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Building the Film and Cinema Infrastructure of Tomorrow

Anatomy of the Machine Behind the Big Screen

Aiman JoeHanz

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IntroductionIntroduction

Every book in this series has asked the same question of a different machine: what does a country actually build when it builds something ordinary? This volume asks it of the least ordinary of them, the one the reader has sat inside since childhood and never once thought of as public works: the dark room where a story is thrown onto a wall. A film is a private dream financed in public, and the machinery around it, the permits, the ratings, the vaults, the inspectors, the ledgers, is the state's answer to a question no other art asks with the same money: who is allowed to make this, who is allowed to see it, who is allowed to keep it, and who is counting?

The book takes the machine apart in ten organs, and it follows the same republic through the same week this series always uses, a country of some ten million people on a plain between two rivers, with a film office in the capital, a studio estate on its northern edge, a vault under a hill, four hundred and eleven working cinemas, one festival that closes the capital's main street every autumn, and a difficult week in which a war film arrives at the classification board with its premiere already booked, a vault transfer goes wrong in the rain, a market town is caught screening without a licence, the festival's selection is accused of favouring a producer's cousin, and the Friday box-office ledger closes with one cinema's returns missing. None of these is a disaster by the standards of flood or famine. All of them are, in the machine's own vocabulary, load-bearing: each one tests an organ built decades before the test arrived, and the machine's claim to the reader's trust is that it was designed while calm for exactly the days it is not.

Why the state is inside the cinema at all is the question the first chapter answers, and the answer is older than anyone now working in the machine: a film is a mass audience in a locked room, a fire hazard with a story attached, and every organ in this book began as either a safety rule or a freedom rule, a way of keeping the audience alive or a way of keeping the projector out of the censor's private hands. The reader who wants the machine in one sentence may have it: the film infrastructure is the state's patient arrangement for stories that are too expensive to be free, too public to be private, and too fragile to be left uncounted.

How to read what follows is the same contract as every organ in this series. Each chapter is a room, taken in the order a film itself travels: permitted, rated, built, stored, carried, shown, backed, celebrated, kept and counted. The invented republic is deliberate, a composite drawn from how such machines

are actually built rather than from any one country's statutes, so no border on any map is being described, and the reader who mistakes the republic for her own country will find that it flatters no one. The numbers are teaching numbers, honest arithmetic on a country small enough to check by hand. The week is the spine, and the reader is invited to hold its threads from the first chapter to the last word, because the machine this book disassembles is not the projector, the studio or the vault. It is the agreement, made in daylight and honored in the dark, that the country's stories should be expensive, permitted, rated, preserved and counted, and that the room where they are shown should belong to everyone who can buy a ticket to it.

Chapter 1: The Film Office — Where a Production Is PermittedChapter 1: The Film Office — Where a Production Is Permitted

Every film in the republic begins as a form in a waiting room, and the waiting room is the first room of the machine. The Film Office occupies the ground floor of a building the republic's founders gave to the machine at its founding: nine clerks behind a long counter, a wall of bound registers that record every shooting licence issued since the machine's first year, a door marked with the single word PRODUCTION, and, above the counter, the founders' brass sentence, polished weekly: THE STORY IS FREE AND THE CAMERA IS NOT. The sentence is the office's whole doctrine in eleven words. No one in the republic needs the office's permission to write, to imagine or to gather a crew in a garden and film a scene. Everyone needs its permission the moment the thing being made is intended for a public room, because the public room is where a private dream becomes a crowd, and the crowd is the state's business the way a bridge's load is the state's business.

What a shooting licence actually says is smaller than the row around it suggests, and the office is proud of the smallness. One page: the production's name, the company behind it, the shooting dates, the locations in which it will work, the certificate of the production's insurer, the number of workers engaged, the presence or absence of children on the call sheet, and the signature of the person the office will hold responsible if the paper's promises turn out false. The fee is flat, the same for the epic and the documentary, set deliberately low enough that no one is priced out of making a film and deliberately public enough that the office cannot quietly favour anyone, and the licence is issued in three working days or the fee is returned, a rule the office prints on the form itself so the counter's clock is visible to everyone standing in line.

The week this book follows opens at the office's counter on Monday morning, because every difficult week in the machine opens where permission is asked for. The queue is ordinary: a student crew with a garden and a borrowed camera, a producer's runner collecting a licence for a shoot already scheduled, a farmer asking whether drones over his own fields need paper (they do, and the clerk explains which kind), and one man the counter knows by name, arriving with the market town's unlicensed screening in yesterday's newspapers folded under his arm. The raid is Chapter 6's story; the office's Monday part is only that a licence nobody applied for is a licence the machine

could not protect, and the office's oldest clerk says the sentence she says whenever the newspapers bring the town in: the machine cannot refuse what it was never shown, but it can always be shown.

