

- » Recognizing how independent films differ from studio pictures
- » The power of digital technology in the world of filmmaking
- » Getting an overview of the filmmaking process

Chapter **1**

So You Want to Be a Filmmaker

Motion pictures are a powerful medium. With the right script under your arm and a staff of eager team players, you're about to begin an exciting ride. The single most important thing that goes into making a successful movie is the passion to tell a story. And the best way to tell your stories is with pictures. Moviemaking is visual storytelling in the form of shots that make up scenes and scenes that eventually make up a complete movie.

As a filmmaker, you have the power to affect people's emotions, make them see things differently, help them discover new ideas, inspire them, or just create an escape for them. In a darkened movie theater, you have an audience's undivided attention. They're yours — entertain them, move them, make them laugh, make them cry. You can't find a more powerful medium to express yourself.

Independents Day versus the Hollywood Way

There are three main types of full-length films made to be distributed (hopefully) for a paying audience:

- » **Studio films:** A studio film is usually greenlit by the head of a major studio, has a healthy budget averaging \$60 million and up (some go as high as \$150 million or more), and has major star names intended to guarantee some kind of box office success (as if such a guarantee were possible). Nowadays many studio movies are based on franchises, brands, best-selling books, and sequels to successful properties. Examples include comic book superheroes (*Superman*, *Batman*, *Spider-Man*), popular TV shows (*Mission Impossible*, *Star Trek*), best-selling books (the *Harry Potter* franchise), high concept (unique ideas that have commercial appeal like *Jurassic Park*, or *The Avengers*) that end up becoming their own franchise, and/or big name stars (Brad Pitt, Tom Cruise, Hugh Jackman, Emma Stone, Jennifer Lawrence). If a major film studio puts up the money for a movie, the studio — not the filmmaker (unless you're Steven Spielberg) — ultimately ends up calling the shots.
- » **Independent films:** A true independent film is often a low-budget movie (costing anywhere from \$5,000 to \$3 million) because the filmmaker has to raise money to make the movie on his or her own, independent of a studio for the financing. A true independent film has no studio influence. One major advantage is that the filmmaker doesn't have to report to anyone or to be limited creatively by a studio. Many films circulating the film-festival circuit are independent films, produced independently of the studios (with some exceptions at Sundance and Toronto International Film Festival). Kevin Smith started his career with his small independent film *Clerks*. Robert Rodriguez started his career with an original budget under \$10,000 for his film *El Mariachi*. *The Blair Witch Project* is one of the most profitable independent films, grossing close to \$250 million on a \$60,000 budget.
- » **Independent studio films:** A studio's independent division is really a smaller "boutique" division of the big company, with smaller budgets and possibly fewer black suits deciding how to make and distribute the films that come from these divisions. Some films are acquisitions and then distributed by the big studios. *Get Out*, *A Quiet Place*, and *The Big Sick* are perfect examples of independent films released by major studios — and all received the exposure that a big studio picture expects, including studio marketing dollars in the millions, when they were nominated during the major awards season.



REMEMBER

The term *independent studio films* is actually oxymoronic because a film produced by a studio is not truly independent. A film produced by a studio's "independent" division is a studio film in disguise.

You can find both advantages and disadvantages to making a studio picture or an independent film. On an independent production, your movie ends up on the screen the way you envisioned it, but you are restricted by your budget. A studio picture has larger financial backing and can afford to pay the astronomical salaries that actors demand as well as for seamless special effects and longer shooting schedules, but the movie ends up the way the studio envisions it — and in the most commercial way. The studio looks at commercial viability first and creativity second. Many independent filmmakers discover that, although having and making money is nice, being independent allows them to tell their story in the most creative way.

An independent film doesn't always have to be a low-budget or no-budget film, however. George Lucas will always be known as the ultimate independent filmmaker. He was independent of the studios and made his own decisions on his films without the politics or red tape of a studio looking over his shoulder. The original *Star Wars* may not seem like an independent film, but that's exactly what it is — even though you may have difficulty seeing yourself as one of Lucas's peers. Eventually, Disney bought out the *Star Wars* brand from Lucas for a few billion dollars, and now the franchise is definitely major studio fare.

