

Spring 2016

## Hollywood Before the Camera Flashes

Jasmine Careddu  
*College of DuPage*

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### Recommended Citation

Careddu, Jasmine (2016) "Hollywood Before the Camera Flashes," *ESSAI*: Vol. 14 , Article 11.  
Available at: <http://dc.cod.edu/essai/vol14/iss1/11>

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## Hollywood Before the Camera Flashes

by Jasmine Careddu

(English 1102)

From caveman wall drawings to Greek tragedies, and from tribal oral heritage to contemporary best sellers, one thing all these have in common is that they all tell a story. It is no different than what filmmakers do today in one of the most modern ways to tell a story. Movies gather visual elements, sound, art, and much more all together; and a director is the one who orchestrates the process as a whole. When I was around four years old and saw for the first time the movie *Titanic*, I wasn't aware of the existence of James Cameron, and I certainly didn't know what a film director was. It was the first movie that fascinated and struck me, the first one I remember seeing. Obviously, I was enchanted by the music, the costumes, the love story, and the actors; but for me, even though I didn't know it yet, it was much more. *Titanic* was the start of my deepest passion, cinematography. As I grew up, I realized that if there is one thing I wish to work hard to achieve, it is to become a filmmaker and fascinate someone with my own movies. However, as much as one might want it, the path to become a movie director is a windy, up-hill, and rough road, especially for all the women like me who are in the pursuit of this career.

*Lights, Camera, Action!*

The Ferguson manual *What Can I do Now? Film* offers an objective overview of the film industry, focusing on a different career in each chapter. In the "Film Directors" section, it is stated that filmmakers "have the ultimate responsibility for the tone and quality of the films they direct" (40). They take care of auditioning, selecting, and rehearsing the actors; give advice on music, and set design; and decide on matters like location and special effects (41). Although this profession might be considered glamorous, "directors work under great stress, meeting deadlines, staying within budget, and resolving problems among staff.... [Sixteen]-hour days (and more) are not uncommon" (42).

Being a movie director is possibly the hardest quest when it comes to the film industry, and even when someone is willing to sacrifice their time and energy to pursue this career, filmmaker Laurie Agard claims that "[i]t's tough to go out and just get hired as a director" (Agard qtd. in Ferguson 46). She suggests to "try and get there in any way possible," implying that there is no clear path to follow, since "you just have to convince someone that your vision is worth spending on and that you can pull off creating a film based on your vision." This particular statement makes it clear that the key to success is to find a personal path, whichever it may be, that allows to build as many connections as possible. In fact, "many Hollywood insiders agree that it's not what you know, but who know that will get you" (47) started in the industry. Addressing this issue, the "Who Will Hire Me?" section of the chapter suggests higher education as a initial solution: "[F]ilm school is a breeding ground for making contacts in the industry" (47), also recommended as a way to be a valid opponent to the broad competition.

As listed in the Ferguson manual, the skills necessary to be a successful filmmaker are: stress management, organization, leadership, good communication, ability to handle criticism and second-guessing, ambitiousness, and strong work ethic (42). Aspiring directors must be dynamic

and make smart choices, sometimes do some unpaid work and volunteer just to get an extra project to add to their resume. It is essential that they are not only trusted by their crew but also highly valued by fellow filmmakers. In order to achieve this status, they must prove themselves first, and then they will be able to be considered for more important projects.

### *Bad News First*

Hollywood isn't only red carpets and camera lights; it is also known for being a white-male based industry. In his article "Hollywood isn't in the Morality Business," published in *The Los Angeles Times*, Stanley Fish discusses the recent controversy that has been challenging the cinematography world after the absence of black nominees at the 2016 Oscars. He takes this opportunity to talk about the presence of minorities and females in the industry, and presents statistics that reveal that this field lacks in representing both categories. In fact, he denounces the fact that "[o]nly a third of the speaking characters in 414 films and TV series were women. Minorities had about a quarter of those roles, even though they make up almost 40% of the population. Things were even worse when it came to directors; women accounted for only 3.4% of the films surveyed, and of those a mere two were black women."

