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The Pocket Essential

FILMING ON A
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Paul Hardy

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In memory of the Depot Studios

Acknowledgements

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Introduction

This book will tell you almost everything you need to know to make a short film on as little money as possible. A 'microbudget' is currently defined (for short films) as a cash spend of £500 or less, but that shouldn't put chains on the quality you can aspire to; a fundamental trait of every microbudget filmmaker I've ever met is that they exploited whatever resources they had as ruthlessly as possible and never acknowledged the word 'impossible' if they could come up with an original way of doing something. With the right mix of ingenuity, contacts and tenacity, it's possible to make a film that looks like tens of thousands of pounds, on a budget within the reach of even the most modest wage packet. And technology is on your side. The Mini-DV format has brought reasonable picture quality within easy reach, video editing is now possible with quite ordinary PCs, and better equipment can be found at subsidised rates from media centres and workshops across the country.

But there's one thing that can't be improved by technology: you, the filmmaker. To begin with, you need the ability to imagine a series of images that tell a story. After that, the only thing that can improve you is experience. You should watch as many films and as much television

(especially the ads, since they're effectively short films) as possible, and with a critical eye. And you must make films, even if you're just going out and grabbing some footage to use for an editing exercise.

In this new edition you can find sections on Budgeting and Mastering, an expanded Glossary, much more information on Sound Mixing, a Case Study of a film which takes you through every stage of planning at three different production levels, a list of the twelve most common microbudget mistakes you really ought to avoid and all kinds of other useful information throughout the book. You're still the one that's got to make the films, and you'll still make mistakes, but hopefully the way will be a little smoother.

Having made many of these mistakes myself, I wouldn't want you to repeat them without being warned . . .

Development

The Idea

Getting an idea for a film is tough. It helps to read widely, as many newspapers as possible, watch a broad range of television and see as many films as you can; the more knowledge you have of the world, the more resources you have to draw upon. Extrapolating further events from something that really happened is often a good source, but many stories are stranger flights of fantasy that come from something in your unconscious; they might start from a grain of reality but something else must be added. In my (highly subjective) experience, the key has always been daydreaming; the willingness to let your mind wander without restraint. Taking long walks always helps this to happen, and I personally find public transport to be enormously helpful. The one thing that can prevent this is anxiety; if you're worried about getting an idea, you probably won't get one. If you're relaxed, your mind stops concentrating on being worried and gets on with doing something useful.

Another way to get ideas is to work backwards. Make a list of all the things, people or places that you could use to make a film, and see if that sparks your imagination to come up with an idea. Robert Rodriguez (*El Mariachi*,

Desperado, *The Faculty*) made a short film called *Bedhead* with his brothers and sisters as performers, the family house as a location, and only what was already available in the house for props. It went on to win multiple awards.

Once you've got an idea, you need to subject it to a few very tough questions before you turn it into a film:

– **Is this actually a story?** Not every idea will be useful. It's necessary to learn about story structure and what actually makes stories work before you allow your idea to progress beyond idle imagination. Skip forward to the Script & Structure section on page 15 for more information but it's a good idea to read some books on screenwriting as well.
– **What's my audience?** Not every idea will be of interest to anyone besides yourself. It's important to be aware of the needs of the audience right from the very start, whether that audience is very small (your immediate family) or massive (the world), or anything inbetween (women, men, OAPs, under-fives, religious groups, national groups, people who watch BBC2 rather than BBC1 etc.). What does a given audience expect? What can they cope with? Will they even understand? Even if you only have a vague notion of who your audience are, you must remember that they're the people you're doing this for (unless you only ever intend to screen the film to yourself).
– **Is it the right length?** Short films can be anything from a few seconds to 40 minutes or so. The longer the film, the more difficult it's going to be to make; if your story is running long, it may be worth considering using

it to build an idea for a feature film. Longer fictional shorts are very difficult to find distribution for, and ten minutes is commonly considered an appropriate length (in the UK, anyway). Many short film schemes run by television companies require this, and cinema distributors of short films tend to stipulate this as the maximum. Ten minutes will allow you to go into some depth with an idea, and is a good benchmark to set yourself. There is also something to be said for making a very short film of 60–90 seconds; while this may not seem like much, bear in mind that television commercials are often shorter and yet capable of telling a perfectly good story. It's an excellent way to learn a very efficient approach to storytelling which will pay off when you make longer films.

– **Do I have the resources to do this?** If your idea concerns space aliens battling Roman soldiers upon the bloody fields of the Somme, then the answer is probably no. If it involves the titanic struggles of your child to throw a ball through a hoop, then the answer is probably yes. Take a look at the idea and work out if you can do it. That includes the time you have to do it – are you completely free? Do you have holiday time coming up? Can you only shoot on weekends?

SCRIPT & STRUCTURE

Story Structure

Writers often like to give the impression that when an idea struck them it came fully formed, ready to be typed

out and rushed to the set immediately. Films often show the process of screenwriting as a simple matter of putting paper in a typewriter and banging away at the keyboard until all the pages are filled.

