Making A Movie Essay, Research Paper

Imagine a young child, eye level

with a floor full of miniature toys, concentrating intently on building

a make-believe world. To the child, the toys are not miniature figures

made of plastic or wood. They are real characters with real adventures.

The child frames the action, crafting scenes that unfold in a world of

imagination.

Looking through the lens of a camera

as actors bring to life a writer’s story, the filmmaker is also peering

into a world of imagination. The director, producer, actors, screenwriter,

and film editor are all essential players in the journey from concept to

finished film. In this remarkable process, thousands of small details-and

often hundreds of people-come together to create a Hollywood film.

In the Beginning

The year is 1890. Directors, editors,

and cameramen are making silent films with the help of a “scenarist,” usually

an ex-vaudeville actor who invents humorous situations. But where are the

screenwriters? These early films don’t need them. Without sound, there

is no need for dialogue. ( Motion Picture Association of America [MPAA],

1999)

The Storytellers

All of that changed with the advent

of sound for film in the 1920s. Suddenly, actors needed something to say.

Writers flocked to Hollywood in droves from Broadway and from the worlds

of literature and journalism. For a brief time in the 1930s, some of the

world’s most famous writers wrote Hollywood scripts: William Faulkner,

F. Scott Fitzgerald, Bertolt, and Thomas Mann.

In 1932, William Faulkner earned

$6,000 in salary and rights for a story, a substantial of money at the

time. Just five years later, F. Scott Fitzgerald earned $1,250 per week,

more money than he had ever earned in his life (Brady, 1981, 26) , and

enough to get him out of the serious debt he had fallen into. Despite generous

pay, the conditions

under which these world-renowned

writers labored were anything but ideal. Hollywood was a factory system,

churning out movies at a furious pace. Screenwriters found themselves at

the bottom rung of the studio ladder.

By the end of World War II, screenwriters

were complaining about their place in the Hollywood machine. Leonard Spigelgass,

editor of Who Wrote the Movie and What Else Did He Write (Brady 1981, 50),

summed up the situation:

“Over the years we have been called hacks, high-priced secretaries, creatures

of the director or producer, pulp writers, craftsmen, sell-outs, cop-outs,

mechanical robots.No Pulitzer Prizes for us, no Noble’s, no mention of

our names….” (Brady, 1981, 51)

Screenwriters continued to earn

little prestige for their hard work, until the filmmaking system experienced

some important shifts.

The status of movie stars began

to increase, and writers often found to be powerful allies. Occasionally,

stars would request a script by particular writer, as happened with Katherine

Hepburn and the movie of the Year. Hepburn brought the script to the attention

of studio head Louis B. Mayer, and the script’s writers, Ring Lardner Jr.

and Michael Kanin, received $100,000 for its use (indieWire, 1999).

A few writers also managed to obtain

creative control over their work. John Huston, a well-known filmmaker who

began as a writer, demanded a clause in his contract with the studio that

would give him the opportunity to direct. A screenwriter gained more respect

if he demonstrated a real talent for directing.

Increasingly, writers became more

important players within the studio system. Even so, some left the security

and good pay of the studio to freelance for whoever held the reins-studios,

stars, or other players. By the late 1940s, screenwriting was a lucrative

occupation.

Screenwriters today are important

and often powerful players in the filmmaking process. They are paid as

well as directors and producers are, and their work is considered an art.

Screenplays are often published and sold to the general public in bookstores

just like novels and plays. (Malkiewicz, 1992, 33).

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Though rare in the 1930s and 1940s,

many screenwriters today are asking to direct in order to guide their script

through the filmmaking process. The number of writers who turn to directing

steadily increases year after year. Even if they do not direct, screenwriters

often have a say in the project from script through production, collaborating

closely with actors and directors to advance their ideas through to finished

film.

The Director’s Vision

The director’s vision shapes the

look and feel of a film. He or she is the creative force that pulls a film

together, responsible for turning the words of a script into images on

the screen. Actors, cinematographers, writers, and editors orbit around

the director like planets around the Sun. Despite the director’s pivotal

role, most Hollywood movies are designed to pull you into the story without

being aware of the director’s hand. Many talented film directors with long

lists of feature film credits are so skilled at being “invisible” that

they are little known by the movie-going public. (Goldman, 1989, 17)

Imagine you’re being considered to

direct a Hollywood film. You’re handed a screenplay has been “greenlighted”

(given approval for production) by a major studio (Wordplay, 1999). As

you read through it, you begin to imagine how it might play out on screen.

You see the characters coming to life. You envision the lighting and hear

the sound. You are absorbed in the world of the story until you see the

script’s final words: Fade Out. When you’re done reading the script, you

ask yourself some key questions. What is the main idea or theme of the

screenplay? What does the story say about the human condition in general?

