



EDGAR WRIGHT

FILMMAKING

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Whether you are 15 or 45,
there is no wrong time
to start. The only wrong
thing to do is never start...

B B C
MAESTRO

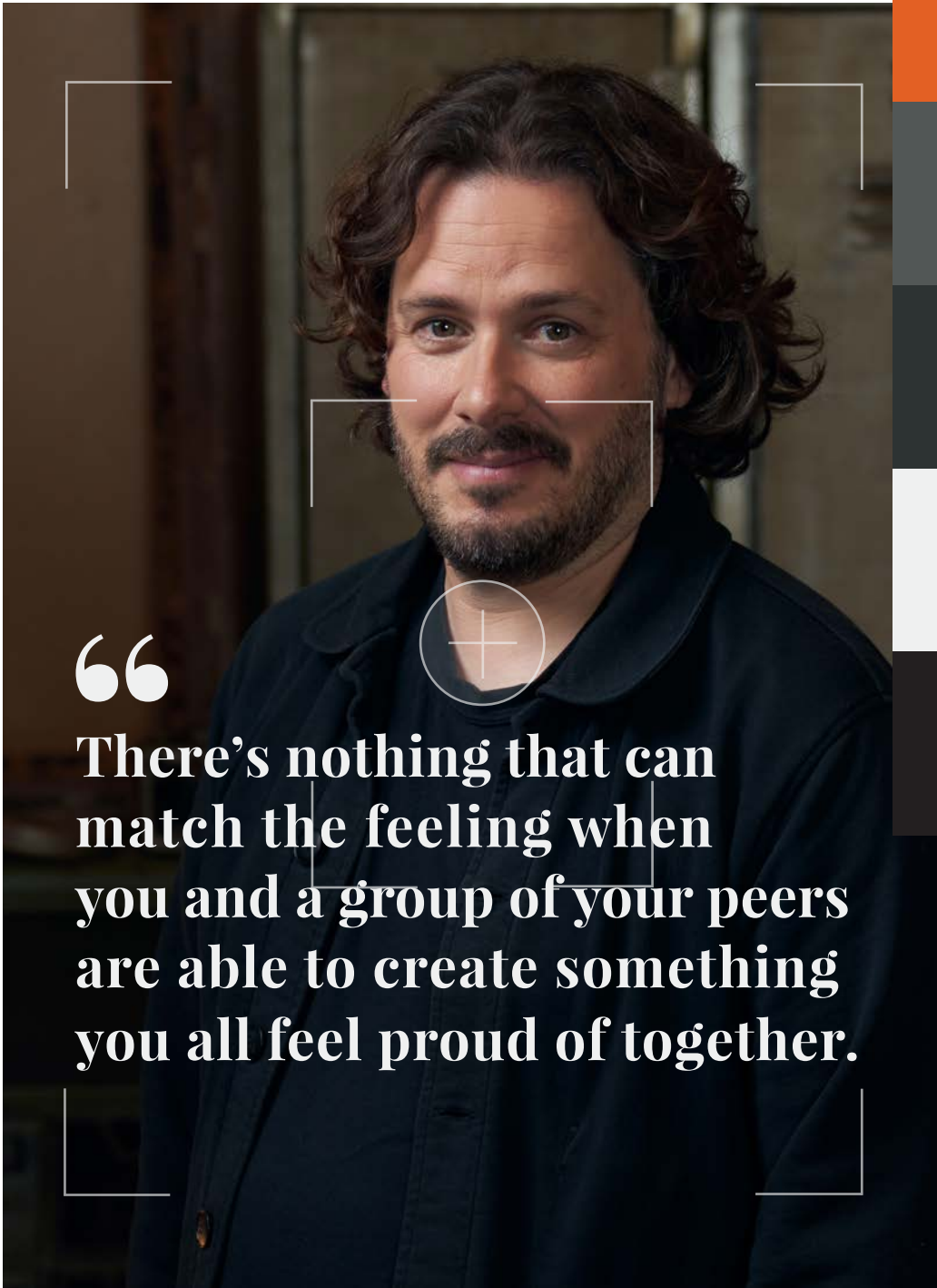
COURSE NOTES 3.2

The Lessons



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A portrait of Edgar Wright, a man with dark, wavy hair and a beard, wearing a dark jacket. The image is framed with white L-shaped corner brackets at the top-left, top-right, and bottom-right. A white circle with a crosshair is centered over his chest.

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There's nothing that can match the feeling when you and a group of your peers are able to create something you all feel proud of together.

01. Introduction

HELLO, I'M EDGAR WRIGHT

I'm the writer/director of such films as *Shaun of the Dead*, *Hot Fuzz*, *The World's End*, *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*, *Baby Driver*, *Last Night in Soho*, and *The Sparks Brothers*. And today I'm here to teach you about the process of filmmaking.

When I started my journey to becoming a filmmaker, it began with making low budget short films with my friends during the school year and summer months. And it still surprises me to this day that this was a legitimate first step to me becoming a studio-backed filmmaker. It just goes to show you, anyone can be a filmmaker. And though the journey to becoming one is difficult, it is far from impossible.

In doing this filmmaking course, I hope I am able to impart some wisdom along with a few helpful tools that will aid in your first steps to becoming the filmmaker you know you can be.

I also hope that these lessons teach you a genuinely unique perspective on the art of filmmaking. Unique, not because my methods are some sort of be-all-end-all process. Unique – rather – because my methods, like every other filmmaker's, are distinct for my own vision. That's the amazing thing about filmmaking. Everyone who works in the craft is able to define the art form on their own terms. That's why there are so many different films that have been created over the brilliant – but brief – history of the medium.

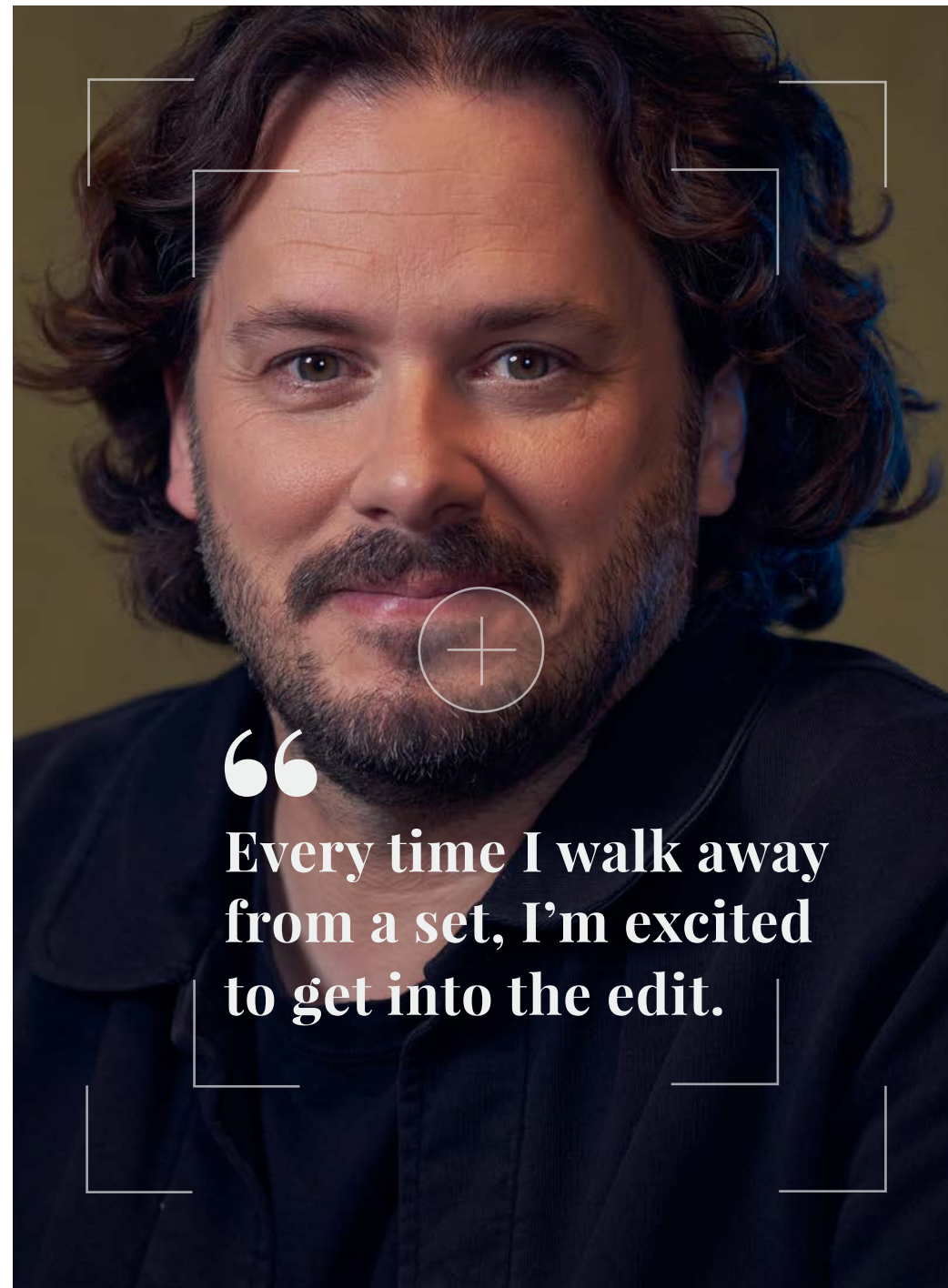


So as you dive into my **BBC Maestro** course, I encourage you to view my process as one of a thousand ways you could approach making a film. There truly is no right or wrong way to shoot a movie, so long as you stay true to your own vision and integrity. If you construct a film in the manner you know in your gut to be the way your movie has to be made, you will create a product you will no doubt be incredibly proud of and one that audiences will hopefully adore just as much as you.

Now, at the same time, I don't want you to think I'm going to be able to reveal some hidden secret of how to get a feature film fully made. Filmmaking is tough. That's the truth. It's never easy, and I can promise you that every filmmaker from the big action directors to the first-time indie darlings approach each film they make with a daunting sense of uncertainty. Nobody ever walks onto day one of a shoot and thinks to themselves, 'I know exactly how this will all play out.' Issues will arise daily and unexpected challenges will undoubtedly come your way, but your resilience and ability to press forward on even the most difficult of days will prove your worth as a filmmaker.

So, with that in mind, please join me as we dive into the incredible world of filmmaking.

Edgar Wright



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Every time I walk away
from a set, I'm excited
to get into the edit.”

02. A Brief History Of Film

I firmly believe that one of the most important aspects of being a filmmaker is knowing the history of cinema, meaning where the art form began and how it has progressed as a medium over the last century.

When you step back in time to see how the early filmmakers approached the craft, you'll quickly realise that they faced possibly the most daunting challenge any director has ever come up against, and that is how to tell a story on film when no precedent for filmmaking existed yet.

Filmmakers today still struggle with the small everyday challenges a film shoot might throw at them: bad weather, equipment malfunctions, a location proving more difficult to stage a scene than initially expected, etc. But none of these even compare to the early days of cinema when the first filmmakers were quite literally inventing how movies were made. Up until that point, stage performance and vaudeville were the two main forms of audience entertainment that took place in a theatre. But as movie-going began to rise in popularity across the globe, filmmakers had to create entirely new concepts such as kinetic editing, special effects, and expressive lighting in order to convey their stories to audiences on celluloid.

The most impressive part about all of this is that the first working filmmakers had to make stories without sound. So this required them to be precise in how they used the tools of the form to create a story the audience could understand with no dialogue or sound effects. And the filmmakers who mastered it, such as Alfred Hitchcock, Charlie Chaplin and Fritz Lang, among many, many others, quickly became popular icons of the era.

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I was very confused at the age of three about where the cinema ended and the film started.

Then, once it became physically possible to record and integrate sound for movies, all these filmmakers were presented with a new challenge. They had to essentially relearn how to make their art as most studios pushed for more sound films (or 'talkies') as their popularity increased among audiences far and wide. Many filmmakers were not able to successfully cross this bridge and ended up being left behind as the medium continued to advance. But those incredibly talented filmmakers like Hitchcock, Chaplin and Lang, who were able to use sound to their advantage, helped pave the way for the next era of cinema.

And this pattern continued throughout the golden era of the medium and still continues to this day, beginning with the advent of colour film, which many filmmakers initially avoided while others chose to fully embrace, all the way through to the invention of widescreen, the shift to on-location shooting, the development of realistic and experimental acting, and the advent of VFX, all tools which presented filmmakers with new challenges to overcome and eventually embrace and perfect.



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I'd assumed wrongly that all directors were born in Hollywood and that Steven Spielberg was dropped off by a stork at Universal Pictures.

So once you choose to watch, read and learn all about the history of cinema, you'll have a better understanding of how the medium works and how the most talented filmmakers were able to overcome challenges in order to hone their skill and master the art form on their own terms.



EXERCISE

Pick a pair of films by Alfred Hitchcock, one silent and one sound, and watch them both. Compare the ways in which he told his stories visually before and after the tool of sound existed. Note any similarities or differences that might stand out to you. If you'd like to do a deeper dive into this, do the same with two films by Charlie Chaplin and two films by Fritz Lang.

03. My Beginnings & Education

The wonderful thing about filmmaking is that, like most art forms, you don't necessarily need to attend a school in order to learn the craft. For some, school might help provide more inspiration and access to tools a burgeoning filmmaker wouldn't normally have. And this might allow them more opportunities to play and experiment with the medium as they develop their style. In this case, that's fantastic. For others, attending film school might be seen as an unnecessary depletion of funds they could instead be spending on themselves by learning while shooting their own films. Similar to what I said earlier, there's no right or wrong path. You just need to focus on what path suits your goals and sensibilities best.

Contrary to what some records might show, I'm actually a film school dropout myself. I originally enrolled at the Bournemouth and Poole College of Art and Design where I applied to the film program and was rejected. The faculty suggested that I enrol in a national diploma in audio/visual design, which I did for two years, and then I reapplied to the film program and was once again rejected. So after being twice turned away from what I was dead set on being my dream, I took my destiny into my own hands and decided to shoot a low-budget feature-length film with my friends. Funnily enough, in a way, even though I ended up leaving film school due to my rejection, it was still the motivating force that propelled me to take the risk of making a full-length film in the first place.

One of the main reasons that I wanted to make a film while I was still young and inexperienced, was because I had seen Jonathan Ross interview Sam Raimi on *The Incredibly Strange Film Show*, about the making of *Evil Dead* and *Evil Dead II*. I was astonished by the fact that Sam Raimi had made the first film in that series, before he turned 20 years old, on a budget of less than \$100,000. And in my mind, I thought, if Sam Raimi (or anyone really) could do that, what's stopping me from

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You have to bet on yourself often in this industry, and you have to be confident in talents or have an intense passion for needing to put ideas from your head onto the screen.

doing the same thing? And when I realised the only person holding me back was myself, I got to work and successfully raised money from a local newspaper editor to shoot my first feature film, *A Fistful of Fingers*.

And while I wouldn't call *A Fistful of Fingers* a must-see film, it was a very essential part of my development as a filmmaker and it led to my first TV directing gigs which would, in turn, lead to me writing and directing *Shaun of the Dead*. But again, that's not to say my path would have been the correct one for everyone trying to be a director. You might need more time to mess around behind a camera and build your confidence before you try to tackle an ambitious feature. And that's completely fine. There's no race to the finish line with filmmaking. Hone your craft in whatever amount of time it takes you, and you'll make your dreams a reality eventually.



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Take risks, and make projects
as often as you can, even if
they’re small, silly shorts.”

Also, even if you can’t afford film school, remember there are many alternative ways to learn about filmmaking. On top of consuming the movies you love, look out for books that focus on specific writers and directors, or even ones that interview them. Books like Syd Field’s *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting* and Blake Snyder’s *Save the Cat!* are incredibly helpful resources that can guide you through learning the building blocks of structure and pacing, even though they won’t teach you the actual art of writing. I also think director’s commentaries on DVDs aren’t appreciated in the way they should be. Some commentaries are practically small seminars on filmmaking that can be incredibly valuable to listen to. So go out there and learn about filmmaking in whatever way will best help you get to your goal.



EXERCISE

Find a copy of one of your favourite movies that has a director’s commentary on it. Listen to the filmmaker discuss their process and how they made the film. If you need a recommendation, Robert Rodriguez’s commentary on *El Mariachi* is a particularly great one, especially if you want to hear how someone shot a feature on an incredibly low budget. You can also go on YouTube to watch Robert Rodriguez’s *10 Minute Film School* where he breaks down his filmmaking technique and how to get maximum bang for your buck.

04. Advice To Aspiring Filmmakers

It's important to understand and acknowledge that you are allowed to take your time as you're developing your craft and prepping to get your first film made. Remember: it is NOT a race! Nobody is looking at you and thinking, 'They're certainly taking a long time to get their debut feature off the ground.'

The other thing you need to realise before you start the journey to being a filmmaker is that this field is not an easy one to get into. I'm not trying to dissuade you, but it's vital to understand that there are literally thousands of other aspiring directors out there, and you will likely see a lot of people reach success before you do. So you have to be resilient. You have to really want it. And so long as you do and you work hard and you are always honing your skills in whatever way you can, you'll eventually get to where you want to be. Just because some filmmakers are lucky enough to direct a feature in their early 20s doesn't mean you're behind if you take longer.

