the 1950s, movies were exhibited in grand auditoriums resembling palaces, museums, and concert halls. The Goldwyn (later MGM) logo had a roaring lion wreathed with the motto *Ars Gratia Artis* ("art for art's sake"). In advertising, Paramount extolled the "Rembrandt lighting" of Cecil B. DeMille. No surprise that when the guild organized, it styled itself after the medieval groups of artists and artisans whose senior members were "masters."

Elia Kazan proclaimed that "[d]irecting, finally, is the exertion of your will over other people" (38). In that spirit, contemporary directors have offered analogies that range from high culture to the military, with examples such as

helming a ship, conducting an orchestra, leading an army, and, my favorite—from Francis Ford Coppola—being the “ringmaster of a circus” (39). Except for the conductor analogy, none of these images would particularly evoke art or artistry. Asserting primacy on the set was clearly an important component of establishing one’s artistic bona fides. Wexman suggests that, in joining forces, directors initially protected themselves from the moguls who recut their films as well as from the producers who demanded additional scenes. Later, they would prevail over screenwriters as well.

The rise of the DGA had the effect of diminishing the power of studio bosses like Darryl Zanuck and producers like David Selznick. The former reedited the films of John Ford; the latter hired multiple directors for his movies. The director of credit on *Gone with the Wind* (1939) is Victor Fleming, for instance, but George Cukor and Sam Wood each directed much of it. This appalled King Vidor, a DGA founding member and its first president, who said, “Let’s be honest, [Selznick] wanted to belittle the importance of any one director” (41).

Wexman charts how “[t]he disappearance of the producers’ traditional institutional bases has played a significant role in the power shift toward directors” (42). Before the Paramount antitrust decree of 1948, producers were supported by the studios’ bargaining entity, the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP), but afterward, the AMPTP spoke for the newly reconstituted studios, “focused primarily on financing and distribution, at the expense of the producers who oversaw the making of specific films” (42).

Post-1948, art had little to do with the AMPTP’s agenda. Also post-1948, the continuing rise of the producer-director eroded the producers’ role and power. Ultimately, Wexman concludes, “the producers lost out to the directors not simply because their institutional bases had disappeared but also because they have historically been more attuned to profits than creative rights and have been willing to bargain away creative rights to augment profits” (43).

The DGA’s greatest resistance came from one guild that was equally concerned with creative rights and control: “More than any other group screenwriters have chafed at the DGA’s drive for control over the entire process of moviemaking, out of a conviction that writers, too, are creators” (46). Preston Sturges, like Joseph Mankiewicz, one of the DGA’s most beloved writer-directors, believed that writers were film’s most important force. Sturges recalled that when he came to Hollywood, directors were “Princes of the Blood” and writers worked in teams of six, like piano

movers. “Then one day I realized it would be easier to become a Prince of the Blood myself than to change the social order. . . . This did not change the relative merits of directors and writers (who are vastly more important), but it changed my salary and the way people treated me” (47).

Screenwriter Philip Dunne argued that a director is an interpreter of a text; that if two different directors made a film from the same script, there would be differences in shading of performances and camera angles. But, Wexman’s counters, “these differences wouldn’t have been much greater than the differences between Jascha Heifetz and David Oistrakh playing Beethoven’s Violin Concerto” (47).

However, the screenwriters’ push for artistic rights suffered from a perception in the 1950s—exacerbated by the House Un-American Activities Committee—that its guild was a Communist cell. Ever since, Wexman writes, the stated mission of screenwriters has been inconsistent: “At times, [the screenwriters] have advocated for the recognition of writers as part of a team effort, while at other times they have championed the idea of writers as sole authors” (50). Consider, as exhibit A, this contradictory opinion from John Wells, Writers Guild president in 1999: “By claiming sole creative authorship the director denies all other artists involved in the picture their rightful due,” he writes, going on to assert that “the writer is the author of the work, the creator” (50). By the 1960s, with the mainstream embrace of the auteur theory, the DGA position was further vindicated.

Frankly, I was surprised by Wexman’s spotty chronicle of the DGA’s inconsistent efforts to promote the hiring of minorities and women among its ranks. If you read her subsection titled “Charisma and Patriarchy” (60–64), you might think that since 1983 the DGA has been responsive to members who are not white and male. Not exactly so.

