FILMMAKER

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SAVANAH LEAF'S
Earth Mama

IRA SACHS'S
Passages

EMMA SELIGMAN'S
Bottoms

DUSTIN GUY DEFA'S
The Adults

**FILMMAKERS WORKING
WITH XR AND AI**

**2023
FILM SCHOOL GUIDE**

**A VIRTUAL PRODUCTION
CASE STUDY**

I can't think of a better film to grace the cover of the final issue of *Filmmaker*'s 30th anniversary year than Savanah Leaf's *Earth Mama*. From its opening scenes, it impresses as a work of classic independent cinema—social realism shot through with unexpected creative flourishes and informed by the personal life experience of its maker. A version of this film might have been made in each of *Filmmaker*'s three decades, but with different emphases, of course, and perhaps under very different circumstances. The story of this one—a U.K./U.S. production backed by Channel 4 and A24—was told last issue by Anthony Kaufman in his Industry Beat column, and that such an uncompromising work had industry backing is a cause for celebration. Speaking with Leaf here is writer-director Derek Cianfrance, who has a long history with *Filmmaker*, appearing on our 25 New Faces list in 2009 when he was in production on his second feature, *Blue Valentine*, but also nearly a decade earlier, in 2000, as part of a roundtable discussion about filmmakers struggling to make their sophomore pictures. In other words, Cianfrance has seen a lot of independent history, and his conversation with Leaf is an uncommonly intimate one, touching on topics I don't think we've seen discussed in this way here before.

Elsewhere in this issue, there are conversations with directors who have appeared here since early in their careers, including Ira Sachs (interviewed by filmmaker Stephen Winter about the spiky relationship triangle drama *Passages*), Dustin Guy Defa (a 2014 25 New Face interviewed by Darren Hughes about his mid-life coming-of-age drama, *The Adults*) and Emma Seligman (a 2020 25 New Face interviewed by Natalia Keogan about her irreverent MGM/Orion comedy, *Bottoms*).

If all these familiar faces and filmmakers with long careers making independent work would have you believe that everything is fine in the independent film scene, the issue also contains recognition of countervailing forces. As I write this, SAG-AFTRA members are considering joining the WGA in striking the AMPTP. By the time you read this, we should know whether the industry will effectively be shut down for months, including independent productions that will be collateral damage. One of the key issues in the labor dispute is the use of AI, artificial intelligence, which could allow actors and even screenwriters to be replaced or, at the least, have their workdays diminished. In a new column, "Emergence," dealing with all forms of new AR, VR and XR, director and artist Deniz Tortum considers how young filmmakers are responding to the rapid proliferation of this technology with both creativity and alarm. Joshua Glick makes his *Filmmaker* debut with a critique of streamer-dominated documentary economics before calling for a rebirth of public media. And in a spirited conversation, distribution workers Keisha Knight and Sophia Haid decry the cautious, establishment politics of the A-list festival circuit and argue for a curatorial recalibration.

Then there are two classic, old-school *Filmmaker* articles: producer Miranda Kahn on how and why to start a production company, and an epic account by filmmakers Jonathan Mason and Tisha Robinson-Daly about their use of virtual production to prove they can make an ambitious independent feature about telecom workers perched hundreds of feet in the sky.

See you next issue.

Best,

Scott Macaulay
Editor-in-Chief

After debuting with a program in the 1979 New York Film Festival, the nonprofit The Gotham has evolved into the nation's oldest and largest organization of independent filmmakers, and also the premier advocate for them. Since its start, IFP has supported the production of 12,000 films and provided resources to more than 30,000 filmmakers — voices that otherwise might not have been heard. For additional information: thegotham.org

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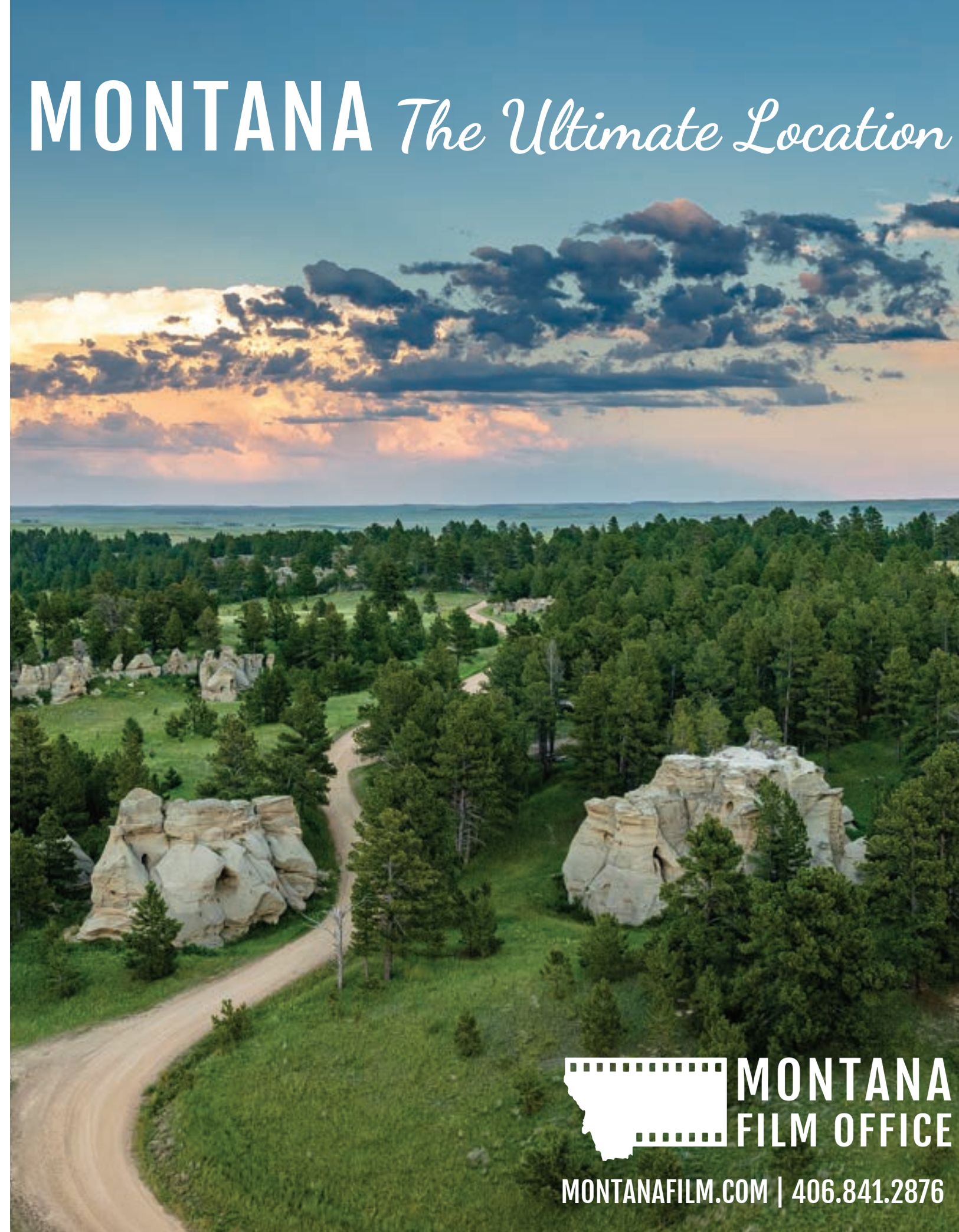
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Peak TV is Over— What Comes Next?

Anthony Kaufman on how independent creators are reacting to the shrinking of the television production landscape.

Remember "Peak TV"?

It was a good run, starting more than a decade ago with the launch of filmmaker-driven shows such as Lena Dunham's *Girls* on HBO, David Fincher's *House of Cards* on Netflix and Jane Campion's *Top of the Lake* on Sundance Channel, not to mention episodic heavyweights like *Breaking Bad*, *Game of Thrones*, *Mad Men* and *The Walking Dead*, all of which supplied steady work for a plethora of indie writers and directors. But that party is over—or at least taking a break. If the corporate mergers and media layoffs of the past year weren't enough of a red flag, the industry's recent labor battles are the ultimate buzzkill, a sign of growing disconnect between the companies that backed such shows and the workers who created them.

It's hard to say what the landscape will look like post-strike. Some producers and directors are optimistic that what comes on the other side will be better for freelance creators looking to make episodic work; others remain wary of an increasingly corporate marketplace—a period recently defined by critic Sam Adams as "Trough TV," where "a steroidal hybrid of algorithmic insights and old-school showbiz wisdom about what sells [results] in a flood of bad-idea IP extensions (*Velma*, *That '90s Show*), true-crime schlock (Netflix's en-

tire Documentaries tab), and *Yellowstone* spinoffs."

Just a few years ago, it didn't seem that way. During the binge-watching COVID months of 2020, "there was a real buying frenzy, and producers started selling lots of series," says producer Sofia Sondervan-Bild, who closed a deal on a new episodic thriller with Fox Networks at the time. "But then in 2021–2022, the consolidation started, the streamers started letting go of entire groups and a lot of the people we were going to pitch to are now gone."

According to a recent report in *Variety*, the streaming companies' new cost-cutting "austerity" measures have led to a wave of cancellations, revoked season orders and a major reduction in new titles, which nearly doubled in 2021 but rose only four percent last year. "We were in a bubble," admits one producer, "where streamers were spending tons on content, then suddenly realized they were not able to sustain that."

During this period of corporate retrenchment, indie filmmakers are bound to bear the brunt. With every studio producing for its own platforms and clamoring for exclusivity, Deniese Davis, producer of HBO's acclaimed Issa Rae series *Insecure*, argues the newly vertically integrated system has created a far more closed environment.

"It's inevitably gotten more risk averse," she says. "You can see how the studios are more concerned about shareholders than what audiences want to see."

In November of last year, on the eve of the downturn, Davis was fortunate to have landed a development deal with Tyler Perry Studios. She suggests the best way forward for creators is to eschew corporate dependency and partner with independent studios, such as MACRO, A24 and MRC. "They can make their own work and bring financial capital to a project," she says.

Similarly, producer Helen Estabrook, who had first look deals with HBO (*Mrs. Fletcher*) and Hulu (*Casual*), saw the writing on the wall a couple years ago and, rather than continue working independently, joined Condé Nast as head of global film and television in March 2021. "We wouldn't be able to get a full season of *Casual* now," she says, referring to the Jason Reitman comic drama. "We've gotten to a point where the creatives are no longer in the room with the decision-makers, and the people who are the decision-makers aren't the decision-makers anymore. It may even be the same people, but they have new bosses and new metrics."

