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Alternative film production

Abstract

Typically a film producer expects the director and actors to 'do their job' within a scheduled timeframe. Rather than expecting the creative principals to just deliver, a production model can be tailored to help this creative team produce successful outcomes. This research paper contrasts alternative production models with a traditional (or standard) production and presents possibilities for producers to emphasise the collaborative potential for their production.

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Introduction Introduction

The fixing of a cinematic vision is a collective enterprise facilitated by the producer, director, cinematographer, writer, actors and designers (amongst others). During the production of a film, these diversely skilled people come together in a co-operative manner usually guided by the director's vision and the producer.

Each of these individuals has a clearly defined role within the overall production. Depending on the type of production, these roles may vary to suit the length of the production, size of budget and the target medium. For example, a director working on an independent film for cinematic release is very likely to have more control than a director working on a serial drama for television (Tunstall 1993, 119). Both roles are identified as being the 'director' with clearly defined roles, but vary significantly in how they need to work to fulfil these roles.

A production role, by defining a specific job, also defines how it interacts with other roles. Rather than expecting the creative principals to just deliver, a production model can be tailored to help this creative team produce successful outcomes. This study looks at different examples of how roles within a film production can be defined, presents possibilities for producers to emphasise collaboration within a production, and contrasts alternative production models with a traditional (or standard) production. The purpose is not to highlight deficiencies in any one production model, but to define how collaborative approaches offer alternative processes for production.

The first section of this paper looks at the nature of collaboration within a film production. The second section examines a standard production model which, in the third section, is contrasted with Alternative Production Models. The third section examines collaboration of roles involved in three film productions by exemplary directors: Mike Leigh, Lars Van Trier and Werner Herzog. The conclusion suggests producers will benefit from understanding the director's and actors' roles rather than just expecting them to deliver.

Collaborative Roles

An important differentiation in how roles interact with each other will be highlighted to help identify collaborative approaches to filmmaking. Due to the production hierarchy, with the producer at the top, each role is either *facilitating* or *supervising* other roles during a production. When one role is *facilitating* another role's process, the two roles can be said to be

collaborating. However, when a role is *supervising* another role's output, no collaboration can take place.

When a producer is *supervising* the creative principals, he or she is directly influencing their creative decisions. Within the context of this paper, this is not a *collaborative* approach as the producer is effectively dictating decisions which would otherwise be made by the relevant person. It might be suggested, if a producer feels he needs to be telling the director how to do a job, then perhaps he should be directing the project himself, rather than dilute the director's intention for the piece. A producer's role, in developing Alternative Production Models, is not to dominate the production team, but to help them realise their potential.

Collaboration deals with empowering processes within the production system that encourages the creative principals with their individual processes. On the other hand, *supervising* impacts on the decision making process of the creative principals and can affect their ability to realise their roles. Whichever relationships are adopted between roles, clear boundaries need to be drawn regarding roles within a production. In effect, the clear definition of roles within a production defines how the creative principals will be working on the film.

Therefore, how a producer defines and frames each role, including elements like the working conditions, will directly influence the collaborative nature of the production team. A producer's input can be made through decisions about how the story is being told, the process to use, the culture on-set, genre and style of the piece and the selection of the crew. A progressive culture within the production can provide an open environment for all the creative principals to explore the material and realise quality work.

In order to examine the nature of collaboration within a film production, the following three questions will be asked:

1. To what extent (if any) does the production facilitate the director's process?
2. To what extent (if any) does the production facilitate the actor's process?
3. To what extent (if any) does the director's process facilitate the actor's process?

Asking these three questions and illustrating their relationship using a Venn diagram will help to highlight the fundamental differences in the production models presented in this paper.

When defining traditional and alternative production models, Proferes (2005) suggests determining whether the producer is supplying the project for the director or if the director has created a project he wants produced. Usually in a standard production a film producer hires a director for a particular project after securing the rights to the screenplay and expects him to follow the producer's lead. The three alternative models show examples where the directors have enough experience and kudos for a producer to give them creative freedom on their projects. In discussing the potential of these alternative production models, it is an attempt to open up possibilities for the next generation of producers and directors utilising and experimenting with the latest technology.