This, unfortunately, is a lie. The actual process of writing involves a lot of hard work, dead ends, and rewriting. Inspiration isn't enough. You have to find a way of structuring your idea into a story. Story structure is nothing to be frightened of; it hides beneath the surface of every story you've ever heard or seen and normally goes unnoticed – unless you know what you're looking for. Structure works on the basis of cycles of rising action; the tension in the story mounts until something major happens, then ebbs for a quiet moment and builds up again to another major event which tops the first; and repeat until the end of the story, the last act ending on another major scene which tops anything that has gone before. Each of these build–ups and major scenes at the end is called an act. Feature films usually have three or four, while short films might only have one, and quite often, that will be a single scene – but they usually follow this pattern even within that one scene.

The simplest structure is the same as that of a joke. Set-up and punchline. Here's an example, from Jeff Stark's short film, *Desserts*: A man walks along an empty beach. He finds an exquisite cake lying upon the sand. He picks it up; sniffs it; decides it's okay. He eats it. The hook inside snags into his mouth, and the line attached to it pulls him out into the ocean. Set-up and punchline; tension and release. It may seem absolutely bloody obvious, but think about what would happen to the joke if it weren't properly set

up, or the punchline (also known as the 'pay-off') wasn't completely shown: the joke wouldn't be funny.

Satisfy the Audience in an Unexpected Way

The trick is to give the audience what they want, but not in the way they were expecting. As soon as we see that cake on the sand, we're expecting something to happen, and it does, but it's so strange and beyond what we could have expected that we react to it. This doesn't just work for comedy. If the man had picked up the cake and bitten into it only to find a telephone number written on a scrap of paper buried in the cream, it wouldn't be funny, but it would be intriguing. Who on earth would leave a cream cake with a telephone number in it on a beach? It's also an example of how the pay-off of a scene can become a set-up for another scene; what happens when the man calls that number? The audience will want to know. And if you don't satisfy that demand – while giving them something unexpected in the process – they're going to be disappointed.

Subtext

Another way to keep things interesting is by using subtext. An example: Two people are watching television. One has control of the remote and is paying strict attention to the set. The other talks very loudly about what they've been doing at work. The 'text' (in this case, people watching and not watching TV) is what we see and hear; the 'subtext' (the fact that these two people detest each other) is what's

actually going on. We may be aware of it simply through the actors' performances or we may know these characters from before this conversation, and be well aware that every word and gesture is loaded with extra meaning.

Show, Don't Tell

The best principle for storytelling is: show, don't tell. We usually speak of 'telling a story,' but in film, what you should really be doing is 'showing a story.' The basic process of filmmaking is to string together a sequence of images that tells a story – NOT a sequence of speeches. Changes and revelations should be, as far as possible, transmitted to the audience in a visual manner. Consider the example of *Desserts*; did the man on the beach need to get out his mobile and tell his mate that he'd found a cake on the sand and that it was really weird and that he wasn't sure if it was safe to eat or not? No. If an audience see something for themselves, they become more involved than if they had simply been told the same information. Of course, it's not always possible to make a film without having people speak to each other, but if the dialogue has subtext, the principle still works; if two people are talking about something innocuous but there's a deeper meaning, then the audience has to make that little bit of deduction which gets them more interested in what's happening.

Keep it Simple, Stupid

One common mistake is to overestimate the audience's ability to make connections. Filmmakers tend to do this

because they're very familiar with the story and the characters and already know what things mean – so surely it should be obvious to everyone else, right? Unfortunately, this is not always the case. Try to look back over the story and see it from the eyes of a first-time audience: what do they know about the scene and the characters? Small details that might seem to speak volumes might not even be noticed. Knowing how much they can be expected to understand while not boring them with too much information and detail is a fine art but one you're going to have to learn. If in doubt, the venerable KISS principle applies – Keep it Simple, Stupid.

Start Late, Get Out Early

When's the best place for your story to start? As late as possible. When's the best place for it to finish? As soon as possible. If you can start in the middle of something already happening (a chase, for example), that's a wonderful way to grab the attention of the audience – their minds will be racing to construct the events that happened before the film started. Don't have anyone stop to explain what happened before, though – go for the visual explanation over the spoken one every time. Then at the end of the film, make sure you know when it's finished. The moment after the epilogue is not the end of the story; the end of the story is the moment when whatever was at stake has been resolved (boy and girl get back together, hero kills the villain etc.). As soon as this final event has happened, try and finish the film as soon as humanly possible, at that very moment if logic allows. The

same principle applies to individual scenes. Why show someone turning up at a doorstep when the moment it gets interesting is the conversation they have inside? Why show them leaving when the next interesting thing is what happens when they get home? Every single thing you show should have some relevance to the story; it may be permissible to show someone turning up on a doorstep if their appearance is a massive shock; it may be fine to show them leaving if the person they were visiting is staring daggers at their back. But if there's no story reason to show something happening, don't show it.

Outline & Treatment

Before you start on the script, you need to know the story, so write the film in outline form to figure it out first. Bear in mind that no one ever has to see your outline; it's a document intended for you and you alone (although, confusingly, you might be asked for an 'outline' when applying for funding. Then it has to be short, sharp and polished). It doesn't need to be well formatted or even well spelt; you can write it and rewrite it as many times as you need to. The reason for doing this is that changes can be made more easily at this stage. Writing your story down will tell you an awful lot about how well it works; having it worked out in your head isn't enough. You don't need to describe everything; you don't need to write dialogue; just the basic, important things. My description of *Desserts*, above, is effectively an outline, and there's another (fairly well polished) outline as part of the Case Study on page 187. If you have something more complex, you can write