He then proceeds to analyze some possible sources for this problem, critiquing how very little effort goes into trying to make a change, but concludes stating that "doing good is not the business they are in and no one is paying them to do it. Making movies is a commercial enterprise and the rules in play are the rules of thumb used by those trying to predict commercial success." As he establishes that doing the right thing is almost impossible due to profit issues, Fish also argues that merit should be taken into consideration as a motivation to make this transition. However, being merit subjective, Fish's consideration is automatically defeated.

While talking specifically about women in the field, the author brings up a study that justifies the casting choices that exclude minorities and women to accommodate audience preferences. Fish also points out that "the small number of women and minority directors given that directors are off-screen and therefore not visible." This observation should make people reflect on whether all choices are made based on impartial analysis of audience's expectation or if those are mere excuses used to keep this industry run by the few "chosen" ones.

Not only does breaking into this industry require skills, determination, passion, and patience, but there are also more challenges depending on your gender and background. Moreover, aspiring directors should keep in mind that arts in general have some margin of subjectivity, which means you can be highly valued or not be considered at all, and sometimes it's also a matter of luck.

### *It's Always Darkest Before the Dawn*

Jumping into an industry so competitive might seem scary at first, and a lot of people who graduate from film school give up even before trying. Independent filmmaker and professor at College of DuPage John Rangel says that "[t]here's usually a three-year period where it's really insecure, but if you stick with it, you demonstrate your talent, you get it seen by the right people, which again is part of your effort, usually that's the breaking point. That's when you become a filmmaker." During those three years there are many challenges to overcome, and also a lot of work that is not only pleasant or ideal, but that is necessary and will pay off in the long run. Here's the story of one of Rangel's former students:

I had a former student when I taught at Columbia who wanted to be a screenwriter, and when she left school the first three years were terrible. She had jobs that she hated, and they were in the industry! She was personal assistant to some people she didn't like, and they weren't creative positions. About the third year, she got an offer to do some writing for a gaming company, so she took it because it was creative and she plays games, too, and she ended up discovering how much she loved it. Now she writes in design-games for them. But those first three years were really awful, and there were a lot of times when she thought: "Oh, God! Did I make a mistake?" But she stuck with it; she put the career first, and now she's doing it.

When discussing job salary, Rangel declares that being a director "is 100% insecure.... No filmmaker has a permanent job. Every filmmaker makes a movie, and they're looking for the next job. So, by definition, we are always job insecure, especially at the beginning." For this reason, he addresses this issue as one more challenge to prove dedication and determination, and adds:

The young filmmaker has to be far more concerned with making movies, than paying bills. Like, with my former students, the students who worry the most about paying bills stop making movies, and they make something else to make sure they're paid. And this doesn't sound good, but I call them "professional bill payers." What they train themselves to do is, they sacrifice anything to get the bills paid. Whereas the ones who become filmmakers, it's the opposite. They'll sacrifice anything to make their movie, but then, yet, somehow their bills always get paid. They're not bums, they're not irresponsible. But, they put their films first, and they make sacrifices as a result. Like, they spend three years eating nothing but Ramen Noodles, or whatever they can find; but that's okay to them because they're getting to make their movies, and that's really what sustains them.

A little more precisely, as reported in the *Occupational Outlook Handbook* in the "Producers and Directors" section, in 2014 "[t]he lowest 10 percent earned less than \$31,380, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$187,200." Obviously, beginners should expect to be hanging in the lower section for a while, working toward more prestigious projects.

In an article for the *Tribeca Flashpoint College*, author Timmy Barron remarks that "understanding that you will not be the next Steven Spielberg as soon as you graduate is one of the most important realizations a film student can have." The key to success is to work your way up step by step. Just like a doctor starts applying stitches first on bananas then cadavers, aspiring filmmakers should similarly begin with the basics and observe experts, even though they've gone through film school.

