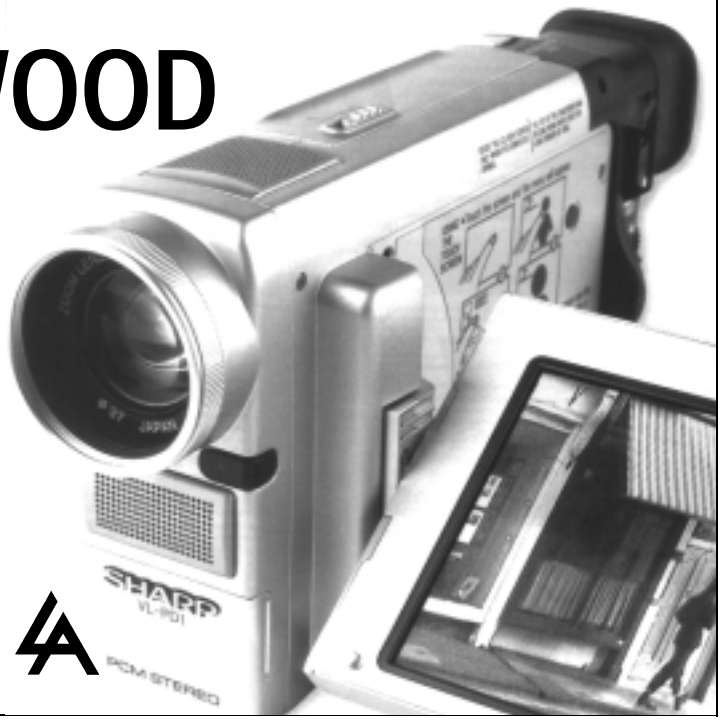


DIY HOLLYWOOD

INDEPENDENT FILM-MAKING AND HOW CHEAP DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY WILL TRANSFORM IT

DAVID KIRSCH CARR



This article has been written in response to David Botsford's excellent piece entitled *Guerrilla Film-Making: It's Happening Here*.¹ The reason for my writing this response is twofold: first, to add the weight, such as it is, of my personal experiences to the debate, and, secondly, to pick up on some of David's points and expand upon them, given my own views about the present and future of film-making in this country.

BACKGROUND

In 1995, enthused with the prospect of making films, I enrolled with the Panico Media Workshop² who were, at that time, running a series of foundation courses in film-making for beginners. There were about thirty or so people enrolled on the same course and whilst the course was basically instructional, the most useful part of the education arose from the networking of these various people, some of whom went on to produce their own short films. I worked on several of these projects, in various capacities ranging from scriptwriter to location

manager to assistant director. Like all the other people who worked on the film, I did so voluntarily as no money was available to pay anyone. The experience was gruelling but highly valuable in terms of educating the wannabee film-maker in the logistical, emotional and financial nightmares that making a film, even a short film, can present. Nonetheless, many of the people I worked with have since gone on to gain employment within the film or TV industry. As for me, I felt that scriptwriting was my strongest calling and this is the career that I have since pursued.

At the time, I was far from alone in being struck by the movie-making bug. This particular *zeitgeist* began in or around the middle of 1994 and was, in my opinion, inspired largely by the efforts of two men: Quentin Tarantino and Robert Rodriguez.

Both these men have become legends in their own lifetime. Tarantino worked in a video hire shop and wrote screenplays in his spare time. One of these, *Natural Born Killers*, he sold to the director Oliver Stone for \$30,000. With this money he planned to make his own full-length feature film. That is until, through a friend of a friend, the script came to the notice of Harvey Keitel who helped raise the money to make the film properly. Thus, *Reservoir Dogs*³ was born. It was a tremendous critical and commercial success and, on the back of it, Tarantino went onto to co-write and direct the even more successful *Pulp Fiction*,⁴ a film which can properly be regarded as a landmark. Tarantino had a unique groundbreaking style of writing that swept through formulaic scriptwriting like a breath of much needed fresh air and inspired many (poor) copycats.

Mexican film-maker Rodriguez describes in his book, *Rebel Without a Crew*⁵ how he made several short films on video and entered them into festivals all over North America, acquiring some measure of success. However,

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he wanted to make a feature and raised the money by working as a human guinea-pig for a drug company. The plan worked and he raised just enough money to shoot his script of *El Mariachi*⁶ using begged and borrowed equipment and family members and friends as the cast and crew. Once completed it was entered for various festivals and spotted by the Hollywood talent scouts. Rodriguez has, since, gone on to become a mainstream Hollywood director: a *player*.