Standard Production Model: the studio system

In the film studio evolution, there have been major shifts in how productions have been approached. Laurance Kasdan states that the last major change in how films were produced was the result of the work of director-producers George Lucas and Steven Spielberg. They "changed every studio's idea of what a movie should do in terms of investment versus return. It ruined the modest expectations of the movie business. Now every studio film is designed to be a blockbuster" (cited in Goldstein 1997). When the producer brings the project and money for the production, there is a "hired-gun relationship" (Proferes 2005, 151). The producer hires "all the major players and elements in the film's genesis" (Mamer 2006). These players are expected to do their individual jobs within an environment which favours the mechanics of production rather than creative processes. So, the processes of the producer, director and the actors are independent in a traditional film production. Thus this production model can be characterised by:

1. The outcomes expected are as predictable for the producer as possible;
2. The hiring of key actors being often determined by the producer; and
3. Each actor using their own method to arrive at their performances.

Of course, there is a discourse about the film, what is to be achieved, or a workable time frame, but the processes of the producer, director and actors are independent of one another. There is no exploration. Filmmaking using a traditional model is focused on purely creating the end product.

Diagram 1 illustrates the independent nature of the producer's, director's and actors' processes for a studio production.

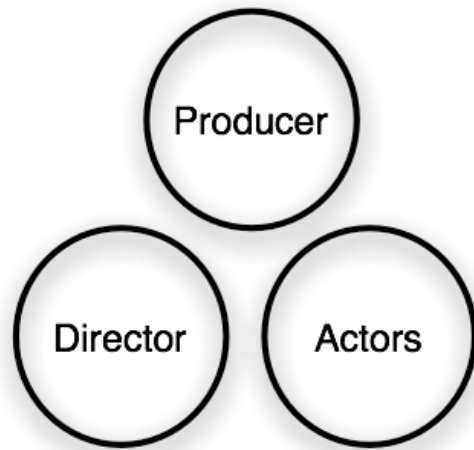


Diagram 1. Standard Production Model

Critics have outlined fundamental problems with this production model. The blockbuster creates its spectacle by “lumping together actors, writers, directors, musicians” (Geuens 2000, 7). No-one seems to care “whether or not [the big name actors are] right for the material.” Even worse “the script is the last thing that people focus on” (De Souza, cited in Wallace 1998, 8).

There is an opportunity to rethink the current production model based on big budgets and movie stars, and move towards a more personal and relevant viewpoint to our lives through alternative cinema.

Alternative Production Models

The good part of independent film, that commercial film doesn't have, is that they will let you do the creative thing. They trust you with that.

(Billy Bob Thornton, cited in LaLoggia and Wurmfeld 1999)

The opportunity to work in more collaborative ways generally occurs within independent productions, which allow possibilities for a greater amount of experimentation (Cahir 2006). One major reason this type of approach is possible, is the much lower budgets required for production which a studio system perceives as too risky. The studio system's decision making during a production tends to be conservative as a large amount of money is at stake and a formalistic approach is 'tried and tested'. Though the expectations at the box office are also more modest, some independent films do cross-over and are distributed to a mainstream audience (e.g. *The Blair Witch Project*, 1999).

A general preference for the standard production model as the dominant approach in Australia resulted in Paul Cox attacking the film funding bodies for not being more open to alternative approaches (Tyndall 2000). By analysing exemplary examples of filmmaking which explore possibilities during production, this paper can open up a production for filmmakers to explore their craft in a less conservative way.

This approach shifts the producer's role (when compared with the majority of productions) to focus more on supplying the director and performers with requirements for their jobs, rather than on the production crew. So, for the producer, the actor's performance would have a greater importance than the actual production values.