Therefore, he suggests six entry-level jobs that would help new graduates break into this industry: set production assistant, office production assistant, grip, script supervisor, second assistant camera, and assistant editor. These jobs are usually centered on satisfying the needs of directors and crew members, but they are still very valuable as field experience and to create connections in the industry. People who do these jobs work very closely with professionals, and even though usually the pay isn't optimal, they compensate with great learning opportunities. Covering such positions is a key to build not only experience and connections but also to boost confidence, one of the characteristics necessary to be a successful director. Even if at the

beginning it will only be a matter of room crowd control ... getting coffee for everybody and their mother, [or] making sure Brad Pitt is on set," the amount of inspiration one can get on set is invaluable. Also, "handling and experiencing more of the behind-the-scenes meetings and deals that happen prior to production" is an aspect that every beginner needs to master, and there's no better way to do so than the possibility to work with well-established people in the industry.

Similarly, Rangel suggests to try to "become a working director personal assistant through the Directors Guild (of America), which is their union." An assistant's responsibilities can be compared to the ones stated above by Barron. Rangel says an assistant would most likely be walking dogs and doing laundry;

but you're doing that because the expectation is that that person is mentoring you into your first job. So, they take you into meetings, they let you read the scripts they're considering, you get to see all the decision-making process; and then when you're ready, they start getting meetings for you. So if you can get that, it's really great because it's the industry walking you right into your first job.

Another way to gain experience or stay employed while trying to figure out the next step is through temporary agencies. Eve Light Honthaner has worked in the field of production management for years for movies like *Titanic* and *Just Married*, and teaches at USC's Summer Program. Her *Hollywood Drive: What it Takes to Break in, Hang in, & Make it in the Entertainment Industry*, published by Elsevier in 2005, is a manual to prepare and inform anyone who is interesting in working in any field in the movie industry. She has a whole section dedicated to Temp Agencies that hire people for short periods of time and look for "receptionists, assistants, executive assistants and in technical, creative, accounting, and legal positions" (131). Most of these agencies are located in LA, and she claims that they sustained her in periods when she was in between jobs (131). Another advantage of working in these agencies is that they offer opportunities for networking and making yourself known. Some of the names of the companies are Comar Agency, Force One Entertainment, Adecco (Universal Studios), Aquent (Disney), and Spherion (*Warner Brothers*) (134-135). Even in this situation, the aspiring director has to be able to get out there and stand out even in a non-creative or non-ideal situation, because you can never know who's around you. A positive attitude and strong work ethics are strongly recommended by Honthaner to make a good impression and possibly get noticed by the right people.

#### *Duplass Brothers Vs Warner Brothers*

The regular audience goes to see studio movies (by Universal and Warner Bros, for instance) in theaters, but there are a lot of filmmakers who work outside of the studio system. They are called independent filmmakers, and their movies are often referred to as "indies." According to John Rangel, the main difference between the two is this:

In the studio world, more times than not, what happens is that somebody else is producing a project, and they hire you to direct it. So mostly, your content isn't stuff that you're generating, it's something that somebody else is generating, and then you're hired like an employee. Whereas, outside the studio system, it's the opposite. You're the one generating the concept, either you wrote it yourself, or you have a writing partner, or you know somebody with a great script and you work with them, and you go and find the finances you need to make it.

Due to budget restrictions, indies remain often unknown to the public because not widely advertised, and are usually less appealing because of scarcity of famous actors and lack of large-scale settings and special effects. Consequently, they can be labeled as bad films, and audiences miss out on them, as they don't understand that they simply belong to a different category of filmmaking. Also, indies offer a great breakthrough opportunities to aspiring filmmakers, who can prove their talent thanks to this platform.