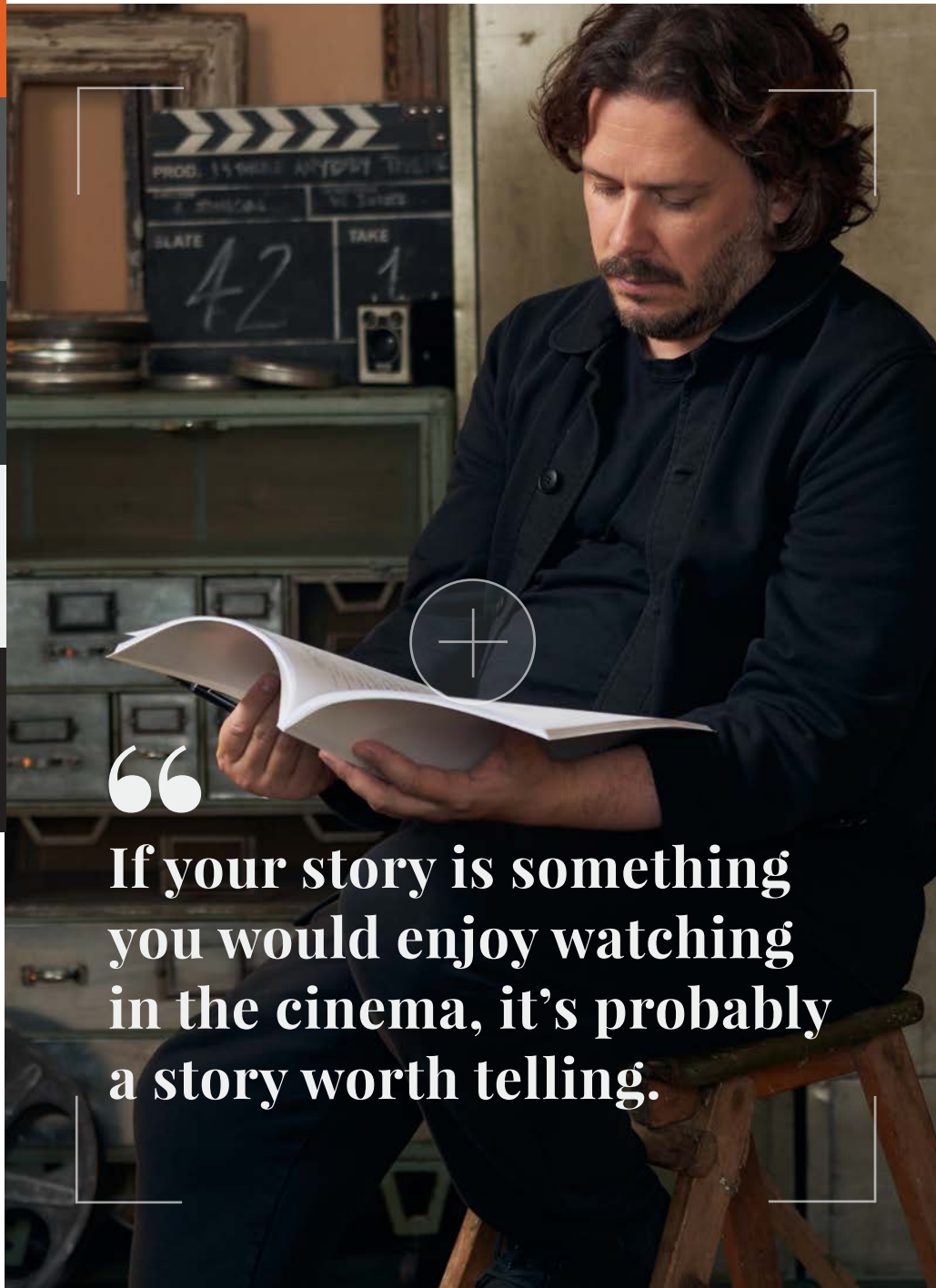
MENTAL PREPARATION

One other aspect of filmmaking that I think people fail to understand until they work on their first set is that shooting a film is an incredibly difficult and gruelling process to go through. It can take a lot out of you physically, emotionally and mentally, and you need to be prepared for that. You will spend months meticulously prepping your film in order to make sure it's the best product it can possibly be. Then you will spend multiple months filming. And then even more months editing. Back in the early days of the Hollywood studio system, some filmmakers would knock out 2 to 3 films a year. Now it takes 2 to 3 years just to make a single film! So be prepared for a long, drawn-out process, but one that will be incredibly rewarding once you reach the finish line.

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Make the films that you
want to make, not the films
that you think you ought
to make.

DON'T REACH BEYOND YOUR GRASP

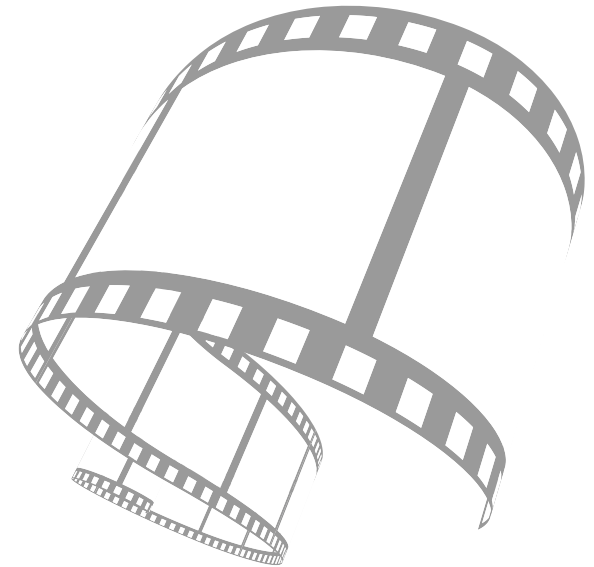
When you're approaching the prospect of making your first film, it's vital to be realistic about what you can achieve with your budget. If you're shooting something for cheap (if it's your first film it almost certainly will be), be sure you're working within your limits, not against them. Don't try to focus on shots and stunts that will deplete your budget quickly. You want to make sure your film works from beginning to end, not just across a few segments. That doesn't mean you can't be punchy and stylistic. Think of Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs*. That movie does so much with so few locations and actors. And it's one of the most iconic debut films of all time. A far cry from the budget and scope of another iconic debut, *Citizen Kane*, but just as impressionable in a completely different way. So make a film you know you can achieve within your means while also taking creative risks that will make your film stand out from the herd.



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If your story is something
you would enjoy watching
in the cinema, it's probably
a story worth telling.”

EXERCISE

Watch a notable, low budget debut film and notice how the filmmaker works around their monetary limitations to make creative choices that help give the film a distinguished look and feel. If you need recommendations, Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs*, George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*, Kevin Smith's *Clerks*, John Carpenter's *Dark Star* and Christopher Nolan's *Following* are all excellent watches in this regard.



05. Writing To Direct

While I am incredibly proud of my work as a writer, when I was initially starting out I never thought that writing was going to be something I would have to master in addition to directing. I had erroneously assumed that great scripts would always come my way. But over the course of my career, I've discovered that is not the case. While I was working on *Spaced*, both Simon Pegg and I were itching to make a movie. But it quickly became apparent that if we wanted to find a project we were both satisfied with and driven to make, we would have to write it on our own. And thus, I became a writer/director rather than just a director.

WORKING AS A WRITER/DIRECTOR

The good thing about doubling as a writer/director is that it makes the prospect of you directing the movie more appealing because you're able to convey through the script exactly how you intend to shoot the film. In short: you're a better sell both from a producing standpoint as well as from a storytelling standpoint. If you're writing and directing, you are an entire package.

That's not to say when you're writing and directing that the process becomes easier. If anything, it draws the process out further because you have to write the script before going into production. And however long it takes you to write and perfect the script will be step one of a multi-step process in getting your film made. If you're similar to me, you'll have some days where you can't get anything onto the page. You'll stare at a blank screen for hours, pushing yourself to write something, but nothing will come out. Those days can be mentally difficult to get through. If I ever catch myself procrastinating, I try to find a way to be 'creatively' procrastinating. Perhaps by watching movies or reading books and articles that are tangentially related to the project I'm working on. Anything that might help me stay on track even if I've hit some writer's block for the day.

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Find stories and ideas that will inspire you in your film or play.

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But on my good days where the words flow from my pen or keyboard like magic, I always have to remind myself that I'm writing a screenplay and not a different form of literature. What I mean by that is, stay focused on the fact that you're writing a film and that you need to convey to the reader what this film will look like. Don't act as though you're writing a novel and start to get heavy on the prose. Keep your stage directions light and efficient. Don't over-describe your settings and characters and actions. Remember that many producers and agents are reading hundreds of scripts every month. They want to be able to move through material quickly. So a tight script is always the goal you should be striving towards. If you can't really grasp what this looks like, it's always helpful to read amazing scripts that already exist, especially when trying to understand how to convey action in as few words as possible. The scripts of Walter Hill who wrote *Alien*, *The Driver*, and *The Warriors*, among many other great films, is the perfect starting point in learning how to write action well.

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SCREENPLAY ORIGINS

Coming up with ideas for screenplays can be difficult. I find it's sometimes easier to start small and work towards formulating a full story. Ideas will often come to me when I begin picturing a specific scene in my head that eventually morphs into the premise for an entire movie. This might happen in days, but sometimes it takes years. The idea for *Shaun of the Dead* came to me during a time in which I was playing way too much of the video game *Resident Evil 3*. When I was walking to the corner shop one weekend after playing the game nearly non-stop for a period of 72 hours, I began to question what would happen if I was suddenly thrust into the middle of a zombie apocalypse right then and there. And that was all it took for the idea to form. Meanwhile, *Baby Driver* took me two decades to crystallise. I began with the image of a car chase set to *Bellbottoms* by the Jon Spencer Blues Explosion and I would continue to slowly develop this idea over the next 20 years. I even did a 'dry run' for the opening scene of the movie by shooting a music video of my idea for the band Mint Royale in 2002, nearly 15 years before the final film came out.

I want to be clear by saying that I've never started a script without an idea. I've always had an inkling of what I will be writing whenever I start putting words on a page. I'm not sure I'd ever be able to force an idea out through sheer will. I have to know what direction I'm heading in, especially because I always need to consider how long the writing process will take. There's no point wasting time attempting to come up with an idea and spending days, weeks and months putting pressure on myself to write a script if I have no idea what it is I want to write about or where the story is going.

After you've finally completed a screenplay, don't be afraid to make cuts and lose whole characters and scenes if you realise they don't belong. You should always be asking yourself if every single word and punctuation mark belongs in a script. Sometimes this means you might need to cut down or delete entire sequences in order to make sure the script is as strong as it can possibly be. Don't leave any fat in your screenplays. If it can be cut, cut it.

WRITING WITH CONFIDENCE

Now, just because I've written a number of screenplays both by myself and with co-writers doesn't mean that I'm someone who feels as though every time I finish a script I am content with my work. I'm constantly looking for validation to help motivate me to continue through the difficult writing phase. And there's nothing wrong with that. Getting opinions from your friends and family is one of the most essential parts of writing a script. If you are comfortable sharing your work with people whom you trust, you'll be able to better understand what's working and what might need more attention as you continue to hone and edit your script.

TABLE READS

Another incredibly helpful part of the writing process is getting the script on its feet and hearing your words out loud through a table read. There's always a specific way you think a script sounds when you're saying the lines to yourself in your head. But when you're able to get other actors, or even just friends and family members, to read the lines out loud, you'll make completely new discoveries about which parts of the script are succeeding and which parts might need to be readdressed. This is even more essential if your script is a comedy. Hearing the comedic timing and rhythm of the script out loud will open your eyes to jokes that fall flat, which can be tough to deal with. But it's far better to come to this realisation when the script is still being tinkered with and fix it before you start filming.



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Collaborating with other writers is always an amazing experience.

SOLO WRITING VS. WORKING WITH A CO-WRITER

I always find that having a partner by your side during the writing phase helps make the process a lot easier. First, it allows you to have someone to help you get through any writer's block you hit. And on the days where you get stuck, your co-writer can become a true lifesaver. The other great thing a co-writer provides is a different perspective. By having twice the amount of worldviews and lived experiences, you'll both be able to bring more to the table. There will be twice the amount of opportunities to explore character traits and themes than you'd likely be able to achieve on your own. And while there are certainly many brilliant writers out there who have never written with a partner before, it's important to understand that having a co-writer does not diminish the process. There's only so much you can achieve on your own. Don't be afraid to open the door to a great collaborator.

One of the biggest challenges of writing solo is setting deadlines for yourself. You are in control of your own schedule when you're working on a screenplay without a partner, and if you're not writing with an end date in mind, time can slip away from you quite easily. So it's essential to give yourself a regimented calendar or set of goals so you're always working towards a tangible finish line.

GETTING EYES ON YOUR SCREENPLAY

Similar to what I said earlier about making your debut feature as punchy and stylistic as possible, the same rules apply when you're trying to get your screenplay in front of people. You always want to be able to stand out from all the other aspiring screenwriters out there. So it's helpful to write a story that, even if it's inspired by other films, has a unique edge to it. Or whose prose is written in a way that feels fresh compared to the usual formats. Another helpful way to get eyes on your screenplay is to have a proof of concept short or even a scene or trailer that you film as a sample to help convey your vision for the script. Damien Chazelle famously did this for *Whiplash*. He shot a short sequence from the film which helped persuade investors to give him money for the full feature, and of course the movie later went on to win multiple Oscars.



EXERCISE

Take a script you've written, whether it's a short or a feature, and set up a table read to hear the material on its feet. Use friends and family members to help if you don't have any actors available. Make edits on your script based on what hearing the words out loud changes for you.

o6. Writing: The Process

THE JOYS (AND WOES) OF WRITING

While the days in which you get a lot of great writing done can feel extremely fulfilling, the days in which you're completely lost in what you're trying to get on the page can be incredibly discouraging. So if you often feel as though you've had some difficult days where you don't hit your goals or you start to question the quality of your own writing, don't worry. I feel the same way all the time.

The benefit of writing, though, is that unlike when you're filming shorts and features, you don't need a budget in order to hone your craft. You can write on your own time with your own tools. Whether that's with a pen and paper, a laptop and a keyboard, a typewriter, whatever it is you need to get your ideas out, you always have the ability to work on your own writing.

That said, don't feel as though you need to rush your writing process, similar to how I said you shouldn't feel the need to race to make your debut film. Obviously, you want to set yourself deadlines, but if an idea isn't fully formulated yet don't force it out and make your script anything less than great. Let the idea grow and develop until it absolutely has to be written. It took me twenty years to get *Baby Driver* from my head to the screen. Clearly, I was in no rush. And you shouldn't be either!



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If writing was easy,
everyone would have
a fully produced film.

DEVELOPING CHARACTERS AND THEME

When I'm coming up with ideas for my movies, the characters and themes almost always come to me together as a package. With *Shaun of the Dead*, the idea wasn't just about finding out who Shaun is as a character in the larger world. For me, he can't exist outside of the zombie apocalypse. The plot of the film informs and motivates his character. It's about who Shaun is – a waster always hungover on the weekends – and how he comes face to face with a serious issue and realises he needs to turn his life around. With *Hot Fuzz* it was about taking the over-achieving Nicholas Angel and placing him out of his element in the slow, boring nothingness that is rural England and seeing how he pushes back and adapts (or doesn't adapt) to a new environment.

Baby Driver was the only real situation in which I came up with a character first and then developed the plot and themes later. But that was a rare case for me. This was mostly because I came up with the first scene of the film in my head and was focused on developing that as an idea before I started asking myself who is this driver and what does he want out of life? Once I began to put those questions to myself and fill the answers in, the rest quickly fell into place.

WORKING AROUND WRITER'S BLOCK

Normally, I find that if I ever hit a block when developing a character or story, it's usually because I haven't fully cracked where the character or plot is heading. Every scene always needs to be a progression of the story or a progression of the character. If you find you have scenes that don't do either, rewrite them or lose them. The tighter the script is, the easier it'll be for you to see what works and what doesn't work. Like I said before, trim away any and all fat that you can.

THE WRITING PROCESS

There is no one way to write a script, just like there's no one way to direct a movie. Ultimately, your process will be whatever allows you to be as efficient and strong with your writing as possible. Personally, I've had a few different writing processes across my scripts. The most common way I write is that I block out the entire script in some kind of outline format to map out the arc of the story and then later fill in the blanks with more detail and prose. Without an outline giving me direction, I would feel incredibly lost.

Another great system, which you can find online, is using forty index cards to map out the entire script. You basically break the script down into its three-act structure by assigning ten index cards to the first act, twenty to the second act, and ten to the third act, and you write all the significant plot points on each card to get a sense of the full arc. There's also a really helpful tool I use known as a 'Beat Sheet' which is a concept whose origin derives from Blake Snyder's book *Save the Cat!* You take the total page count of your screenplay and it roughly tells you where each beat should hit by page number. Though this is not an exact science, it can be incredibly useful when you're trying to tighten your material and get it into a properly finished form.

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Thomas Edison said,
*“Genius is 1% inspiration
and 99% perspiration...”*

For me,
writing is 1% inspiration
and 99% procrastination.

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EXERCISE

The next time you're outlining an idea, break your plot down using the index card method. See if you have too many or too few plot beats and try to add or trim as needed.

07. Genre

I'm a big proponent of genre, which is a term used to distinguish a group of artworks that has similar subjects, themes, characters and story traits. Now the interesting thing is that when I was starting my career as a filmmaker, a lot of people looked down on genre with a pretentious air about them. As if working in genre film was somehow an insult to 'true artists'. And this never really made sense to me. Especially when you consider how filmmakers like David Cronenberg almost always exclusively worked in a genre like horror and mastered it time and again, while other greats such as Stanley Kubrick and William Friedkin would weave in and out of different genres with tremendous mastery.

It's funny to think certain people ever had a problem with genre filmmaking because if you turn back the clock to the 1940s and 1950s, most filmmakers at the time were working in genre movies. People just weren't classifying the form as including genre yet. If you take a great filmmaker like Howard Hawks for example, most of the films he made dipped into one genre or another. And while he wasn't given much due at the time, now he's considered one of the great filmmakers of the era.

