

4 - Why Do We Make Films?

Films are entertainment, and entertainment is important in its own right, but films are much more than that.

Films are important

A good way to be reminded of just how important films are is to reflect upon how they have influenced one's own life. Whoever we are and wherever we are from, films will have in vital ways defined our childhood imagination. They will have provided guidance through teenage rites of passage. They will have provided role models, influenced our notions of good and evil and defined how we see our own worlds and others too.

Films play vital roles in our understanding of the past, the present and the future. They affect how we think about love, and they may also have provided the discussion points out of which love grew, or did not. They affect how we understand ourselves as adults and who we aspire to be as adults. In short, they affect and influence almost every single thing about us. Films are important and film making is not an unimportant endeavour.

We each have our own narrative of our own relationship with films, including, most vitally for those of us who work in film, the ones that made us want to become film makers.

It's not as if life doesn't offer other endeavours that are easier to pursue and more financially rewarding. Financially, independent cinema is a mug's game and there is no reason to think that's likely to change soon.

The reason that we are making films, or trying to make films, is because of passion.

That might seem like an astonishingly obvious thing to say. But obvious things can be easily forgotten and we see examples of this when people talk about films in ways that lack any real passion because they lack any real meaning.

These "Empty Passions" are worth looking at in a little detail because they are virulently recurrent and they are holding us back.

They are ridiculous as soon as one thinks about them for more than a fraction of a second – but until that happens they can exert a powerful influence.

"I really want to make a film" and the story of the Long White Line That Circles the Globe.

The entirely careerist "I really want to make a film" is too often offered up in a way that is little more profound than saying "I want to be rich" or "I want to be successful" or "I want to be beautiful". An attempt to disguise the narcissism of this statement often comes in the form of the entirely empty "that means something".

Unfortunately "that means something" too seldom relates to any idea regarding what the film they want to make is going to be about. That not to say that there isn't a very clear idea in the film maker's head – their most cherished idea in fact, the very one that gives their whole life it meaning, so vital that it must remain unspoken.

When it's rooted in nothing more than personal ambition here's what I think the film that "means something" refers to:

The "film that means something" refers to the dream of an all-encompassing life-transforming event, vaguely defined but so orgasmically brilliant that all a film maker's past failings, frustrations and set-backs will be forgotten. The meaning is embodied in a metaphorical, or maybe not so metaphorical, line of cocaine that runs from New Zealand to Cannes. There scenes are envisaged in which the film maker will receive the acclaim of the great ones of world cinema, before continuing on to Los Angeles in time for the Oscars and an Academy Award acceptance speech that has already been drafted and redrafted countless times in the course of the many years in which the film maker wandered alone in the wilderness of not having made a feature. The long white line will then stretch back, through oceans of box-office cash to New Zealand, and a trip back to their old stomping grounds where they were NOT recognized in their years of struggle, where even their worst enemies will now have to acknowledge their genius and where beautiful lovers will, like the critics, compete for their favour.

Am I wrong? I don't mean to denigrate the dream – it's a worthy one. But like most forms of self-stimulation it is of use only to the person both giving and receiving their own private pleasure, and is best kept private. The best it's going to be for one's audience is ridiculous, and it risks being much worse than that.

Our film industry wasn't built by people who wanted to make careers. It was built by people who wanted to tell stories on film.

The Appeal to Technology and the Story of Digital

"I really want to make a film" is often followed by "because I think that with the new digital cameras/editing systems (insert specifics of your choice), making a film is now a lot easier/cheaper than it was before". The tendency to attribute human values to mechanisms and machinery is a powerful one and this is a good illustration of it.

There are aspects of digital film making which are genuinely interesting. But the claims that have been made, and are still being made, in the name of digital film making, as opposed to what it's actually delivered, are reminiscent of that other great digital phenomenon - Y2K. As with Y2K, there's an evangelical, even apocalyptic, element that often infects the discussion.

I remember the first time I heard word of Digital as something more than a technical term. A friend who shall in fairness remain nameless said to me - after a long speech invoking the French New Wave, Guerilla Film Making, the evils of the Powers That Be and god knows what else - "Yeah man the future is digital". Such was the intensity of this pronouncement, and the profundity of his stare into yonder that I wondered if he was actually seeing this Digital as a living entity, or a hologram perhaps. Actually he was just catastrophically stoned but the words he spoke were the start of a message with which we are all now familiar.