You also think about the script cinematically. How will the script translate

to the visual language of the screen? Who is the audience? As the director,

you must feel passionate about this soon-to-be film. Feeling connected

and committed to the story will help you do your best work, and there’s

an enormous amount of work ahead (Movie Maker Magazine [MMM], 1999) .

If you are hired as the director

of this film, you may need to help shape the script for the screen. A good

script is the foundation for a good film, but even the best one may need

to be developed or molded to work well on the big screen. Sometimes the

producer will develop a script and then hand it over to the director. In

other cases, the director may work with the writer early on to help develop

a script from its beginning stages.

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Nowadays, the planning for a film

is often underway before there is a script. A director or producer purchases

the rights to a story and then hires a screenwriter. Whatever the route

from script to screen, the director plays an important role in shaping

the way the story is told.

Assembling the Cast and Crew

The people you work with, both the

actors and the crew who will make things work behind the scenes, are crucial

to the film’s success. The right people will understand and respect your

vision, work well with one another, and bring their own unique gifts to

the filmmaking process.

The film’s producer normally hires

the crew, but the director will have input into crucial hires such as lead

actors. A production designer is responsible for the believability of a

film’s scenery and sets. In essence, the production designer is the architect

of the film, working to make your vision, as director, a reality. The production

designer also works closely with the art director and set decorator, making

certain all the visual details are accurate and the style and period of

the film reflect your wishes. (Bone, 1996, 62)

The cinematographer, or director

of photography, helps to translate your vision to film, scene by scene,

planning shots and supervising camera operators. Often, cinematographers

are artists with experience in painting and photography. Their job is to

create and capture the images that best tell the story. (Malkiewicz, 1992,

56)

The actors you choose will bring

your story to life. Your casting decisions will be based on such factors

as availability and whether or not an actor is suitable for lead or ensemble

acting, as well as on a healthy dose of intuition. Often a casting director

or producer will help you select the cast.

Filming: Pre-production

After months or even years of development,

delays, and rewrites, the final script is set and the film goes into pre-production.

During this phase, budgets are detailed, scenes are planned and designed,

and a shooting schedule is prepared. Storyboards-visual representations

of every shot-are prepared by a storyboard artist in consultation with

the director, director of photography, and designer. Before a single frame

is shot, the

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film is planned from beginning to

end on paper. The final stages of pre-production include weeks of rehearsal,

set construction, and location scouting.

Once shooting begins, you’ll need

to continue to communicate your vision of the film to the actors and crew.

You’ll also need to be able to improvise on the set and troubleshoot if

necessary. This flexibility can make the difference between an acceptable

production and an excellent one.

On average, you will be able to complete filming for about three script

pages per day, or the equivalent of about three minutes of screen time.

Once the shoot is over, hundreds

of thousands of feet of film need to be assembled into a suitable story

(Murch, 1995, 27). Days or weeks of shooting result in only a few minutes

of screen time. In the editing room, your vision will either come to life

or perish. With your guidance, the film and sound editor will complete

the detailed technical work required at this stage. Your “director’s cut”

of the film (the one you work with the editor to create) may not be the

final one the audience sees. The film’s producers may decide to cut certain

scenes or use a different film clip for a certain effect. Editing is a

mutual process, the final step in the difficult work of bringing your vision

to life.

Your stature as a director (as well

as the terms of your contract with the studio) determines how much say

you have in determining what version of the film is released to the public.

Occasionally, a director dislikes the final cut and decides not to be listed

in the credits. If this happens, the credits list Alan Smithee as the director.

Alan Smithee is not a real person, but an alias used as a substitute when

a director refuses to be linked to a film. (Murch, 1995, 63)

Filming: Camera Angles

As a director, you have many

tools and techniques that can shape the look and feel of a film. You can

vary a shot’s perspective, lighting, location, or other qualities to achieve

certain effects. One powerful way to communicate your vision is through

camera angles.

During the planning stages of a

film, the director and possibly the director of photography may meet with

a storyboard artist to illustrate the flow of shots that will best tell

the story. There are a number of camera angles that a director has at his

or her disposal. The most common of these are the establishing shot, long

shot, medium-shot, over-the-shoulder shot, and close-up. (Wordplay, 1999)

The establishing shot is normally

taken from a great distance or from a “bird’s eye view,” that establishes

where the action is about to occur. The long shot shows a scene from a

distance (but not as great a distance as the establishing shot). A long

shot is used to stress the environment or setting of a scene. The medium

shot frames actors, normally from the waist up. The medium shot can be

used to focus attention on an interaction between two actors, such as a

struggle, debate, or embrace. The Over-the-shoulder shot is

of one actor taken from over the

shoulder of another actor. An over-the-shoulder shot is used when two characters

are interacting face-to-face. Filming over an actor’s shoulder focuses

the audience’s attention on one actor at a time in a conversation, rather

than on both. The Close-up shot is taken at close range, sometimes only

inches away from an actor’s face, a prop, or some other object. The close-up

is designed to focus attention on an actor’s expression, to give significance

to a certain object, or to direct the audience to some other important

element of the film.