What appeals to me the most about genre is that it allows filmmakers to have fun with the story conventions they're using. *Shaun of the Dead* gave me the freedom to take a zombie film and transform it into a romantic comedy. It gave me the opportunity to make a movie unique to my own vision as well as one that felt distinctive to the genre as a whole. So while I was obviously paying homage to the conventions you'd typically see in zombie films, I also had the ability to tell a story that I felt had never been told before. And nowadays, that's a rare feeling to achieve in filmmaking.

At the end of the day, I don't think there's anything wrong with working in genre for an entire career, just like I don't think there's anything wrong with avoiding genre. Make the films you want to make. Whether you want to be like Alfred Hitchcock, who

“Genre is a classification of art in which a shared group of works have similar elements of style or subject matter.”

focused on thrillers for an entire career, or Stanley Kubrick, who made a completely different genre film with each new project he embarked on, the choice is yours for how you approach (or don't approach) genre filmmaking.



EXERCISE

If you are writing in a particular genre, then why not watch some films from that genre that you either love or that are popular entries. Watch the film and break the story down into the three-act structure, making notes of where act one ends, how act two begins, what the midpoint of the story is (a false triumph or punishing loss), what the elements that lead into act three are, i.e. the rock bottom that precedes the road to resolution.

(NB – before writing the *Shaun Of The Dead* screenplay, myself and Simon did this with *The Birds*, *Straw Dogs*, *An American Werewolf In London*, *Back To The Future* and more. It was very illuminating and helpful.)

o8. Style

A filmmaker's style is the way in which they use all the tools of cinema in order to convey a story to the audience. Through editing, sound, cinematography, performance and every other aspect of filmmaking, a director will define their style by how they weave these elements together. A style might be incredibly flashy, or it could be completely threadbare. It really comes down to each individual choice you make while you're filming your movie.

When I'm asked about my own style, I never know how to analyse my work. To me, my style is simply the way in which my brain registers how I want my movies to look and feel. At some point during my development as a filmmaker, it became clear to me that two of the most essential aspects of storytelling I loved were editing and pacing. And in order to tell my stories in a way that kept both of those elements kinetic in the way I wanted them to, I realised that this requires getting a heavy amount of coverage. And the more I shot and edited my projects together, the more my style came to the front. It was really a matter of learning my style by doing rather than intentionally creating my style. I discovered my style as I filmed, I didn't force it upon myself.

Even though I am lucky enough to direct feature films for major studios, I would never tell you I'm an 'expert' by any means, or that my style has reached its apex. Every time I walk onto a set I feel as though I'm still a student ready to learn more about the art of filmmaking. And that's why all of my movies don't use the exact same style over and over again. I'm always trying to be intentional with my choices. I'm not going to use fast cuts and whip pans in every single scene of my films. I always ask myself, what tools of the form do I need to use in each scene and, even more importantly, "why?"

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My style is an amalgamation of every movie that I've ever loved, that I've then reinterpreted through my own lens.

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Styles have always come
and gone and been played
with since the dawn of cinema.

In this sense, I would argue that my style is always evolving. If I was using the exact same tricks in all of my films, audiences would get tired of me very fast. So I think it's important for filmmakers to always be challenging themselves and questioning the decisions they are making stylistically. In doing so, your style will be refined and your filmmaking will become stronger.

One quick aside: when I was writing *The Adventures of Tintin* with Joe Cornish for Steven Spielberg and Peter Jackson, I asked Spielberg to sign an original *Raiders of the Lost Ark* poster as a gift for Joe's birthday. And not only did he sign one for Joe, but he signed one for me as well. And on my poster he wrote: 'Edgar, we are all Raiders of good ideas.' And that got me thinking about how every filmmaker today has learned their craft, either directly or through the influence of others, from how the silent filmmakers approached the form. Filmmaking is a craft that's passed through generations, and I promise you that every kind of cut, framing, staging, special effect, etc., has already been done in one way or another. So your duty as a filmmaker is to learn from the masters and take the influences that speak to you and interpret them in the way you want to make your films.



EXERCISE

Pick a film you love and watch it front to back with the sound off. Notice how much you are able to follow without any dialogue. Look for any particular stylistic traits you enjoy or that stand out to you. Track how the filmmaker repeats and varies those traits across the film. Ask yourself why they use those particular traits for a scene and why they either repeat or vary these traits in other scenes. My recommendations to watch are Martin Scorsese's *Goodfellas*, Steven Spielberg's *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, Alfonso Cuarón's *Gravity*, and George Miller's *Mad Max: Fury Road*.

09. Storyboards & Animatics

While I never used storyboards in my earlier days working in TV, which was mostly due to lack of time, I've storyboarded every frame of every one of my films since *Shaun of the Dead*. And I, personally, couldn't imagine shooting anything without them. I find it an essential part of the process that helps me to visualise the ideas in my head while also providing me a way to quickly convey to the cast and crew what I'm trying to achieve on each shooting day.

That said, this doesn't mean that storyboards are the right tool for everyone. Robert Altman famously would walk onto his sets with no defined plan and just put the script on its feet with his actors and see what happened. I couldn't imagine ever doing that myself, but for Altman it clearly worked considering his rich and eclectic oeuvre.

REARRANGING THE JIGSAW PUZZLE

The main reason I find storyboards so key to my process is that it allows me to create a visual map of the entire film – similar to how I said I outline my scripts before I write them – so that I know exactly what I'm trying to get for every shot. This way, if any issues arise on set and a specific shot isn't possible to achieve for any number of reasons (the location isn't what we expected, the sun isn't in the right direction, equipment is malfunctioning, etc.) then I can look at the entire map of the scene and readjust and figure out the best alternative shot to get in its place.

Picture the entire film as a jigsaw puzzle. Every single shot you get is a piece of the puzzle and it all has to fit together seamlessly. If one of the puzzle pieces doesn't fit, I have the structure of the other puzzle pieces already in place to inform me of exactly what kind of shape I need the readjusted puzzle piece to fit into. So in that sense, going into each shooting day with a full plan helps put my mind at ease by having storyboards and animatics to help keep everything set to a tight schedule.

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Filmmaking is about finding
a balance. It's about telling
a story and the choices you
make in telling that story.
It's about when to utilise,
say, kinetic editing just as
much as when you don't.

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CREATING & UTILISING STORYBOARDS

During the writing of each of my screenplays, I begin my storyboarding process by scribbling simple doodles in the margins of the printed script as I start to visualise how I want to frame and stage each scene. Later, I'll scribble some more formal doodles down with a clearer sense of what I'm trying to convey and hand them off to a group of storyboard artists, which usually includes my brother Oscar. He and the rest of the storyboard team will then begin to draw and develop them into fully illustrated frames. Those frames eventually become a gigantic binder (or electronic file) of every single frame I intend to shoot in the film.

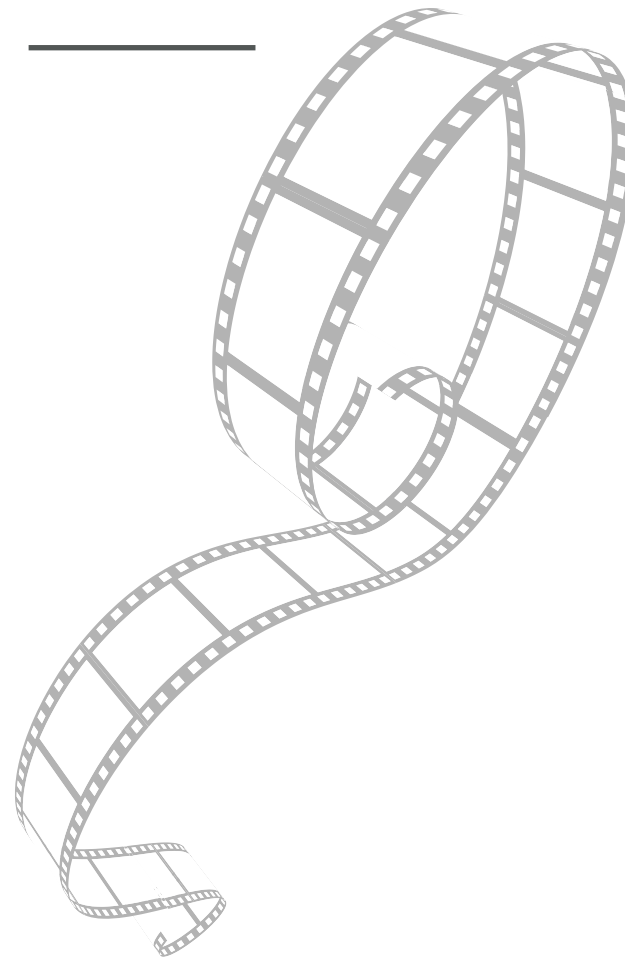
“ Filmmaking is a team effort.”

These final storyboards become my main source of reference for the cast and crew throughout the shoot. It's an easy way for me to pull up images to quickly explain the shots we will need to get for the day, which saves a lot of time and energy on set. I'll even have the storyboards turned into animatics, which are a sort of moving image version of the boards that provide an even clearer sense of how each shot will work together.

I find it's sometimes even helpful to take photos during location scouts of the different places we want to shoot by lining up practice shots as I intend to stage and frame them when the cameras are rolling. Quick visual reference points like these are all part of my preparation in the lead up to a shoot. Without these tools at my disposal, my shoots would become much more drawn out and difficult to navigate.

EXERCISE

The next time you write a script, try drawing some simple sketches of what you picture a scene to look like in your head. See if it helps inspire creativity as you map out a plan for what the visual structure of a scene might look like.



10. Getting Your Film Made

One of the many ways you can go about honing your skills in the lead-up to getting your feature film made is by making short films. It's so rare that a first-time filmmaker with no credentials gets a feature made through funding other than their own. So an important step to getting past this issue is making sure you have work to show as proof of your talent behind the camera.

When I was younger, I was always making short films with my friends. I even had a teacher at school who once told me my grades were suffering because of how much time I spent focusing on my shorts instead of my schoolwork. Even if I might have been slacking a bit at school, those shorts taught me so much as I was just beginning to get an idea of the stories I wanted to tell, as well as what my sense of style was.

Just like when you're teaching yourself a musical instrument, it always helps to start small with learning chords and simple tunes before you begin to tackle a larger and more difficult piece of music. Apply the same methodology to film. By starting with short films, you'll build your confidence up while also developing your skills through the process.

FINDING COLLABORATORS

One of the key ways of getting a film made is by finding a producer who wants to support you. But it's not as easy as just handing your script to a producer and asking them to fund it. You need to build relationships over time. And sometimes the best relationships happen organically. I met my lifelong producer, Nira Park, on the set of the series *Spaced*. But up until that point, even though I had worked on a number of other TV shows where I made a lot of lasting relationships with cast members who would recur throughout my work, the main collaborator being Simon Pegg, I hadn't found a producer that would stick with me before. These things can take time. Never forget that.

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There are lots of ways to be creative in film and make things look far more expensive than they are.

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I highly recommend working with the same team if you can, as often as you can.

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When you're searching for cast and crew for low-budget projects, I always found it was best to hire other people in whatever town or city you're in that are hungry to be on set. And of course, it doesn't hurt to find talented people as well. But seek out others who are also just starting out and trying to learn more about the world of filmmaking like you. I once asked a friend of mine, who had zero interest in acting, to play a role in my debut film *A Fistful of Fingers*. That friend later ended up sticking to film for his career and became an art director for movies like *Indiana Jones* and *Star Wars*. You never know where your early collaborators will end up. So take advantage of other young and motivated individuals around you and find projects you want to make with them

FINDING FUNDING

One of the most difficult aspects of getting a feature film made is funding. For *A Fistful of Fingers*, I was lucky enough to find a local newspaper editor in my hometown who was a fan of my work and had just come into a large inheritance. He graciously gave me £11,000 which he could write off as a tax loss. That was a lot of money at the time, and it still is. And it gave me enough to be able to put together a simple, 80-minute film I could make with my friends.

But even with that money, we had to get creative with how to keep costs low. When you're making a low-budget film you might need your crew to sleep on floors and live off of croissants for breakfast and cheap pizza for lunch. Low-budget filmmaking at every level is tricky. But all filmmakers have to start somewhere. Whether you can fund a film on your own or are able to get family or close acquaintances you know to donate to help, or set up campaigns on Kickstarter and Indiegogo, it's all part of the difficult but worthwhile process of getting to your final goal.

Even when I was making *Shaun of the Dead*, which was funded by a proper production company, we had to deal with budget issues that made me change the way I would film a few scenes. Sometimes I had to show more restraint in areas where I wanted to shoot more coverage and have multiple camera angles to cut together. Again, it's important to be realistic with the budget you have and work within the limits set upon you. Don't be so ambitious that you risk losing the ability to complete the film.

SHOOTING MORE THAN YOU (MIGHT) NEED

But having said all of this, my one big piece of advice about making your first film - which I had to learn the hard way - is to always make sure you shoot plenty of coverage. It's always better to have more footage to work with rather than less. When you're editing the film later, you'll be glad you shot some extra footage that might give you the ability to tinker with a scene more than if you only shot the sequence in one long take. That's not to say there's anything wrong with long takes. Some of the best moments in many movies are long, unedited takes. But - again - it's always better to have the option, especially if you suddenly discover you've been newly inspired to construct a scene differently while you're in the edit. Trust me, you'll thank yourself later that you got that insert shot of a coffee mug being set on a table.



EXERCISE

Pitching a film is a necessary skill to have, even if you may have to become more of a car salesman to do it. To rehearse your pitch, why not try out your idea for a story on a friend. If you can tell the story of your film as a compelling campfire tale, then you are already thinking about how to keep an audience. Relating your story in a dramatic fashion is a good skill to have, as it'll keep anyone listening intrigued.

11. Form & Content

At the centre of dissecting film into its different components, you'll find the concepts of form and content. The form of a film is the way in which the material is presented to the audience while the content of a film is its actual narrative. The job of every great director is to merge a film's form and content into one cohesive whole. When you are able to make a movie in which its physical construction and storyline weave together seamlessly, that is the ultimate goal you want to reach.

One of my favourite things to do with my films is to use the form to slip in ideas you might not expect to see in the film. This was even one of our marketing pitches for *Shaun of the Dead*; that even though it's billed as a zombie film, it's actually a romantic comedy. The same can be said of *Baby Driver* which is sold as an action thriller, but I really made the film as a pseudo-musical.

The best way to pick apart a movie's form and content to see the inner workings, is by looking at a scene closely and noting to yourself the specific choices a director made in how it was staged, shot, and edited, among all the other formal tools being utilised.

In the video lesson, you'll see me discuss the decisions I made in how to construct the town shootout in *Hot Fuzz* in comparison to the toilet brawl in *The World's End*. Both scenes are big action set pieces, but you'll notice there aren't many similarities in each outside of the literal action happening within the scene. That's because of the specific choices I made in each film. In the case of *Hot Fuzz*, I wanted the action to feel hyper-stylised and energetic, whereas the focus in *The World's End* was to make the scene look like it took place in one shot. The intention was to make the action, despite it being about a group of humans fighting alien robots, feel as real as possible.

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All artists should strive to both solidify their style as well as to challenge it and take risks.
That's the core of making art.

Because of all the different choices directors can make when merging the form and content of their films, this is one of the reasons why there are thousands upon thousands of films that all feel unique and original. Every single decision you make as a director has an effect on how the audience experiences a film, and while this may seem like an overwhelming concept to grasp, once you master that knowledge you'll be able to utilise it to help make the strongest film possible.



EXERCISE

Pick a scene from a movie you love and watch it in full. Think about what is happening within the scene narratively and how that is presented to you as a viewer. Where the camera is placed for each shot. Where each cut is made. The sound design used within the scene. Ask yourself why all these choices were made (to thrill you, to make you laugh, to make you cry, etc.) and how they are the perfect combination of constructing the scene for the viewer at this particular moment within the film.

12. Casting & Directing Actors

Finding the right actors for your characters is such a crucial step to the filmmaking process. At times, you'll be writing characters with specific actors in mind. If you're an established filmmaker or incredibly lucky, they'll be the person you end up casting. But other times you'll end up finding someone during the audition process who knocks you off your feet by total surprise.

The casting process itself can be fruitful in many ways. Sometimes your casting director will have recommendations that you never saw coming and end up being the perfect fit for your character. Other times you'll spend hours going through different actors until you find the one person who can play the part. And once you find a great actor for your character, you'll never be able to picture anyone else playing them.

USING UNKNOWN ACTORS

When you're a first-time filmmaker, it's important to understand and acknowledge that it is very unlikely that you'll get anyone famous to be in your film. So taking this into consideration, make sure you're comfortable with your friends or family or less trained actors playing the parts. That shouldn't be seen as a bad thing, but just something to accept as you go into the process. And who knows, the actors you work with at a lower budget might end up becoming the next big stars.

Take Brie Larson in *Scott Pilgrim*. We saw her at the end of an incredibly long day of auditions, and some of the people we had seen before her were really big names. But when she performed the lines for us, it was far and away the best take on the character I had seen. The moment she left the room, the producer, casting director and I all knew that she had the role locked down. Every once in a while, you'll get a magical surprise like we did with her.

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Film is a collaborative art form, and while you're the director, that doesn't mean that no one else is dictating what's happening on camera.

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REHEARSALS

Rehearsals are a requirement for my films because, similar to how I use storyboards and animatics as a way to convey my ideas more easily to the cast and crew, I find it's immensely helpful to be able to rehearse and discuss character and motivations with the actors in advance of the shoot. The last thing I want to do while we're filming on set is to hold up the production by having serious conversations with actors about what we're doing. The more we can discuss in advance of filming, the better.

And this isn't just limited to the actual characters and performance levels I'm looking for. Because most of my films involve a lot of musical sequences as well as specific syncing of movement and editing to the beat, many of my rehearsals will include practicing these sections of my films so that everyone is prepared when they show up to set.