This section examines three independent filmmakers who have worked using alternative production models and successfully reached large audiences. These examples highlight how different collaborative approaches helped the filmmakers realise a particular aesthetic in their work and utilised the available resources during production to the utmost.

DOGME 95

Dogme 95 is an effort to 'purify' filmmaking by limiting the technology used in a production process, so to allow the focus during filmmaking to be the story and acting rather than superficial production effects.

This is achieved through the 'Vow Of Chastity' which lays down a set of rules as a kind of production methodology for producers to follow. Rules include that all action must be shot on location, only natural lighting is to be used and that the camera must be hand-held (Dogme 95 2007). Dogme 95's approach, by removing technical restraints, basically creates a production environment more conducive for actors to work more openly and naturally to tell the film's story.

Dogme 95's rules highlight problems in a conventional production where a producer can strangle all life out of a film by focusing predominantly on superficial values. This paper suggests that the opposite is also possible: the producer can create a production environment where creative people are more likely to succeed.

An example of this production model can be seen in the film "Breaking the Waves", directed by Lars Van Trier. The director of photography, Robby Muller, stated that "we would shoot a whole scene in one shot". The resulting film had a quasi-documentary approach where the production valued a sense of authenticity over compositional style. Van Trier said "if Breaking the Waves had been rendered with a conventional technique, I don't think you could have tolerated the story." (Geuens 2000, 139)

The diagram below illustrates the relationships within this production model:

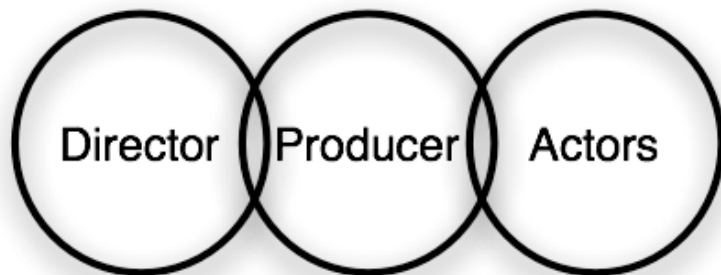


Diagram 2. First Alternative Production Model

MIKE LEIGH

Leigh's actors literally have to find their characters, through improvisation and research into the ways people in specific communities speak and behave. The setting for Leigh's stories can be Northern Ireland (Four Days In July), or in a modern South London slum (Meantime), but where ever it is, Leigh and his cast immerse themselves in the local life before creating the story. (Buruma 1994, 7)

The director Mike Leigh develops his film's characters and stories while working with actors using themes. He doesn't require a standard script (as it is developed using improvisation), but needs a longer rehearsal period for the story and character development. Leigh works in both theatre and film, and "Abigail's Party", which was developed for live theatre, was later filmed for television. Notably the same actors were used, as they had already gone through a process of developing their performances for stage. "Secrets and Lies" has a particular scene which wasn't rehearsed. This encourages spontaneity, which Leigh talks about:

To get everything right for that one moment on film, that's what interests me. You want the spontaneity of the theatre to happen at that white-hot moment when the camera is rolling. (Mike Leigh, cited in Buruma 1994, 7)

This is only possible due to the amount of character development done with the actors.

Of interest with Leigh's films is how his directing method differs in production requirements to a studio film. Examining how a producer can set out to produce a film using improvisation will highlight differences when compared to a normal (or traditional) production process. Having a starting point (an idea, theme, or a rough story-line), a producer could gather creative principals (director and actors) with the necessary experience and structure a film's production to facilitate a creative journey.

Diagram 3 shows the relationship between director, actor and producer.