Filmmaking: Celluloid Film Stock or Digital?

Today, you can shoot your movie in several different formats. You can choose digital — high definition (HD) using a digital camera or even your smartphone — or a traditional film camera using Super-8, 16mm, or 35mm motion-picture film stock. However, the majority of studio films are now shot on digital.



REMEMBER

The medium on which you set your story — whether it be actual film celluloid or digital (high definition) media with a film-style look — engenders specific feelings and reactions from your audience. A movie shot on actual film stock tends to have a nostalgic feeling, like you're watching something that has already happened. Something shot on digital elicits more the feeling that it's happening right now — unfolding before your eyes, like the evening news. You can use this knowledge to enhance the emotional response your audience has to your movie. As technology continues to develop, digital cameras are coming closer and closer to emulating the look of film. Arri, for example, has been very successful with this look with their Alexa digital camera. Currently there is a myriad of software applications that helps you play with the grain, colors, and other elements to better emulate the look of film in post-production.



TIP

Another style you can give your film is to finish it in black and white. Steven Spielberg delivered *Schindler's List* in black and white, as did Alfonso Cuarón for his film *Roma*, to help convey the film as a long-past event and to express the dreariness of the era. Black and white can be effective for a vampire or zombie movie as well. As an independent filmmaker, you would shoot your movie in color (just in case) and turn it black and white during post-production.



REMEMBER

Why do we still call it *filmmaking* when hardly anyone uses film anymore? When we go to the movies, we often say, *Want to go see that film?* or *they're filming a movie at the local mall*. When we enter our movie masterpiece, we submit it to a *film festival*, not a digital festival.

The word *film* as a noun refers to a thin flimsy strip of celluloid with sprocket holes evenly lined on one side (to accommodate the projector registration pins). As a verb, the word *film* means to record or capture something through a lens — that is, to create moving images or motion pictures, whether it be through the use of a film camera, a digital camera, or even your convenient smartphone — *Hey, I'm filming you!* So when I use the word *film* throughout the book, remember that it refers to the same thing whether you are shooting on digital or with actual film stock.

All digital: The new age of technology

The professional format of choice for most television shows, including TV movies and streaming films (Netflix, Amazon Prime, and so on) is shooting digital. It's less expensive and much more convenient than shooting with film, and it's perfect for the fast schedules of television productions and mini-series.

In this age of digital technology, anyone with a computer and digital camera (or smartphone) can make a movie. You can purchase a digital camera (like the Panasonic Lumix GH5 or the Black Magic Pocket Camera) that emulates the look of motion picture film without incurring the cost of expensive film stock and a pricey motion-picture camera. You can also purchase computer software such as Magic Bullet Frames (www.redgiantsoftware.com) that can take a harsh video image shot with an inexpensive home camera and give it the look of a motion-picture film camera.

Most digital cameras use SD (Secure Digital) flash memory cards to store your footage, which can be downloaded to your computer or a separate hard drive, and then the SD card can be erased and used over and over again.

If you can't afford a professional digital camera, you can shoot your movie on your smartphone. The quality is almost as good — or even fully as good — as many consumer digital cameras. The main disadvantage of using your smartphone is that it has a fixed lens.

Many new computers come preloaded with free editing software. In Chapter 16, I give you tips on starting your very own digital-editing studio. You can also find out more information on the technical aspects of capturing digital footage to your computer and then editing and sharing your work in *Digital Video For Dummies* by Keith Underdahl (published by Wiley). You can uncover more camera information in Chapter 10.

High definition (HD) is the new-age technology that has replaced standard definition, taking the camera image one step further. The picture is much sharper, richer, and closer to what the human eye sees as opposed to what an old standard definition (SD) video camera shows you. Watching HD is like looking through a window — the picture seems to breathe. The new HD digital cinema cameras combine HD technology with 24-frame progressive technology to emulate a unique film-like picture quality in an electronic digital file format, without the use of physical film. 2K HD has been the norm for years now, but 4K and 8K will soon come into their own.