Most movies don't have any rehearsals at all, and I'm not really sure why that is. To me, it makes sense to be able to practice and discuss the larger and more difficult scenes in advance so everyone is keyed in on my intentions for the film. This is so important to me that whenever I'm casting my films, I make sure the actors I want to hire are available to rehearse in advance. And this can be tricky when you're trying to schedule around the calendars of a lot of busy people. But even if it means having to rehearse in small bits here and there out of order, it's still worth it to get the material on its feet and have those important movement rehearsals and discussions before the cameras roll.

I said this earlier when discussing writing, but one other advantage to rehearsals is that when you're given the ability to hear your writing on its feet spoken by other actors (or even just friends and family) you should always do it. You'll never know if something you've written isn't working unless you test it out in advance.

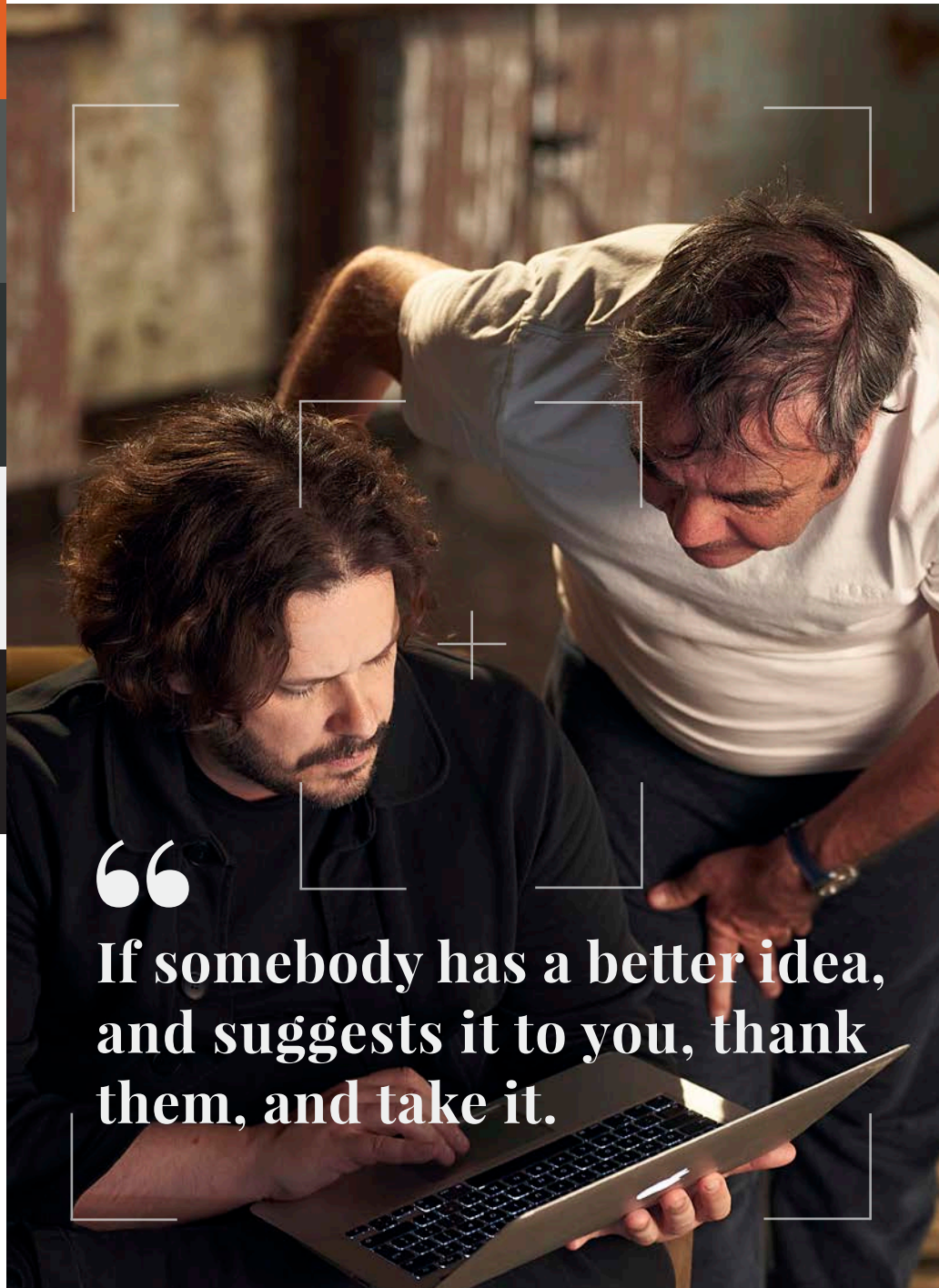
EVERY ACTOR IS DIFFERENT

The range of actors you will work with over the course of your filmmaking career will vary from project to project. I'm not talking about the quality of the actors you work with, but rather how they operate and go about their acting processes. There will be actors who sync up with you immediately and understand the material and what performance you're trying to capture perfectly. Other actors might need more direction as they try to discover your intention with the character. And when you're working with this second type of actor, that means you might need to shoot a little longer in order to make sure you have the correct take from them to use in your film.

You'll also discover that different actors can have a varying degree of energy levels, and this might be because of age or disposition. But whatever the reason, you need to understand that your communication with your actors is one of the most important parts of your ability to direct, and you might need to communicate in completely different ways with certain actors.

Some actors will only be good for a few takes and then you need to move on. Others might take a while to warm up before they start hitting the beats you're seeking. Either way, you need to be patient and respect the process of each actor you work with. With Dame Diana Rigg's big dialogue scene at the end of *Last Night in Soho*, I wanted to respect her age and energy level of how many takes she felt she could do for each camera angle. So to keep things efficient, I simply asked her how many takes and angles she wanted to do. I made sure she felt comfortable within the scene and I let her choose, which helped provide our filming day with a sense of trust and collaboration.

This is not to say that's how you have to operate every time. You'll often need to direct the actors in the specific way you intend to make sure you're getting the performance levels you're trying to hit. Also, make sure you don't let actors who are off camera in a scene waste all their energy during those takes. You want to make sure you're saving everyone's best performances for when the camera is rolling on them.



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If somebody has a better idea,
and suggests it to you, thank
them, and take it.

EXERCISE

Read Sidney Lumet's book *Making Movies* to get a sense of a director who puts a lot of time and energy into the rehearsal process. See if any of his process might inspire you in advance of a project you plan to shoot.

13. Locations

STAGE SETS vs. REAL LOCATIONS

When you're considering whether to be shooting on a stage or shooting on location, the only right selection is the one that gives you exactly what you want out of your scene, as well as whichever is the most sensible for the logistics of the shoot. Stage sets and locations both have their pros and cons, so put your energy into making sure the place you pick to shoot is as perfect as you need it to be.

The great thing about filming on stages is that everything is controlled. So you rarely need to worry about sound or lighting issues. But filming on location, which gives you a greater sense of reality, will have more uncontrollable elements to fight against while you're trying to get each shot. But if the goal is to make the scene feel as real as possible, location shooting is likely your best bet.

LOCATION SCOUTING

Location scouting is an integral part of the filmmaking process but also a time consuming one. And it can be frustrating if you've fallen in love with a location that later becomes unavailable. Or, even worse, if you select a location and prep to shoot there but when you show up on the day it's been reformatted in a way that no longer makes it desirable. There was a situation in *Shaun of the Dead* where we chose the pub to shoot as 'The Winchester' because the park across the street made it look amazing within the frame. But by the time we got there to film, the park had been torn down. So we had to stage a fake fence in front of the camera in one sequence to make it look like the park still existed for the scene to work.

With stage sets, sometimes it just makes more sense to film there. If you're making a big budget action or sci-fi film, having more control and being able to create fictional sets will be essential to your vision. Other times you might just need to work on sets because it's the only way you'll be able to film the scene. An example of this was for the Café de Paris scene in *Last Night in Soho*. We had the option to film in the real location, but it was limiting in terms of where the crew could park, the amount of electricity we would have to run inside, and the fact that we'd be loading in and out of a real night club. It ended up being cheaper and easier to build the location as a set. So when the choice is obvious for ease, go with that and just do your best to use your location to its maximum potential.

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So much about making
movies is persistence.



EXERCISE

If your story is based on a real location, it can't hurt to thoroughly research that real place. Perhaps you could design a sequence around a real location and plot it out step by step. If the scene has any action, why not plan it out with a stills camera and shoot every shot of the sequence in photos first. You will be amazed how it helps you plot something out.

14. Costume Design

I think in recent years, costume design has become a lesser appreciated part of the filmmaking process. Typically, unless your movie has extravagant costumes or is a period piece, the costumes are unlikely to be getting a lot of recognition. But just because a movie's costumes seem simple on the surface doesn't mean they are any less important to the overall design of the film. Think of all the brilliant costumes that don't scream big budget or complicated design. The Blues Brothers, John McClane, all the thieves in *Reservoir Dogs*. There's plenty of examples of iconic costumes that have stood the test of time and left impressions in the mind while being incredibly minimal.

COLOUR IN COSTUME DESIGN

Personally, there aren't a lot of rules I have when it comes to costumes. The one thing I've realised has become a central focus of my choice of costumes in my films is the colour palette. There's so much you can do with colour that helps to strengthen the overall design of each character while helping to solidify themes of the film. For example: Baby's costume in *Baby Driver* is very simple in style and design, so I took that one step further by allowing the muted colours of his costume to comment on his character arc. Even though he mostly wears only whites, greys, and blacks throughout the film, it shifts over the course of the runtime. While at the beginning he wears a lot more white, his colours become greyer and darker as his moral dilemma becomes more complicated.

The other smart thing to take into account when thinking about using colour in costume design is that your choice of colours can help separate your characters from the world around them. And when certain scenes are moving fast, or you want your

characters to pop against the background, the colours will make it easier for the audience to follow the movements within the frame. That's one of the reasons I made characters like Buddy and Darling wear a distinct blue and pink in *Baby Driver*. When there's so much action and fast movement happening, it's easier to read the action on screen when you have a specific colour to associate with each character.

TRUST YOUR TEAM

Like all aspects of my films, I'm very involved in the costume selection process. But I also don't like to pretend that my knowledge of costume terminology and fashion goes very deep. I know what I like, but I also trust that the costume team will come up with options based on my ideas that I might not have thought of otherwise. That's why it's always important to have collaborators you trust. You can't always pretend you're an expert in every single area of production. Having a team around you to help present you with options that you can comment on, and say what is working or not working, or what direction you'd rather go in, is essential to helping you make your final decisions.



EXERCISE

Whether you can draw or not, it can't hurt to sketch out the characters as you see them in your head, even if it's just for your eyes only. If you have no idea what they look like, why not go looking on the internet and narrow down what your character would wear or not wear. Create a vision board for each character based on what you see in your mind; it could be drawings, reference photos, textures. No detail is unnecessary.

15. Cinematography

So much of great filmmaking relies on the quality of the cinematography. But when I was working in television comedy I felt as though there was a clear sentiment that the medium was all about performances and not about the visuals. And I found this to be quite unfortunate, because some of my favourite movies that inspired me as a comedy filmmaker merged performances and visuals in such an incredible way. *Evil Dead II* and *Raising Arizona* in particular are two films that keep the integrity of both performance and cinematography at such a high level, it made me question why more movies didn't do that. And the reality of the situation is that it's because it's extremely difficult to pull off effectively. It's about finding a middle ground of being stylistically interesting while allowing the physical and comedic performances of the actors to sing.

THE CAMERA'S RELATIONSHIP WITH THE ACTORS

When I was working at the BBC doing comedy specials on TV, I was often chastised for doing more than one take. There was one particular instance when I was filming the *French and Saunders Christmas Special* where I wanted to do another take for the camera and the producer ran up to me and yelled, 'Dawn and Jennifer were great, why weren't you?' And as harsh as that was, it did leave me with a valuable lesson learnt. It's always important to make sure you're fully prepped and ready for each shot you're doing. You never should have to do more takes because you weren't ready. If the performance is there, you want to capture it immediately.



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Using the camera as a narrative device is something I like to do.



As I moved on to direct the series *Spaced*, I made it a point to always make sure the cast was fully aware of what my intention and plan was for each shot. This was especially important because I was using the camera like another character in that show. And I needed the cast to play opposite the camera as if it was another actor in the scene. By doing this, it made the cinematography more stylish and more involved than a traditional television comedy normally would.

THE CAMERA'S RELATIONSHIP WITH THE NARRATIVE

When I talk about the camera being like another character within a show or film, what I'm getting at is the idea of using the camera as a narrative device within the story. Filming in such a way that you notice the presence of the camera and what it is doing within a scene. For me, this is simply the way in which I like to make my films. But it's certainly not for everyone, nor should it be.

If you watch a Mike Leigh or a Ken Loach film, the camera's presence is so muted it's essentially invisible. It creates a wonderful sense of naturalism that helps bring the stories they're telling to vivid life. But then when you look at some of the Coen Brothers' comedy work, or even Tim Burton's films, you'll see a hyper-stylisation in which you can't help but notice the camera's role within those movies. Again, a director's job is to make specific choices that dictate how an audience experiences a film. And whether you want to have the camera being used in a flashy way or in a sedated way, or even a mix of both, you have to make the choices that are right for your story and your film.

THE CINEMATOGRAPHER'S RELATIONSHIP WITH YOU

When you're trying to find a great Cinematographer (aka Director of Photography or DP) to work with, you want to make sure it's someone whom you can establish a strong level of communication with. It's essential that the DP understands what your vision for the film is and is able to share that vision along with you. You don't want to work with someone who is always going to be questioning your ideas. It's definitely important that your DP brings their own ideas to the table, but you want their ideas to work in tandem with yours, not against them.

If your DP is able to suggest new ideas that you hadn't considered before, that's brilliant. Because, again, you can't always have the answers to every single question. Even though it's your job to do so, sometimes you might feel lost or confused as to how a particular shot will work or fit into a scene. The DP is there to be your main collaborator and help you capture your vision fully on camera.

Every day you get to set, you want to be open to the process the DP needs to go through. So be sure to ask them what's the best order to film in for the day. Even though you're planning out every shot yourself, you might not realise something about the lighting or the location that can complicate matters. But the DP will always be thinking about these potential issues and navigating around them to ensure you are able to film everything you need to get.

I typically like to get to set earlier than the general crew call to grab a coffee and discuss the entire day of filming with my DP and my Assistant Director so we can plot out our plan of attack. And if any problems arise during those conversations, we can figure out a solution in the moment rather than during the actual shooting hours which, again, will inevitably waste valuable time when we should be filming.



EXERCISE

Watch *Raising Arizona* and *Life is Sweet*. Note the completely different ways in which the Coen Brothers and Mike Leigh use the camera in their comedies to accent the humour. Consider how the choices of each filmmaker help create and establish the universe and tone in which each film is set.

16. First Day On Set

When it comes to the first day on set, I find it's helpful to do a very ambitious shot in order to set the tone for the cast and crew. Both *Shaun of the Dead* and *Baby Driver* started their respective shoots with really complicated long takes: the walk to the corner shop in *Shaun*, and the opening credits walk to the coffee shop and back in *Baby Driver*. By starting with both of these shots on day one, I wanted to encourage the crew to feel a sense of unity in achieving something extremely difficult together.

Before the first day of filming, I have a few traditions that I like to do. I'll typically watch a movie I love that has a similar story or tone to the movie I'm about to shoot. Something to help inspire me before I walk onto set. Then, once I arrive on set, I like to give a motivational speech to the crew before we embark on our journey ahead. I'll even play a song to help formally announce that the shoot is underway, which is a fun way to kick the production into motion.

In advance of the first day though, it's important that you are already having active communication with the crew. Just like with rehearsals and storyboards, you want to make sure you're sharing your ideas for your vision with the crew ahead of time so any major questions can be discussed before the cameras roll. Images of costume design, production design, location scouts, as well as the storyboards and animatics, are all essential assets to share with the crew so they understand the full scope of what you'll all be trying to create together.

Lastly, it's always good to be sure to get every shot you're trying to achieve on your first day. If you're not able to finish what you set out to accomplish, it will likely be disheartening for both yourself and the crew and a sour note to start on. And you never want to suggest that your film set will be slow-moving and running behind schedule throughout the shoot.

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A director's job is to make
sure that everyone is making
the same movie.

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EXERCISE

Learn to memorise names! Possibly the most important and useful thing you can do as a director is make everyone feel welcomed and part of the team by learning their names.

17. Music

Music became a central part of my work when I was directing the TV series *Spaced*. During that period, for the first time in my life, I had the ability to get the rights to songs I wouldn't have had the budget to do so on projects in the past. And now that I could lock in songs I wanted to use in advance of our filming days, this allowed me to rehearse scenes with specific choreography set to those tracks before production began.

As I moved into features with *Shaun of the Dead*, I began to push this further which culminated in us using Queen's *Don't Stop Me Now* for the Winchester fight scene. We shot the entire scene having already cleared the track so we could time every movement within the sequence to the beat of the song. Had we not been able to clear the song, I would have never staged it in the exact same way. The movements were so precise for the song that it would have needed to be planned differently with an alternate track. But in clearing the song, we could rehearse it, put ear wigs in the actors so they could hear the song on set while we filmed, and create a sequence that was almost like a scene from a musical.

Since *Shaun*, I've continued to take this idea and amplify it more and more with each subsequent project. It's part of the universe of my films; merging music with the images on screen. And it all relies on clearing the music in advance so we can choreograph for each specific song. Sometimes it's an actual dance scene. Other times, like in a lot of *Baby Driver*, it's more about timing movements and actions to certain moments in songs.

The reason I'm interested in using music so specifically in my films is mostly because when I'm picturing scenes in my head, I always wonder what will happen if I bring in a song and set it to the scene. There's a famous story of Sergio Leone playing the

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Get creative and make a film
that is distinctive to make
your film stand out in the
crowd.

already recorded Ennio Morricone score for *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* on set as they were filming. Picturing everyone on set listening to the epic music live during the cemetery standoff must have made that moment feel even more grandiose than anyone thought possible. And that's something I strive to achieve in my movies.