Why the office demands to be shown at all is the child-actor rule, the licence's one clause with teeth. A production that puts anyone under sixteen before a camera must name a tutor, cap the working day, and file the child's hours every week of the shoot, and a production that lies about it loses the licence and the insurance with it. The rule began, like so much of this machine, as a fire rule: the founders had watched a generation of children carried out of locked, unpermitted screening rooms, and they built the office so that the room would never again be locked, the work would never again be uncounted, and the child on the call sheet would always have an adult in the building whose signature could be found. The clause has since outgrown its fire, the way load-bearing things do, into the machine's general habit: nothing about a film shall be hidden from the paper, because everything the paper can see, the machine can answer for.

The office's own arithmetic is printed every year in the machine's annual report, one of the shortest sections in this series because the office is one of the smallest organs: about two thousand and a hundred shooting licences a year, roughly a third of them for productions that never finish, forty-one child-actor clauses enforced, six licences suspended and one revoked, the revocation a standing exhibit in the office's training room and the subject of a chapter to come. The report prints the office's refusals with its grants, in the same type, on the same page, and the founding act's one sentence about the office's discretion is the sentence every clerk memorizes on the first day and no clerk has ever been able to shorten: the office shall refuse a licence only for a lie on the form, an unpaid insurance debt, or a danger to the people on the call sheet, and for nothing else, because the state that may not refuse a story may not smuggle a refusal into the paperwork of its making.

The week's weather at the office, the last thing this chapter needs, is the queue itself: nine clerks, three minutes a licence, the wall of registers behind them filled to its four hundredth volume, and at the counter's end the oldest clerk stamping the student crew's form with the same brass stamp that has opened every film in the republic's history, the stamp the office's founder ordered from the same foundry that made the fire brigade's bells, so that the machine's permission and the machine's oldest fear would always be made, quite literally, of the same metal. The reader's own errand list at this organ is

two lines long, and the office prints them on the back of every licence so no one can claim the system is a maze: renew before the expiry line, and read the refusal list before booking the crew. Everything else belongs to the office, and the founders counted the errands on purpose when they wrote the act, arguing that a licensing organ that gives the applicant more than two duties has quietly moved its own work onto the public. The two-line card is the organ's quietest invention, and the queue moves at the speed of it.

The people of the film office are counted by hand in the act, and the count has survived every modernization proposal since: a registrar, four clerks, a legal reader and a stamp-keeper, seven in all, for a country that licenses several hundred productions a year. The registrar's own account of the office, written for the archive's oral shelf, explains the smallness as doctrine rather than thrift: every applicant should be able to name the person who read their licence, and an office past that size becomes a corridor of initials. The stamp-keeper is the seventh and the most senior in seniority rules the founders wrote for a reason the handbook states plainly: the stamp is the office's whole authority made of brass, and it should report to someone who has read every act that mentions it.

The office audits itself with a calendar the industry can quote in its sleep: one licence file in five is redrawn every quarter and re-read blind, the refusals list is reprinted with the quarter's decisions beside it, and once a year the registrar publicly audits the office's own stamp ledger, counting the impressions against the licences issued, a reconciliation that has never once failed and that the founders demanded anyway, for a reason the handbook keeps on its first page: an organ whose only tool is a stamp must be able to prove the stamp has never worked a night shift.

The handoffs out of the film office run to every sibling at once, and the reader can trace one licence through all of them: a production licensed on Monday is a booking at the studio estate by noon, a scheduled item on the classification board's list within the week, a deposit obligation on the archive's calendar within the year, a row in the fund's ledger if it borrowed, a seal count waiting at the distribution office when it is finished, a room inspection ahead of its first screening, and finally a band on the audience bureau's tables when the country buys its tickets. The office's only outbound document is the licence itself, a single page each sibling recognizes by its number, and the founders' design note calls the arrangement the machine's nervous system: one instrument, ten reflexes, no conversation needed between them.

The office's future is a queue question, and the assembly has noticed: a proposal sits before it to let licences be applied for by photograph, the counter kept only for the cases the clerks would want to see in person, and the debate has split the office down its own history. The registrar's side argues that the counter is the organ's judgment seat, where the drone farmer and the student crew and the market town's operator are told the same thing by the same person; the modernizers answer that the queue is a tax on the far hill towns that a photograph would refund, and that Tuesday proved the office can work from a van if the van has the file. The office's own submission to the assembly is a compromise the drafting note calls the counter stays: the photograph may carry the paper, but the signature stays at the counter, because the machine's whole authority ends in a hand on a page and the founders wanted that hand witnessed.