Thanks for the memories: Memory cards

Now that 90 percent of filmmakers shoot in digital, SD memory cards and external hard drives are the norm. Those small, thin, delicate SD cards slip into the memory card slot of most digital cameras. You can then transfer the SD card onto an external hard drive. Or, if you prefer, you can run a cable from your camera to an external hard drive and record directly into the drive. There are also external solid-state flash drives (SSD) that have no moving parts and thus have less chance of losing your footage to glitches, drop-outs, or worse — a dead drive — and they are much faster than standard hard drives.

Developing Your Sense of Story

Because you can't possibly make a great movie without having a great story, choosing the right material is more important than anything else. Successful film careers are more often built on making the right decisions about a story than on having the right talent and skills. So where do you find good ideas to turn into a movie? An idea starts in your head like a tiny seed; it has a gestation period, and then it sprouts and begins to grow, eventually blossoming into an original screenplay.

Don't have that tiny seed of an idea just yet? Turn to Chapter 3, where I tell you how to find ideas and give you tips on turning your idea into a feature-length script. In that chapter, I also show you how to *option* (have temporary ownership of) existing material, whether it's someone's personal story or a published novel.

Financing Your Production: Where's the Money?

To get your movie made, you have to have financing. Raising money isn't as difficult as it sounds if you have a great story and an organized business plan. You can find investors who are looking to put their money into a movie for the excitement of being involved with a movie and/or the possibility of making a profit. Even friends and family are potential investors for your film — especially if your budget is very low.

SURFING SITES FOR FILMMAKERS

Becoming a filmmaker includes plugging yourself into informative outlets that help you be more aware of the filmmaker's world. Here I list websites that may be helpful to you as a low-budget filmmaker:

- **The Internet Movie Database (www.imdb.com and www.imdbPro.com)** lists the credits of film and TV professionals and anyone who has made any type of mark in the entertainment industry. It's helpful for doing research or a background check on an actor, writer, or filmmaker. The difference between the two? imdb.com is free, and imdbPro.com costs around \$20.00 a month at the time of this publication, but lists contact information and pertinent details not found on the free version.
- **The Independent Feature Project (www.ifp.org)** is an effective way to get connected right away to the world of independent filmmaking.
- **Film Independent (www.filmindependent.org)** offers assistance to its members in helping get their movies made and seen. They also produce the Los Angeles Film Festival and the Independent Spirit Awards.
- **The Independent (www.aivf.org)** is an organization that supports independent filmmakers. At the website, you can find festival updates, along with what's happening in the Independent scene.
- **IndieTalk (www.indietalk.com)** is a discussion forum for filmmakers where you can post and read messages about screenwriting, finding distribution, financing, and lots of other topics. It's a great site for communicating with other independent filmmakers.
- **Filmmaker IQ (www.filmmakeriq.com)** is one of my favorite sites for independent filmmakers with fun graphics and visuals to explain all about the process of making movies.

In Chapter 5, I give you some great tips on how to find investors and how to put together a *prospectus* to attract them to fund your production. Crowdfunding is a whole new ball game — and I'll tell you all about that too! You also find out about other money-saving ideas like bartering and product placement. I even show you how to set up your own website (or crowdfunding site) to help raise awareness for your movie, attract investors, and eventually serve as a promotional site for your completed film.

On a Budget: Scheduling Your Shoot

Budgeting your movie is a delicate process. Often, you budget your production first (this is usually the case with independent low-budget films) by breaking down elements into categories, such as crew, props, equipment, and so on — the total amount you have to spend. Your costs are determined by how long you need to shoot your movie (scheduling determines how many shoot days you have) because the length of your shoot tells you how long you need to have people on salary, how long you need to rent equipment (if you're not using your own camera and lights), and locations, and so on.