Now this doesn't mean I will always be having intense soundtracks playing over all of my films for the rest of my career. I love working with a composer and using original score as well. I just enjoy a lot of the possibilities playing songs over scenes provides.



EXERCISE

Shoot a short video on your phone or open a project you've already filmed. Rewatch the footage and turn the volume all the way down. Now pick a couple of songs to listen to while you rewatch the footage. See how the music might enhance or weaken the scene. Test the ability for music to heighten the action happening on the screen.

18. Sound Design

One of the unfortunate aspects about sound design is that because it's not an element the audience can visibly see on the screen, I think a lot of the genius of a great sound design goes unappreciated. But you have to realise that sound is just as important a tool in your filmmaking arsenal, as anything you put up on screen. Film is, at its core, sight and sound intertwined.

THE IMPORTANCE OF GOOD SOUND DESIGN

When filmmakers ask me for advice as they're approaching getting a low budget feature or short film made, I always give two pieces of advice. The first is to make sure to keep your credits concise. And the second is to put money into your sound design. I cannot stress this enough. Poor sound design will lead to a sub-par product. Audiences can be forgiving, but they will not let a grating sound design go. It will have a negative impact and, ultimately, will prove that the rest of the money put into your project went to waste.

Similar to what I said about music, my increased focus on the quality of the sound design in my projects began with *Spaced*. Most of the sound effects I was using in my low budget shorts before my TV career began were stolen from other movies and TV shows and layered over what I had already filmed. Because I was forced into getting creative with what sound I could find via other finished works, it made me realise just how important good sound production and effects are to the art form. A clean, polished sound design, loud or quiet, can enhance the quality of a film tenfold while immersing the audience deeper into the story.

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Sound is just as important
as visuals.”

DIEGETIC vs. NON-DIEGETIC SOUND

When you're deciding what kind of sound to use in a particular scene or moment, you'll always be choosing between diegetic and non-diegetic sound. Simply put, diegetic means sound that comes from within the world of the film, while non-diegetic means to come from outside the world of the film. Almost a reality versus fiction situation. So if you have a score made by a composer playing at any point during your film, you're utilising non-diegetic sounds. But when the sound effect of a helicopter comes onto the soundtrack as a helicopter is seen (or suggested to be passing by) within the world of the film, that would be a diegetic sound.

A lot of my movies use both diegetic and non-diegetic sounds in very specific ways. *Baby Driver*, for example, relies heavily on diegetic sounds to help immerse the audience in Baby's world and experience his POV in a more synchronised manner. However, many of my other films employ a wider range of non-diegetic sounds that help to craft the universes of those films in completely different ways. Each project you make will have a specific need for whatever type of sounds you use within the design, and how they're employed to work within the story of the film.

SOUND ENHANCING A FILM

One of the aspects of sound I love most is how it can help heighten the style of a film. Sound can be used in an infinite number of ways to help set the tone of a film's universe. If you watch my films, you can hear how I'm trying to use sound to enhance every second of my films that I can. *Scott Pilgrim* and *Baby Driver* have most of the sound effects synced in time with all of the music, which is the most extreme I've been with my use of sound effects.

And I should stress, you don't just want to use sound effects as a way to cover up something you believe is weak. You want it to make the product even better than it already is. When I was working on *Shaun of the Dead*, in order to punch up the presence of the zombies in the Winchester finale, I had us record the zombies' moans while conducting them to be in time with the music playing within the scene. Before we did that, the audio and sound effects we placed over the scene felt weak. But once we utilised this specific zombie soundtrack, it made the scene much more potent.

When you have a sound design team who knows exactly what you want, it makes the process so much easier. I've been working with the same sound team since *Shaun of the Dead* and by now we have such a great rapport that the work we do together feels natural and easy. Working with people who respect and understand the power of sound and how it can enhance a film is essential. Find collaborators who will take risks and try things you would have never thought of yourself. You'll find new and inventive ways of how to utilise sound in your films.

EXERCISE

Take a favourite set piece from a film you love. Now watch it with your eyes closed. Analyse what the sound is doing and why. The great director George Miller would sometimes hide underneath the drive-in cinema near his house and listen to movies such as *The Thing From Another World* (1951). Listening to films as well as just looking will create an appreciation for sound design.



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Filmmaking is all about
the choices you make,
every choice you make
should have a purpose.”

19. Filming Action Sequences

There are fewer things on a film shoot as difficult as choreographing and executing a great action sequence. Whenever you are filming action scenes, you have to understand that you're creating a mini story within the plot of your film. And the tricky part is you have to stage something the viewer can easily track while also keeping the action believable. This can sometimes require you to get creative through the use of editing and stunt doubles in order to sell the sequence to the viewer.

But no matter how you decide to craft an action piece, the one thing you'll almost always need to do is shoot a lot of footage in order to cut the scene together effectively. And when you want to film an action sequence for a low budget project, this becomes even more difficult because often you won't have the time or money to shoot too much. So if you're filming action in your first ever feature film, as always, have a plan and be intentional with every second you have on set.

HONG KONG ACTION STYLE

I've been fortunate enough to work with some amazing stunt coordinators who were trained under Hong Kong masters like Jackie Chan and Yuen Woo-ping. These stunt performers utilise a very specific method – the Hong Kong Action Style – in which you shoot the action sequences in small segments in the chronological narrative order they happen within the film. We did this on *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*, and *The World's End*, and they made the action sequences so much stronger than I ever imagined they could be.

That said, there's definitely a trade-off that happens when you decide to use the Hong Kong action style. For one, lighting a scene becomes much more difficult as you are forced into designing sets that you can shoot in order, shot by shot, rather than filming everything in one direction first and then flipping the camera to shoot the other way.

But it does make things easier later on when you're editing the film. Because you'll be piecing together tiny bits of the scene piece by piece, you won't have to worry about cutting up and rearranging long takes of sustained action beats. It also becomes much easier for the actors performing the stunts as they will only have to memorise 3-4 moves instead of 20 or more. So in this sense, despite it creating more work initially, it's ultimately a more efficient system in many ways.

PIECING ACTION TOGETHER

When I was filming *Baby Driver*, we ended up having to film the opening car chase in bits and pieces throughout the entire length of the shoot. Even as we reached the end of filming, there were still a couple of insert shots we had to get before we wrapped, in order to complete the sequence. This circles back to my earlier point - that it's so essential to shoot as much coverage as you can because you'll likely need it later on in the edit. And it's really only when you start piecing the film together, that you'll know if you've got all the components you need or not.

Since *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*, I've actually had my editor on set with me during the shoot so he can be editing the movie live as we're filming. This way, especially with difficult action sequences, we can know immediately if we have enough footage or if we're missing pieces that are essential to the sequence. By doing this, we're saving time and money later on by avoiding having to potentially reshoot big scenes we never got the proper footage for.



One of the reasons I'm not particularly fond of my debut film, *A Fistful of Fingers*, is mostly because I never had the chance to shoot enough coverage and I didn't have the means to go back and get additional footage. Because of this, I've always made sure to focus on shooting coverage and making sure I can pace my films the way I intend them to feel. This is especially important for all my action sequences which rely so heavily on snappy editing and upbeat music.

WORKING WITH THE STUNT TEAM

It's always so great to be able to work closely with a stunt team. You'll be amazed at the unique skill sets and energy they can bring to a set. The two main stunt coordinators I've worked with, Darrin Prescott and the late Brad Allen, were able to create and pull off such complex stunts on my films that I'm always impressed with how much they could accomplish within the frame of a single shot.

In *The World's End*, Brad choreographed a sequence in which he swapped out one stunt actor for another in the middle of a shot without anyone being able to notice. Two people wearing the same costume were switched in and out of frame with no cutting or special effects to hide it. He simply had the character they played leave frame for a moment and then return as a different actor. And that's what an action scene is really about. Fooling the eye of the viewer into thinking what they're watching is real and carries actual risk and stakes.

Stunt doubles and stunt coordinators are vital members of the filmmaking team. And it should go without saying but you always want to make sure that they, as well as the rest of the cast and crew, are safe on any set when an action scene is being shot. If things move slower during the filming of action scenes, that's because they take more time and precision to pull them off. Always be sure you're working with a properly trained stunt team so there's never a question of safety on set.

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Working with stunt performers is one of my favourite things, because I love the skillset they bring to a movie.

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EXERCISE

Now do the opposite, take a favourite action sequence, for example the amazing foot chase in Kathryn Bigelow's *Point Break*, and watch it with the sound turned off. The best movies can be enjoyed silently because the emotion and storytelling is expressed in the visuals, the composition and the editing – as well as in the sound and dialogue.

20. Production Design

When getting your crew together for a film shoot, be sure to seek out a great Production Designer. This is such a vital role as they're the person who can help facilitate getting all the aspects of the visual ideas you have in your head, onto the screen.

My Production Designer, Marcus Rowland, is someone I have been working with since the days of *Spaced* and I cannot imagine going through a film shoot without him. He is always there in the early days of prep and typically stays on until the very end of a shoot. In fact, he often continues working with me after the shoot is over as I like to send him cuts of the film to get his notes and feedback. Without Marcus, I promise you my films would not be as visually unified as they are when they reach cinemas.

When it comes to prep, I will often begin meeting and discussing with Marcus what my objectives for the film's visual aesthetic are. For *Last Night in Soho*, we went around the city of London together and began to make a list of all the potential shooting locations we might want to secure for the film. We also spent a great deal of time researching a lot of period photos, artwork and other archival materials to help get a better sense of what the world of the film might look like.

Outside of costume design and hair and make-up, the Production Designer is essentially in charge of all the visual aspects of the film you'll see within the frame. If you really think about it, this is not an easy job to oversee. This means any time a location needs to be dressed in a particular way, or a stage set needs to be built, or any props need to be included in a scene, the Production Designer will be the one collating designs and options for me to approve.

Marcus will typically begin sharing his own ideas with me the moment he finishes reading the script. These will usually be a combination of ideas similar to my own as well as fresh ideas I hadn't considered before. The latter is incredibly helpful as they will no doubt spark even more ideas for me to chew on as the world of the film becomes clearer in my head.

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Get what is realistic for
your budget and make sure
it fits your vision and your
integrity. Use your limitations
to your advantage and get
creative.

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A good Production Designer will be by your side throughout the entire prep, production, and editing phase. Now this is not to say that they will be sitting in the editing room with you, but rather if you need to run final ideas by them as you're locking the cut for the film, they'll be open to watching and giving you any further feedback you seek. Since the Production Designer comes onto a film so early, they will be one of the few people who understand your vision in total. So don't be afraid to ask them questions and seek their advice. They will hopefully see the world of the film in a similar way to you, but perhaps from a slightly different angle which can help provide you with an alternate perspective when needed.

I always like to ensure that I'm working side by side with Marcus to guarantee that all the sets and locations he has helped design make it into the film. The last thing you want is for all that hard work and money to go to waste. I'll make sure to communicate to Marcus exactly where I want the camera to be and where it'll be looking in every scene so he knows what parts of the sets and locations he needs to put his energy into making look great.

The savviness of your Production Designer can also be invaluable to a shoot when budgetary limitations might feel as though they'll hinder your ability to get your entire vision on screen. There was a situation that came about during *Scott Pilgrim* in which we were only given a certain amount of space on a sound stage where we could build sets. And it seemed as though it was going to be detrimental to our shoot. But Marcus devised a brilliant idea where he created a 'Russian doll' set in which multiple sets could live within each other to save on space. So there was a small set that 'lived' within a larger set, and the larger set wouldn't be visible until we finished filming on the smaller set and broke it down. So as you can see, having an amazing Production Designer doesn't just mean having a brilliant artist around. It also means having someone who can help problem solve when you're in a bind, which is always helpful.



EXERCISE

When writing, try to draw a space out or block some action by using some scribbles on some paper. They don't need to be elegant drawings. Just something you can use to easily convey your ideas to a production designer of how you intend to stage a sequence. Think of it like making a map, one that is the plan for the scene which you have in your head.



21. Editing

Out of all the tools at your disposal when it comes to filmmaking, editing is the most essential. Filmmaking would not exist without the choice of how to edit together every single moment of a movie. Every piece of footage you've shot won't have any significance unless you edit the film together in the correct way for the entire film to work as a cohesive narrative.

Going back to what I said earlier, that your job as a director is about making specific choices, when you really think about it, editing is really just a long series of making specific choices over and over again. Every single cut you make, and where you make it, will affect how a viewer interprets a scene.

Think about a traditional conversation scene in which two people are talking. It's likely shot from two angles, one on each person. But just because it's a simple back and forth conversation doesn't mean you have to edit it so that every shot is on each character as they speak. You might decide to only use the one angle and have the camera focus on one character for the entire scene while the other character talks off frame. Or perhaps you only have one cut to the second character during the entire scene. All of these choices are going to dictate the way in which the viewer receives this scene and how the cuts change the dynamic between these two characters.

THE KULESHOV EFFECT

One of the most basic building blocks of editing theory was invented by the Russian filmmaker Lev Kuleshov. In discussing editing, Kuleshov was the first to come up with the concept that a viewer will interpret more meaning from two shots placed next to each other than they will from one single shot presented to them on its own. While this might make logical sense today, during the early days of cinema this was a radical concept.

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When the stars align
and you've brought a scene
together in its most perfect
form, it's a truly life
affirming moment.

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Alfred Hitchcock took Kuleshov's concept a step further by giving a vivid example of how this works. He said that if you took three simple shots, an old man staring off screen cutting to a baby and then cutting back to the old man smiling, the viewer will understand the old man to be a kind, genial man. However, Hitchcock emphasised that if you swap out the shot of the baby for a woman in a bikini, this will completely alter the viewer's perception of the old man and they will interpret him as a creep instead. It's a simple but effective way to highlight just how vital editing is to filmmaking. Every individual cut has an impact on the overall narrative of your film. So make sure you have an intention behind every choice you make. Even changing a millisecond of a cut can shift everything within a scene.

TRIAL & ERROR

If you take a step back and look at the editing phase as a whole, you'll come to understand that it's basically one long trial and error process. After you've got all your footage set up in front of you, you have the ability to go through it bit by bit to play with it and discover how it should best be edited together. You are given the freedom to experiment and try any idea that comes to you. So harness that and don't be afraid to take risks. Sometimes you'll surprise yourself in the editing room with new moments you discover while tinkering with your footage.

And this is one of the reasons why I have stressed over and over again that it's so important to get lots of coverage while you're filming. Having additional footage will provide you with more flexibility when you're editing. It gives you more breathing room to ensure that you can pace your film in a way that works while remaining true to your original intentions. If you have less footage, you won't be able to fix any portions of the film you feel might be slow or stagnant. But if you got that extra footage on set, you'll likely find it truly lifesaving as you're piecing together the edit.

KILLING YOUR DARLINGS

When you're editing your film, sooner or later you'll reach a point where you are forced to come face to face with a harsh reality: you need to cut a scene you're fond of. Whether it's because you need to get the running time down, perhaps the performances aren't strong enough, or maybe the scene feels repetitious to another scene in the film. Whatever the reason, it's important to know that almost every filmmaker has had to cut a scene they love. Sometimes the most difficult decisions I've made as a filmmaker were cutting scenes from my movie I felt were truly great. But I've learned through experience that cutting scenes is a natural part of the filmmaking process.

In a similar vein, I think it's important to understand what the term 'director's cut' really means. There are so many 'uncut' versions of movies coming out nowadays that I think people have lost sight of what the intentions behind theatrical releases are. I have always approved of every single cut of every film I've released in cinemas. I wouldn't work so long and hard on each of my films if I wasn't going to release the version I'm happiest with. I typically share final cut with my producer Eric Fellner, and in the only instance in which I didn't have final cut, which was *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*, I was still fully satisfied with the version we released which I truly felt was the best cut of the film.

In considering all these director's cuts with additional scenes added back into them, I almost always think to myself that I far prefer the original cuts of the films. There's usually a reason those scenes were cut in the first place. And while they make for fun additions to the DVD bonus features, rarely have I ever watched an 'uncut' film and thought it was superior. I've never rewatched scenes I've cut from my own films and had the desire to add them back in. If you're not satisfied with the current cut of the film you're editing, keep working on it until you feel it's truly complete. The old rule of thumb that 'less is more' goes for filmmaking as well.



EXERCISE

Find a copy of *In the Blink of an Eye* by Walter Murch, editor of *The Conversation* and *Apocalypse Now*. Read it front to back. Digest it. Then read it again. An additional recommendation is *A Long Time Ago in a Cutting Room Far, Far Away* by Paul Hirsch, editor of *Carrie*, *Star Wars*, *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, *Mission: Impossible*, and more.

22. TV vs. Features

After I finished filming my debut feature, *A Fistful of Fingers*, I moved to London where I began to edit the film. And while that was happening, I got a job at London Weekend Television working for a program called *Beadle's Hot Shots*, which was hosted by the late Jeremy Beadle. The concept for the show was that home viewers would submit comedy sketches they filmed to air on TV. And I was given the odd task of editing the sketches to make them punchier and, even more strangely, would sometimes be sent out to help reshoot the viewer's sketches with them to elevate the material and make them presentable to broadcast on air.

The fascinating thing about this job is that I was doing this all on my own. I did not have any crew or decent equipment at my disposal. But as lo-fi as it was, it was an interesting experiment that allowed me to take these shorts that weren't very strong and turn them into projects that worked. It was, in a way, a different type of 'film school' I could go through.

When *A Fistful of Fingers* premiered at the Prince Charles Cinema in Leicester Square, it received mixed to negative reviews from a number of publications. *Variety* actually gave it a strong review and, in retrospect, I likely could have flown to Los Angeles based on that to look for work or representation there. But I stayed in London and tried to carry on. And I'm glad I did because the comedians David Walliams and Matt

Lucas had seen the movie at the Prince Charles and liked it enough to ask me to direct their upcoming show *Mash and Peas*. And this became my first legitimate directing job at age 21.