The Heads of State

The film’s producer acts as an administrator,

communicator, and guide, helping hundreds of people reach a final goal:

completing the film on schedule, on budget, and as the director envisioned.

The producer administers all the various aspects of film production, from

initial concept to script and budget preparation to shooting, post-production,

and release. He or she does not have to be able to write, direct, edit,

or act to help screenwriters, directors, editors, and actors do their best

work. A producer’s guiding agenda is the budget. The producer must work

within the limitations of the budget, creatively selecting the best possible

people and solutions to bring the script from page to screen. If the project

runs out of money, the production can’t be completed. The film can’t be

printed or distributed, and therefore won’t ever make it to theaters. Most

film investors take out insurance, called a completion bond, to avoid the

often disastrous financial results of an uncompleted film. Questions? Complaints?

The producer hears it all and must be smooth in handling problems. The

producer must know everything (or know how to find out about it), be “hands-on”

or “hands-off” depending on what the situation calls for, and understand

the daily decisions and difficult logistics behind the art

of filmmaking. The producer always

has his or her eye on the prize: the completed film (Houghton, 1992, 50).

The Actor

No cinematographer or film editor,

no matter how gifted, can turn a terrible performance into a great one.

The right actor can give a screenwriter’s words exciting new depth and.

Actors are essential for conveying emotions to an audience, for bringing

the words and ideas in a script to life.

Imagine that you are an actor. You’ve worked

primarily in New York theater, but have decided to try your hand at working

in film. Once you’re lucky enough to secure an agent, you are sent on interviews

where you meet casting directors and read for parts. Over the course of

two months, you try out for 23 roles and are chosen for none of them. Finally,

you are cast in a film. It’s a minor part, but substantial enough that

if you do well, you will enjoy more work and exposure. After the shock

wears off, you begin to prepare.

As an actor, you must be able to

become many different people, you must bring to the role those parts of

yourself that are similar to the character. You look deep inside yourself

to find feelings that will help you come across as sad and bitter. You

study the role in depth. In order to learn your lines, you know you must

learn the part. Memorizing lines without understanding the role will be

of little help to you. (Barr, 1997, 12)

Filming: Shooting the Scene

The day of the shoot, you walk onto

the sound stage (or location) prepared to begin filming. The set has been

constructed prior to your arrival by. You’ll be working with a diverse

crew of people to get your scene done, each of whom has an important role

in the making of the movie. The cinematographer (or director of photography)

is responsible for the lighting, choice of film, correct exposure, correct

use of lenses, and supervision of the camera crew. The mixer is responsible

recording the sound. Other sounds are added during post-production by Foley

artists. The gaffer is responsible for making sure all the lighting equipment

is where it should be and operating correctly. The

gaffer sets the lights so that the

finished picture will have the desired effect. The key grip is responsible

for the rigging (carpentry) and for moving and readying the sets and camera

dollies. The set dresser decorates the set. The property master ensures

the sets and actors have all the necessary dressing and props. The wardrobe

master is responsible for all wardrobe needs. The make up person is responsible

for all makeup. The assistant director keeps order on the set and makes

sure the production moves according to schedule. Normally hired by the

producer, the assistant director aids the director but also watches over

the production company’s investment. Sometimes this involves prodding the

director to finish the shots planned for a particular day, or hunting down

actors if they are not where they should be on the set. The assistant director

also functions as a record keeper and handles time cards and minor union

disputes. (Wordplay, 1999)

During filming, you are told exactly

where to stand and where to move. Every time you stop, someone places a

piece of tape on the floor. The camera follows you slowly. You rehearse

the scene on the director’s command. Once. Twice. Then the director says,

“Let’s go for a take.” The assistant director yells, “Quiet on the set!”

The actor who appears in this scene with you moves to his position. The

cinematographer instructs the cameraman to take a medium shot. “Roll it,”

says the assistant director. Someone says, “Rolling.” “Speed,” says someone

else. “Thirty-five, take one.” An assistant holds a slate in front of the

actor’s face and snaps it shut. This “clacker” will later aid the film

editor in synchronizing the picture to the sound. “Action!” commands the

director. Seconds later, the director calls out, “Cut. Do it again.” The

process is repeated until the director yells, “Cut. Print it.” The makeup

person moves into the scene and adjusts the actor’s makeup. The director

now wants a close-up shot and the cameraman films several takes until the

director is satisfied with each one. Finally, it’s your turn for a close-up.