The Tarantino and Rodriguez 'legends' filtered their way over to the UK where, suddenly, there was a realisation that anyone with a good script, a small amount of money and sufficient enthusiasm and energy could follow along the trail these two had blazed whereas, prior to this, film-making in this country was seen, rightly, as the preserve of either the BBC or heavy-industry, highly-financed studios such as Ealing. The only viable way to become a movie director was to work your way up through the ranks of the studio system or map out a successful career in television. In both cases, career paths were stymied by restrictive practices, archaic attitudes and, probably worst of all, a quagmire of apathy. Any way you stacked it up, it all seemed remote and highly inaccessible to young, budding talent.

THE AWAKENING

For many years, any British person who wanted to make movies in this country would have been as well-advised to try to open a gay bar in Riyadh. They would be far better advised to go to America and, indeed, that's just what many did. Hollywood has a long and noble tradition of embracing British writers, directors and actors as well as exploiting British technical innovation.⁷ But why Los Angeles and not London? Well, this is where the merits of the free market show themselves in all their glory. The culture of Hollywood has always been one of business. The men who established film-making in that particular part of the world, men like Louis B. Mayer and Sam Goldwyn, were not artists or film-makers; they were salesmen and had, by and large, already made their fortunes in New York before heading West. They recognised that moving pictures were a great product with universal appeal and they wasted no time in exploiting it for all it was worth with a 'give the audience what it wants' attitude that became the template of Hollywood's ethos and remains so to this day. As a consequence of this approach, Hollywood has become the world's largest and most profitable film factory and the engine of America's cultural dominance. All this despite a distinct lack of 'regulation' and not a smidgen of taxpayer subsidy.

In Britain, however, such attitudes were anathema. Whilst the British have always had a reverence for the written word, film was seen in various quarters as anything from a frivolous hobby to a morally corrupting medium whose only value was to be found in delivering important social messages; as if film-making was an extension of Social Services. Further, most producers spent too much time bleating for tax-payer handouts and far too little time making films the public actually wanted to see. Despite all of this and, possibly against the odds,

the Brits have achieved some cinematic glory, e.g. the golden days of Ealing studios, Carry On etc, but it is still undeniably true that the British film industry is not, has never been and, probably, never will be a patch on its American cousin in terms of output or influence. But it's not all bleak news. The 1990's has seen an upturn in the fortunes of the British film industry as typified by the success of such British films as *Four Weddings and a Funeral* and *Trainspotting* and the number of films being made in the UK is steadily rising.⁸ I believe this is the result of a combination of factors: one, the increased grass roots interest in film-making as inspired by the aforementioned Messrs. Tarantino and Rodriguez; two, the realisation by financial institutions that there was money to be made in films;⁹ three, the wide commercial availability of video cameras mean that getting your foot up onto the first rung has been made that bit easier. But more on this later.

SO YOU WANT TO BE A MOVIE DIRECTOR?

Where do you begin? Well, it's easier than it used to be but it's still a Herculean task. The conventional way is to attend a duly accredited film school, graduate with a showreel and work your way up from there. There are many film schools in the UK which enjoy a fine reputation in the industry. However, a three-year course may be impractical as well as financially prohibitive. As an alternative you may wish to try the advertising industry of directing in the theatre. Either may lead you into a movie career¹⁰ but you'd best be prepared for a very long haul.

Happily, another method has now emerged: make your own film from scratch. Now when I say 'film', I don't mean full-length feature film. As a first-time director it will be next to impossible for you to raise the money it will cost (unless you are immensely wealthy in your own right) and, without any previous experience, you will probably make a complete hash of it anyway. A very expensive mistake.

No, you're best advised to start by making a short film; something, say, ten or fifteen minutes long. This serves two purposes: one, it provides you with some experience of film-making at the sharp end and two, it acts as your showreel. It's a kind of 'calling card' so that, when you march into the high-powered producer's office clutching your feature script you can slap a copy of your short down on the table and say: "*Here, see what I can do.*" Also, there are now a plethora of film and video festivals both here and worldwide into which you can enter your short film. The moneymen and producers go 'talent-scouting' at festivals all the time and, if someone likes what you've done, you could just find yourself being approached with a view to directing or writing for a far larger project. It's a way of putting yourself in the shop window.

There are two ways to shoot a short film: video or cine. Both have advantages and drawbacks.

CINE

Cine or celluloid is the established medium of the camera and has been since the moving picture was first de-

veloped. Naturally, the cine film itself has improved dramatically since then. The three basic gauges are 8mm, 16mm and 35mm. 8mm is rarely used these days except by hobbyists. 16mm is widely used for short films and some features but 35mm is the movie feature film standard medium and gives quite breathtaking quality even though it is analog (even 16mm will provide more quality of visual image than video can).