I knew this was a lucky break for me and not necessarily the norm. In a way, it almost felt yet again like a return to film school as I was learning on the job just by doing. Later on I ended up directing a show called *Asylum* which featured Simon Pegg, Jessica

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Making a story that you want to tell and share with audiences. At the end of the day that's what it's all about.

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Hynes, Julian Barratt and Bill Bailey, among others. And it was here that I began to start focusing on finding my style. My intention was to make sure that all the elements I wasn't able to achieve while I was filming *A Fistful of Fingers* could finally become a staple of my work.

The rare thing about this was that nearly all of the cast and crew were supportive of my desire to make a visually punchy comedy show, which was certainly not common at the time. And I'm sure that didn't necessarily come easy, especially because I was so young during this period. Later on when I shifted over to the BBC, there was even one instance while I was filming *Alexei Sayle's Merry-Go-Round* when Alexei saw me wearing a Cat in the Hat shirt on set and told me that we needed to find me some 'adult' clothes.

It was clear to me at the BBC that the older crew members who had been there for years were a bit divided on my presence. Some got along with me quite well while others were likely asking themselves why there was a 'kid' directing these shows. And it probably confused them even more because I was a nobody rather than a product of nepotism.

Having said this, overall I had an amazing experience at the BBC. But because I was so young and trying new things, there were certain established crew members who were sceptical of my techniques. There was one time a producer chastised me for shooting more film in two days than another director had done for their entire episode of a previous shoot. But, again, this wasn't because I was doing too many takes. Rather, as I was coming into my style, I was discovering how many set ups I needed to get the amount of coverage I wanted.

By the time I got to directing *Spaced*, which is still the last TV I've made to date, I learned that for my style of filming it's crucial to convey to my cast and crew what I'm trying to capture on camera and how I plan to film it. This is especially important for the actors. Other directors might prefer to keep their intentions hidden from their cast and crew. That would never work for me. I'm of the belief that the more transparent you are with your collaborators, the more comfortable everyone will be on set as the cameras start rolling.

The more I directed TV, the more I was able to hone in on the style that would become part of my identity as a filmmaker. As I've said before, the realisation that coverage is an essential part of my shooting plan came about during this time. But again, this is more about the number of different camera angles and positions I film rather than the number of takes I do. There's no need to pretend that filming like Stanley Kubrick and doing 100 takes of every angle will make you a genius. You need to be intentional with your shooting schedule and make sure you're staying on track to complete your days in time.

Because I spent a number of years in TV honing my style, when it came to making *Shaun of the Dead* I was fully prepared to take a second crack at making my 'debut' feature. Though the shoot for *Shaun* was not without its difficulties, I felt more prepared to tackle my vision and make the feature film I wanted to make.

The shooting schedule for *Shaun* was eight weeks long which is definitely longer than a traditional low budget filming schedule. But we were tactical in creating savings across various departments to give us the ability to have additional time for shooting the coverage that I knew by that point was essential to my style. One of the funnier ways in which we saved some money was by having a whole bunch of *Spaced* fans come onto the set to play zombies for free which helped ease the budget substantially.

I'm very proud of the work I did on *Spaced*, which felt like my first truly formed vision being executed to my best ability. It was an amazing learning experience before I transitioned to film. It was ambitious and unique in so many ways. But one thing I learned as I made the transition from TV to film, is that you face the same problems on both sets. The sun will always rise and fall every day, and you will always lose light and have to rush to get shots before the day ends. Whenever you're forced to move fast, it's amazing what your crew can accomplish in a small time span. In that sense, while there may be scheduling and budgetary differences in film and TV, you'll quickly learn that the same challenges for filming exist no matter what medium you're working in.

23. Filmmaking In Collaboration

In the video lessons, you'll see a clip from *Last Night in Soho* that fully illustrates the way in which an entire crew works together to make a challenging sequence come to life on screen.

The transition from Ellie's real life flat to the Haymarket shot in 1960's London would not have been possible without the location department's amazing ability to secure the real-life Haymarket to film in at night. Shooting in the centre of London on one of its busiest streets was not easy, but it did add a sense of reality to a scene that would have looked much more fabricated had it been shot on a set.

However, the next sequence of Ellie entering the Café de Paris was indeed shot on a set (designed by Marcus Rowland) and it was exactly what was needed to pull off some ambitious camera tricks. The first big moment in the scene, when Ellie looks in the mirror to see Sandie as her reflection, required the work of a couple of departments to pull off effectively.

Choreographer Jen White was able to work with Thomasin McKenzie and Anya Taylor-Joy to time their movements with each other to make the beats work. So when the two actresses are in front of each other in the scene, it's not VFX but rather a double set with a fake mirror that slides back from the wall as the maître d' (played by the Phelps twins to help sell the fake wall) crosses by. So you immediately have our Choreographer working in tandem with Production Designer Marcus Rowland so that this 'dream' sequence could all be done on camera. And this required a lot of rehearsing to pull off.

While these rehearsals began in a small room ahead of production with a tiny video camera to test the movements out, we eventually had a proper rehearsal on a Saturday

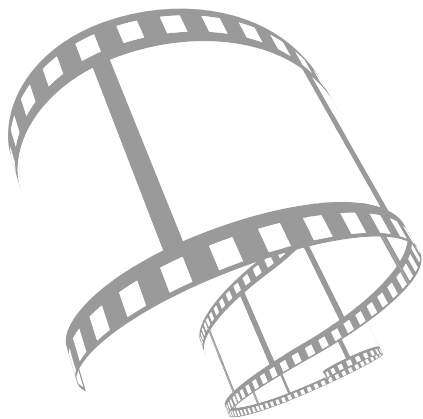
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For comedy,
having a co-writer
is very important.

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in the middle of production where the actresses, the Choreographer, and our Camera Operator Chris Bain all worked together to practice the movements so they could land in the exact right positions at each moment. Then during post-production we had a bevel added to the fake mirror as a nice minor detail to fully sell the idea that this was a real location. And the bevel was orchestrated brilliantly by VFX Supervisor Tom Proctor. So now at this point we have even more departments getting involved to help bring this sequence to life.

As Ellie and Sandie descend the stairs into the lobby, with Ellie presented as Sandie's reflection in the mirror, this is once again the two actresses choreographed in sync. We had to shoot the scene twice to get their movements perfect to allow the VFX team to put them both in the frame to create the dream-like quality of the scene. Along with using a difficult piece of equipment with the camera team called a motion control rig, this allowed us to replicate their movements exactly and, once again, sell the audience on what they were seeing to be real.

By the time we get to the big dance number in the centre of the scene, the choreography we've done in the sequence becomes even more crucial. Now we have the timing of the actresses, Matt Smith, the Camera Operator, and the dancers in the background who all have to sync up to make the long, nearly unbroken take work. Most people likely thought this scene relied heavily on VFX in the finished film when in reality it all came down to rehearsal and choreography. When you watch the behind the scenes footage we captured from the finished sequence, you'll understand exactly how complex everything was to pull off. Throughout the course, I've emphasised the importance of great collaborators, and there's no better way to explain this than through the final product of a complicated sequence like this which everyone worked hard on to make look seamless.



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It's less about being
a perfectionist, and more
about pushing myself to
be as efficient as I can with
every second I have behind
the camera.”

24. Getting Your Film Seen

One of the many amazing things about being a filmmaker today is how easy it is to find equipment and shoot projects on your own. While I had to deal with bulky cameras when I was growing up, so many aspiring filmmakers can shoot entire projects with smartphones now. However, with that additional ease comes another challenge: there are far more films being made today than there ever have been before. So there's a battle to get your film seen even after you've shot it. As a result, distribution in today's age is not an easy thing to come by for many films.

I was honestly quite surprised when my first film, *A Fistful of Fingers*, got distribution. But I know that one of the reasons it was picked up by Blue Dolphin, a small indie distributor at the time, was because it had a selling point: it was a spoof Western made by a 20-year-old in the West Country of the UK. And nowadays, a selling point is one of the most important ways you can get your film seen by people. Whether that's at a film festival, online, or in front of a distributor who might want to buy the film to put it into theatres.

MAKE IT PULPY

Think about some of your favourite low-budget films. What is the reason you are attracted to that film? Is it because of a certain low-fi realism it portrays? Perhaps it's an edgy film like *Reservoir Dogs* that uses its low budget to its advantage in the look and feel of the film, while still having distinct and memorable energy to it. Or perhaps it's a movie that is mostly set in a single location. Either way, all of these elements are selling points for the films. So it's to your advantage to think of what your selling point might be. Because sometimes it doesn't help to just make a good film. It has to stand out from all the competition around it.

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The right people will see your project eventually.

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FILM FESTIVALS

In terms of film festivals, this is another area where I think it's important to be realistic with expectations. If you've made an action film, don't put too much stress on yourself trying to get into Sundance. Submit it to festivals that cater to action or genre. Use your film to your advantage and be strategic. Also, don't worry if your film doesn't get into festivals. There are so many festivals in the world and sometimes a lot of the programmers have to consider certain themes or topics to fill a specific section of the program. There's a lot of reasons why your film might not get accepted into a festival. But don't let that bring you down. Keep focusing on your work and eventually, when you make something truly great, the right people will see it one way or another.

25. Ask Me Anything

During production of my **BBC Maestro** lessons, I wanted to offer up the ability for anyone to ask me any specific questions they had about the filmmaking process. So I took to Instagram and Twitter to open up the door to the general public. Here are some of the questions I found most intriguing.

Q. What is it like working with people that you've idolised in movies for decades? How did you handle the pressure when you were starting out and you began working with bigger stars?

A. When I was making *Shaun of the Dead*, it wasn't so much of a problem because I was lucky that I got to make it with a lot of my friends.

When we were doing *Hot Fuzz* there were a lot of people in the movie who I was a big fan of, like Billie Whitelaw, Edward Woodward and Timothy Dalton, and you just have to get over that hump. You can get a lot of that nervousness out of your system when you have a general meeting with them or through the rehearsal process. That said, Simon, Nick and I would make the same joke every time Timothy left the room, we'd go, 'You know who that was, that was James Bond!' So apologies to Timothy but we were just star struck by him!

When I was working as a TV director in my early twenties, I worked with a lot of TV stars I'd grown up watching and that was very surreal. I worked with French & Saunders and Alexei Sayle, and even in the French and Saunders episode that I did, Joanna Lumley and Helen Mirren were in it. The way of dealing with that was not dissimilar to how to tackle imposter syndrome; just know the answers to all the questions. So if you're a young director on a shoot working with people who are much more experienced, have an answer for everything. Know what you want to do and be able to make decisions quickly. Even if you're bluffing it - have an answer for everything.

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Writing a screenplay
is different from writing
a novel.

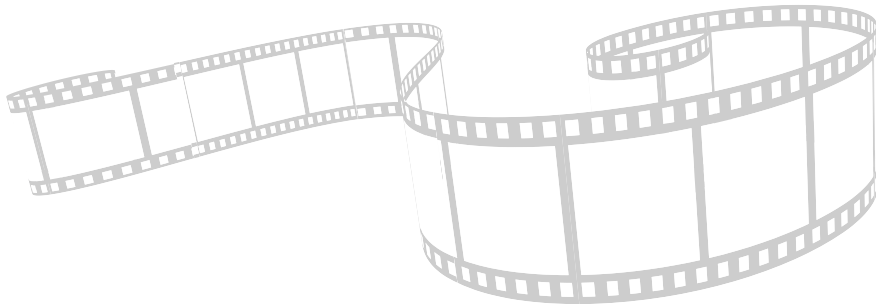
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Q. How have your favourite films and directors inspired your own work?

A. I have many favourite movies, but there are certain movies that I watched when I was thinking about being a director that really inspired me. Usually, they were mind-expanding or really playing with form in a way that made me excited about what you could do in a film. One was Sam Raimi's *Evil Dead II* and another was the Coen Brothers' *Raising Arizona*. Now those two movies are such an amazing Pandora's box of every single cinematic trick in the book. When watching you feel that the directors are having such a blast at playing with the possibilities of what you can get away with in a film, in terms of the camerawork and every sort of gag. Those were films that really inspired me and I thought, 'Oh my God, how do you make a film like that?'

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And the answer to that question is what leads you into being a film maker - you want to figure out how the hell you make a film like that. There have been lots of other films along the way that I've loved, and usually they were ones that have more than one thing going on. *An American Werewolf in London* is another of my favourites. I saw it when I was ten years old and, at that time, I couldn't really conceive how everything was in one movie. It's a horror film, it's scary, frightening, and gory, but it's also a really funny comedy. It has characters that are sympathetic, you care about them, and you don't want them to die. It also has an amazing soundtrack and was probably one of the first films I saw where the use of pop music within the film as counter scoring was really striking and impactful. These films all hit me at a formative time, whereas there are other films that have become favourites of mine having grown in my estimation.



When I first saw *2001: A Space Odyssey* on TV that was maybe not seeing it at its full potential, but it was still a movie to obsess over and then with successive viewings on a big screen, I started to realise, this is one of my favourite films of all time. *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly* would be the same case, incredible on a big screen, but still works on TV. What I love about some of my favourite films is that they're the ones that I return to again and again because they get me excited about the idea of making films.

Q. How do you know when to stop writing?

A. I think when a script is finished, or at least finished enough to show somebody else, you'll know in your gut. There'll be a point where you can't rewrite something anymore and you want to show it to somebody so they can read it.

A script is never really finished because you might rewrite things during the rehearsal process, or things might change on the day of filming, and people always say that the editing is the last draft of the movie. In a way post-production is the final draft of the movie, and I've certainly found ways that we can rewrite something after we've shot it.

When you're writing a script, you don't want to have something that's too long. If a first-time screenwriter handed in a script 150 pages long, people would raise their eyebrows. Now, obviously if you're making an epic and you're a more established writer/director or writer, you could get away with that, but if you're writing a first script, being succinct and telling the story in a way that's both impactful but also efficient, is a good way to go.

If I receive a script that feels overwritten, it can be off-putting and sometimes it's the sign of a writer who's just starting out. If it's off-putting to me, it will definitely be off-putting to a producer. Remember you're not writing a novel, you're writing a screenplay, and you're trying to convey detail and tell the story with fewer words. Read screenplays by brilliant screenwriters to teach yourself tricks about conveying information in a succinct way.

Screenwriting is a different art to writing prose, so if you're a new writer getting your script out to somebody, make sure it's as concise as it can possibly be. A good lesson to learn in writing a screenplay, even if you're writing an epic, less is always more.

Q. What is your process when you're researching genres and themes of movies that you're interested in working in?

A. I've done different processes for different films. Sometimes it's about watching as many films in that genre as possible and sometimes it's about watching films in a different genre.

For example, with *Shaun of the Dead* Simon Pegg and I felt we knew the zombie films, and wanted to watch films that we liked structurally, like *Back to the Future*, *Raising Arizona*, *Gremlins* or Hitchcock's *The Birds*. We tried to break down the films in terms of a three-act structure. We also watched romantic comedies because, although *Shaun of the Dead* is a zombie film, if it is a spoof of anything, it's a spoof of romantic comedies. We thought about the tropes that exist in those films and how you could put them into a zombie film.

With *Hot Fuzz* we felt it wouldn't be wrong to watch every cop movie ever made and, while Simon watched a lot, I may have watched close to a hundred cop movies, to the point where all of the clichés of cop movies start to come to you by osmosis. I couldn't pinpoint any one thing in any one film because so many films are similar to each other: I wanted to figure out the different clichés within cop movies and find ways to subvert them. The other big aspect of *Hot Fuzz* was that we did first hand research with the police and that was worth its weight in gold. We interviewed police in London, went on a mini tour of rural police stations in Somerset, Gloucestershire and Wiltshire, and interviewed many police officers in the areas where the film was going to take place. The interview transcriptions were an absolute goldmine of amazing details, turns of phrase and sometimes specific stories. Some of the sillier stuff in *Hot Fuzz* is from real interviews, for example swans escaping and police officers having to catch them. That sounds like something that would be made up, but no, it's very real. Even tiny things like the idea that a police officer is punished by having to buy cake and ice cream for the rest of the office came from these interviews.

Scott Pilgrim didn't need any research, but Michael Bacall and I watched a lot of teen movies looking for specific lines that could equate to action films, breaking down the dialogue of those movies. *The World's End* came more from my personal experiences and Simon's, while *Baby Driver* was a bit of both. I watched a lot of crime movies, going back to the classic film noir thrillers of the forties, and I did research with ex-cons, people who had actually been bank robbers and getaway drivers, and that was invaluable. At a certain point one of those ex-cons, a guy called Joe Lawyer, became the technical consultant on the film.

In the case of *Last Night in Soho*, even though it has a horror element, those were not the films I rewatched because those were the films I knew very well. In making that movie I wanted to recapture my excitement about those films. What I did watch, which was key to the movie, was lots of films of the period, so I watched lots and lots of sixties' dramas, looking at what the fashions looked like, the hairstyles and what the locations looked like at the time. We did years of research on every single facet of the screenplay, talking to students who'd just moved to London, talking to real prostitutes, talking to vice police, doing interviews with people who worked in Soho in the sixties and doing interviews with people who worked in Soho now. I had this amazing bible of interviews and articles, enough for maybe a hundred movies.

Sometimes it's zeroing in on exactly what you're writing, and sometimes it's researching something that's adjacent to it. If you have an opportunity to do real research, that can be an amazing rabbit hole to disappear down. That said, you don't have to research anything if you're writing a movie, if your movie is coming straight from your brain onto the page, fantastic; if you are helped by the idea of a wealth of research, whether it's reading or watching stuff and just totally immersing yourself into the genre that you want to make, then great. I happen to like total immersion in what I'm doing, or something that's adjacent to what I'm doing but you can also not watch a single film and write a screenplay, it's entirely up to you.

