The Career of the Online Motion Picture Maker

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ABSTRACT

This paper charts the transition in the motion picture maker's career from spec scripts, agents, and reels consisting of several short films to series of short online videos accompanied by evidence of sustained or growing popularity. I examine the discourse surrounding online videos as well as recent attempts by the motion picture industry to make use of burgeoning online talent. By comparing this information to existing histories of motion picture making, I offer an account of a career in transition and, in doing so, provide a standpoint from which the legal, ethical, and commercial interests of the present-day motion picture maker can be considered. I argue that the abundance of online video blurs the line between video-as-conversation and video-as-art/entertainment. As such, online motion pictures are not as liable to be restricted in terms of their use as subsequent versions. At the same time, digital distribution allows for a high level of transparency and a thoroughly efficient networking system that may shrink the gap between insider and outsider, creating a middle management class in the motion picture industry.

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"Openness is one of the key founding principles and characteristics of the Internet."
– Internet Governance Forum, October 31st, 2006.

"In general, the motion picture business is a closed system."
– Richard MacCann, "Hollywood in Transition" 1962.

Introduction

During this, my first year teaching digital media, I often encourage my students to create and distribute as much video online as they can. "Don't worry about creating a masterpiece," I say. "Just get your work out there, get feedback, and learn from the feedback." I've regarded YouTube and similar open online video sites as the greatest laboratory for motion picture making a young film student could hope for, so why shouldn't they take advantage?

More recently, my unbounded enthusiasm has started to give way to the next stage in the inevitable progression from infatuation to contempt. I've begun to reflect on what the career of one of my students might look like. The initial hurdle that a motion picture maker faced in the past – the one that prevented said student from exhibiting a motion picture to millions of people – has disappeared. Many young filmmakers had spent so much time butting up against this barrier in the past that they hadn't considered what they might do if it were suddenly removed (or perhaps replaced by a subtler barrier). This paper is part of an effort to describe the current challenges facing the online motion picture maker.

The Carr-Benkler wager offers a concise summation of the current debate surrounding the regulation of online video (Fox 51). Are online video distribution sites an example of the new gift economy, or are they just instances of hierarchical exploitation

masquerading as egalitarian networks? Rather than answer this question, I hope to provide an economic and ethical starting point (something a bit more historical and practical than previous iterations of this debate) from which others can extrapolate.

To that end, I briefly review existing literature on the careers of motion picture artists in television and film, situating the current upheaval in a historical context. I then outline the players involved in online motion picture creation and distribution. Next, I examine the ways in which videomakers are currently using online video to express themselves, paying particular attention to the difference between video-as-art/entertainment and video-as-conversation and the implications of this subtle difference on the careers of online videomakers. I conclude by positing a hopeful, if speculative, vision of the future.

I will use the terms “motion picture” and “video” interchangeably. The first term feels ridiculously antiquated, and the second is commonly associated with short motion pictures that accompany music. What we know is that online videos (or online motion pictures) are not films, nor are they television shows. In terms of their content, exhibition, and mode of production, they differ greatly from what has come before. The terms I use are more placeholders than anything else.

Where We’ve Been

In the book “Hollywood in Transition,” scholar Richard MacCann refers to the practice of hiring new talent in Hollywood as “a process of massive neglect, based on seniority, familiarity, and nepotism” (129). Though that particular observation was written in 1962, before the first flood of high-profile, independent filmmakers hit

Hollywood in the late 1960's and the second wave of independents in the 1990's, things would remain, by and large, the same in the motion picture industry. "It was tough for me to get in," says the insider. "Why should I make it easier for someone else?" (130). The words "glamorous" and "practical" frequently recur in MacCann's account of the motion picture industry, representing the two poles of both film and television creative work. Plainly put, there is the fantasy of being paid big bucks to create popular stories, and the grim reality of being shut out of an industry notoriously hostile towards outsiders.