According to many insiders, the studios are only looking for proven concepts and proven talent. "Companies

want only the most experienced and proven showrunners—all of whom are already locked up by other shows," says Davis.

"In the same way that only one of 10 actors could get an independent film made," echoes Estabrook, "now you have one of only 10 showrunners who can get a show made."

"The challenge now," agrees Mark Duplass, the indie filmmaker turned prolific TV executive producer, "is to continue to make unique, interesting, smaller shows as the lanes for what the buyers want narrow. The big dudes want that big, repeatable IP. It's more about putting all their chips in a few big baskets these days."

One executive, who recently left her production company to become an agent, says the larger players have less room for independents. "They have their production deals, or producers with a big IP library," says the agent. "Unless you're a big name yourself, they don't need you."

Zadoc Angell, co-president of Echo Lake Entertainment's management division, who represents a number of creatives for the TV industry, sees shifts in the kinds of series that networks and streamers want these days away from anything niche toward the mainstream. "Unfortunately, there are [fewer] opportunities for that

slice-of-life or small audience type of show," he says. "They're talking a lot about reaching wider audiences and shows not being for 'Middle America' enough. And there is a strong need for a propulsive story engine that is going to keep people binging a show."

And despite all of the chatter about prestige TV like *Succession*—which, like many similar high-profile series, has employed indie filmmakers, including Shari Springer Berman and Robert Pulcini, Andrij Parekh and Miguel Arteta—such series do not satisfy the mandates of the new streaming universe. "A lot of these companies are looking for broader content because they are moving more toward an advertising model," says one executive. "As much as we all talk about *Succession*, everyone is watching *NCIS*." (According to trade reports, *Succession*'s season finale reached a series-best 2.9 million people; *NCIS*, CBS's conventional police procedural about the Naval Criminal Investigative Service, regularly reaches more than 10 million people in a week.)

The state of the nonfiction serial business is even harder for indie filmmakers. "To say the marketplace is cold is generous," says one documentary producer. "It's fucking freezing." In the same way that many fiction shows need familiar branding associated with them, the very rare documentary

THE SLOB

Will mediocre talent take down your project?

projects being greenlit are only the most celebrity-driven and accessible. Because of the cutbacks, "the saddest part for me," says the producer, "is there are all these people who were working as co-producers and associate producers who thought they had a career, and now that's going away."

Despite such constrictions and contractions, there is the sense that the push for new content will continue. After all, many of the big media platforms are trying to grow and compete for subscribers. Duplass, who, together with friend and colleague Barret O'Brien, launched an episodic indie pilot at this year's Tribeca Festival called *The Long Long Night*, says, "I hope to make things cheaply enough so that they can't say no to me. It's what I've always done, and I hope it continues to work."

Smaller platforms also continue to strive to break out. As O'Brien says, "There is more and more acceptance of smaller TV platforms, so there are more outlets and space for creators to pitch their wares."

Amazon's ad-supported Freevee platform, for one, continues to produce independent TV (including recent hit *Jury Duty*), and The Roku Channel is seen to have growth potential (recently buying actress-filmmaker Zoe Lister-Jones's comedy series *Slip*). But the sector remains "limited" and "to be determined" says one insider, with a lot of focus on ad-supported reality TV–style programming. It was not a good

sign for more prestige-style indie TV when Facebook Watch's Originals unit, home to shows such as the Elizabeth Olsen drama *Sorry for Your Loss* and the Stanley Tucci podcast adaptation *Limetown*, was shuttered this April.

Some directors are trying to remain positive. James Ponsoldt, director of *The Spectacular Now*, who recently worked as an executive producer and director on *Sorry for Your Loss*, as well as Amazon's *Daisy Jones & the Six* and Apple's *Shrinking*, has faith that distinctive and visionary work will continue to thrive. "I think the studios and networks want to have shows that make people talk, and you don't get that from being mediocre because the bar is so high these days," he says. With multiple shows in development, Ponsoldt still feels "there is an openness to ideas that are pushing the envelope."

"I would like to think that we're going to bounce back and the crème will rise to the top," agrees *Lift* filmmaker De-Mane Davis, who got her TV start on Ava DuVernay's *Queen Sugar*, like a lot of African American women directors, and was recently a co-executive producer and director on new shows such as CBS's *Clarice* and the CW's *Naomi*. While Davis worries about new creators being able to graduate to the showrunner ranks in the current climate, she says, "There are a lot of popular shows that are ending, and there's going to have to be shows that take their place."

Tze Chun, another indie filmmaker turned prolific TV creator for such shows as *Once Upon a Time*, *Gotham*, and Boots Riley's new series, *I'm a Virgo*, admits that he's seen some "shutting down of submissions. But I see this as short term. I'm trying not to get discouraged because in every part of the industry—indies or studios, cable or streaming—there have always been companies that are hot for a little while, and then contract for a little while."

Like a lot of indie filmmakers who have made the transition to television, Chun is using the slowdowns and strike hiatus to develop new projects and feature films. According to one producer, a lot of filmmakers are going back to independent film projects or even making podcasts to create an original IP for shows that they'll develop later.

"I don't chase trends anymore," says Chun. "By the time a studio is looking for something, that information is old. When *Ted Lasso* was reaching its peak, all the studios just wanted optimistic stuff, and all my friends who write dark stuff were freaking out. I said, 'Wait a month,' and then *Squid Game* came out."

"Every project is short term, but you are long term," he continues. "And nothing in this industry—no ebb or valley—is forever. We just have to keep proving that people who are coming from independent film can break through, and as long as the shows are successful, there is no reason why they won't continue."
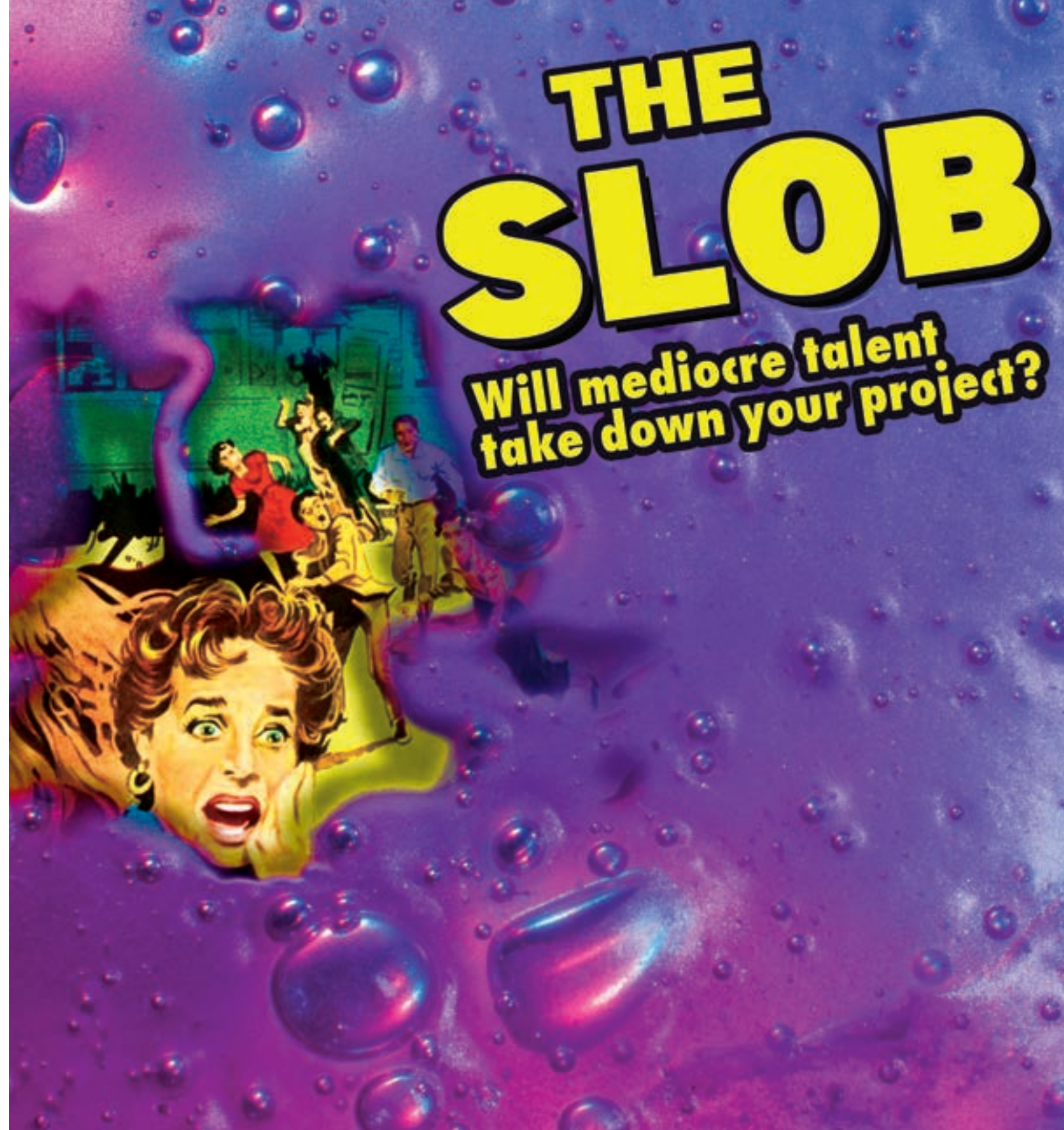
Images: the cast of *Jury Duty* (pg. 6) and Edy Modica, Mekki Leeper, Susan Berger, Ross Kimball and Ronald Gladden in *Jury Duty* (pg. 6), both courtesy of Amazon Freevee. Above: *I'm a Virgo*, courtesy of Prime Video.

Crash Course

Holly Willis on catching up with developments in AI.

Earlier this year, as ChatGPT, Midjourney, Runway and a long list of other AI tools ignited a national conversation about artificial intelligence, many of my colleagues in the School of Cinematic Arts at the University of Southern California shuddered in horror over the displacement of human craft and creativity by visuals created through simple text prompts. Published in *The New York Times* in February, columnist Kevin Roose's description of his creepy conversation with Bing added gasoline to the fire, prompting a desire to prohibit the use of all AI across all of our programs. And what about plagiarism?! The general vibe was anxious fretting.

While AI's seemingly sudden presence, increasing capacity and rapid speed of development sparked a sense of unease, we were not quite sure how best to respond. Some institutions around the country programmed AI-related events.