Before the week of this book, the office's hardest week on record was the one the clerks still call the queues week, when a co-production treaty doubled the licence traffic overnight and the counter ran out of numbered tickets by ten in the morning for six straight days. The office's response that week is why the organ reads the treaty differently now: the four clerks triaged by need rather than by order, rewrote the queue rules on a Wednesday evening, and posted the new rules at the door before opening on Thursday, so that the treaty's paperwork moved at the price of a small delay to the domestic queue that was never charged in the end. The week's report closes with the sentence the handbook quotes in its chapter on queue design: a queue that must be rethought will be rethought in public or not honestly at all.

Every organ in this machine has quarreled with a sibling, and the quarrels are worth reading because the act settled most of them in a single sentence each. The office's oldest quarrel was with the board, over which came first, the permission to make a film or the judgment on the film made, and for a decade the two organs traded the order back and forth until a festival film premiered unclassified under an exhibition licence and the assembly ended the argument by ranking the machine: a production licence, then a certificate, then an exhibition licence, and no organ may reorder the queue. The office accepted the ranking on a condition the handbook still prints: it would hold the first place only if the holder of the second agreed to act within the week, and the board has honoured the condition for so long that the trade assumes it was always a rule.

Every organ keeps one form, and the office's form is the licence itself, whose

design history is a lecture the clerks give to every visiting delegation without being asked. The page has carried the same eleven fields since the act's second year: the production's title and licence number, the shooting places and dates, the two named responsible officers, the third-party insurance line, the classification undertaking, the deposit undertaking, the fee and stamp, and one blank line the founders added at the last minute whose printed label is simply notes, on the drafting theory that every honest form needs a place for the truth that fits no field. The notes line has carried drone altitudes, a llama's name, and the market town operator's apology that opened the raid chapter, and the office's submission to the assembly on the licence's future closes with the sentence that keeps the page alive: the eleven fields have outlived every machine we have bought, and the page will outlive the photograph proposal too, because it is not paper, it is a promise in a shape the counter can read.

The office's succession is the counter's, and it is designed to be unremarkable: the apprenticeship rule has the four clerks each spend one year in five attached to the registrar's desk, so that when a registrar retires the successor has already signed a season of Monday queues, and the handover is a week of overlapping initials rather than a ceremony. The act adds one condition the office treats as sacred: the outgoing registrar's last duty is to file, in public, the count of their own refusals, with reasons, so that the successor inherits the office's judgment record along with its stamp. The office's handbook calls the filing the organ's inheritance tax, and the country's historians note that the three registrars with the highest refusal counts are the three whose successors lasted longest, a correlation the handbook prints with visible satisfaction and no explanation at all.

Every organ watches one number, and the reader should know all ten, because the numbers are the machine's dials at a glance. The office watches its refusal rate, applications refused with reasons published, not because refusals are a success but because a quarter with zero refusals means the office is either rubber-stamping or lucky, and the handbook's target band is narrow enough to look like a confession: three to seven percent, the range the founders argued the honest counter lives in. The rate is printed on the office's own wall beside the queue, where applicants can read it while they wait, and the clerks' favourite training exercise is to ask a new recruit what the number would have to do to make the office proud; the correct answer, the handbook records, was written by the farmer with the drone question, who said it should rise whenever the machine gets honest faster than the country gets careful.

Delegations arrive from other countries at a rate the office has learned to plan for, two or three a year, and the office's briefing pack for them is famously one page long: the eleven fields, the stamp, the queue rules, and a sentence at the bottom that the clerks insist on keeping even though no delegation has ever quoted it back. The sentence is the office's honest advertisement of its own limits: we were designed for a country that trusts its paperwork, and the machine will not travel well to a country that does not, and the office's senior clerk has watched four delegations copy the licence word for word and one delegation, the one that had read the sentence, go home and fix the trust first. The office's annual report prints the delegation count with the same neutrality it prints the queue, and the trade's joke about the organ's tourism, that the machine exports more refusals than films, is filed with the report, uncorrected, as usual.

The reader has followed the machine through its difficult week, and the catalog owes the reader the ordinary one, because an infrastructure is judged by its Tuesdays more than its storms. On an ordinary Tuesday the office opens at eight with a queue of two, both renewals, and the senior clerk has time to walk the applicant through the drone altitudes of the notes line for no better reason than the counter is quiet; the stamp falls eleven times before noon, the post of the morning adds three, and the day's hardest decision is a permission for a film about the assembly to be shot inside the assembly, which the office grants with a condition that has become a small tradition: the crew may film the chamber, and the chamber may film the crew, and both deposits go to the archive. The office's ordinary Tuesday produces no stories, which is precisely the office's ambition for it, and the annual report's most reprinted sentence on the ordinary day is the senior clerk's: the machine is at work when nothing happens and the queue goes home early.