In her article for *Time*, "How A Pair Of Fraternal Filmmakers Perfected Low-Budget Success," Eliana Dockterman presents the story of the Duplass brothers. After losing all their savings on a film that turned out to be a failure, their next project, a "seven-minute short *This Is John ...*[m]ade for \$3,...was accepted at the 2003 Sundance Film Festival" (76), thanks to which they started their break into the industry, as it was their first work accepted at a festival. Mark and Jay, the two brothers, started off as independent filmmakers, and still don't consider themselves to be part of the big studio system. Dockterman points out that "[e]ven now, their films rarely cost more than \$1 million, but they maintain creative control of what they make" (77). They prefer turning down profitable offers to preserve their integrity as filmmakers, and still manage to be successful. They have not reached international fame, but Mark is able to proudly say, "Quentin Tarantino -*Tarantino!*- comes up to us at a party and for 30 minutes he is telling us why he thinks that our movies are great" (75). That is a major achievement for someone who started by making movies with nothing, and still presents movies at festivals filmed with an iPhone 5s, like in the case of their successful feature film *Tangerine* (77).

By not compromising their vision as storytellers, Mark and Jay Duplass managed to climb their way up to the film industry, gaining the respect of famous directors and actors. They have also produced two series for HBO, *Togetherness* and *Animals*, which star comedians like Aziz Ansari. Their story is the demonstration that independent filmmakers can achieve a relative success, and that Hollywood can bring greater fame but also puts restrictions on the creative process of a director. The two brothers are an example to young aspiring directors who will most likely find a hard time to get into the business at first, but who can still make their way through this tough industry. They are also the real-life example that sometimes you need to fall and make mistakes to learn at your own expense what works on the screen and what doesn't.

#### *Are You a Scorsese or a Tarantino?*

As claimed by *The Hollywood Reporter* in the article "The Top 25 Film Schools in the United States 2014" written by Tim Appelo, most of the best Film schools are located in Los Angeles. Among them, University of Southern California, Chapman University, University of California Los Angeles, and the California Institute of Arts. Second only to USC is New York University, which has Martin Scorsese among its notable alumni. However, other well-renowned directors such as Quentin Tarantino have no educational background. Which way is best then? Here's Rangel's opinion on the matter:

Film school gets you two things automatically. One thing that it gets you is a network of people that are going to be in the industry. That's invaluable. That's a wonderful thing. The other thing that it gets you is very, very safe opportunities to make really s\*\*tty movies, and you need that! You need the opportunity to make bad movies, to frame terrible shots, and have terrible dialogue. It's no different than someone who paint, who really paints. You gotta draw your stick figures

before you can have your masterpiece. Film school gets you to do that where nobody's money is at risk. The hard part is that your money is at risk, because you are paying \$30'000 a year to go to a film school, which is way too much.

As John Rangel suggests, there are pros and cons to this path. A college education offers the basis to be more prepared once out in the real world, and the possibility to meet people from the industry as well. However, there is no guarantee that after graduating it will be 99% easier to get to your personal goal, especially financially. According to Appelo's article, what is certain is that the top schools in the nation cost almost \$50,000, and that is something to take in consideration when deciding a career path.

Another big aspect of film schools is the admission requirements. In order to be accepted by the top programs, the applicant must submit a creative portfolio and other samples depending on the university along with a regular submission. According to its website, USC requires a Cinematic Arts Personal Statement in which they look for "a sense of you as a unique individual and how your distinctive experiences, characteristics, background, values and/or views of the world have shaped who you are and what you want to say as a creative filmmaker[.]... the kind of stories you want to tell"; a Writing Sample among their 3 choices; a Visual Sample of the student's choice between video or photo; a creative portfolio; and a letter of recommendation. NYU Tisch's website asks for similar requirements: "a one-page resume that highlights creative work accomplished, activities and/or relevant employment;" a leadership and collaboration anecdote; a personal story that "[d]escribe[s] an event in your life and how it changed you or someone close to you;" a writing sample where the student discusses personal artistic influence; and creative submission of choice among a video, set of pictures that tell a story, or photos/drawings/paintings/sculptures. These requirements automatically exclude anyone who is not at least familiar with cinematography, making it harder to get started if you don't have the chance to explore this field beforehand. However, this selection propels the aspiring director into the competitiveness of the real world and automatically eliminates those who don't want to work so hard for an application, ergo those not cut out for this field.