For example, Bart Weiss, a filmmaker and professor in the Art & Art History Department at the University of Texas at Arlington, hosted a conversation titled "DIALOGUES IN ART: THE AESTHETICS OF AI" featuring Lynn Hershman Leeson, David Stout, Ira Greenberg and Kevin Page. Similarly, Stanford University's HAI (Human-Centered Artificial Intelligence) hosted a symposium titled, "Creativity in the Age of AI: AI Impacting Arts, Arts Impacting AI," with a terrific lineup of presenters, including Golan Levin and Lauren Lee McCarthy. These events were great, with a level of precision about AI that was refreshing; however, despite reading and hearing so much about AI, most of us had absolutely no real understanding of just how AI tools actually work or what they might offer a creative community.

To alleviate this illiteracy, we invited computational linguist Noya Kohavi to lead an intensive three-session workshop explaining the foundations of the technology for faculty in SCA. Kohavi is currently part of the Antikythera program of the Berggruen Institute in L.A., which brings together an interdisciplinary group of scholars, designers and artists to consider planetary-scale computation. Led by Benjamin Bratton, the project is exploring forms of synthetic intelligence, planetary sapience and methods of worldbuilding. Noya took time away from intensive research on that massive project to present "From the Chinese Room to the Embeddings Space: A Workshop About Language and AI." At the beginning of the workshop, I admit I had no idea what the Chinese Room was, never mind embeddings space, which I assumed must have been a misspelling.

On day one, Kohavi took us through foundational concepts of intelligence and cognition, from the power attributed to Clever Hans, the horse thought to be able to complete math problems in the early 1900s, to the Turing Test and Mechanical Turk. The Chinese Room, it turns out, names a thought experiment developed by philosopher John Searle in the 1970s that helps us understand how computers function. Searle imagines himself alone in a room; his job is to respond to Chinese characters that are delivered to the room even though he does not understand Chinese. He completes his task using a program for manipulating the characters to create the appropriate response. As a result, for those who send and receive the Chinese characters outside the room, it might appear that someone who understands Chinese inside the room is responding. However, what Searle shows is that all that's needed is the program. No actual comprehension or interpretation by the man inside the room is required. The thought experiment offers a quick way to point to both the limitations of intelligence in a system like ChatGPT as well as our tendency to overattribute the competencies of computational systems based on what we imagine to be happening.

Kohavi then moved on to explore more complex concepts, showing, for example, how language modes use sophisticated forms of pattern recognition to predict word strings. We talked about the Distributional Hypothesis, which states that semantically similar words will tend to occur in related contexts. This concept may not seem particularly illuminating, but in the context of language models, the hypothesis not only begins to show their spatial dimension but also demonstrates how text prediction functions. Words become vectors through a process of embedding, which in turn allows us to calculate the probability of appropriate outputs in text strings.

Even just this bit of clarity about how language models basically use a giant multidimensional collection of text as a foundation to infer relationships among words so that they can predict what words should come next helped us begin to see through the hazy rhetoric that touts the "magic" of AI. Furthermore, the rootedness of these models in statistics and probabilities made us aware of a very different logic at work than that of the analog image. With this fresh in our minds, Kohavi pointed us to artist Hito Steyerl's recent essay in *New Left Review,* "Mean Images," in which Steyerl explains, "Visuals created by ml [machine learning] tools are statistical renderings, rather than images of actually existing objects." She continues, "They shift the focus from photographic indexicality to stochastic discrimination. They no longer refer to facticity, let alone truth, but to probability." While I bristle at the implication that photographic indexicality necessarily embodies truth, Steyerl's biting critique goes on to consider the many ramifications of "mean" as a term, from the statistical average to notions of nastiness.

With Kohavi, we went on to talk about how generative pre-trained transformers (GPTs) work, with attention to ethics, politics, labor, bias and environmental costs, as well as compelling concepts such as what N. Katherine Hayles, in her book *Unthought,* calls a "planetary cognitive ecology" to reference human and machine-based tools that, when integrated, prompt questions about the changing nature of cognition, not to mention the human.

Many of us teaching in film programs began using image- and video-generating tools as soon as we could and, as a result, gleaned a sense of their capacities and limitations through practice. However, Kohavi's foundational workshop has been incredibly grounding, helping explain the rootedness of machine learning in statistics. My sense is that all of us in filmmaking programs need this basic literacy, not simply to understand the underlying logic of AI and its larger cultural implications, but also to be better equipped to explain it to our students.

Turning Data into Art

Joanne McNeil on large language models and the poetry of Allison Parrish.

An application like ChatGPT is "taking the last 20 years of the internet and chewing it up, then producing a system that draws from that," Allison Parrish explained when we spoke over Zoom last month. To the poet and programmer, generating content with large language model (LLM) neural nets is like "powering an engine with the methane that comes from decomposing corpses in a graveyard."

Few artists working today have Parrish's depth of experience with generative text. You have likely encountered her work online, especially if you were active on Twitter in the "Horse_ebooks" era. Early on in her career, she was featured in publications like *The Village Voice* and *The Guardian* for building bots like @everyword, which, from 2007 to 2014, tweeted "every word" in the English language in alphabetical order—or quite close to it. In recent years, Parrish has published acclaimed books of computational poetry, including *Articulations* (2018) and *Wendit Tnce Inf* (2022). She is currently developing a solar-powered device for generating poetry with a "radically small language model." Her practice might fall under the heading of "AI art" (given the rubbery definition of what "artificial intelligence" even is), but no one would mistake what Parrish creates for Midjourney-made Wes Anderson-ified *Dune* trailers or any other turbo-pastiche novelties entered as a prompt and produced with the click of button.

I've been thinking a lot about Parrish's work and that of other artists who have engaged with generative art long before OpenAI released ChatGPT to the public in November 2022 (which destined us to at least a year's worth of thinkpieces on authenticity and the value of writing as thinking). The difference between what Parrish creates and the "AI" detritus swiftly clogging up the internet is obvious, but where is the line drawn?

Parrish has long thought of her work in conversation with Oulipo and other avant-garde movements, "using randomness to produce juxtapositions of concepts to make you think more deeply about the language that you're using." But now, with LLMs
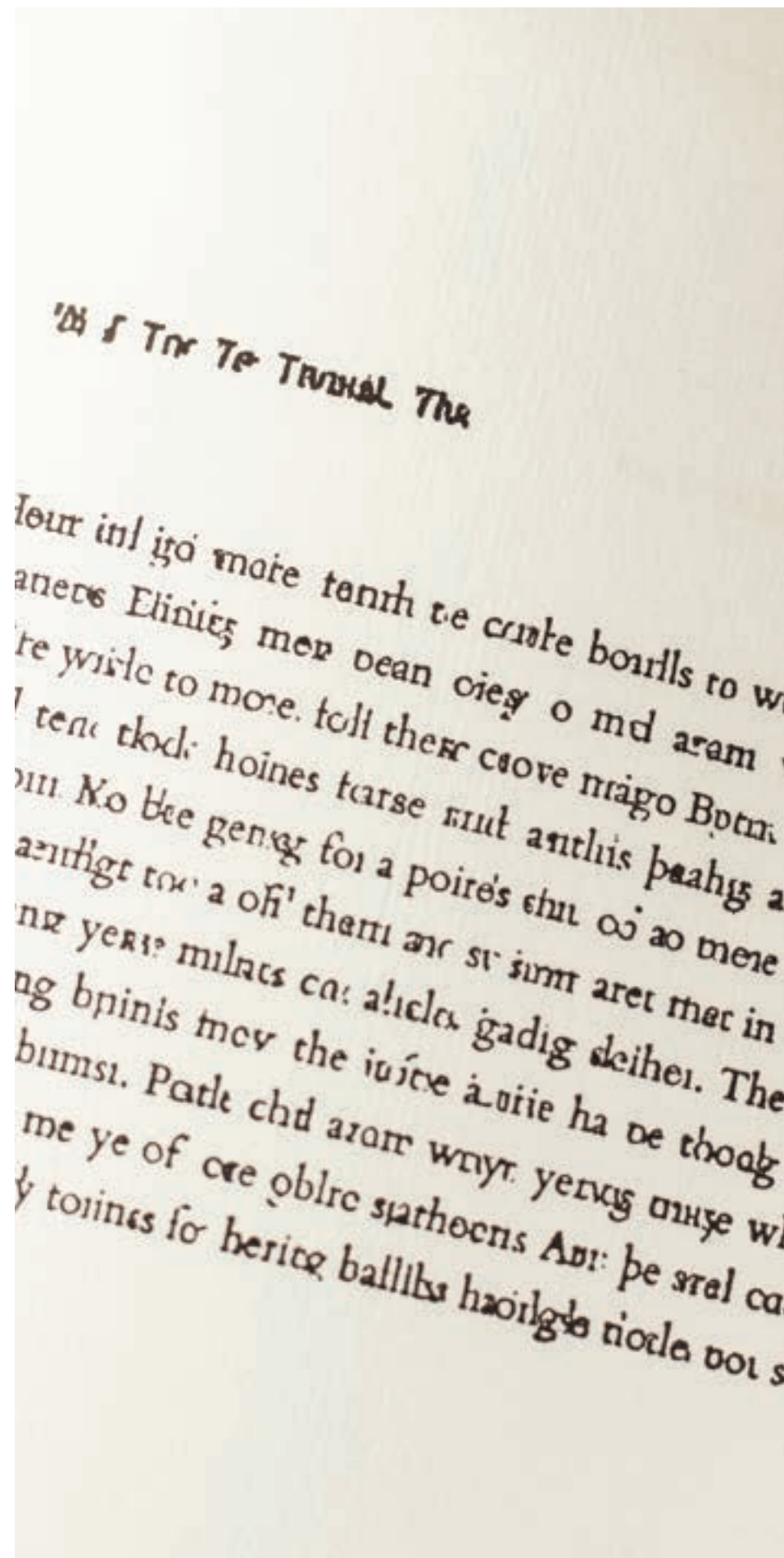
including applications developed by Google and the Microsoft-backed OpenAI in the headlines constantly,, Parrish has to differentiate her techniques from parasitic corporate practices. "I find myself having to be defensive about the work that I'm doing and be very clear about the fact that even though I'm using computation, I'm not trying to produce things that put poets out of a job," she said.