"Digital is coming" is the message. And when Digital comes things are going to be different. Digital is the living embodiment of all that is cool, in fact of all that we need. Digital is edgy, He is Hip (it does tend to be guys who talk like this), He is innovative, non-mainstream, and challenging and when He gets jiggy

with his loyal consort Guerilla (a hermaphrodite perhaps?) the powers that be better watch out because Digital and Guerilla are not only going to destroy everything that holds us back, they are going to give birth to a tsunami of super creative new films that are going to overwhelm all that stand in their way.

We first started hearing this message in the early 90s. It was also the message in the mid-90s, in 2000 and in every year since. As with any nutty religion, the failure of these sky-gods to arrive does not deter their most zealous prophets.

Let's give Digital its due. Any technology that makes film making easier and more affordable has got to be good. But making a film with digital technology is just that, making a film with digital technology. There's nothing inherently interesting in that until you start talking about its content.

Here's a question: Name the digital feature films made in the past 10 years that have "revolutionized" world cinema in any way other than the number of films being made? Even their stylistic impact has been overstated. Whilst George Lucas has shown that it is possible to make shockingly bad films digitally, Danny Boyle, and plenty of others, have shown that it is possible to make very good ones. Does the format it was shot on rank amongst the greatest crimes committed by "The Phantom Menace"? And wasn't there much more than just style to the success of films like "28 Days Later" and "Slumdog Millionaire"? Is there a film that you have just loved or hated, purely for the format it was shot on?

Keeping the camera mobile and the production values simple is a great idea. Buster Keaton thought so in the 1920's and the Italian Neo-Realists thought so in the 1940's. The French New Wave film makers thought so in the 60's and the Movie Brats thought so in America in the early 70's, just as the Dogma film makers thought so in the 90's. It's not a new idea.

A no-budget digital film that secures an international release may herald the arrival of a brilliant new talent and that's an awesome thing, but it's not a revolution. Film making has always been in many ways a classical form.

There's a big debate going on at the moment about the future of digital film. I think it's great and I think the news that the NZFC may be interested in digital film making again is great. In particular I think it would be good if an NZFC backed scheme called for tenders from groups of EP's wanting to make particular types of films in terms of theme and subject matter. That's another debate but an interesting one.

The Appeal to Finance and the Story of Co-Pro

Have you heard of Co-Pro? Co-Pro is the patron saint of bad ideas developed specifically to procreate with other bad ideas from other places. He is needless to say, a very good friend of Finance and when these two get in the driver's seat you get all sorts of road kill.

Deal-driven films are made all the time, they're easy to spot because they tend to have one thing common – they're awful. We are all familiar the Hollywood products of this approach. However the same driver can be seen at work – with a similar outcome in terms of quality of product – in the world of state sponsored European co-productions and in fact anywhere where the money drives the creation and not the other way around. We have some very recent examples in our own industry and the results are not pretty.

New Distribution and the Magic Phone

When Digital, Guerilla, Co-Pro and Finance start rapping on the theme of the Line of Coke That Circles the Globe a disinterested audience member might ask a very impious question as to who on earth wants to see or hear this type of shit? Luckily our heroes have an answer.

The answer is that the final member of this group of deities is standing by. His name (and again it is guys who talk about this the most) is Digital Distribution and he is about to change EVERYTHING because soon we aren't going to need distributors at all, film are going to be channeled directly from the film makers to viewers' cell phones. These phones will be so amazing that the filmic experience will soon resemble something out of Huxley – images and emotions will actually be directly piped into our blood streams.

Fact: People don't watch feature films on cell phones.

Fact: Yes with more cinemas going digital we are seeing greater opportunities for diverse films to find a cinema release. As download technology improves we are also going to see a greater diversity of films sold (or at least delivered) straight to the home.

Fact: However films get to people, the international cinema audience is actually finite, and the competition to reach that audience is only ever going to increase. If it's cinema that we are really talking about the most fundamental challenge of distribution will always remain how to get people to leave home to pay \$15 to see a film.

Why do these ridiculous ideas generate so much attention?

For one, let's give them their due. Personal drive, technology, finance and distribution are all vital parts of the film making process and they are actually interesting in their own right.

They are also easy to discuss. They involve questions that can be broken down into bite sized pieces to be logically analyzed to produce superficially clear answers. They recognize specialist knowledge in every aspect of film making, which cannot be challenged by those beyond each particular aspect of specialization. They excite in equal measure the egotist the techo, the geek, the politico and the businessperson within each of us, all of whom have vital contributions to make to the debate. When they are spiced up with enough gossip and speculation regarding who's got what and who's doing what in each area they can start to sound more important than they really are.

But when they operate in a vacuum of ideas regarding actual story content these various means to an end can start to masquerade as ends in themselves.

Whilst the ways films are made, financed and distributed is always changing, it's worth remembering how much they don't.