Nonetheless, film school is not the only path available to someone interested in film-related careers. John Rangel suggests that:

If you don't go to film school, then it's really a matter on how to generate those things on your own. How do you find opportunities to make your stick figures and find people to do it with? How do you build a network of people who are going to be in the industry?... We had a woman who came here and took one class with us, she took a pre-production class, and now she's producing movies in Chicago that play at major festivals all over the country, and it's mainly because she wanted it. She'd eat through a door to get an opportunity to make a movie. When she came to us, she didn't just take a class. She was asking everybody a thousand questions, she was meeting everybody, and she made friends with her teacher. Her teacher then asked her to be her personal assistant because she was such a hard worker, and she did it. And when she was her personal assistant on set, she wasn't just her personal assistant. She was asking her questions, she was helping her with stuff, she was anticipating. That got the attention of other people who offered her to work with them, and now she's producing major series and films.... In the end, it's really a matter on how you wanna go about that. And it really depends. I've had

students take one class and do nothing else. Then there's Jacki who's producing great stuff after one class. Or, I've had students transfer to Columbia, pay 70 grand and do nothing with it.

The student's personality just described is exactly what Honthaner suggests in her book. And this does not only apply to people who choose to skip film school. Anyone who is starting out and trying to break through must dedicate their time to whatever it is they're doing. Being quick, attentive, and able to anticipate needs are qualities that will make a difference between being highly considered by other people or making yourself a bad reputation, as opposed to stating which film school you went to.

Another argument that Rangel brought up and is worthwhile reflecting upon is location. Being in the right place is a key factor, and there aren't many cities that offer a lot of opportunities especially if the aspiring director is aiming at studio careers. He suggests that:

[O]n the studio level, it really, really helps you to be in Los Angeles sooner rather than later. Perhaps even New York, but I'd say more Los Angeles. Because when you go to Los Angeles, whether you went to film school or not, there's a thousand people your age, exactly like you, and the difference is that they know people and you don't. So, they get jobs because their friends recommend them, that's the hard part. At the same time, you don't go there until money says it's okay. Either you have a bunch of savings, or there's a job waiting for you.

### ***Be One in a Million***

Competition is one of the biggest obstacles when trying to enter the entertainment industry, but as Rangel says, "[P]eople who do films for a job, find that to be fuel, and not a smothering blanket that stops you from breathing. It's so, so hard though to think about it that way. Especially when you see someone going so far, and you don't like their stuff. What you have to remember is why you're making movies in first place." Surprisingly, he comes to this conclusion after seeing how even famous directors who have job security still look around and say, "How do I have what he has?" Competitiveness then becomes a common characteristic in filmmakers, possibly due to the dynamics of the industry. In fact, ever since the beginning of a film career you are constantly measuring yourself with others and being compared with them. There should be no surprise if you find yourself being competitive even after establishing your career.

Being in such a competitive environment requires a lot of confidence, willpower, determination, but most of all, being unique. As Rangel said, there are thousands of people with the same hopes and dreams moving to LA every year. If connections play a huge role in building a career, personality is just as important, if not more, since it enhances your chances to make a statement and being liked by people. In an interesting section of her book, Honthaner collects a variety of working professionals' thoughts on what they look for when interviewing possible employees (189-193). The words "intelligence," "passion," "creativity," "reliability," and "enthusiasm" often appear among the credentials preferred. Someone also claims that they "couldn't care less about experience" (190). The one answer that really struck me is: "I look for the 'spark,' then at a person's body language and presentation" (190). There are no skills mentioned, nor creativity or recommendations. Veterans in this business are surrounded by people at all times, and they constantly look for someone new and special, and they can easily

detect that "spark." You either click with them, or you don't. And when you don't, it is up to you to move on and find the person who will see that something in you.