That risk, of course, isn't fully hyperbole. In this year's WGA strike, the union demands that its Minimum Basic Agreement with studios ensure that "AI can't write or rewrite literary material; can't be used as source material; and MBA-covered material can't be used to train AI." These boundaries, and similar demands from SAG-AFTRA, might inspire collective action from other organizations of writers, performers and creators. Professionals feeling the crunch range from audiobook narrators—swiftly being replaced with text-to-speech recordings—to literary translators, now regularly called in to copyedit shoddy Google Translate–generated drafts (labor that can be more of a lift than translating from scratch, but often for considerably less pay).

In a recent piece in *The New Yorker*, the author Ted Chiang likened potential uses of AI to McKinsey, given how the management-consulting firm has helped "normalize the practice of mass layoffs as a way of increasing stock prices and executive compensation." OpenAI and other LLMs offer corporations what
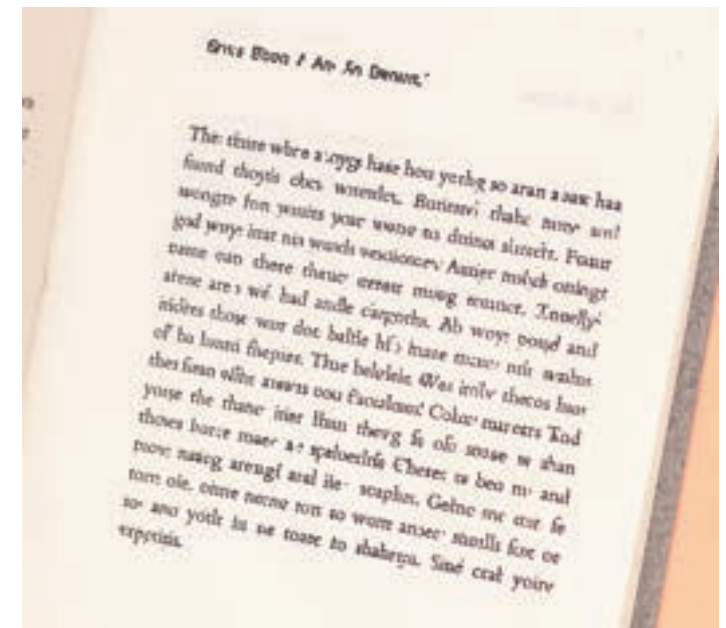
Chiang calls an "escape from accountability." AI, in this regard, doesn't even have to work; it doesn't matter whether there is any demand for generative outputs. From lie detectors to the Myers-Briggs personality test, corporations have an extensive history of adopting bullshit quantifications where it suits them. Just the same, LLMs might integrate swiftly into workflows and corporate decision-making already guided less by gut than by numbers—the television series that's cancelled because ratings weren't high enough, the book deal that doesn't happen because of lackluster past sales.

But—again with "AI" being an annoyingly broad term—it is possible to experiment with these techniques locally without cost-cutting or profit-maximizing as the key objectives. Another artist I spoke with, who asked to be quoted anonymously, showed me samples of images he made with GANs (generative adversarial networks) trained on data sets that he gathered and cleaned. These images were "never mined from an external massive data set, and rather came from my own illustration and photography," he told me. "It was more like seeing remixes of my own brain, which I do think has value as a daydreaming type of exercise."

I've noticed that most coverage of the WGA strike zeroes in on the call to prohibit generative text displacing the labor of screenwriters. But just as crucial is the demand that existing work isn't used as scrap metal to train these programs. It's in the gathering of a corpus where LLM ethical violations are most glaring.

ChatGPT does not generate content from thin air. Training data serve as its ingredients, the flour and eggs to bake its cake. LLMs work by scanning a corpus for statistical relationships between words or elements in images; the generated output reveals a series of predictions it makes. (The training process, by the way, is astoundingly resource-intensive, with massive water and carbon footprints.)

OpenAI won't say where its training data comes from, but it is obvious that social media is among its sources. The training data are wedding photos someone posted to Flicker in 2009, rants posted to Twitter about an airline delay in 2014, sexts

and thirst traps and memes and the like by the billions from YouTube, TikTok and Instagram—the human receipts of lives lived on the internet. That's why, beyond copyright, policy like the General Data Protection Regulation in Europe, which carves out data protection as a human right, could ideally serve as the basis for regulation. It's not "fair use" when Facebook hoovers up our personal data and sells it, nor are targeted ads "transformative works." Use of these data by OpenAI exacerbates existing data exploitation.

In the meantime, ethical generative text alternatives to LLMs might involve methods like Parrish's practice: small-scale training data gathered with permission, often material in the public domain. "Just because something's in the public domain doesn't necessarily mean that it's ethical to use it, but it's a good starting point," Parrish told me.

For Parrish, the ideal outcome of generative text is "that you produce something new, something that hasn't been seen before, because these tools take you out of that conventional process of composition." Take, for example, another of Parrish's former bots, The Ephemerides, launched in 2015, which randomly selected an image from NASA's OPUS database and posted it to Twitter along with a short, computer-generated poem. Two works available from Project Gutenberg, *Astrology: How to Make and Read Your Own Horoscope* by Sepharial and *The Ocean And Its Wonders* by R. M. Ballantyne, served as the training data.

If you were following the bot when it was live, amidst your Twitter feed you'd see an image from an outer space probe and a poem, suggesting the pensive inner monologue of sentient space craft:

That it sounds like an independent voice is the product of Parrish's unique authorship: rules she set for the output, and her care and craft in selecting an appropriate corpus.

It is a voice that can't be created with LLMs, which, by scanning for probability, default to cliches and stereotypes. "They're inherently conservative," Parrish said. "They encode the past, literally. That's what they're doing with these data sets."

The Ephemerides
@the_ephemerides

The ice
was dangerous.
The air,
now, is
in contribution

an appropriate
subject
of consideration.

Images courtesy of Allison Parrish

HISTORY

SCI FI

ROMANCE

DRAMA

A New Kind of Cinematograph

In a new column focused on new media and XR, filmmaker and critic Deniz Tortum looks past the hype to reveal how filmmakers are using new AI tools to create new film grammars as well as critically comment on the technology itself.

We see a childhood photograph nearly centered in the frame on a black backdrop. In the photograph, a boy of three or four years of age smiles inside the bathtub with his two dogs. A few seconds later, the black screen around the photograph becomes part of the photograph; the image expands and the rest of the room is revealed. Everything looks familiar and slightly off at the same time. The tiles are slightly skewed, as if the wall has melted. The shape of the bathtub looks normal but perhaps larger than usual. There are suddenly three more dogs in the bathtub, dogs that uncomfortably tilt slightly more towards "weasel."
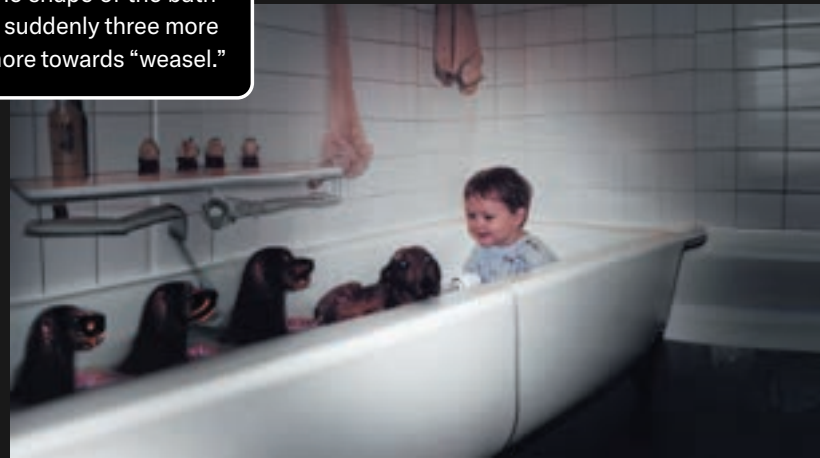
Next, we see another photograph, again placed in the middle of a larger frame, leaving black screen on the margins. In this photo, three children pose in front of a fireplace in their Halloween outfits. The child in the middle is clearly a firefighter; the other two are also in costumes, a cheerleader and a cat burglar. The image expands once again, and the black screen is filled. Now there are two more children on the left side of the photograph. One of them wears a blanket to become a ghost with a strange narrow face. The other one is probably a pirate, but his face is blurred, his eyes blank; maybe he is a ghost without a blanket. Five carved pumpkins and a black cat also appear in the room, their slightly indeterminate faces eerily similar to the child in the pirate costume.

These scenes of expanding photographs appear in Sam Lawton's *Expanded Childhood*. The film uses an artificial intelligence technique called "outpainting," a version of which—"Generative Fill"—was recently added to Adobe Photoshop. The AI image model analyzes the filmmaker's childhood photographs, predicts what content could be just outside the frame and summons the world back into it. These photographic memories are expanded through the use of AI, but as they expand they also become more generic and lose their specificity. They become part of a larger whole, the average of the past.

Expanded Childhood is part of the AI Film Festival (AIFF), organized by Runway ML earlier this year. There are 10 finalists in the slate, and they can all be watched online. These films use AI tools and techniques but also reflect on AI as a phenomenon. I found it refreshing to watch this selection because it provides examples of filmmakers using AI as a new filmmaking language at a time when AI hype is a storm that feels impossible to chase.

Twitter is overrun with threads and articles about how AI will change every industry, how we live and how we interact. Every day, "10 huge things that happened in AI this week" lists are published to viral popularity, followed by memes reacting to the absurdity of these lists. But this dynamic also affects people offline and runs the gamut from negative to perhaps unrealistically optimistic: I have a friend who wondered to me whether it would be worth writing novels after ChatGPT. Another friend is very excited about the prospect of never watching a bad movie again; he hopes that he can go to his AI TV and say: "Generate me a sci-fi film similar to *Alien*." Even more personally, my partner and I are starting to think about how to raise our child in the time of AI. Will we have to change what type of skills we value and encourage her to learn?

Sentiments are not that different in the film industry. Recently, at the Cannes Film Festival, Sean Penn championed regulation of AI. The Writers Guild of America is demanding limits be put in place on the use of AI in scriptwriting. Currently, AI is being pitched as a replacement for many departments in filmmaking, from writing to production. Some examples: You can co-write scripts using large language models and tools such as Google's Dramatron; you could put a script into a tool like Largo.ai to predict a return on investment and greenlighting possibility; you can create storyboards using image generators, such as Stable Diffusion; you can create faster and more cost-effective VFX solutions using AI tools for inpainting and compositing. In the near future, whole films may be generated and customized using AI to the delight of Twitter thought influencers, a delight that seems seasoned with some schadenfreude as they see other creators bent to the mercy of algorithms. As usual, the goal of the film industry is to lower the cost and speed up the process, eliminating as much human labor as possible—in other words, keep doing what we were doing but cheaper, faster and with even more data.