So why not automatically opt to shoot on cine? The answer is cost. Shooting on film is prohibitively expensive for the guerrilla film-maker and the total cost of even a ten-minute long piece on cine can, and often does, run well into five figures. And that's with the benefit of cast and crew offering their services for free! Simply every aspect of shooting on film is more expensive from the hiring of the camera to the development of the film after it has been shot.

Another drawback is that shooting on film is a more complex and delicate process. Mistakes are commonplace, especially when the project is under the stewardship of a novice director and mistakes are expensive.

However, it is for these very reasons that shooting on film is generally considered to be a more instructive apprenticeship.

VIDEO

The great advantages of video are the availability of video cameras and the comparatively low price of hiring or buying them. Also, the cost of video tape is much less than the cost of cine film and it needs no developing. Once your film has been shot, the tape only requires editing. All this means that the cost of making a film on video is a fraction of the cost of making it on cine. For a guerrilla film-maker that is a compelling attraction. So why doesn't everyone shoot their films on video? Well, here's the downside, and it can be summed up in one word: quality. Despite all advances in video technology, the best quality video commercially available is Hi-8. (Of course there is now digital video, but more on this later.) Sadly, even Hi-8 has got nowhere close to capturing the depth, field, richness and general luxury of image provided by cine film. It is for this reason that video is not an acceptable medium in the film industry and this disdain filters its way down to the guerrilla level where shooting on cine has far more kudos.

However, video has established a valid role as a starting point and has succeeded in 'democratising' film-making that bit more. If financial resources are really limited and you want to shoot a showreel you would be best advised to shoot in on video despite the prejudice, as a video festival will screen it and you can still get 'spotted' if your script and direction shows merit. Besides, if you want to make a film or documentary for television, then video is ideal because most television programmes are shot and broadcast on video.

There is no easy answer. The general consensus is that, if you've got the money then shoot your film on cine. If not, then it's better to shoot on video than not shoot it all but, whatever the level of your investment, you must accept in advance that making a short film is always a loss-

making venture. Even if you manage to sell your film (and that is unlikely) the amount of money you'll receive will only cover a fraction of the cost and this is especially so for cine.

The most important caveat is that you should not bother embarking upon the adventure at all unless you've got burning desire, iron will, boundless energy and unquenchable enthusiasm. Shooting a film is a fraught, high-octane and exhausting experience and anything that can possibly go wrong *will* go wrong and usually at the worst possible time. It is not for the faint-hearted.

THE BRICK WALL

Okay, so you manage to make a short film; you enter it into a festival where a high-powered producer takes a liking to it and says: "Let's do lunch." Over a chateaubriand and a bottle of red you pitch him your idea for a feature film and he loves it; promises to raise finance sufficient to get it made. He does so. About a year or so later, you find you have just written and directed your first feature film. So what follows next? Rave reviews? Critical and commercial success? An invitation to Hollywood? An appearance at the Oscars ceremony with a supermodel draped around you? Well, no; because your film will quite probably never even see the light of day. The reason, for this 'manifest injustice' is that, once your film has been made, you have to find someone who will distribute it to cinemas here and abroad. This is the job of a Distribution Company who, if they like your product, will buy the rights to it. However, once they buy those rights, the film is theirs to do with as they wish and, all too often, their wish is just to leave the film mouldering on a shelf. According to the British Film Institute more than half of UK-made films suffer just this fate.⁸

There's an abundance of hand-wringing in the industry about what, exactly, can be done to address this problem but the solution, to my mind, is quite clear (though not simple). Like all companies, distributors are commercial concerns: their prime objective is profit not art. This being the case, they will always release a film if they feel confident that that film is going to make money and, in order to make money, the film needs to put 'bums on seats'. On the other side of the spectrum are the writers and directors who, all too often, put art before money and the result of this is that far too many British films are aesthetic, exclusive or downright self-indulgent. I believe that it is incumbent upon the writers, directors and producers to make films that, whilst having artistic merit, the public both here and abroad actually want to see and are prepared to pay to see. The success of Hollywood lies in its universal appeal and while the word 'compromise' is a dirty one to most artists (in some cases, rightly so) it is something they are going to have to do if they want to generate the kind of success that will ensure the continued growth of film-making in this country.

DIGITAL

'Digital' is one of the landmark concepts of the 1990's. Put simply, it is the production of a visual image and audio accompaniment using binary number 'pixels' rather

than analog waves and its use is rapidly coming to dominate television broadcasting worldwide. The reason for this is, well, it's just a far superior medium to analog in every respect. Not only is the picture quality superior but it allows far greater compression of signals so that, whereas a given broadcast channel has room for maybe four or five analog signals, the same channel could accommodate, literally, hundreds of digital ones. The production of television programmes is now overwhelmingly done in the digital medium. Digital cameras and equipment are cheaper to buy, more compact, more rugged and more versatile than their analog predecessors, while sacrificing nothing in terms of visual image. Also, because digital images can be so easily manipulated ('morphed'), special effects and graphics become much easier and cheaper to graft on during the post-production process.