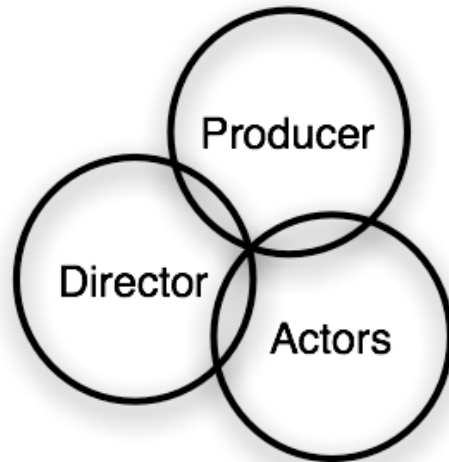


Diagram 3. Second Alternative Production Model

WERNER HERZOG

“Fitzcarraldo” is a movie directed by Werner Herzog, where the plot required a boat weighing 360 tonnes to be pulled over a steep hill from one river to another. During the film’s production Herzog actually did pull a real boat over the hill (without using any special effects) and in doing so created the movie. A Brazilian engineer left the project during production and warned Herzog not to continue as people would die. Also when investors suggested it would be wiser to stop making the production, as it was appearing impossible, Herzog responded:

How can you ask this question? If I abandon this project, I will be a man without dreams, and I don't want to live like that. I live my life or I end my life with this project. (Werner Herzog, cited in Ebert 2005)

The boat was eventually pulled over the mountain. When describing the experience, Herzog commented: “When it came to *Fitzcarraldo*, it was not money that pulled that boat over the mountain, it was faith” (cited in Cronin

and Herzog 2002, 13). The movie is about a struggle, which was real ... which really happened.

Herzog, who has also often directed documentaries, said: “I actually consider *Fitzcarraldo* my best documentary” (cited in Cronin and Herzog 2002, 240). Even though the story was scripted and the characters fictional, a situation was set up to create a drama through a near impossible task. The production took place 500 kilometres from the nearest town (though could have easily been shot close to Quito, Ecuador’s capital) (Ebert 2005). As documented in the documentary of the making of *Fitzcarraldo*, “Burden of Dreams”, the whole cast and crew were placed under extreme difficulties (Wikipedia 2007). Through all the fabrication of Herzog’s script came a true struggle, which embodied the film with another layer. Herzog said: “I make a clear distinction between ‘fact’ and ‘truth’ in my films, I am able to penetrate into a deeper stratum of truth most films do not even notice” (cited in Cronin and Herzog 2002, 240).

As a production model, the acting and directing is dictated by production restraints. The actors are left to strive to complete their task. The director and crew shoot the actors about their work, trying not to impede or influence what the actors are doing. The drama is inherent in the struggle and the whole set-up situation is the production. The diagram below illustrates that the actors’ and director’s processes are embedded in the production’s process. The actors’ processes are also under the guidance of the director, as is also reflected in the diagram.

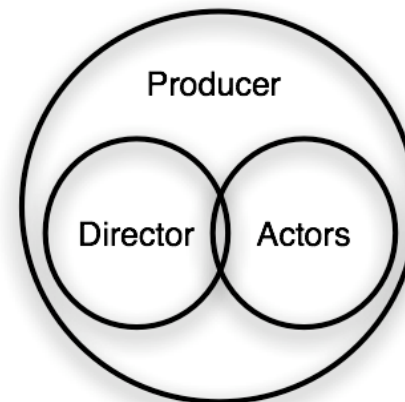


Diagram 4. Third Alternative Production Model

Conclusion

This paper looked at how alternative production models differ and how these compare to a standard production model. The producers using these alternative production models have a credo relating to collaboration with a film's creative principals: understanding rather than expecting.

By highlighting filmmaking as a collaborative art-form, opportunities arise to explore the medium in a more personal way and break away from formulaic answers. Each producer has “different strengths and weaknesses which influence their style of work and the teams they select” (Tunstall 1993, 118-119). Rather than treating filmmaking as a machine, it can be realised as an organic, living entity, an exploration which gains life as a result of an active process like all works of art.

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William Bligh is researching how improvisation may be used to shape the artistic decision-making process of the filmmaker. Also as part of this research, new ways of representing a film text using rich-media format will be explored. Will has enjoyed a process of discovery while performing in theatre and filmmaking, and looks forward to the challenges of practice-led research. He is working towards a doctorate in the Creative Industries faculty at QUT.