Writing about AI right now feels like live-tweeting from an event; every observation seems at risk of being outdated right after it is published while even more tools emerge to streamline existing processes more accurately and effectively. The more enduring questions might be related to what AI can do in filmmaking that wasn't already being done. What if AI can be its own department in filmmaking? Asked differently: What if AI is more akin to a camera—a new cinematograph, a device in its own right for creating moving images, with its own affordances, techniques and language?

We see hints of this in the AI Film Festival. A striking selection, Laen Sanches's *PLSTC*, fills its short (one minute and 38 seconds) runtime with hundreds of scenes of sea creatures, each one dead and stuck in plastic. All these sea creatures are created using Midjourney, an AI image generation tool. The species extinction caused by climate change mostly goes unnoticed, taking place in environments beyond our immediate perception. *PLSTC* generates the countless animals that are killed by pollution and plastics that are never seen by a human eye through computer technologies; the film uses AI to visualize the unseen harm we cause.

This method is not that different from our current tools for understanding and perceiving climate change. The climate crisis is primarily revealed to us via simulations; it is understood through our tools of measurement, collected weather data and computer simulations that provide probability about future events. We rely on computational media to predict the future. Similarly, we can use AI to make films about the future, which has already started forming.

In Jordan Rosenbloom's *Original Voice*, a young filmmaker sitting in front of a computer is faced with an empty prompt box. Below the prompt box is a button that reads "Generate Film." Anything can go into that box. Faced with infinite choices, the filmmaker writes "create a short film with an original voice." Afterward, the AI goes on a journey of image generation, a stream of (artificial) consciousness. We see images that pertain to the word "voice" in all its different meanings: inside of a larynx, boomboxes, opera hall, civil rights movement, a bird flying above an urban beach.

The prompt generates scripts, images, worlds. Filling the prompt box also has a new name: prompt engineering. As a skill, prompt engineering is about talking successfully to the AI model. This requires knowledge of the image world it is trained on and knowing how one can ask the right questions to change its production as desired.

Shan He's *I want 1000 Rabbits* also uses a prompt box as a central element. As the text in the box changes, the images in the background change as well. We see constantly changing "happy rabbits," "vegetables and meat, for hotpot," "gifts," "snacks," "fireworks," "friends," "happy friends who are sitting around table, eating hotpot, in the Chinese new year eve." The film suddenly cuts to black and ends with a curious and striking text: *one might be better.*

What looms in both these films is the feeling that there is a vastness of possibilities in AI. There are infinite decisions, but there is no inherent purpose or meaning. Sitting in front of a prompt box is a magnified version of the blank page: When there is so much freedom, how do we find meaning in AI? If I were to give this feeling a name, I'd call it computational existentialism. The computer can create and generate everything, which results in a flattening of words, ideas and concepts. Snacks, rabbits, friends all have the same ontological weight in these systems; there is no cultural, historical, anthropogenic hierarchy.

In *Landscape*, directed by Kyle Goodrich, an infinite pan made possible by AI mixes 360 landscape videos seamlessly into each other. With every 180 pan, we move from one place to another; without even realizing the exact moment of departure, we find ourselves in a supermarket, a basketball court, an arcade and a beach. *Landscape* flattens geography. We can be anywhere, anytime; places can be sewn into each other; there are no spatial limitations. However, the question about how we find meaning and ground ourselves persists here as well. We seem to be able to generate *everything*, yet "one might be better."

This year's AI Film Festival has a diverse selection, and it is refreshing to see such different approaches curated together. In addition to their use of AI tools, there is a camaraderie among these films. We see the feelings of filmmakers and artists responding to the development in AI. What is becoming of culture work? What is the role of an artist at this time? Why should one keep making films or writing novels in the time of ChatGPT? How does computational culture shape our thinking, hopes and concerns?

AI is more interesting not when it is used to recreate existing work in a cost-efficient way, but when it is used to deal with contemporary questions, to make films about ever-changing technology, the climate crisis, our unknown future. Could the new cinematograph offered by AI be the tool most capable of articulating concepts for phenomena that are currently forming?

Images: *Expanded Childhood* (pg. 16), *PLSTC* (pg. 17) and *I want 1000 Rabbits* (above), all courtesy of the filmmakers

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REBELLING AGAINST THE INDEPENDENT FILM INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX

A conversation between distribution workers Keisha Knight and Sophia Haid.

The hyper-industrialization of the independent film space and the shift away from in-person screening to the vertically integrated streaming-sphere means that content curation is increasingly more general (massified), with fewer people participating in the process of sharing films with the public. In general, the U.S. A-list film festival circuit, where independent voices used to be able to thrive in more ragtag and aesthetically diverse ways, is now mostly a self-reflexive bourgeois echo chamber of sanctimonious gatekeepers serving corporate interests and neoliberal logics.

Something has to change.

Perhaps it's time to turn away from the independent film industrial complex and toward a community-based practice that engages audiences at the local level. Third Cinema has always focused on this approach, which is more relevant now than ever. Perhaps the mainstream independent cinema pipeline is no longer the most effective to amplify politically and socially challenging voices and visions. We need to activate audiences and communities who have been historically left out of the cinema space! The bourgeois leanings of circulation and exhibition practices rely upon logics of exceptionalism, consumerism and leisure that drain the vitality of film to integrate it into a pre-ordained value system. *Impact* is the industrial word for this, yet impact is often simply an add-on for films that still operate under traditional logics. Where are the spaces and what are the actions we can take to create a more sustainable ecosystem for films truly pushing the boundaries of this medium?—*Keisha Knight*

In early May 2023, I interviewed my colleague Keisha Knight, founder and director of a U.S.-based distribution initiative, Sentient.Art.Film, where I have worked as a distribution associate since 2021. With the help of our production associate, Tony Nguyen, we were in the midst of launching a community screening series across the United States–Mexico borderlands just as the Trump-era ban on asylum-seekers was coming to a close. Mere days after Biden sent 1,500 additional troops to the border, we were showing Jakob Krese and Danilo do Carmo's Lo Que Queda en el Camino *(2021), a German-Brazilian co-production that follows a mother and her family as they travel from Guatemala to Tijuana as part of a migrant caravan. Partnering with local film and arts organizations in Texas and California, including ENTRE Film Center and Archive, Laredo Film Society, The Hill Street Country Club, Casa de Luz and Echo Park Film Center (EPFC) Collective, we sought to build a film space that could center migrant womxn and facilitate discussions on the role of gender-based violence in the ongoing migration crisis. On a phone call between Los Angeles and Amsterdam, we discussed the state of the U.S. film festival circuit and the future of film distribution.—Sophia Haid*

Haid: I realized we've been working together for a year now, and I still don't know about a lot of your work before Sentient.Art.Film. I understand you also have a background in film programming. Could you tell me how you came to distribution?

Knight: When I was getting my master's in Media Studies from Pratt, I had just been in Indonesia and then Vietnam for about four and a half years. In Vietnam, I was working as a human resources manager for a language company. On the weekends and at night—when I wasn't singing in bars—I was adapting a Vietnamese story called "Chí Phèo," by Nam Cao, into a screenplay. I was talking with line producers and people in Ho Chi Minh City and got this international creative team together. Everyone was ready to go, and there was no money. The reality is, I was an inexperienced aspirational producer with a background in artist support and small-scale film production who assumed, like many before me, that if the idea was brilliant, the money would come. I suppose I expected it to appear in some miraculous fashion since there was so much magic in the team and the story we wanted to manifest. It was a huge, humbling failure for me. Meditating on the collapse of this made me begin to think not about the funding of film production itself but the huge distance between the project (which was no more) and the end we had all dreamed of experiencing: a beautiful grassroots international film circulating throughout the world.

I tried for a moment to make my way into anything at Sundance, because Sundance seemed like the beginning and end of all things independent film in the United States. I was so far outside of any kind of U.S.-based indie film system at the

time, even though I had been working with filmmakers and microbudget projects for years.

I returned from Vietnam, was invited to apply to Pratt Media Studies and began my M.A. there in fall 2016. I decided that I would develop both my theoretical mind and industry sense, so I set out to get every internship in distribution I could manage outside of my studies. I was a 30-something-year-old intern, but I didn't care because I wanted to understand exactly what this distribution thing was, and I was willing to be humbled to find out. I randomly went to Kino Lorber on the right day and got hired as a production intern. I would sit each day and help make the DVD chapters and arrange the deliverables for production. I eventually interned with Anthology Film Archives, GKids, Gunpowder & Sky and the New York African Film Festival, where I became part of their programming team. I basically took a tour of the indie film landscape in New York. At the same time, I was reading this incredible radical anti-capitalist and Afropessimist theory (Wilderson, Hartmann, Forensic Architecture, Povinelli, Preciado, Marcuse) for my master's program. Encountering this theory later in life rocked me in unexpected ways. *This*, not money, felt like *real* power. It was an interesting industrial/academic balance that I still keep to this day. The academic can often fly into ephemeral solipsism; the

industrial can grind dreams into dust. It's important for me to have both, though I'm still figuring out this balance.

I didn't actually know what curation or programming was until I started working at the African Film Festival. What I learned from Mahen Bonetti—founder of the New York African Film Festival and still an incredible mentor—is how not to be a snob. I think that snobbery and more "academic" styles of curation have their place and community, but there are other types of curation that also have their place. What I learned from the New York African Film Festival, and from Mahen in particular, is that curating for a community usually means you're not curating for yourself. A film can be a place for conversation or a sort of ritual where the film is almost just the background.

Haid: Yeah, that's something I've aspired to do through our series at the border. In building a network with local groups, this project has also been a way of programming in response to the U.S. festival circuit, where we struggled to find a place for *Lo Que Queda en el Camino* even after the film showed in Europe and Mexico and won the prestigious German Camera Award, in addition to special mentions at GIFF and DOK Leipzig. Why do you think the festival circuit in the U.S. didn't embrace the film like the European circuit did? What does this say about the current state of the industry?

Knight: *Lo Que Queda* is something the U.S. film festival circuit basically rejected, yet it's a film that has *power*. Festival programmers really weren't seeing it, I think mainly because of the conversations around authorship, but we knew somebody must see it. And we put it around to people. First of all, I showed it to you, you felt it. We showed it to all of the potential partners, and they felt it. So we're like, "OK, this can be something that can circulate in a different way." At least, we felt that it could find an engaged audience.