When you know you can only afford to pay salaries for a three-week shoot, you then have to schedule your production so that it can be shot in three weeks. You schedule your shoot by breaking down the script into separate elements (see Chapter 4) and deciding how many scenes and shots you can shoot each day, so that everything is completed in the three weeks you have to work with. An independent filmmaker doesn't usually have the luxury of scheduling the logistics first (breaking it down into how many days it will take to shoot) and then seeing how much it will cost.



TIP

Have a budget (and even a possible schedule) ready when you talk to a potential investor, including whether you are doing *crowdfunding*. It serves as ammunition to show that you didn't just draw a number out of a hat and that you did your homework and know where every dollar will go and to which category.

Planning Your Shoot, Shooting Your Plan

Planning your production includes envisioning your shots through *storyboarding*, the technique of sketching out rough diagrams of what your shots and angles will look like (see Chapter 9). You can storyboard your movie even if you don't consider yourself an artist: Draw stick characters or use storyboard software, like Storyboard Quick (www.powerproduction.com) or Frame Forge (www.frameforge.com).

Each comes with an eclectic cast of characters along with libraries of props and locations.



REMEMBER

You also need to plan where you shoot your movie. You research where you're going to shoot much as you would planning a trip, and then you make all the appropriate arrangements, like figuring out how you're going to get there and the type of accommodations, if your shoot is out of town. As you plan where to shoot your movie, keep these points in mind (and head to Chapter 6 for more detailed information):

- » You have to choose whether to shoot at a real location, on a sound stage, or in a virtual location that you conjure up inside your computer.
- » Regardless of where you're shooting, you need to sign agreements with the location owners to make sure you have all your location settings reserved for your shoot dates.

Hiring Your Cast and Crewing Up

Your production crew becomes your extended family (although maybe a dysfunctional one). You spend many days and nights together — through good and bad times — so hiring people who are passionate about your project and willing to put their all into it is important. You may have to defer salary to your crew if you're working on a tight budget. (Find out how to do that and more in Chapter 7.)

Acting is not as difficult as you may think. People are born natural actors and play many parts on the stage of life. Everyone is constantly in front of an audience — or performing monologues when alone. In Chapter 8, I lead you step by step through the process of finding a great cast to bring your screenplay to life. I also fill you in on acting secrets so that you can direct your actors to get the best performances.

Shooting in the Right Direction

Making a movie requires special equipment, like *cranes* (tall apparatuses on which you place the camera for high shots), *dollies* (which are like oversized skateboards that you put the camera on for movement), camera systems, and so on. In today's day and age, affordable advances in moving the camera have arrived: from camera drones to sophisticated camera stabilizers. Getting it right also involves lighting, sound, performances, and more, as explained in the following sections.

Seeing the light

Lighting, which can set a mood and enhance the entire look of your film, is important. Without it, you'll leave your actors in the dark — literally.

The eye of the camera needs adequate light to “see” a proper image. What's adequate light? Whatever produces appropriate exposure for the camera and lens. Many digital cameras today have advanced significantly — to use very little light to capture a good quality image. Low-wattage LED lighting has changed the trajectory of movie set lighting and is becoming the medium of choice over expensive halogen and old fluorescent and incandescent bulbs. Chapter 11 gives you the low-down on lighting.



REMEMBER

Lighting can be very powerful and can affect the mood and tone of every scene in your film. A great cinematographer combined with an efficient gaffer (see Chapter 7) will ensure that your movie has a great look.

Being heard and scene

In addition to seeing your actors, you need to be able to hear them. This is where the art of sound comes in. You need to place microphones close enough to the actor to get a good sound recording, but not so close that the microphone creeps into the shot. The skill of recording great sound comes from the production sound mixer. New advances in wireless microphones using Bluetooth and Wi-Fi are introduced in Chapter 12.



REMEMBER

Production sound is extremely important because your actors must be heard correctly. Your sound mixer, who's primarily in charge of recording your actors' dialogue on set, needs to know which microphones and sound-mixing equipment to use. Chapter 12 shares all the necessary details.