For more on this topic please see Lesson 7 – Genre.

Q. If the producers or crew give you notes on your script that you don't agree with how do you fight your side?

A. I think the way to fight your corner is to prove how strongly you feel about the idea. For example, when I was doing *Shaun of the Dead*, there were these little inserts which would be crash zooms on different little routines and the joke was that you were seeing these action movie close-ups of things that were boring - like making tea or making toast - and then that built up to the idea of a gun being loaded, an actual action movie montage.

Now invariably, on a low budget film, those inserts are always the things that drop off at the end of the day, and maybe at the end of a shooting day you don't get any of those inserts and you can't afford a second unit doing inserts which big movies would have. I remember really vexing about the fact that we didn't have these shots and I got the sense that some people didn't think it was that important, so the only way I could prove that it was really going to work was to shoot one.

I ended up asking the B camera – because we had two cameras – if they would stagger their lunch and over lunch we would shoot three of these shots and edit them into the film with the right sound effects, and then show it to everybody else to illustrate the idea. After this, as we went along, we were able to pick up the other close-ups because they became excellent linking montages. For some people, that's one of the most famous bits from *Shaun of the Dead*, but at the time I really had to argue.

I think the only way to push back is to prove that it works and that might be by showing it to an audience. With *Hot Fuzz*, there is a scene in it, where Simon Pegg's character karate kicks a granny in the face. We had shot the scene, but on the day of

the shoot the sun had gone down and we were missing a few key shots, so I managed to convince Eric Fellner, the producer, to let me shoot a couple of days of little pick up shots before we showed it to an audience, because I knew the scene was going to be good but what was missing was a shot that gave it real impact. It's unusual to do reshoots or pickups before an audience has ever seen it, but I really knew in my gut that this scene would be better with one more shot. And the shot was literally a close-up of a shoe hitting the old lady in the face.

So we managed to do it on a very, very small budget - Simon Pegg wasn't even available so we used the old Jackie Chan Hong Kong trick of a shoe and a trouser leg on a stick. I think we might have even done it backward, so you have the foot in the face, then you pull back, and then you reverse it so it looks like it goes into somebody's face really hard.

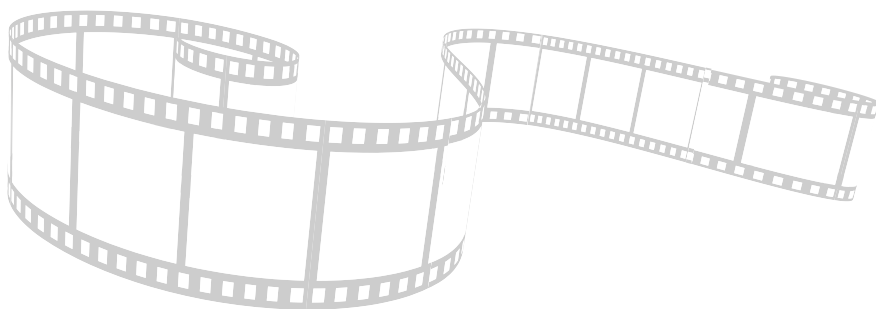
Anyway, cut to the first test screening of the movie, and that shot brings the house down with easily the biggest laugh in the entire movie: people are laughing for five minutes afterward and and Eric and I turn to each other and give a thumbs up.

But that's the thing, if something's really important, the only way that you can prove it is to somehow do it. That might mean working out of hours, that might mean scrabbling and saying to somebody, 'Hey, I really need to get this shot, how can we do it?' But I don't think you can prove those things theoretically, you just have to find a way to prove that it works and the audience will always be the ultimate litmus test.

Q. What is your process for determining a story that would make for a good film?

A. It's a difficult one to answer because I don't sit down with a blank page and think, 'what's a good story?' Usually, how an idea for a film comes to me is a situation, or a character in a situation, and how that could develop.

So in the case of *Baby Driver*, that was an idea that developed from a song and a car chase together in my head. And then the idea that the driver is listening to the song. And then the idea that the driver cannot do anything without the right song playing. So it was an idea that developed and then you start to think of what that story could be. If that was the first scene, then what journey does that character go on? With *Shaun of the Dead*, we were going to have a character like me and Simon in our late twenties, who was going to go on an emotional journey out of adolescence, during a zombie apocalypse.



All these things come interlinked, the idea for a premise is usually based around a character and their journey. And that journey can be from within the genre, or the journey can be separate from the genre: it can be a genre film with something more personal happening within it.

Q. How do you cultivate the ability to write creative and original jokes?

A. The nice thing about writing comedy, and having written with writers who have an appreciation for the form in the same way I do - like Simon, Joe Cornish, or Michael - is that anything could be a joke. It could be a verbal joke, a visual joke, a joke in the audio, it could be a joke in the editing, and the fun part is that you're not limited to words on a page. Sometimes the joke can be the contrast of what the dialogue is, depending on what's happening in the scene, or what's happening in the background of a scene. And I think what's fun about some of the movies that we've done is that you're looking for ways to pack every frame with jokes or details. I like films and TV shows that can withstand multiple viewings, so if you can pile them with lots of detail and extra things going on that you might not notice until a second or third or fourth watch, I think that's great. As long as you can enjoy the movie on a first watch, it becomes the gift that keeps on giving.

Q. How do you go about balancing commercial appeal with artistic intention?

A. I think the answer to that is the key to any successful movie. Ultimately it all comes down to engaging the audience. I don't say entertaining the audience, because not all films are entertaining, but it's all about engagement. Do you have the audience's attention? Are they engaged with the story that you're telling? And artistic intentions and the stylistic way of doing that is not always entertaining, but it can be engaging. I guess the key to any successful movie, or certainly a successful movie for me, is a synthesis of the two. You have your artistic intentions of something that you would like to do, but you've got to engage the audience. If you don't, you've lost. Most of the movies I've made are an attempt to fuse the two.

Q. How do you make the perfect needle drop when you're coupling it with your editing style? You've created all of these iconic film moments, how do you arrive at those ends?

'A needle drop' means a song found in the edit when people used to literally drop a needle on an album to find the right track to go with a scene. Strangely, *2001* is essentially a needle drop film, because all of those pieces of classical music were ones that the editors tried in the edit suite. Originally that film was going to have a score by Alex North and the score got canned because Kubrick fell in love with all of the classical music needle drops they used in the edit.

While I was making *Spaced* there was no music supervisor, so I used to find songs that I liked and then go to the Virgin Megastore (when it still existed around the corner) and look for tracks that might work in the context of *Spaced*. In that case, I was doing the needle dropping myself.

In my films now, 99% of the songs that you hear have been picked before we start filming, and usually they've been pre-cleared for use in the film - because what you absolutely don't want to do is film a scene with a song that you don't know whether you can clear or not. Many people making their first movies are suddenly stuck with a scene revolving around a Led Zeppelin track which they cannot afford. So don't fall into that trap.

Sometimes a song will inspire a scene, or be the impetus for the entire movie. In the case of *Bellbottoms* by the Jon Spencer Blues Explosion, I heard that song in 1994, in my bedroom, in Wood Green, on a tape of the album copied off my brother, and listening to that song, I would imagine this car chase, and then beyond that I was thinking, 'Well, maybe they're listening to the song during the car chase.'

'Well maybe the driver has to listen to music during a car chase.' So it was something that just all spiralled out of just hearing that song. With *Last Night in Soho*, once I got the idea for the film, there were certain songs of that time which I thought, 'That's the perfect song for that movie.' That movie was gestating in my head for a long time, and it would be the songs that would keep me excited about making it. Whenever I heard a cover of *Wade in the Water* by The Graham Bond Organisation, I would think about the scene in *Last Night in Soho*.

That image in my head and that song choice were rattling around for years before I wrote a single word of *Last Night in Soho*. Conversely, with *Baby Driver*, I would be writing the script and I would get to a point where there's a different song for every single scene. And if I didn't have a song, I'd think about the scene I was about to write and try to find the right song. I would think how long the scene was roughly going to be page wise, and I'd find a song that was that length, there's an instrumental by The Beach Boys, *Let's Go Away For A While*, which is in *Baby Driver*, and I arrived at that song by running time alone. I mean, I loved the song, but I was thinking, 'I need a great two-minute instrumental. Ah this is perfect.'

There was one instance in *Baby Driver* where we changed the song after we had filmed the scene and that was because I got slightly irritated by the original song. If a song in anyway annoys you, don't use it in a film because you're going have to listen to it a thousand times. This song started to get on my nerves, and I started trying to figure out a way to find another song with the same tempo that would perfectly fit the scene, which is what I did.

From more on this topic please see Lesson 17 – Music.

ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS

Q. Do you have screenwriting books you swear by?

A. The important thing to remember is that no screenwriting book is going to tell you how to write (but Jed Mercurio might be able to help). However, they can really help you get writing, and that's the important thing. Sometimes if you're stuck, you can refer to those books that might break the dam of a block that you're in.

So there are some screen writing books that I think are pretty good; I thought that Sid Fields' book on screenwriting was really useful and interesting when I was starting out. I remember that when we were writing *Shaun of the Dead*, we also read a book called *How Not to Write a Movie* and again, that's not a book that tells you how to write, but it can certainly tell you things to avoid if you want your script to be widely read and enjoyed.

There were other books like *Save the Cat!*, which is sometimes a bit more controversial because people consider it somehow cynical and formulaic, but as long as you're getting something out of a book which helps you in your process, then it's good, and there's lots of interesting lessons within that book that I think are very valuable.

One of the best books on writing is not actually about screenwriting, but I'd really highly recommend Stephen King's book on writing, which is more just about the creative process and is really about inspiring you to write, which is the whole point.

Q. How do you draw the line between poking fun and making a parody and giving a film homage?

A. When *Shaun of the Dead* and *Hot Fuzz* came out, Simon and I used to really bristle at the words parody or spoof; people saying, '*Oh Shaun of the Dead is a zombie spoof*,' or '*Hot Fuzz is a parody of cop movies*.'

In the case of *Shaun of the Dead* we didn't like these words because we saw it as being affectionate. We're not taking the piss out of zombie films, we're making a zombie film, and the thing that's funny is the characters' reactions to what's going on. We were trying to think up a better term for those movies and we started to call them valentines, like, *Shaun of the Dead* is a valentine to George Romero and zombie movies, and *Hot Fuzz* is a valentine to cop movies. And really what I think it comes down to is whether you sincerely love the genre yourself.

Sometimes when you see spoofs or parodies like the *Scary Movie* films or *Disaster Movie*, they seem to hate the movies they're satirising, and there's maybe a much nastier edge to the humour. I don't think that's the case in *Shaun of the Dead* or *Hot Fuzz*. It is hopefully very clear that we love these movies. In a way, in *Hot Fuzz*, the character of Danny Butterman, played by Nick Frost, is how I feel about cop movies and that movie is me trying to live vicariously through the movie to be like an action cop. I'm from the rural area of Somerset, like the characters in the movie, and when I was a kid, watching *Dirty Harry* movies on TV, it was as though they were from a different universe. So that aspirational quality of the movie, about Danny Butterman wishing there was big action in his small town, is how I felt as a kid.





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The beauty about filmmaking
is there is no right
or wrong path.”

I feel strongly that the difference between parody and homage is the sincerity of why you're making the movie. If you look at some great parodies with Mel Brooks, it's clear to me that *Blazing Saddles*, *Young Frankenstein* and *High Anxiety* are among his best ones. Why? Because Mel Brooks really loves westerns, really loves black and white universal horror films, and really loves Hitchcock movies. In some of his later films, maybe like *Space Balls*, you don't get the great sense that Mel Brooks really loves *Star Wars* that much.

It's about the sincerity of why you're making the film. Films are so difficult to make and you have to have a passion deep down, so I wouldn't make a film in a genre that I didn't care for.



Though I wish I could have answered every question that came my way, I hope the ones I selected gave you some additional insight into the filmmaking process outside of the major topics we've covered during these lessons.

26. Q&A

When discussing the structure of these lessons with the producers, I thought it might be nice to carve out time to invite some current film students in to discuss the process of filmmaking with them and offer up any helpful tips I could provide. So we invited 5 students from the National Film & Television School to come in and ask me any questions they had while also discussing a couple of scenes from my films in the process.



FRANCESCA LIN:

I'm Francesca and I'm a writer. How do you approach rewriting? Sometimes after the first couple of drafts it's hard to see outside characters and stories, so how do you think about which notes to take, and what not to?

EDGAR:

One good thing to do, if you can, is a read through of the script, especially if it's a comedy. Hearing it out loud with whatever actors you can get together, is really helpful. It will highlight which things are working, and which things aren't, or how you could sell an idea better.

I feel sometimes when you get notes the script tends to get longer, and then you end up having to tighten it up again. It's an ongoing process of trying to answer everybody's concerns about the script while keeping to the core of what you wanted to do in the first place.

STEVE LEE:

I wanted to talk about the final fight scene in *Scott Pilgrim*. And my question is, in a film like that which has at least seven fight scenes, how do you go about keeping action and fight scenes fresh?

EDGAR:

Well, I'm glad you asked that. Let's have a look at the clip. One thing I'll say about this scene is that I get immediate PTSD watching, because this was easily the toughest of all the action sequences. Partly related to exactly what you're saying which is that we're trying to make each fight scene more spectacular.

So in this sequence there's lots of moving parts in terms of there being two battles going on at the same time. Scott and Gideon are fighting on the lower level of the Pyramid, and then Ramona and Knives are also fighting at the top. The really tricky thing with this section was, on top of the intricate choreography, we're shooting on a pyramid and when you're a certain height off the ground, you have to have security platforms around to stop the actors falling off. We didn't want to have them all wired up, so we had these platforms and every time we shot one direction, we had to move the platforms around. It was incredibly slow. Usually on this film, Bill Pope, the cinematographer, and I would work pretty fast. On any given day, we would usually get thirty setups, sometimes more. I think the most we ever did in one day was sixty setups, which on a big Hollywood film is sort of crazy.

On the first day of this fight scene, we had done less than ten setups and I was sitting on the pyramid, really depressed. Bill Pope came over to me and said, '*What's the matter?*'

I said, 'Ah, it's just going so slow. We're never going to get through this.'

And Bill said, 'This is how all Hollywood films are.'

We had just worked out a way between us to work very fast. But for this scene, every time you wanted to change the shot, you were looking at half an hour of moving security platforms around, because obviously everybody had to be safe, so it had to be done.

It meant that this sequence was particularly challenging. One of the things I love in this section is there's a little section of still frames. This little bit where Jason Schwartzman is being beaten up is basically all stills. We had a hairdryer making his hair move, but the shots are Jason standing like that with a fist in his face. And I just thought, wouldn't it be funny if it's going so fast it just turns into stills? And so that was one of the bits in the sequence I really loved. There are also little parts of this sequence that were shot maybe nine months after the end of the shoot because we did some pickups at the end.

For more information on this topic please see Lesson 19 – Action Sequences.

JACK VERHAEG:

What's your way into dialogue when you're writing it? For instance in *Baby Driver*, how did you approach that first scene with Baby and Deborah, and building the chemistry in the script?

EDGAR:

With that scene when he first meets Deborah in the diner, I tried to imagine that Baby was a character who didn't really speak that often. In fact, maybe he goes entire days without speaking to anybody, and suddenly he's in a conversation with somebody, and so writing that was fun, because it's almost like Baby is an alien visitor on Earth. He doesn't have the tools to engage in a proper conversation with somebody.

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While the craft of writing
takes a tremendous amount
of patience and dedication
to hone your skill, the only
thing holding you back
from fulfilling your
dreams is you.

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That was the sort of dynamic that I tried to get across. For example, there's one particular bit in their second scene, when he's talking about T-Rex, but he pronounces it 'Trex', and it's that embarrassment of mispronouncing a word, and somebody correcting you, because maybe you've read the word, or it exists in your head, but you've never said the word out loud. I was looking for those little awkward things in conversation.

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WILL PEPPERCORN:

I was wondering what your approach to improv is. Do you use it much on the set when it comes to comedy? How much is nailed down in the script and how much do you improvise around the script?

EDGAR:

Well, it's funny, when we were doing the press tours, particularly for *Shaun of the Dead*, *Hot Fuzz* and *The World's End*, every night somebody would say how much of the film is improvised. And the truth is none of it was really improvised. There were maybe one or two bits in some of the films where there was room for an actor to improv. In some of the sequences in *Shaun of the Dead*, where Nick Frost is in the pub, there was room for him to improv within a little section of the script, but we don't really like doing it. What we do like doing is rehearsing, and if funny stuff comes out of that, through improv, or somebody coming up with an extra line, we'll write it into the script, but pretty much then when we're shooting, we shoot the scripts.

There was definitely a vogue, especially in American comedy, to improv around things, and you can get some really fresh performances, or some surprises. But normally what people tend to be able to improv is arguments. Take *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, the TV show is a perfect example of how to build a show out of improv. And that show is mostly them engineering different arguments between people. But with films like *Shaun of the Dead*, *Hot Fuzz* and *The World's End*, and even going back to *Spaced*, the scenes have a start and they have an end. Usually the last line of the scene leads into the first line of the next scene, so there's nowhere really to go with improv.



BETHAN MOORE:

My name's Bethan, and I was wondering, as a comedy writer, when you're writing your scripts how do you push through the fear that it's not funny?

EDGAR:

Well, it's an interesting one. I'd say, you can write a comedy script on your own, of course, and there are brilliant scripts written by solo comedy writers – Richard Curtis writes his films on his own. But I find writing a comedy is always great with somebody else because writing is a pretty lonely process anyway. *Shaun of the Dead*, *Hot Fuzz*, *The World's End*, were all co-written with Simon Pegg. *Scott Pilgrim vs the World* was co-written with Michael Bacall. I think you come up with things that you wouldn't necessarily come up with alone as you're bouncing off each other. Sometimes you will agree on something and sometimes just the contrast of ideas will create a third way which is even better than either of you were thinking. So I wouldn't say you have to write with a co-writer, but with comedy, I think it's always more fun.