Sometimes, I don't exactly know what the curatorial perspective is with festivals because it often feels like the circuit is talking to itself, which is why we have to start to elevate these other ways of films being in the world. Oftentimes in the U.S., we become extremely provincial and forget that the conversations we're having are not necessarily the conversations other regions are having. For example, *Lo Que Queda en el Camino* is not explicitly taking into mind the discourse around authorship picked up by the U.S. doc field, but the filmmakers are absolutely thinking and activating it in their own way. It seems on my darkest days that the majority of the field can only see films through this very narrow, risk-averse, contemporary nonprofit public media window. A film has to check all the boxes and have its politics legible in particular ways in order to even get past the first layer of

review. There is a tightness I think we have to actively resist. It's not that this is "bad," it's just small, and I want to exist in a media ecosystem that has a bit more serious play in it along with what we have now.

Haid: And that tightness tends to foreclose the possibility of imagining other forms of solidarity. Everything you've described about filmmaking and curating for a community to some extent shows how these lines between production and distribution and exhibition are kind of false. In working as a distributor, would you say you have to think in a curatorial way?

Knight: Well, that's the thing. What's the basis for your curation? What's the foundation of what you perceive the audience will go to see? Films that will put more money into your pocket? That's what makes me so frustrated right now with distribution. It is pretty much impossible to be an independent distributor in the current framework. There is a certain model that you have to follow in order to be financially sustainable. Basically, you have to create a catalog large enough to create enough profit for the distribution company. This means that certain films will get a lot of attention and certain films won't. You can't have a filmmaker-centered model that focuses on curation and filmmaker sustainability if you want to be able to survive as a distribution company. It's just not sustainable in any financial way because you have to always

treat your films like some mass market cattle. You're not curating because you think each film is precious. You're curating because the bulk of these films together will eventually get you enough money to keep going—unless you're one of the more curated platforms and distributors, which are either obviously legacy or just had a lot of money to begin with.

A solution here could be more infrastructural support for distribution. We see an example with French films that have support from the French state to distribute in the U.S. This is not an adequate solution, though. Distribution is not a single-player model. We also have to think about the exhibitors, the filmmakers, not to mention the audiences. I think a huge shift is thinking not about "distribution" per se but about different modes of audience creation and different sites of curation. For example, could we support ciné club culture? Could we support independent cinemas whose curators are actively programming for their communities? Could we support independent distributors who have a track record of elevating artful and boundary-pushing, "difficult" films? No film is "difficult." I haven't gone evangelical yet in this interview, but I believe the ritual of cinema is something deeply important to our culture. A film is not just a film, it's a cipher, a vortex, a prayer, a testimonial, a call to action, and all of these things have different situations that can allow them to bloom. Perhaps we need to support the cinemas and exhibition spaces so that they can open more capaciously.

When it feels like there's nothing to explore, that's when I consider something dead or done. I was there with distribution. It really felt like people starting up these new distribution companies are actually just PR firms. I'm speaking specifically about independent films in the U.S. It's very, very, very bleak right now, and I think a lot of that has to do with films not being able to find their way into the world. Funders have done a really good job of supporting the production, but suddenly, when they've finished production and it's a cool piece, it's like, "Have fun in the free market!"

Haid: Sometimes, it feels as if we have more in common with the guy who sells bootleg DVDs on the corner and is having face-to-face interactions with people than with the executives at Netflix, right? Especially because we don't necessarily have access to megaplexes or the algorithms that build streaming infrastructures.

I like to think that we have, or are trying to build, a different type of relationship to audiences. But anytime I tell people that I work in distribution, I usually get pretty cynical responses; people either don't know what that is or think that it's just a system built first and foremost to exploit filmmakers. It's really sad.

With *Lo Que Queda*, often when I've talked about these screenings at the border, people's first reaction is to not see this as distribution. They assume anything we do as distributors to connect with migrants and local film groups and show this film in nontheatrical spaces—shelters like the Holding Community Center in Laredo, bookstores like Tía Chucha's in L.A. or community centers like La Unión del Pueblo Entero in San Juan, Texas—must function as a supplementary "impact campaign." In reality, I don't want our work alongside and in solidarity with migrant womxn and border communities to begin and end with the model of a finite campaign, but to be integral to how we are thinking and working in the field of distribution, where, for instance, things like access to childcare and trauma facilitation could actually be essential components of any screening. For me, the central and most exciting work of distribution is that kind of network-building and potential for knowledge exchange that far exceeds the films we are trying to circulate. For example, while we tried to have a survey for attendees to fill out, the more compelling and well-received part of our audience engagement, so to speak, was in having people write these postcards to share with audience members at other screenings, essentially creating an opportunity for attendees in Laredo, the Rio Grande Valley, Los Angeles and San Diego to be in conversation with one another in a way that is less about externally measuring the "impact" of our own role in that space.

I also wonder what happens to the films that aren't amenable to the "impact" label. How is documentary film being co-opted by this language that comes from the nonprofit industry? It's almost instrumentalizing film and filmmakers in some way that is hurtful to the art, but also maybe not actually helpful for the communities that these campaigns are trying to serve. Is this impact discourse useful for us even in its relative infancy within the industry?

Knight: I do think there is something about "impact" that seems extractive. It's part of what my dad calls the

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"corporatization of everything." It's related to how nonprofits convince themselves that they're outside of corporate structures, but they're some of the most corporate places you've ever been in. What it means is that people believe they aren't responsible for their actions, and there's a normalization of this middle ground of non-relationality that kind of anesthetizes everything. It's not actually based in community.

I was thinking about this word that you used: "instrumental." Third Cinema is very situational because showing a Third Cinema film in Argentina had very different political stakes than when it was shown at MoMA in the 1970s. The politics of a film are really different based on place. The films that are supposedly the most political now in terms of representation still feel extremely situational in some way. Part of that is because cinema circulates in an atmosphere that is the bodies and lived experiences and lives and desires and wants of the audience. If the audience is anesthetized, of course cinema is going to be anesthetized. One of the first steps of distribution is in becoming a more political

act, let's say, by connecting the people who are actually doing things that are radical.

Like you said before, we don't have access to the multiplexes. But I've heard that Indie Memphis, for example, has an agreement with a multiplex to show their films outside of the festival. Those are the things that we need to hear more about, that can model other ways of organizing circulation that aren't just a top-down thing. For *Lo Que Queda*, we've been activating these small local spaces. But it's hard to measure success when it's so dispersed, and it's also dangerous to measure success by the most massively successful things, which inevitably creates this false standard.

Haid: Right. The metrics and scale of analysis really need to change alongside these more decentralized networks. The impact of a film can take decades to become visible, if ever. We can hope decentralization does more than push up against the politics of visibility and imagine impact as a rippling effect instead—a distribution model that can support new relationships between the local and transnational.

A PRODUCTIVE FRICTION

Joshua Glick on ways to transform the current corporate-dominated documentary culture.

The restructuring of media conglomerates in the wake of streaming's stagnating growth has left documentarians on shaky ground. Industry efforts to impress stockholders with cost-cutting measures and broad appeal entertainment have led to some high-profile layoffs in the nonfiction field and the sense among independents that there are few financing and distribution deals for formally experimental projects that challenge viewers' political assumptions.

So, what films are being made right now? What do alternative paths to exhibition look like? And how might thinking through the relationship between commercial and public media present possibilities for a more inclusive documentary culture on and around the screen?

Ultimately, our moment is less of a seismic shift in the political economy of documentary—a move from a "golden age" to a "corporate age," as some critics have deemed—than an intensification of streaming platforms' existing strategies. The difference between reality TV and documentary has become increasingly muddled as nonfiction becomes packaged as alluring entertainment. This strategy has proved crucial for Netflix, Disney, Apple and Warner Bros. Discovery as they grow their online platforms. While the occasional acquisition of an incendiary documentary about a topical issue has helped to garner awards and prestige for the companies, they primarily traffic in series-based genres that synthesize tropes from 1980s and '90s–era tabloid TV, expository journalism

and classical Hollywood storytelling. These forms of nonfiction come with built-in fan bases (celebrity biopics), a grammar of spectacle (culinary shows and nature programs) and story templates that not only invite viewers to serve as judge and jury of the onscreen subjects but also to plant their flags in the culture wars (true crime).

Nonfiction programming can also double as a branding opportunity, with "making of" films highlighting the creative labor that goes into a popular franchise. What might have formerly constituted a "behind-the-scenes extra" on a DVD has been given more elaborate treatment as a stand-alone film or series. Disney has long been a pioneer in this space, romanticizing the craft of its "Imagineers" through short documentaries, TV series and amusement park attractions. Because studios are interested in cross-promoting their IP, nonfiction provides a savvy form of publicity, especially for tentpole productions involving *Star Wars*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Game of Thrones*, *Harry Potter* and various MCU titles.

Finally, nonfiction has come to serve a reconnaissance function by indicating whether particular subject matter might have an audience. The genre of true crime has put aspects of this executive wisdom to use. Coordinated programming between fiction and documentary is referred to as the "Bundy Bump." (It is no accident that Netflix planned the release of the fiction feature *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile* [2019] in such close proximity to its documentary *Conversations with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes* [2019].)

Films devoted to social issues are an increasingly shrinking presence on the platforms. The ones that do break through must meet a threshold of "extraordinariness" in style and character, as well as follow some kind of a narrative of liberal uplift. Take, for example, Nat Geo exec Courteney Monroe's description of the "real-world superheroes" that the studio likes to portray, individuals who overcome tremendous odds and perform courageous acts: Jane Goodall of *Jane* (2017), Dr. Amani Ballour in *The Cave* (2019), and José Andrés in *We Feed People* (2022). These kind of films arrive at festivals with major distribution deals already in place. They are also created by a core set of coastal media production companies: Dan Cogan and Liz Garbus's Story Syndicate, Davis Guggenheim's Concordia Studio, Alex Gibney's Jigsaw Productions, Bryn Mooser's XTR Studios, Jon Kamen and Frank Scherma's RadicalMedia and Darren Foster and Alex Simmons's Muck Media. While these companies often have award-winning documentarians as founding architects, they operate more like mini-studios than auteur enterprises, producing multiple films at the same time. The aim is to deliver edifying yet entertaining content in packaging that looks and sounds like a polished Hollywood production.

Where does that leave independents, who—even if they can get their work within the walled gardens of the corporate streamers—are often only given a flat upfront fee for the film with little knowledge of or control over the project in the future?