In very key ways the feature film is a classical form.

Camera technology has been through many evolutions since the time of Edison but the way we judge a cinematographer's art – in terms of lighting, lens, camera movement and composition – has not. Nor has the way productions are organized. The crew positions on films today are pretty much the same as they were in 1930. Post production may have changed beyond recognition but the craft of editing has not. The

main change is that for the majority of film history films have been made without the benefit of cell phones, or email, and they did just fine without them.

The demise of the Hollywood studio system of production and distribution has been predicted every decade for over 80 years now but the biggest studios in Hollywood today are the same ones that were the dominant players in 1920. The relationship between studio, distributor and theatre is also very similar. Who owns what and who controls what, is always in play but the underlying structures remain the same.

The structure of film stories themselves is largely unchanging. The three act structure which still dominates today has been around since "Birth of a Nation" in 1915. Non linear story telling – that's as old as the Odyssey.

The overall quality of a film – it starts with the story, the same as it always has.

This can be obscured by the whole sub-industry of pundits and publications and courses which exist on the promotion of the notions that EVERYTHING IS ABOUT TO CHANGE, and IT'S A FAST CHANGING BUSINESS AND IF YOU DON'T STAY UP WITH THE PLAY YOU'RE A GONNER and EVERYTHING – MOST PARTICULARLY SCRIPT WRITING - IS FRIGHTFULLY COMPLEX AND IF YOU DON'T KNOW ALL THE RULES YOU'RE FUCKED.

For the vast majority of film history film makers have managed to make films without this whole support industry. Yet being a pundit, a guru or a bureaucrat has become a far more viable career option than being a film maker. There's a tipping point at which parts of the support industry ceases to be supporting and becomes parasitic.

Some people might find the suggestion that not everything is about to change disappointing. Personally I find it rather a relief. It allows attention to be diverted to more interesting questions of what films are actually about.

When talented film makers come up with real reasons for making films, that is human reasons to do with things beyond their own personal ambition, then all these questions of practicality, finance and distribution, take their proper place.

That is, as vital components of the film making endeavor rather than the driving forces. Vision that drives forward without regard for practicality is madness. But a real vision that truly engages with practicality will find a way forward. The momentum that swings in behind an exciting film project is a wonder to behold. Producers want to produce it, directors want to direct it, actors want to act in it, crews want to work on it, funders want to fund it, distributors want to distribute it and film audiences want to see it. The ability of a great project to blast through all manner of practical impediments, to make existing structures bend to its own requirements, to draw funding from unexpected quarters, to draw audiences that were not expected, to operate as a force far more powerful than the sum of its parts or of the combined efforts of the people who come together to make it, is a truly amazing thing to watch.

However questions regarding how to develop a film project that does this, in terms of story and substance, even regardless of practicalities, face a difficult challenge at inception.

They involve questions of values and aspirations which in turn force us to even more challenging questions regarding who we are and who we might aspire to be. And we shy away from these questions

for a very good reason which is that they are indeed fearsomely complex and challenging, and they can seem particularly so in the age in which we live.

But they are worth tackling, not only because they are actually the really interesting things to talk about. In the absence of having good answers to the questions of what films we should be trying to make and why, or more importantly until we have developed the films that are our best answer to these questions, we will continue to have, at the very best, some very bad ideas for films.

I think it's important to define these aspects of film debate because in my (highly scientific) observation the questions of *how* to make films, as opposed to *what* films we might want to make and *why*, don't just take up a majority of the mind space, the talk time, the industry magazine column inches, the university class room time, the script meeting time, the sum total of thought and imagination that is devoted by the film making population as whole to the question of film – they take up about 99% of it. And that is not a good balance.

Of course film makers do debate the questions of what and why we make films. But in terms of the time and energy devoted to these questions, what should be the grand debate is treated with the time and energy more appropriate to an incidental side show. If these notes achieve nothing else than having highlighted this imbalance, and the need to redress it, then I will consider the time and energy spent writing them to have been justified.

I don't actually think that most people when they really think about things do actually want to make films for foolish reasons.

The real reason we want to make films is because we want to have an impact on people lives – not just our own. More even than critical or commercial success we want to make films that people enjoy and remember. We want to make the type of films that are not only watched but loved, which live on in the hearts and minds of their viewers and in conversations in kitchens and bedrooms and bars. We want to make films that not only record the culture but define it.

If these were the sort of films that we were developing in abundance we'd be presenting the NZFC with a very high quality problem – the problem of which amongst so many strong contenders for feature film production funding they should choose. But that's not the problem the NZFC is facing. In fact it's not a problem they've ever faced.