Actors taking your direction

If you're taking on the task of directing, you'll become a leader to your actors and crew. You'll need to know how to give your actors direction, because it's the director's job to help the actors create believable performances that lure the audience into your story and make them care about your characters. Directing also involves guiding your actors to move effectively within the confines of the camera frame. It's almost like choreographing a dance. Chapter 13 guides you in the right direction with some great secrets on how to warm up your actors and prepare them to give their best performance on set.

Directing through the camera

In terms of telling your story visually, you'll need to understand a little about the camera (whether it's a film camera or a digital one). Much like driving a car, you don't need to understand how it works, but you do need to know how to drive it (your cinematographer should be the expert with the camera and its internal operations).

Directing the camera requires some technical knowledge of how the camera works (film or digital) and what each lens and filter does, which I explain in Chapter 10. Chapter 14 addresses how to frame your shots and when and how to move the camera. In that chapter, you also discover the skills that make a successful director and how to run a smooth, organized set.

Cut It Out! Editing Your Movie

During the editing phase, the scenes are finally assembled. Editing your movie gives you a chance to step back and look at the sequence of events, to review all the available shot angles in order to shape and mold them to tell the most effective story. You can even work to repair a bad film (or at least make it better) during the editing process. During editing, you really see your movie coming together.

Nonlinear editing software is now available for virtually any computer at affordable prices (many computers come with free editing software). With it, you can edit anything from a home movie to a professional theatrical-length piece (90 to 120 minutes). The technology of nonlinear editing allows you to cut your shots together in virtually any order. You can easily and quickly see different variations, cutting different shots together, rearranging them, and moving or deleting in between scenes in a concise and easy-to-understand manner. Chapter 15 tells you what the new-age digital technology and software makes available to you for editing your movie on your desktop.

Listening to your movie

Contrary to what most people think — that the sound they hear in the movie is the natural sound from the set — the entire soundtrack must be built just as the visual elements of the film are built. At the editing stage, you add and create the audio, dialogue, sound effects, and music (Chapter 16 has the details). Titles and credits are important, too, and I discuss them in Chapter 18.

Simulating a film-look with software

Most digital cameras today provide more of a film-look than they used to. The old days of harsh video are gone. If you want to enhance that film-look, post-production secrets and special software can help you. These software programs emulate grain, softness, subtle shutter flutter, and so on. Magic Bullet Frames software, available at www.redgiant.com, can convert any footage and soften it to look more like it was shot on motion picture film stock.



The natural frame rate of video is equivalent to 30 frames per second (technically 29.97). Motion picture film operates at 24 frames or images, per second. As a start, converting digital footage to mimic 24 frames (technically 23.97 in video) makes the image feel and look more film-like.

Distributing Your Movie and Finding an Audience

The final, and probably most important, stage of making a movie is distribution. Without the proper distribution, your film may sit on a shelf and never be experienced by an audience. Distribution can make the difference between your movie making \$10 (the ticket your mother buys) or \$100 million at the box office. *The Blair Witch Project* or *RGB* (the story of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg) may never have generated a dime if they hadn't been discovered at the Sundance Film Festival by a distributor. Even mediocre films have done well commercially because of successful distribution tactics. And great movies have flopped at the box office because the distributor didn't carry out a successful distribution plan. Chapter 19 offers a slew of tips and secrets for finding a distributor, as well as some tips on how to become your own distributor, including using the Internet and social networking.

GEARING UP FOR CINE GEAR

Cine Gear is one of my favorite expos. Every June in Los Angeles, thousands of people flock to the outdoor Cine Gear Expo held on the backlot of Paramount Studios to schmooze with fellow filmmakers, network, and see the latest developments in equipment technology (and, in many cases, to even experiment with the equipment, hands-on). It's like a giant toy store for filmmakers. Cine Gear has also started a film series with a call for entries. The expo runs for two days of exhibits, seminars, and screenings, and you can get a free pass by pre-registering at the expo website (or pay \$20 at the entrance). Cine Gear also operates an annual expo in Atlanta, Georgia in early October. For information on all Cine Gear expos, go to www.cinegearexpo.com.