FRANCESCA LIN:

One of my favourite scenes in *Shaun of the Dead* is the plan montage scene and I think that's such a good example of your signature humour. How do you think about when to use montages, either for storytelling or transitions?

EDGAR:

The funny thing about this scene is one of the producers never understood it and didn't understand why we wanted to do it. It was one of the scenes we always had to justify at a scriptwriting stage. We had to shoot so many extra parts for this scene – three different versions of the plan. We just liked this idea of seeing what the perfect world version is, and then to have three different drafts of that. And in Shaun's head, everything's fine. Everybody's smiling. Everything is perfect. It was just something that we thought was a funny idea.

What's also interesting is that the music in this bit is actually music from the original *Dawn of the Dead*. It was one of our nods to the George Romero classic. But it was one of those scenes that some people just flat out didn't get it until we had edited it together with the music. So I'm glad you pointed this out because I really had to argue to do this scene at all!

STEVEN LEE:

What I noticed looking back at your films and in preparation for this, was the Cornetto trilogy and *Scott Pilgrim* seem to have a unique brand of humour, and then you seem to deviate a little bit from that in *Baby Driver* and *Last Night in Soho*. I wondered was that a conscious decision, and is it scary or exhilarating to try something that's a bit new?

EDGAR:

I think you end up wanting to challenge yourself. Sometimes people say 'Oh, you can do another film like *Hot Fuzz*.' But if I only made films like *Hot Fuzz*, then people would get tired of that. You have to do what you want to do and not what you think you ought to do. I'm fortunate enough to have the chance to try different things and I want to try and flex different muscles. That's not to say that I wouldn't go back and do a film like that again, but I have the opportunity to try different things and different tones. *Baby Driver* is more of an action film, and *Last Night in Soho* is more of a horror film. I like the idea of trying to do different things within the different movies.



STEVEN LEE:

Is anything off limits? Would you do a period drama, for instance?

EDGAR:

No, I think that the exciting thing is that there are so many different types of stories to tell. I think it's really about what the germ of the story is rather than necessarily what genre it's in. Sometimes it's the story first or even just the visual. And then you realise that, 'Oh, that's this kind of movie'. *Baby Driver* was an idea of a particular scene, the opening scene and how that could be an entire movie.

BETHAN MOORE:

I was wondering about *Baby Driver* and your use of music. I was wondering how your choices played into the storytelling and when you were writing the scripts, how much did the choice of those revolve around the story? When you're working on set with the songs, how did that work with everyone?

EDGAR:

Well, let's have a look at a scene from the film; this sequence is all set to a cover of *Tequila*. And there's a couple of things going on here. Firstly, it was written into the script. And then, long, long before we made the movie, myself and this DJ, Osymyso, AKA Mark Nicholson, had edited all of these gunshots into the song.

We designed this sequence around the sound mix that we'd made and we cut them together with the storyboards. In other sequences in the film, we would play the music out loud if there was no dialogue. Or if there was dialogue, we would have earwigs where the actors can hear the song and we could still record the dialogue. But then the blank firing guns were so loud, that it wiped out any playback, so even if you were playing *Tequila* on set, which we were, you couldn't hear the song over the guns.

We had to come up with a different way of doing it, so we broke it down into little segments and myself and the choreographer, Ryan Heffington, had to tell the actors what their part was based on. We had to say to Jamie, '*And then you come up and go, bang, bang, ba-ba-bang. And then be, bang, bang, ba-ba-bang*', while you're doing it with your finger and a sound.

It was sort of crazy where we had to break it down into tiny little pieces, mimicking the sound effects that we'd already put on the song. And that was the only way of getting through this particular bit because, unlike other sequences in the film, there was no way of hearing the track over the gunfire. But what it also meant with this sequence is that we knew exactly how long each shot was going to be and we could design the entire sequence to what we'd already put together with the music and the sound effects. And then later, cut the storyboards together to form an animatic.

With some action films, people would just shoot reams and reams of footage and edit it together later. But we were able to reverse engineer it, because we knew the shot might be as long as a verse in the song, for example. And then at a certain point in the music, they needed to get into the next section. So, it was really useful in a way where it actually hemmed in the actors.

Sometimes actors don't want to be told exactly how long to do a line but in this case, everybody was on board with the idea of this section having to be exactly this long because then we have to get to the next piece of music. It was a really interesting way of putting together a film and I think it actually meant that there was less waste because there were very few shots that we shot for the movie that didn't end up going into it.

If you're shooting action films, people might be shooting on seven cameras and have reams and reams of feet, but pretty much every shot that we shot in *Baby Driver* is in the film, because it was all tied in to a specific bit in the music.

For more information on this topic please see Lesson 17 – Music.

BONUS QUESTIONS

1. I watched *A Fistful of Fingers* the other day, and it looked like you guys just had so much fun making it. Even the credits had me laughing. If you could go back, would you do something similar or maybe better? Would you advise aspiring filmmakers to do something similar and make a feature on a small budget?

EDGAR:

That's a tricky one, because if I could go back and make the film better - would I? Absolutely. But if I could go back and not make the film, that's a trickier proposition, because as I detail in the rest of the lessons, making that film led to a set of chance encounters that led to *Shaun of the Dead*, and without that film I don't know whether I would have done any of this.

A Fistful of Fingers was all powered along by my own naivety and I don't think I ever did, as you can probably tell, a second draft of the script. I think it was a film where, if anybody had thought about it for more than a single second, it might have completely collapsed in on itself. There were several moments leading up to the production where we didn't really know whether it was going to happen or not.

I wanted to make something that was a bit like the *Evil Dead*, and when I was editing it, it started to hit me that the film was not that great, and I wanted to go back and shoot some extra material. I thought if we shot some extra scenes, we could paste up the movie. We could make it funnier. And I committed a cardinal sin, in that I called the film's financier, told him I thought the film was no good, and that we had to shoot more scenes. My producer was so mad but it backfired on me; the guy who gave us the money came up to London to watch the film, said, '*Oh, I think it's really great*', and that was the end of that discussion. The film was what it was, and there were no reshoots, and I just had to be happy with what I'd made.

That said, if you've got a great idea for something, and you want to go out and shoot it, then great. Your first film doesn't have to be a classic. Not everybody makes *Sex, Lies and Videotape*, or *Reservoir Dogs*, or *Citizen Kane* right out of the gate. Most people don't, and I think I set myself unreasonable goals with my first movie. It took me a long time to be at peace with the film.

2. How fluid is your process from idea to script to storyboard to screen, and does the script change a lot when you get to storyboard stage?

EDGAR:

Because I write to direct, I tend to have the images in my head and writing the script is the process of getting that idea from my head onto the page. Then I tend to draw the storyboards in the margin.

That process came from having worked in TV where you're working a lot faster. I would usually mark up a script by drawing the shots. When I was doing *Spaced*, written by Simon Pegg and Jessica Hynes, I would read the scripts and draw my storyboards in the margin to give me the idea of how many shots were in the scene and I tend to do the same thing with my own scripts. I start drawing the frames, then usually there are key frames which you can start to do as concept frames.

So something like *Last Night in Soho*, there was the script and then when we presented it to the studio, we had some key concept frames of hero moments from the film. After that, you start mapping out all the storyboards, which is a long process. I sketch them first and then I work with my brother and other artists to create the finished boards. I used to do all my own storyboards, but *Shaun of the Dead* was the last time that I actually did that.

For more information on this topic please see Lesson 9 – Storyboards and Animatics.

3. Do you enjoy drawing as part of your visualising process? Was there a particular reason you moved on from wanting to do it after *Shaun of the Dead* such as logistics, or is it something that you get a lot from?

EDGAR:

Because *Shaun of the Dead* was a lower budget film, I did all of the storyboards myself, with my brother Oscar, and it saved on having to pay a storyboard artist. I do like drawing, but I've never done finished storyboards like I did on *Shaun of the Dead*, just because of the time factor. I always sketch out the process of it so I know what the boards are. And sometimes there'll be times when you're on the set of a movie and even though you've got the finished storyboards, you have to doodle it in your head again to get the sequence in your head.

You can have all these finished storyboards and it starts to look like Japanese lettering. I still have the piece of paper from one sequence in *Scott Pilgrim*, where I sketched out how a little sequence should go in really rough sketches. I showed it to Bill Pope, the DP, and he said, '*Oh yeah, okay, I've got it.*' But I had to do it for my own mental processes. I'd forgotten how it was going.

4. Because your visuals are so choreographed, I was wondering, whether you get an editor on board earlier than most people to help with that choreography? Or is it quite linear in terms of work?

EDGAR:

With the first couple of movies we edited after the film. Usually the editor is already in the edit editing what you shot a couple of days ago, while you're shooting. Then they can flag up problems with scenes.

But when we started doing *Scott Pilgrim* with very detailed action sequences we started to edit on the set and that was really useful. You could see whether a sequence was working or not and you could adjust on the fly if something was missing. Then, on *The World's End*, we did the same thing. For the action sequences, we started to edit on set. That was revolutionary in a way, because by the end of the day, you could bring all of the actors around the monitor and say, 'Hey, do you want to see what we shot today?' We were shooting on 35mm, but we managed to take the images off the video assist and just edit that to see whether the continuity was working. Then on *Baby Driver* and *Last Night in Soho*, because they have so much choreography in them and there's so much music, we started to edit everything on set.

You don't need to edit a dialogue scene on set. If it's a simple dialogue scene, there's no real reason to be editing on set, you'll know whether you have the scene or not. But if there's choreography or timing involved, or with stunt stuff like continuity, you can establish whether you need to go again. There's little bits in *Last Night in Soho* that we would be shooting and then we'd wait a couple of minutes for Paul Machliss, the editor, to say if it was going to work.

I trust him implicitly. If he says it's going to work, I'm happy to move on. It's there to make the process go quicker and to be moving on with the knowledge that you actually have it in the can. It's not something I share with everybody. You don't want all the producers sitting around the edit, seeing what's happening and I tend to ban people from being by the edit on set. I'll go up and talk to Paul but I don't want everybody to be watching it. It's so we can figure out whether we have the sequence or not and it's incredibly useful.

For more information on this topic please see Lesson 21 – Editing.

5. You talked a little bit earlier about writing to direct. What is the fundamental difference for you in storytelling as a director versus as a screenwriter?

EDGAR :

I love writing but I didn't set out to be a writer. It was almost like a necessary evil in the sense that Simon and I wanted to make a film and we realised that nobody was going to write it for us. *Shaun of the Dead* came out of that. At the time, we were both reading screenplays that were out there, feeling disappointed in them and thinking in a cocky way, 'Oh, we could do better than this'. So, that's why we started writing that film.

It gives you a huge advantage. Very rarely are you sitting around on a set discussing what the intention of the scene is, because you've written the script. You can explain that to the actors and the crew early on and the script is less open to interpretation because you are the writer and director.

Essentially, you can answer all the questions. I found that to be a huge benefit because you have a more unified vision. They're asking one person for answers to the question instead of two. Sometimes the writer isn't even on the set; they've long gone. Then it's a free-for-all in terms of different interpretations of what the script is supposed to be. But because I wrote or co-wrote the script, I can answer all those questions as well.

27. Conclusion

I truly hope during these lessons you were able to discover some new tips and tricks to help you on your journey to becoming a filmmaker. Though I have discussed how difficult the filmmaking process can be, it's important to note that if you truly love the medium and want to become a filmmaker, you'll get there if you keep working hard and pushing yourself to hone your craft. Focus on making the films you want to make, something that is memorable and true to your own voice, and the rest will eventually fall into place. Remember, even I'm still learning about the art of filmmaking every day. You never stop being a student of the form. So keep at it and eventually, I'll be seeing your name in lights when your feature debut hits the big screen.

Edgar Wright



FADE OUT :



“
It cannot be overstated how
much the movies can leave
an impact on someone.”

Appendix: 100 Movies That Influenced Me Before I Made *Shaun of the Dead*

1. *M* – Fritz Lang (1931)
2. *Duck Soup* – Leo McCarey (1933)
3. *Dames* – Ray Enright & Busby Berkeley (1934)
4. *Citizen Kane* – Orson Welles (1941)
5. *A Matter Of Life & Death* – Michael Powell & Emeric Pressburger (1946)
6. *Black Narcissus* – Michael Powell & Emeric Pressburger (1947)
7. *Strangers on a Train* – Alfred Hitchcock (1951)
8. *The Wages of Fear* – Henri-Georges Clouzot (1953)
9. *Breathless* – Jean-Luc Godard (1960)
10. *La Dolce Vita* – Federico Fellini (1960)
11. *Peeping Tom* – Michael Powell (1960)
12. *Psycho* – Alfred Hitchcock (1960)
13. *The Innocents* – Jack Clayton (1961)
14. *A Hard Day's Night* – Richard Lester (1964)
15. *Blood and Black Lace* – Mario Bava (1964)
16. *Dr. Strangelove* – Stanley Kubrick (1964)
17. *Repulsion* – Roman Polanski (1965)
18. *Blow-Up* – Michelangelo Antonioni (1966)
19. *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* – Sergio Leone (1966)
20. *Belle de Jour* – Luis Buñuel (1967)
21. *Bonnie and Clyde* – Arthur Penn (1967)
22. *Playtime* – Jacques Tati (1967)
23. *The Graduate* – Mike Nichols (1967)
24. *2001: A Space Odyssey* – Stanley Kubrick (1968)
25. *Night of the Living Dead* – George A. Romero (1968)
26. *Rosemary's Baby* – Roman Polanski (1968)
27. *The Swimmer* – Frank Perry (1968)
28. *The Italian Job* – Peter Collinson (1969)
29. *The Wild Bunch* – Sam Peckinpah (1969)
30. *Duel* – Steven Spielberg (1971)
31. *Harold and Maude* – Hal Ashby (1971)
32. *The French Connection* – William Friedkin (1971)
33. *Cabaret* – Bob Fosse (1972)
34. *American Graffiti* – George Lucas (1973)
35. *Don't Look Now* – Nicolas Roeg (1973)
36. *Blazing Saddles* – Mel Brooks (1974)
37. *Phantom of the Paradise* – Brian De Palma (1974)
38. *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot* – Michael Cimino (1974)
39. *Deep Red* – Dario Argento (1975)
40. *Assault on Precinct 13* – John Carpenter (1976)
41. *Carrie* – Brian De Palma (1976)
42. *Nuts in May* – Mike Leigh (1976)
43. *Taxi Driver* – Martin Scorsese (1976)
44. *Annie Hall* – Woody Allen (1977)
45. *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* – Steven Spielberg (1977)
46. *Eraserhead* – David Lynch (1977)
47. *Suspiria* – Dario Argento (1977)
48. *Halloween* – John Carpenter (1978)
49. *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* – Philip Kaufman (1978)
50. *The Driver* – Walter Hill (1978)



51. *Alien* – Ridley Scott (1979)
52. *Mad Max* – George Miller (1979)
53. *Airplane!* – David Zucker, Jerry Zucker & Jim Abrahams (1980)
54. *Dressed to Kill* – Brian De Palma (1980)
55. *The Blues Brothers* – John Landis (1980)
56. *The Fog* – John Carpenter (1980)
57. *An American Werewolf in London* – John Landis (1981)
58. *Gregory's Girl* – Bill Forsyth (1980)
59. *Raiders of the Lost Ark* – Steven Spielberg (1981)
60. *Poltergeist* – Tobe Hooper (1982)
61. *The Thing* – John Carpenter (1982)
62. *Risky Business* – Paul Brickman (1983)
63. *Gremlins* – Joe Dante (1984)
64. *This is Spinal Tap* – Rob Reiner (1984)
65. *Top Secret!* – David Zucker, Jerry Zucker & Jim Abrahams (1984)
66. *After Hours* – Martin Scorsese (1985)
67. *Brazil* – Terry Gilliam (1985)
68. *Police Story* – Jackie Chan (1985)
69. *Blue Velvet* – David Lynch (1986)
70. *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* – John Hughes (1986)
71. *Something Wild* – Jonathan Demme (1986)
72. *The Fly* – David Cronenberg (1987)
73. *Evil Dead II* – Sam Raimi (1987)
74. *Raising Arizona* – Ethan Coen & Joel Coen (1987)
75. *Withnail & I* – Bruce Robinson (1987)
76. *The Vanishing* – George Sluizer (1988)
77. *Goodfellas* – Martin Scorsese (1990)
78. *Life is Sweet* – Mike Leigh (1990)
79. *Tremors* – Ron Underwood (1990)
80. *Delicatessen* – Jean-Pierre Jeunet & Marc Caro (1991)
81. *The Silence of the Lambs* – Jonathan Demme (1991)
82. *Braindead* – Peter Jackson (1992)
83. *Hard Boiled* – John Woo (1992)
84. *Reservoir Dogs* – Quentin Tarantino (1992)
85. *True Romance* – Tony Scott (1993)
86. *Clerks* – Kevin Smith (1995)
87. *Pulp Fiction* – Quentin Tarantino (1994)
88. *Desperado* – Robert Rodriguez (1996)
89. *La Haine* – Mathieu Kassovitz (1995)
90. *Trainspotting* – Danny Boyle (1996)
91. *Boogie Nights* – Paul Thomas Anderson (1998)
92. *Out of Sight* – Steven Soderbergh (1998)
93. *Run Lola Run* – Tom Tykwer (1999)
94. *Rushmore* – Wes Anderson (1999)
95. *Election* – Alexander Payne (1999)
96. *The Sixth Sense* – M. Night Shyamalan (1999)
97. *Requiem for a Dream* – Darren Aronofsky (2001)
98. *Songs from the Second Floor* – Roy Andersson (2001)
99. *Amélie* – Jean-Pierre Jeunet (2001)
100. *Hero* – Yi-Mou Zhang (2004)

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