Now that television in Britain is to be broadcast digitally we will, within the next few years, have a choice of anything up to a thousand different channels giving the viewer a dizzying array of choice. In fact, for the first time in broadcasting history, there will be more air time than there will be programmes to fill it and, therefore, if anyone is thinking of devising programme ideas, now is the time to start getting them down on paper and sending them to production companies.

Better still, it is now quite feasible to start your own production company if you have a computer with sufficient processing power. With a digital camera at your disposal, you can shoot your film, download the information into your PC or Mac and then, with the appropriate software, e.g. Premiere, you can edit the thing there and then with no loss of quality. Simply download the finished product onto a digital tape and it's ready for broadcasting.¹¹ You can then, either, sell your programme to an existing channel or, buy airtime yourself and then sell the advertising space. Either way, you're in showbusiness. Of course, I'm making it all sound ridiculously simple and there are those people who complain that like in the USA there will be hundreds of channels and nothing to actually watch. But I think this is too gloomy a prediction. Whilst it is true that most of these channels will have no or negligible advertising revenue, the possibility arises of subscription or pay-as-you-go TV. With so many channels available, there will be specialisation, e.g. a gardening channel; if your interest is in gardening, then subscribe.

Although there are many fears about a loss of overall quality of television programming (in some cases justified) I feel that this is the wrong emphasis: television will simply become a more individualised and customised rather than collective experience.

As regards the movies, digital technology has already had a huge impact in terms of computer-generated images for special effects and graphics. However, the movies themselves are still made on cine as, to date, Digital Cinematography has not quite captured the quality of cine film.

However, it's getting better all the time (a number of films made for television are now being shot using Digital Cinematography) and, if and when it does catch up or overtake cine quality, it's possible to predict that the

highly persuasive lure of reduced costs will see the industry switch over to digital movies and probably with lightning speed. If that happens, and it just might, then cine film will become the plaything of hobbyists. It is conceivable that the next 'Godfather' will be made in someone's front room!

It is said that digital technology will change the world. I happen to agree.

THE FUTURE?

The immediate future for British film-making looks pretty good and a string of recent British movie successes¹² has stimulated an almost frantic search by the industry moguls for new and innovative talent. This, combined with the availability of new technologies has made it easier for anyone with ambitions to be a film-making to realise their dreams.

The problems are still monumental and the competition is terrifying but that's only because the rewards of success are so very great. Yet despite that, it can truly be said that the days of the moguls and their strict, studio-based hegemony are over.

And it's possible that we ain't seen nothing yet. Just as the advent of portable tape recorders in the late 1950's facilitated an explosion of pop groups (because you no longer had to go to the trouble and expense of going to a recording studio to make a demo tape), so the availability of affordable and increasingly high-quality digital technology could breed an entire new generation of Steven Spielbergs. Personally, I can't wait.

NOTES

1. David Botsford, *Guerrilla Film-Making: It's Happening Here*, Cultural Notes No. 43, Libertarian Alliance, London, 1999
2. 1 Falconberg Court, London W1. I believe they are now running three-year degree courses in film-making due to demand.
3. © 1991 Columbia Pictures.
4. © 1994 Miramax Pictures.
5. Robert Rodriguez, *Rebel Without a Crew*, Faber, London, 1996, first published Dutton, New York, 1995.
6. In the late 70's, *Alien*, *Superman* and *Star Wars* were all filmed in Britain. One of the reasons for this was the high quality of British technical expertise.
7. © 1993 Columbia Pictures.
8. *British Film Institute Handbook 1999*.
9. The film *Four Weddings and a Funeral* is, arguably, the most successful film ever in terms of return on initial investment. It cost about £5m to make and, to date, has grossed something like £300m in sales. These are approximate figures.
10. Ridley Scott (*Bladerunner*, *Alien*) began his career making commercials and Nicholas Hytner (*The Madness of King George*) was formerly a director at the National Theatre.
11. There is now Digital Video Disc (DVD). Like a CD but able to bear visual images as well as audio sounds. DVD players/recorders are now becoming commercially available. We all know what happened to tapes when CD's came along.
12. I refer to such films as *The Full Monty*, *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*, *Shakespeare in Love*. *The English Patient* is not actually a British film but it did serve to rekindle America's long standing love-affair with things British.