From the early days of Hollywood, writers, actors, and directors were part of an intricate system of divided labor. The motion picture business grew out of an assembly line mode of mass production popularized by Henry Ford that broke production into interchangeable, standardized units, and encouraged the vertical integration of the entire process, from inception to distribution (Bordwell et al 90-91). Hollywood's first directors synthesized these industrial practices with vaudeville norms in order to produce short, cheaply made narrative films created in a central location. The Nickelodeon boom of 1906 led to greater demand for product, and greater division of labor. The director came to replace the cameraman as catalyst for film production. Freelance writers would submit synopses to director/producers. During those first two decades of film production, the scenarios submitted by writers gradually transitioned to the continuity script format that persists today (Bordwell et al 124-126).

By the middle of the second decade of the 20th century, feature length films had replaced short subject films as the dominant source of box office income (Bordwell et al 132). These larger productions required an individual to concentrate his or her efforts on pre-production planning and post-production work, leaving the production primarily in

the hands of another individual, the director (Bordwell et al 135). Copyright law and the profit potential of a known intellectual property resulted in a decrease in freelance-submitted scripts and an increase in the purchasing of existing literary or stage stories by producers who, by the 1920's, were working for studios (such as Warner Brothers, MGM, and RKO) that secured funding from financiers in New York City (Bordwell et al 132). After the advent of sound, studios maintained a stable of talent, including several producers who specialized in various genres and gathered together the talent around a script (Bordwell et al 320).

It's interesting to consider some of the similarities between studio era filmmaking in Hollywood and some of the popular online motion picture websites of today. Sites like Channel101.com offer freelance videomakers a place to exhibit their work as well as an online forum to trade production and screenwriting tips and organize collaboration. Though this particular site is, in principle, open to submissions from anyone, the most popular videos on the site tend to come from a loosely organized collective of Los Angeles-based actors and videomakers who share an absurd, profane comic sensibility. Much like the studios of the 30's and 40's, they possess a stable of talent and a reputation for a certain brand of entertainment.

However, the close-knit Channel101 community seems like an exception to the rule at this point in the evolution of online motion pictures. Most video-makers float freely between sites, exhibiting their videos on sites such as YouTube in addition to their own hosting site. As online motion pictures become commodified, certain filmmakers are signing exclusive deals with certain websites like Revver, Metacafe, or Collegehumor,

embedding the web address for those sites into their videos, and thus, forming short-term formal partnerships.

As the 1950's dawned, the scale of movie producing (in terms of the sheer number of pictures that studios released and exhibited in theaters) drastically decreased. After the Paramount Decrees and the diffusion of the wondrous new device for disseminating motion pictures known as the television, American cinema ceded the duty of churning out inexpensive (increasingly serialized) entertainment to TV.[1] By 1960, American film companies produced less than half as many pictures as they had just nine years before (MacCann 105-106). Though one could argue that the blockbusters that came to dominate the box office in subsequent decades are as formulaic and as serialized as any motion picture produced during the studio era, the means of production changed from a Ford-ian assembly line to a pool of freelancers linked by social and professional connections.

The assembly line mode of production that characterized early cinema did not leave the field of motion pictures altogether. It merely switched media. If we may extrapolate for a moment, one possible motion picture industrial scenario would resemble the film industry's shift towards "fewer and better" motion pictures, with television scaling back the number of shows it produces to concentrate on producing high-budget, "higher quality" fare, while the online motion picture business would change from today's free-for-all into a highly regimented assembly line production scheme. But before

[1] Though we may see sequels as a product of 1980's blockbuster excess, there were, in actuality, more movie serials in the era before television, and certain genre pictures were so similar to one another in terms of their content that they could be considered part of a series, not unlike early television series such as The Twilight Zone, which were organized by genre.

considering whether or not that is a worthwhile comparison to make, it's important to know exactly how television shows are produced.

The freelance television writer typically submits a "spec script" to his or her agent. These scripts are submitted to producers of shows. Many of the creators at the top of the television food chain – the head writers known as "show runners" – work their way up from being staff writers. By proving their ability to work within the system, to reliably churn out compelling material based on someone else's vision, they can achieve a level of clout that permits them to pitch their own ideas to networks (Kukoff 47). Soap operas represent the clearest example of televised motion pictures created via an assembly line production scheme akin to the studios of pre-World War II Hollywood.