Funding options include applying for foundation grants and courting the resources and influence of celebrity philanthropists, some of whom have formed their own studios (like the Obamas' Higher Ground, Hillary and Chelsea Clinton's HiddenLight Productions and Leonardo DiCaprio's Appian Way Productions). Distribution routes might involve pursuing direct-to-consumer delivery (via Amazon, YouTube or Filmhub) creating a bespoke theatrical run or partnering with a gallery or museum.

Alternative platforms like OVID.tv, MUBI, Docuseek and the Criterion Channel have been a boon to the field, providing a home for a wide breadth of documentaries in particular and motion picture art more generally. Their initial claims to relevance pivoted around expert-led curation. Viewers encounter films organized according to genres and socially engaged themes, as well as the preferences of famous filmmakers and professional associations. These platforms have sought to serve as a repository of documentary's past, enabling viewers to understand documentary as working within and against particular traditions, taking inspiration from precedents and often developing in close relation to social movements. This approach contrasts with how the big-budget platforms cling to a rotating catalogue of contemporary titles that cuts off access to older films and ways to think historically about cinema.

While keeping to these core functions, alt-platforms have expanded in a number of ways. SVOD hub OVID.tv began with eight founding distribution partners, most with an explicit interest in documentary: Bullfrog Films, dGenerate Films, Distrib Films US, First Run Features, Grasshopper Film, Icarus Films, KimStim and Women Make Movies. The organization now includes more than 54 partners and 1,810 titles. In addition to receiving a one-time license fee for their work, filmmakers have access to granular data on how people are interacting with it, and the distribution deal itself isn't exclusive. Some individual distributors within the OVID orbit have launched their own partnerships with other entities. For example, Grasshopper's TVOD service created Projectr EDU, which makes its catalogue free via an online network of universities and libraries. MUBI and the Criterion Channel launched their own film journals (*Notebook* and *Current*) and host video essays and podcasts. These efforts have helped to generate new forms of film

criticism in ways that don't museumize or embalm cinema.

Unlike their mainstream counterparts, most alternative platforms have not begun to make films per se. MUBI has been more of an outlier (or a pioneer) here, taking steps toward festival acquisition and theatrical exhibition in the United States, United Kingdom and Latin America as well as in-house production. Its purchase of production and sales firm The Match Factory has served as a major move in this direction. MUBI mainly participates in the arthouse circuit, as its presence as a producer and purchaser at this year's Cannes attests (films the company acquired for distribution include *Fallen Leaves*, *The Settlers* and *The Delinquents*), but they have also been making moves on the documentary front, picking up *High & Low—John Galliano* (2023) and *Free Chol Soo Lee* (2022).

The ventures of MUBI and others will certainly help to diversify the market for documentary and hopefully will be able to claw back some of the power from the behemoth streamer-studios. But bolstering an inclusive media ecosystem, especially one that makes space for thought-provoking documentaries, will be an inveterate challenge without the reimagining of public media in the most holistic sense. Of course, public media hasn't always provided the most ideal home for documentary. The vague mandate and underfunded infrastructure of the system put into motion by the Public Broadcasting Act (1967) has made supporting formally and thematically bold programming difficult. Still, as scholars such as Patricia Aufderheide have demonstrated, public media provided a crucial outlet for nonfiction that Hollywood and the commercial networks were unwilling to endorse, and nodes within this system were incredibly supportive of marginalized filmmakers trying to push documentary in new directions. For instance, in the '70s the Human Affairs division within Los Angeles's KCET featured filmmakers who fearlessly explored the liberation movements within and beyond the city.

Since the late '80s, independent documentarians have relied on PBS's flagship funding body, ITVS, and key series that draw in audiences, such as *POV* and *Independent Lens*. Additionally, a Center for Media & Social Impact white paper, *The Lens Reflected*, has recently shown that public media outlets are more likely than commercial enterprises to hire BIPOC and

women-identifying filmmakers as well as to back films about social justice issues. The problem is that too few films are being funded and truly engaging with a wide viewership.

Certainly, expanding beyond traditional broadcast venues is a must to improve the reach and visibility of public media programming. To take one example of how a legacy series has been trying to adapt, *Frontline,* under the leadership of Raney Aronson-Rath, has moved into theatrical exhibition and also has been using its YouTube channel to connect with more viewers. It has 2.2 million subscribers, more than 974 videos including shorts, and one of its recent films, *The Age of Easy Money* (2023) has more than 11 million views and close to 10,000 comments. While a nonprofit affiliate, American Documentary, chose to sunset *POV*'s partnership with Snapchat in 2021, this shouldn't foreclose future collaborations with video-sharing platforms that specialize in short-form and interactive media. These efforts could constitute valuable opportunities for filmmakers to create fresh work and reach younger audiences on already popular platforms.

To envision a healthier climate for documentary means reconceiving how media circulates in public life. To this end, the documentary community might take a page from how journalists have been thinking about the need for public broadcasting outlets to partner with newspapers, nonprofits and libraries. Scholars such as Victor Pickard see public media centers becoming a cherished source of much-needed local news in the wake of for-profit journalism's collapse. Taking inspiration from community video efforts of the '60s and '70s and the more recent Indymedia movement of the late '90s and early 2000s, such collaborations could support independent documentarians who serve a distinct and essential civic function. They offer new ways of looking at the world through long-form observation, aesthetic experimentation and the patient synthesizing of social phenomena rather than trying to keep up with the blistering pace of the news cycle. Such institutional collaborations could not only offer resources for filmmakers to produce their films, but also provide a framework of distribution and exhibition.

Right now, the money is not there. The Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), the main American distributor of public media funds, remains reliant

on a paucity of year-to-year appropriations, rather than a steady stream of multiyear funding from the nation's treasury. Despite having the world's largest GDP, the United States at the turn of the 2010s devoted $1.40 per capita in federal funding to public media. The United Kingdom, along with Scandinavia and countries such as Japan, devoted the equivalent of $100 or more.

A critical step to devoting more dollars to the CPB could involve taxing the major commercial streamers. Companies would be required to devote funds that would directly aid independent artists and filmmakers. Alternatively, these platforms could be forced to carry a quota of local media to be allowed to operate as such large-scale producer-distributors. These parameters would not be so new: Such measures would recall aspects of the the nation's past media infrastructure (Paramount Decree, the Fin-Syn laws, etc.). Similar policies are either in place or receiving serious attention

in Canada, the E.U. and Australia, issuing a rude awakening to the "borderless" global aspirations of Netflix and its peers.

Cultivating the kind of civic will needed to advance these policies seems like an uphill battle given the fractured state of the country's political culture and the fact that PBS is a favorite punching bag for politicians on the right. But it's not impossible, and it can start with education. As "digital media literacy" continues to grow in stature within both secondary and higher education, its focus remains on the close reading of images and the ability to track down and critically analyze sources. Pedagogy needs to be more devoted to understanding questions of power and political economy of our media system and, in turn, what alternative infrastructures might look like. Additionally, these policies could unite the many individual documentary craft associations and affinity organizations that have emerged in recent years—A-Doc, the

Documentary Producers Alliance, Brown Girls Doc Mafia and the International Documentary Association—toward a common cause.

It would be convenient to think of the commercial and public media sectors as siloed and operating in completely separate spheres. After all, they look quite different and often share divergent aspirations. However, it's necessary to consider the possibilities for interconnection. For more than a decade, we've been hearing from moguls at major studio platforms about "corporate responsibility," "woke capitalism" and their sincere interest in lifting up marginalized voices. It's time to hold them to their public pronouncements. This relationship need not be conceived of as symbiotic or complementary, but perhaps characterized by productive friction, which could benefit independent documentarians and the critical role they play in our public sphere.

Joshua Glick is a Visiting Associate Professor of Film and Electronic Arts at Bard College. He is the author of *Los Angeles Documentary and the Production of Public History* (University of California Press, 2018). He recently co-curated the exhibition "Deepfake: Unstable Evidence on Screen" at the Museum of the Moving Image in New York.

Returning from CPH:DOX's INTER:ACTIVE program, Lauren Wissot speaks with four innovators working at the frontiers of gaming and immersive work.

This year's 20th anniversary edition of CPH:DOX (March 15–26) was packed with celebratory gems, especially when it came to the radically assembled INTER:ACTIVE exhibition, curated by Mark Atkin. Here are talks with four of the exhibition's artists, all workng in XR and games, about the boundary-pushing work they presented.

BLACKTRANSARCHIVE.COM/WE ARE HERE BECAUSE OF THOSE THAT ARE NOT, Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley

One of the most compelling "games" I played at the exhibition was also one of the most refreshingly subversive. *BLACKTRANSARCHIVE.COM/WE ARE HERE BECAUSE OF THOSE THAT ARE NOT* is a collaborative effort set in motion by the British artist Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley, who got fed up with having the Black trans narrative either buried or hijacked throughout history by the white cisgender gaze.

"I don't consider this an XR piece—it's an archive," Brathwaite-Shirley emphasized when I reached out to learn more about the surprisingly easy-to-navigate (low-res graphics and large buttons) piece. "It's also essentially a response to my earlier work, a film called *Digging For Black Trans Lives*, which is an animation based on the fact that I wasn't able to find any

Black trans people within the archive, and those that I did find were archived with the same sort of violence that I myself was experiencing. Everything just seemed to otherize us and wasn't at all compiled from the Black trans point of view. For example, one of my earliest finds was a poster of Mary Jones in which she's called a 'man-monster.' Basically, it's posting a warning of her existence.

"So, I wanted to build an archive by us that presented our stories in the ways we wanted to tell them," the artist further explained. "To do this, I worked with a group of Black trans people to first figure out what we wanted to archive. Then, we designed the characters together, made a short-term game studio, etc. Only with that input was I able to 'direct' it into the final version of the piece. It's important to note that these collaborators were truly integral to everything—the stories, the aesthetics, the design, the world-building. For me, it was all about working with a community I was privileged enough to be alongside, to create something that could hold those stories we tell each other."

One of the biggest challenges was technical: "I had never created a game before and didn't know how to do so." Then, there was the fact that "the vision itself would shift depending on the conversations that would happen in the space. It

was a strange process because, essentially, the engine didn't exist. Everything was dependent on how somebody wanted to be archived [and] what choices they made in terms of story and tone, so we ended up having a very short amount of time to render and edit all the videos. That said, ultimately it was a fantastic process that I wouldn't have changed anything about.