You know that the camera and microphone will be within a few feet of you,

so you’ll need to communicate ideas and emotions at a very close range.

“Action!” You enter the room. You’re careful to “hit your mark” and stop

exactly where the tape was placed on the floor earlier in the day. “Cut,”

the director says, and tells you to do it again. (Wordplay, 1999)Finally,

he calls out, “That’s a wrap.” You take a deep breath of relief. The assistant

director gives you your callsheet, or your schedule, for the next day’s

shooting. The crew begins to pack away the equipment for the night.

The film shot that day is sent to a lab where it is processed and made

into “dailies.” Dailies are film clips that are viewed after each day’s

work in order to evaluate performances and spot any technical problems.

They are shown to only a few people-normally, only the director, producer,

and director of photography.

Cuts and Transitions: Assembling

the Scene

The film editor must know how to

tell a story, be politically savvy when working with directors and studio

executives, and have a calm and confident demeanor. Millions of dollars

of film and the responsibility of guiding the picture through post-production

and into theaters rest in the editor’s hands. Scenes may have been photographed

poorly and performances might have been less than inspired, but a skilled

and creative editor can assemble the film so that the audience will never

see these imperfections. (Murch, 1995, 28-29)

To better understand the editing

process, imagine you are seated in a movie theater. The lights are dim

and credits appear over an establishing shot of a seacoast town in Maine.

The title appears on the screen: Arson Hill. After the last credits evaporate,

you see a long shot of a vacant summer cottage, then a medium shot of a

mysterious-looking man pouring lighter fluid on the grass near the house

and striking a match. The grass catches fire; the man flees. The vivid

crackling of the fire dissolves into the sound of a young girl’s laughter

as she packs clothing into a cardboard box and sings along with her CD

player.

Who created this scene? The screenwriter,

director, cinematographer, actors, lighting designer, sound designer, and,

finally, the film editor. Working with the director, the film editor shaped

the scene into its final form. After hours and hours of reviewing the unedited

film, he created this one-minute scene. The scene appears to take place

in a seacoast town in Maine during an autumn afternoon. In truth, little

of what the audience sees on screen occurred in Maine, and it certainly

was not all filmed in one afternoon.

The actor who played the mysterious

man was most likely filmed on a Hollywood set in late summer. The young

girl was filmed on a different set in early fall. The establishing shot

of the seaside town was filmed months earlier in California, not Maine.

The song on the girl’s CD and the sounds of the crackling fire were recorded

in a studio. But when you see the finished scene, all of the sounds and

images work together. They appear to have taken place at one time and in

one place. That is the magic of film editing.

The Big Cut

Editors select sounds and images

from all the film that has been shot and

arrange them to make the movie (Murch,

1995, 46). They also plan how one shot will best transition to the next.

Assembling the opening scene of Arson Hill, the editor might choose to

begin with a wide shot of the bay, focusing on the white caps and buoys

that dot the water. From the shot of the grass catching fire, the editor

might decide to dissolve to the girl packing clothes into a box. There

are dozens of possible transitions the editor can choose, each of which

will create a different feeling. Editing often begins as soon as film has

been shot. Early scenes are assembled for the producer and director to

view. Occasionally, the actors will also view these early scenes. Many

directors choose not to show actors these edited scenes for fear that they

will affect the actors’ performance. The first cut of a film, called a

“rough cut,” takes up to three months to complete. The final cut may take

another month to finish (indieWire, 1999). Sometimes the editor works alone,

sometimes with the director. The sound designer and music composer join

them for the final cut, adding sound effects and the musical score. In

the past, editors worked with copies of negatives called “work prints”

to plan a film’s scenes and transitions. When an editor was satisfied with

the final film, he or she would create an edit decision list, a list of

each shot in the film and its length. The list would correspond to numbers,

“edge numbers,” printed on the edge of the work prints. These numbers helped

a negative matcher accurately copy the work print and cut the negatives.

Today most editors use computers or nonlinear digital editing systems to

compile a film. This is more efficient, but for the most part, the process

is the same. The work prints, complete with edge numbers, are stored in

the computer. The editor arranges the work print, and then creates an edit

decision list. (Murch, 1995, 49-51)

When the editing is complete and

the director and producer have approved the final version of the film,

this final cut is sent to a negative matcher. The negative matcher makes

a negative of the film that exactly matches the final cut, and the negative

is then sent to a film lab where prints are created. These prints eventually

end up in theaters. Like many productions in life, numerous counts of setup

and preparation are involved. The film industry is the largest grossing

enterprise ever, employing millions of specialists to take on the great

feat of creating never before told stories to share with the world.

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