Diving Labor Online

Though there were significant changes in the production/distribution film infrastructure, many of the players remain the same. Independent producers still rely on the divisions of larger studios dedicated to smaller, prestige pictures, and a star's approval of the script and willingness to work for a reduced cost determines whether or not many independent picture gets made. Clearly, the clout of stars is still a determining factor, as it was during the studio era. If any player rose to prominence during the last 40 years, it is agent. Actors, writers, and directors would not have enough work to be judged on, and would need someone to speak on their behalf, exploiting whatever connections they had. Online video allows individuals to build up their own reputation and connections. Search engines and burgeoning folksonomies promise to connect like-minded artists with one another. Thus, online motion picture makers may act more like

agents themselves, or, to put it another way, the online social networking technology will perform those tasks previously performed by agents. Nevertheless, there may still be a need for individuals to protect the artist's long-term professional interests. Consider the frequency with which motion picture artists change jobs, and the sheer number of collaborative combinations this results in, keeping track of the alliances and personal conflicts that underlie the socio-professional network of the entertainment industry may still be a full-time job.

Many online motion pictures are produced by a pre-existing social group of media savvy young people. Once the world of online video reaches the next stage of maturation, a division of labor seems inevitable. As individuals become more experienced at certain tasks, they're more likely to specialize. However, certain tasks in the production process are more easily shared online than others. Writers work travels better than actors' or directors' work. Online, a writer can easily have multiple personae, while an actor (having only one face) cannot. As always, reputation and identity are the key aspects of one's professional career, but the world of online video changes the practical definitions of these attributes. The opportunities for theft dramatically increase, though public sites allow for a new kind of transparency that might curb script stealing through a collective disapproval. The viability of online motion picture production requires that all participants address the susceptibility of this system to corruption relative to alternatives. Participants must keep an eye on how individuals try to "game the system." Ideally, the policing should not be left to a small group of people. Rather, the system should be open so that everyone can keep an eye on everyone else.

Praxis: Current Trends in Online Video

Each online video seems to perform two functions: to serve as entertainment for the audience, and to serve as an audition to be viewed by agents and executives working in film and TV. One website might act as a demo reel for another, while the entire enterprise of online video might act as one big demo reel for television and/or the movies. Due to technical necessity (namely limited bandwidth), motion pictures are returning to the short subject. In the earliest days of Hollywood, short "two reelers" provide a low-commitment testing ground for young directors like Fred Zinneman and George Pal (Bordwell et al 131). In his essay "Convergence Television: Aggregating Form and Repurposing Content in the Age of Conglomeration," John Caldwell observes a steady progression in television production from the feature length teleplay, to the three page treatment, to the 30 second pitch (57). Online video may be the next iteration of the pitch. Beyond standalone shorts, many online shorts could serve as "pilots" for ongoing narratives that get picked up by other websites like Revver or television networks.

Online videomakers could also produce a "spec episode." Rather than writing an episode of a show that is already on television, the individual would produce his or her own episode of an existing low-budget television or webshow. This, of course, might give rise to questions of authorship. If anyone can produce an episode of a show, whose to say which episodes are legitimate parts of a narrative whole and which are not? In most cases, the actors' presences signal authenticity, but how might this apply to easily rendered stick character animation or the emerging genre of machinima, where anyone with a copy of a video game, some desktop editing equipment, and a microphone can create a spec episode that could pass of the real thing? Instead of voting for our favorite

series, we might vote for or choose our favorite new episode of an existing series. There is no clear distinction between the spec episode that serves as a mere calling card, and the spec episode that could potentially usurp an existing online series' audience. However, as production values rise, it will be harder to produce spec episodes that could pass for the real thing.

The practice of video blogging, or vlogging, is, in many ways, the inheritor of the soap operas legacy. These direct address video diaries feature motion picture makers reflecting on their experiences and matters of the day (Mcgrath). Not unlike soaps, they are part of the ongoing social history of their audience, not designed to take prolonged vacations or to come to any conclusion. As such, the writers, actors, directors, and producers of soaps and vlogs have different careers than those of finite narratives. These industrial actors make less money than those working on higher-budget, finite narratives, and consider soaps or vlogs to be steppingstones for more lucrative projects (Sandeen & Compesi 162-165).