Another thing that Honthaner suggests for interviews and meetings is to be prepared and, as she says, "do your homework" (188). She highly recommends being informed about the people you're going to meet and their projects and companies (188). This doesn't only show how dedicated you are in making a good impression, but also that you care about being hired by them specifically. Another good way to be informed about the industry is keeping track of other directors' work. John Rangel suggested few journals that he believes to be necessary for filmmakers. He suggests the magazine *Film Comment*, since it deals with criticism, and he claims that as a director "[y]ou have to understand what it is that's being received" by the audience. Another thing he suggests is the *Indiwire* website, which:

[D]oes a great job in merging independent, studio film and TV all in one place from the perspective of people who make films. They have resources on how a specific director does a certain shots, a cinematographer creates some kind of colors, and it doesn't matter if it's a tiny movie or a giant movie, it's about craft. Then, it's also on how movies are selling them.

Especially when it's finally time to make your own movies, being unique means being able to convey a message and a story in a way that has never been told before. Rangel says that you do that by making "the things you really wanna make. And...that boils down to a voice: 'What is it that I have to say? What is it that I have to add?' Because somebody is making *Ironman 3*, somebody else is making *The Girls on Liberty Street*; don't make another one of those. What can you add to them?" Being a movie director seems to be a long, never-ending journey of finding and proving yourself, your way, and your voice. Nobody said it was going to be easy, but as details emerge, it all comes down to how a person perceives the world, and how well that vision is presented back to it.

### *Cinderella's Slipper*

It seems to me that finding your own vision resembles the quest of Prince Charming when trying to find Cinderella after the ball. There were many girls who claimed to be "the right one," but it was always a failure time after time. It was only when the last bit of hope was almost gone that Cinderella showed up. It took her a lot of courage to ask to try that slipper on, but once they saw that she was the girl from the ball, there was nothing and no one that could stop her. This is how I see myself becoming a filmmaker. There will be a lot of hard times, living with my evil step sisters and mother, but with the help of a fairy and my own bit of confidence, I am sure I will make it happen.

Lady Tremaine, Anastasia and Drizella will come in all shapes and forms. Being a woman, I might encounter people who won't even consider me, or I might see male directors less deserving getting ahead of me. Knowing myself, I will probably play along with them, second guessing my choices. In his interview, John Rangel confesses that one of his challenges is doubting his instincts, and honestly, it makes me feel a little better to see that I am not the only one. However, he advises, "Trust your gut. If your gut says: 'I'm a filmmaker,' go do it," there's no second guessing that, just like there should be no second guessing your vision, which will only make you take steps back.

My Abracadabra would be finding someone who believes in me and my vision. Actually, thinking about it, it is not left to fate; I'll be the one casting the spell. No one believes in you unless you demonstrate your talent and your passion. Regarding this, Rangel says:

Your career is entirely in your hands. There's no magic to this. The people who make movies, they make them because they made it happen. Nobody gifted it to them, they earned it. Just as the people who aren't making movies earned that exact same position. And that doesn't make them bad people, but they can't blame anybody else for it, and I really truly believe that. If you buy into that, it gets a lot easier because you realize that if you really bust your butt there's nobody who can stop you.

Despite everything, there is one thing that I know for sure no one can take away from me. When talking to him about whether or not college is the best pathway to take, one thing that he said really hit me. He said: "To me, the thing Tarantino and Scorsese have in common, other than genius, is desire. They wanted it more than anybody. They did anything to make the movies. And that's the common thing among all filmmakers you've heard of. They all just wanted it so badly." And although it may seem an obvious statement, it made me realize one thing: I already have something in common with the people I admire.

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