Wexman does mention that the DGA’s 1983 support for female members who sued two studios accelerated the hiring of more women and the ACLU’s 2014 investigation into industrywide gender discrimination within Hollywood studios. But she does not mention that it was the activist efforts of a female member of the DGA that sparked inquiry into whether and how guild practices might be contributing to this, nor does she point out that the guild would maintain that it bore no responsibility because studios, not the guild, hire directors. Actually, in 2015, the ACLU alleged that the DGA maintained a list of female filmmakers it provided to producers and showrunners upon request. Further, the DGA Diversity Task Force clumps together women and

minority filmmakers, enabling producers to comply with equal-opportunity laws by hiring men of color. Only in the appendix does Wexman mention that the investigations were continued in 2015 by the EEOC (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission). It is possible that she completed her manuscript before the announcement of the 2019 statistics showing that the film industry saw a 600 percent increase in female studio director hires and episodic TV a 130 percent increase. Many attribute these increases to the federal inquiry.

Where the early chapters of the book are about the director's right to control the creative process, in the book's fifth chapter, "Law: The DGA and Artists as Owners," Wexman explores whether directors have jurisdiction over their films after release. This question first arose in the 1960s when wide-screen movies were "panned-and-scanned" for broadcast on television and once again in the 1980s when the controversial "colorization" of black-and-white movies began. Wexman illustrates how the "Anglo-American doctrine of copyright" clashes with the European presumption of artist's rights (109), and she provides examples of more-enlightened practices overseas. "France, for example, grants moral rights to directors and screenwriters, other countries give them to composers and cinematographers. . . . Only Japan grants such rights to anyone involved in producing a work" (115).

Though I had hoped that Wexman would take up the mantle of a Supreme Court justice and argue in favor of directors over screenwriters (or vice versa) or of artist's rights over copyright (or vice versa), she avoids such positioning as she clearly explains the arguments on all sides. I closed the book feeling like Justice Potter Stewart, when he made his famous ruling on pornography in 1964: I know authorship when I see it. Certainly I'd rule to extend auteur status to Ava DuVernay, David Fincher, Spike Lee, and Steven Spielberg. But to Michael Bay, Joel Schumacher, or McG? Not a chance.

She concludes her evenhanded book duly impressed by how much the guild has accomplished in its eighty-five years. And indeed, it is impressive. For the most part, the DGA has declawed the moguls and defanged the producers who demeaned directors or behaved as though they were fungible. As to the guild's future, Wexman wonders whether in a labor-unfriendly nation where union membership has dropped to 11 percent of the work force, a guild comprising some fifteen thousand directors of movies, TV, radio, and commercials can evolve at the lightning pace of their converging technologies. I wonder whether commercials directors have the same investment in creative rights

as film directors. And whether, in this era of media disruption, filmmakers care more about protecting their employment than their status as artists.

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## PATRICIA WHITE

### *Afterimages: Women, Cinema and Changing Times* by Laura Mulvey

A new book by Laura Mulvey is a publishing occasion to mark. This is the case not only because the present moment of public scrutiny of issues of women and cinema—with #MeToo, 5050by2020, and the now-frequent invocation of "the female gaze"—calls out for her perspective, but also because of the sheer pleasure of her company. Whether co-curating one of the first women's film events, at the Edinburgh Film Festival in 1972; diagnosing the Hollywood pleasure machine's construction of "woman as image/man as bearer of the look" in her famous 1975 essay; or making the new kind of cinema she prescribed there in works like *Riddles of the Sphinx* (codirected with Peter Wollen, 1977), Mulvey has combined practice and theory and occupied public and scholarly spaces from the outset.

She maintained this perspective through her long career as an educator only recently retired from Birkbeck College, University of London. In her new book, *Afterimages: Women, Cinema and Changing Times*, Mulvey's voice welcomes the reader into an intimacy of unfolding thought that feels like the best kind of teaching. Although I speak here of her writing voice, anyone who has watched *Riddles of the Sphinx*, or heard Mulvey's audio commentaries, lectures, or interviews, will have a memorable aural image to accompany her prose.

Mulvey positions herself more as an essayist than a writer of tomes. As its reflective title indicates, *Afterimages: On Cinema, Women, and Changing Times* does not undertake any definitive statement on present debates, even as it invokes the keywords that define Mulvey's prodigious influence on an entire field. The text that introduces and connects the book's thirteen essays—on women and spectacle, global women filmmakers, and the