Conversation vs. Art/Entertainment

But are vlogs really just entertainment? The interaction that many vloggers have with their small audiences suggests that the phenomenon is more like a chatroom than a television show. The statement-response relationship that many of the vlogs have to one another, combined with the personal, site-and-time-specific nature of the content of these vlogs, indicates that they are closer in nature to transient, everyday conversation than to the lasting, non-specific nature of art or entertainment.

To complicate matters, those who are making motion pictures that are clearly designated as "entertainment" are making them more and more like "conversation" by having some writers blog as characters on the show. After the revelation that the vlogger known as Lonelygirl15 was an actress working off of a loose script, viewers have become critical of vloggers that appear to be engaging in conversation with viewers, but may be trying to sell them a product or a larger narrative on another medium.

When considering this disappearing gap between entertainment and social interaction, its interesting to note that some people, through the process known as "Facebook (or Google or MySpace) stalking," piece together their own narrative of a person's life, one that is arguably as compelling as a reality TV show. Anecdotal evidence suggests that "the audience" uses these narratives to fulfill desires similar to those served by more traditional forms of storytelling. Goals and threats can be deduced from blog entries, there is vicarious identification on the part of the spectator, varying levels of suspense, all generating the voyeuristic emotional investment that we require of a film or television viewer. Who is the author of that narrative, then? Where might one draw the line between a reality TV show (which is an entertainment property with the characters generally signing the rights over to producers) and simply standing in a public park observing others[2]?

Though this particular example rarely involves motion pictures, it is relevant to this topic in that it illustrates the need for a new perspective on the relationship between online social interaction and intellectual property. Just as in offline life, any moment or

[2] One wonders what film theorists and filmmakers who saw the process of watching films as fundamentally an act of voyeurism would think Facebook stalking. It seems to me to be a validation and a perverse extension of their theories.

excerpt from online social life can become a story. We must have a reliable, transparent system for accounting for the way individuals use information (specifically motion pictures) if we're to develop an equitable, flexible, and hopefully lasting system for compensating online motion picture artists.

Many of the disagreements over the rights and careers of online motion picture artists stem from the long-standing characterization of motion pictures as either creative expressions or attempts to inform and enlighten an indeterminate audience. As it stands, communication is classified as conversation or as something that will be a potentially lucrative property for 75 years. This characterization fails to take into account recent shifts in the ways people are using motion pictures. This evolution is similar to the evolution of the desktop publishing and its effects on the relative worth of traditional journalism, memoirs, and fiction. The existing copyright law as it applies to motion pictures doesn't allow for much in the way of nuance, and this may be indirectly responsible for the wide gap between insiders and outsiders.

Conclusion

How might these changes affect a young students' vision of what it means to be in the business of making motion pictures? As noted previously, the career of the Hollywood screenwriter (or, as more properties become optioned by studio arthouse divisions like Sony's Picturehouse or Fox Searchlight, the novelist) seems to be part of this rags-to-riches American mythology: one day, toiling away in anonymity, the next day, offered six figures for a script or a novel. Success may come after years of unheralded hard work or it may be precipitated by a chance encounter, but in most accounts of Hollywood

careers, the path from starving artist to successful motion picture storyteller is rarely gradual. Success occurs suddenly.

This is likely the result of the huge gaps in the professional hierarchy of Hollywood, between the insiders and the untouchable outsiders waiting tables. One possible outcome of the industrial upheaval precipitated by the inundation of the internet by homemade video is that the motion picture business would begin to resemble all other businesses, possessing a more nuanced hierarchy: no more insiders and outsiders; the rise of the motion picture middle class. That isn't to say that online click-fraud and payola won't take the place of the "casting couch" online. Wherever there is power, there is the potential for corruption. But the Internet also allows for greater transparency of process. There is hope that we might move towards what McCann calls a "rational presentation of talent." (125-126).

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