Every organ in this machine refuses something, and the refusals are the catalog's best-kept catalogue, because an infrastructure is defined as much by what it will not do as by the ten stamps the reader has met. The office refuses urgency: no licence is hurried, whatever the premiere booked, and the war film's week proved the rule's cost and its worth, since the certificate waited on the board's two viewings and not on the opera house's marquee. The refusal is drafted in the handbook's plainest sentence: the machine does not have a faster gear, because a country that has seen one hurried licence will ask for a second, and the queue that learns to hurry has stopped being a queue and become a bargain.

The machine's buildings tell its history better than its minutes do, and the catalog should end its tours with them. The film office is a converted postal hall the founders chose for one reason, the queue fits under the roof, and the counter is the original parcel desk, cut down twice, kept because the clerks' argument about replacement furniture was settled by the applicant who said the wood had learned the queue. The founders spent the act's whole architecture budget on vaults and stages and spent almost nothing on the office that ran them, and the drafting note defends the asymmetry with the sentence the building still wears over its door: the machine's authority is in its procedure, and procedure needs no marble.

The act has been amended eleven times in the machine's history, and the catalog closes with the amendments because they are the machine's autobiography, one paragraph per organ, each change argued in public and printed beside the reason it was needed. The first amendment created the office's appeal, a second reading for a refused licence before the registrar's own file, added after a farmer's drone refusal was found to rest on a clerk's misreading of the altitudes line; the amendment's text is one sentence and its note is shorter, and both are taught at the counter: the machine corrects its own handwriting first, and the appeal exists so that it can be seen doing so. The office's chapter of the act is the machine's most amended and the least argued, because the office files every amendment itself, in public, with the queue's approval asked at the door.

Every organ keeps one object that is not a form and not a machine, and the catalog has saved the objects for near its end because they teach the design faster than the clauses do. The office's object is the stamp, the founding brass seal the clerks have used since the act's first Monday, re-inked from the same tin the office refuses to replace, and the counter's standing rule about it is the organ's whole theory of authority in miniature: the stamp is heavy on purpose, the clerk must feel the permission being given, and the applicant must hear it, one thump, because a licence nobody heard granted is a licence the machine cannot defend in the market town's courtroom or its queue.

Every organ is misunderstood in one recurring way, and the catalog owes the reader the corrections, because the misunderstandings are all reasonable and all wrong in the same direction, toward suspicion of the machine's calm. The office is accused of gatekeeping, and the correction is the queue's arithmetic the reader has met: eleven fields, a stamp, and a refusal rate the office publishes on its own wall, which is not a gate a country builds against its

filmmakers but a counter a country builds against its own weather. The founder's draft called the office the machine's ear, not its mouth, and the accusation of gatekeeping was answered in the act's commentary in the sentence the clerks still give the delegations: a licence is a promise the country makes to the film, not a permission the country sells it, and the queue moves because the promise is cheap to give.

The catalog closes where the machine itself closes, with what the reader may check, because the founders built the act for the reader's own eyes and the reader deserves the list. At the film office, the reader may walk in without an appointment and read the refusal rate on the wall, stand in the queue and watch the stamp fall, ask the senior clerk for the amendment that created the appeal and be handed the text, and see, in the notes line of any licence the office will show, the machine's honesty in its own handwriting; the reader who does these five things will have audited the organ in an afternoon, and the office's handbook says so in its final paragraph, on the founders' standing theory that an instrument the public cannot check is an instrument the public is being asked to guess about, and that a country should never have to guess about the machine that holds its permissions. The reader's own licence, if the reader ever films so much as a garden, will be one page, eleven fields, and a thump, and the reader will hear the promise being made, which is the whole of what the office was ever designed to prove to the country that asked for it: that the machine's first door opens, and opens for anyone who queues.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The author writes the anatomy of the machines that hold daily life together, one organ at a time. This series and its companion volumes have taken apart the systems that govern, feed, trade, police, heal, remember, defend, welcome, and mourn; the present book turns to the machine that fills a dark room with a country's evenings, and to the craft of the licensing clerks, classification members drawn by lot, studio keepers, vault couriers, distribution registrars, cinema inspectors, fund officers, festival programmers, archivists, and tally clerks who keep the beam honest from the first stamp to the last count, one licence, one band, one thump of the stamp at a time.