AN INTERVIEW WITH A STUDIO HEAD

I sat down with Alan Horn, former president and chief operating officer at Warner Bros. Studios, for an interview. Alan is one of the nicest guys, very down-to-earth, and also one of the most influential people in Hollywood. We still keep in touch regularly via email and often run into each other at industry and black-tie events where he always takes the time to chat with me. With a myriad of major hits behind him like *The Dark Knight*, the *Ocean's Eleven* trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*, and the *Harry Potter* franchise, Alan left Warner Bros. in 2012 — but instead of retiring, he took a lucrative offer to become chief creative officer and co-chairman of The Walt Disney Company. He also oversees the Marvel Studios empire, a division under the Walt Disney banner. The Walt Disney Company also owns Lucasfilm, the *Muppets* franchise, and as of recently, 20th Century Fox.

A chess enthusiast, Horn makes use of his skills — savvy calculation and strategic planning — to run a studio and release theatrical feature films successfully.

Horn has been in the industry for many years, having co-founded Castle Rock Entertainment with his friend director Rob Reiner in 1987 (which produced many successful films like *When Harry Met Sally . . .*, *City Slickers*, and *A Few Good Men*, as well as the hit TV series *Seinfeld*). I asked him how the industry has changed over the years.

Without hesitation Horn said, “Technology — the technology that manifests itself in the production process — in the making of the movies and in the completion of the movies. The special effects technology now is stunningly good and it’s seamless; the audience has come to expect first-class technology. They expect to see a tiger and not be able to tell if the tiger’s real or not” (and he was right about that — he oversaw the all-computer-generated *The Lion King*). To make his point, he told me about a “little movie” the studio did when he was at Warner Bros.: *The Bucket List*, starring Jack Nicholson and Morgan Freeman and directed by Rob Reiner. “In the movie, these two characters travel all over the world, but the actors actually never went anywhere. So when we tell people, no, they didn’t go to the Pyramids — it’s such a shock. It’s all green screen.” Horn laughingly recalled being on the set of *300* and seeing “twenty buffed-out guys charging each other in an empty warehouse with a bunch of fake rocks! It really is amazing what they can do nowadays.” Since this interview, special effects and CGI, including motion-capture, have only continued to evolve to amazing heights. The computer-generated *The Lion King* is opening this weekend (as I write this), and Disney is destined for a record-breaking weekend and a huge commercial success.

I asked Horn what he looked for in a screenplay. “The most important thing is a good story,” Horn said. “I’d like to see a screenplay that is about something. It doesn’t have to have a message in it, but it needs to have a good story. It’s easy to get sidetracked by the spectacularity that exists in special effects and technology and lose the story to that,” Horn continued. “It’s always about the story. If it’s supposed to be a comedy, then

it ought to be funny; if it's a horror movie, it ought to be scary; if it's a dramatic movie, it ought to be dramatically compelling. If it isn't, you wind up with what I call a 'feathered fish,' which is just a little bit funny and a little bit dramatic and a little bit this and a little bit that — and I think you have a problem."

When asked about the advice he'd give filmmakers just starting out, Horn said, "Filmmakers need to understand and have a comfort with technology, but it's always back to basics. A filmmaker should find something about which he or she is passionate. Everything flows from passion. Mr. Shakespeare said many years ago, 'The play's the thing.' Filmmakers have to find something that interests them, and they should build on their strengths." He went on to say that the filmmaker should strengthen his or her weaknesses and make his or her strengths "super strengths."

I agreed with Horn, especially that it takes passion to be successful. I could have asked him many more questions, but even though Horn seemed in no hurry to end the interview, I didn't want to overstay my welcome. After all, in addition to being one of the most powerful people in Hollywood, an adroit chess player, and gracious interview subject, Horn also holds a third-degree black belt in *tae kwon do* (although that was back in the day)!