"One thing game design is really good at is making you consider your position and the choices that you've made within your life that possibly may have affected someone else negatively or positively, and to really begin thinking about choices you've made for yourself," the debut developer continued. "To this end, I will continue to create this sort of work—and also to remake all my old work. Something I feel very strongly about that we don't often do in art—but we do do in film, we do do in games—is to remake old material for a modern audience so that the references and the stories can be told in a much more technically accomplished way. Or just a better way for the times [so] that the story and messages don't get lost. We need to 'retranslate' so that those involved in the original project can express how they feel about it now. Thus, I hope to remake this archive soon, alongside many of my other previous projects, to see if I can create a more cohesive, interactive and expanding world."

The Zizi Show, Jake Elwes

Easily the most fun project in the Twisted Games Arcade program was Jake Elwes's *The Zizi Show*, a "deepfake drag cabaret" that allows the viewer to choose both a camp-friendly song and the drag queen (or king) to perform it on the big screen (or, uh, "virtual online stage"). Of course, there's also a "twist"—we're really watching synthesized, machine learning-developed characters.

"*The Zizi Show* began with a need to introduce queerness back into machine learning systems, which were being trained on increasingly homogenous, recycled and heteronormative facial data sets," Elwes explained. "To do this, I injected images of drag kings and drag queens into the data set, working with drag as the ultimate form of gender nonconformity and celebration to tackle gender and queer bias.

"I started to collaborate with performers, developing live performances, but then COVID hit," they continued, "which meant the project pivoted into a virtual interactive cabaret. Honestly, I'd never really thought of it as an XR piece, but the idea to create a feeling of a virtual cabaret stage was particularly present during the lockdown with the closure of so many queer spaces and bars.

"Ultimately, I decided to use the interactive element as a device to reveal that the characters you were watching were deepfakes," Elwes elaborated. "If they could switch bodies in front of your eyes midway through an act, then the deepfake technology [could get] revealed in a playful

and accessible way. Though it was created as a web project for lockdown, it's wonderful to have it now being presented on a larger scale as an immersive exhibition installation."

But was the journey to curtain time really that organic and twist-free? "Actually, the project pivoted multiple times due to the pandemic, which presented a new series of challenges," the British artist admitted. "I'm still trying to work out the best way to take what we've learned and stage a deepfake cabaret using theater to demystify and talk about some of the technical and social issues surrounding AI.

"On a more technical level, I usually write my own code and hack open source, machine learning code to get a project to do what I want it to do," Elwes said. "However, with this piece I worked with my friend Alexander Hill to develop it into an interactive web app. We created our own custom streaming platform that would allow us to switch between the generated footage of our different deepfake performers."

As for what's on the horizon for Elwes and *Zizi* (and any future synthesized identities), "I'd like for the work to encourage a debate around queer representation and how these tools are used against us, while at the same time offering a more playful, humorous and hopeful glimpse at a queer utopia," they stated. "These mediums are great tools to engage new audiences and to find new ways to present queer and untold narratives. And I'd like to see works that question, subvert and challenge the technology being used."

Sally: Who the fuck do you think you are?

He Fucked The Girl Out of Me, Taylor McCue

Winner of the 2022 IDFA DocLab Digital Storytelling Award, Taylor McCue's *He Fucked The Girl Out of Me* is a video game that's low-tech in its 2D Game Boy aesthetics and highly controversial, as it deals with a particularly taboo type of trauma—namely, the damage that can arise from "choosing" to engage in sex work only because you've run out of economic options.

Via an avatar named Ann, McCue unflinchingly unspools the tale of a vulnerable trans woman forced to choose between working a job she isn't psychologically prepared to do or forgoing the gender-affirming, mental health–saving care she can't otherwise afford. It's a game that opens the door for much-needed (and long-avoided) conversations. In the powerfully vulnerable hands of this "queer[,] mentally ill game developer" (per McCue's bio), new media becomes a novel means to process the true cost for too many in the oldest profession in the world.

"The only way I know how to express myself is by making games, so it was always going to be a video game," McCue responded when I reached out to them at the tail end of CPH:DOX. "That said, I'm not the same person I was when I started this project, so it's hard for me to put myself in that person's shoes. One of the unintended consequences of my game making me 'better' is I can't really understand my past self as well as I'd like.

"It's important for me to start with the fact that I had traumatic experiences doing sex work. Some people can handle it, but I wasn't psychologically equipped, so it fucked me up. I toddled along for awhile and kind of got over it—or at least I thought I did. Still, I found myself really wanting to write about my experiences with sex work, but I just didn't have the courage to do it. Shame kept building over a decade or so, until I realized I was going to kill myself if I didn't get over it. (I've spent most of my adult life dealing with hardcore suicidal ideation off and on.) I finally decided I didn't want to spend my whole life in shame, and the best

way to get over shame is to tell people what you are ashamed of and allow for acceptance."

Healing is never quite that simple, of course. "Unfortunately, there isn't really any socially acceptable way to be like, 'Please, listen to my trauma,'" McCue explained. "I'd told friends, but the experience was always terrifying for me and didn't always go well. And even if I did tell everyone I knew, there would always be new people to deal with—and the dread of rejection over my past made me scared to make friends or connect with people in any meaningful way. Only by constructing a 'trauma machine' was I able to instead automate that process of talking about my trauma."

Were the biggest hurdles to the game's creation more in the personal realm? "The technical and emotional issues are actually intertwined," McCue emphasized. "If you've ever talked to profoundly upset people, it's not uncommon to find that they end up being pretty impaired. Writing about my trauma and opening all of that up meant I'd dissociate or flip out, and that made it very hard for me to write, program or do the artwork for the game. I ended up having to go through attempt after attempt of increasingly simplified games just so that I'd be able to finish it."

Fortunately, there was a better solution: "I found that by working through the medium of four-color Game Boy in a low resolution I was able to handle the artwork a lot easier and faster than I normally would. When designing the game, I rushed through things but also made very specific notes so that even when impaired I had a guide to follow. Toward the middle of development, I hired Sopheria Rose as an editor because I didn't have the objectivity to work on my own trauma 100 percent of the time. Having a nonjudgmental professional editor like her was crucial. She kept me from going off on tangents (as traumatized people can sometimes do) and also helped me expand where needed.

"Most of the time, working on the game meant just having to accept that I was going to feel horrible

I'm tired.

There isn't any good or bad.

and start crying," the artist confessed. "This might sound strange, but having all of that trauma—and looping it over and over with as much detail as possible—eventually rendered it boring. It lost its pain. Sure, there are still parts of the game that upset me and can move me to crying, but I'd say 95 percent I'm fine with. I don't want to pretend I'm all better, but I am different and don't hurt in the same way I used to. It isn't unbearable, unspeakable suffering anymore; it's just my life."

As for actually getting the work on the radar of other like-minded creatives, "Distribution has been tough [because] my game is technically classified as a porn game," McCue lamented. "Before IDFA accepted the project, a lot of places rejected it—only after was it viewed as a lot more 'legitimate.' That said, it's still classified for '18 and older,' so it's just not allowed to be mentioned in many places.

"For example, if you look up the game in the Nuovo Award listings, many outlets will refuse to use the word 'fuck' or will censor part of it," they added. "This means that articles about the game are scrambled and there isn't a consistent way to even see that the game has been written about. (Which is particularly upsetting because I'd often find through a Google search that many of the sites refusing to list the title nevertheless would use 'fuck' in other articles.) Also, being labeled '18-plus' means the game is mixed in with porn on itch. io. And according to the analytics, a not-insignificant amount of users find it while searching for transgender or sissification porn games. It's quite surreal seeing your trauma on the same virtual shelf as sissification games or erotica, to say the least!"

Not that McCue is waiting for the GLAAD establishment to come to the rescue. "Unfortunately, within the queer community I've also had a decent amount of pushback on the grounds that the game is 'bad representation,'" the artist bemoaned. "Then there are the people who view the game as unsafe for those with mental illness, so in order to keep them 'safe' the

game isn't allowed to be mentioned. This includes developer communities (which sucks pretty hard). I guess 'protecting the mentally ill from feeling uncomfortable,' 'lack of positive queer representation' and 'adult content is not allowed' were the trifecta of reasons given to block the game at various points." Fortunately, less risk-averse communities have stepped in to fill the support void: "While not mainstream successful, the game has been embraced by a lot of film and art spaces."

Which doesn't mean that the IDFA DocLab winner is always comfortable with that embrace: "One of the more challenging aspects is that after people with trauma have seen my game, they often feel compelled to write to me about their own trauma. The problem with this is that I am still really mentally ill and can't take care of myself all of the time. Being thrust into that role is quite difficult and not something I'm equipped for. Luckily, I've reached a point now where, after publicly presenting my game so much, I have enough self-respect that I don't really care about the reactions anymore. In the past, I'd have a bunch of men stop by my booth at events and laugh at me while playing. The old me would've been suicidal. But now, I realize I can't control every reaction, can't control how people view me—but I have enough courage to face people understand[ing] or misunderstand[ing] me. While making the game might have been a terrible experience, I think I am a better person for having done so."

As for the XR future, "There are two games that I became a game developer to make. I have now made one of those games, and I hope to make the second someday. As for queer art in general, my hope is that it gains more sources of funding and continues to grow. Otherwise, I am just incredibly proud to be part of this blooming queer art community. It's been such an incredible privilege to see the works of other queer artists and to contribute something to that world."

Welcome to Bulls Country Pharmacy.

In the Mist, **Chou Tung-Yen**

While Chou Tung-Yen's *In the Mist* was certainly the most sexually explicit project featured at IN-TER:ACTIVE, it was also one of the most unexpectedly touching. Set in a gay sauna (and unabashedly packed with all the hardcore imagery that would imply), the virtual reality experience, as its award-winning creator has noted, is "not about sex—it's about what's behind it." Indeed, stripped down to its essence, *In the Mist* is simply the familiar tale of a lonely young man grappling to find his own place in an unfamiliar new world.

"I have a theater and film background, and the focus of my work has long been about dream, memory and intimacy in all different kinds of forms," the filmmaker/theater director/production designer revealed when I reached out to ask about the steam-filled journey. "I've made a (gay dating app-inspired) documentary called *Looking For?* and theater work about childhood memory using hologram projections onstage. (*Chronicle of Light Year: Taipei–Copenhagen* was a 4D box hologram collaboration with Culture Yard in Denmark.) But from the very beginning, *In the Mist* was conceived as a 360 film because I was looking for something that could only be experienced through the very specific medium of VR. I like the idea of the viewer being there but also not being there, this boundary between reality and illusion, and also creating and breaking illusion. For me, that echoes the state of desire and longing."

That made me wonder whether all that hard-core sex nevertheless may have hindered the project's loftier goals. "I had so much support—from my producer, to my casting director, to the technical crew and
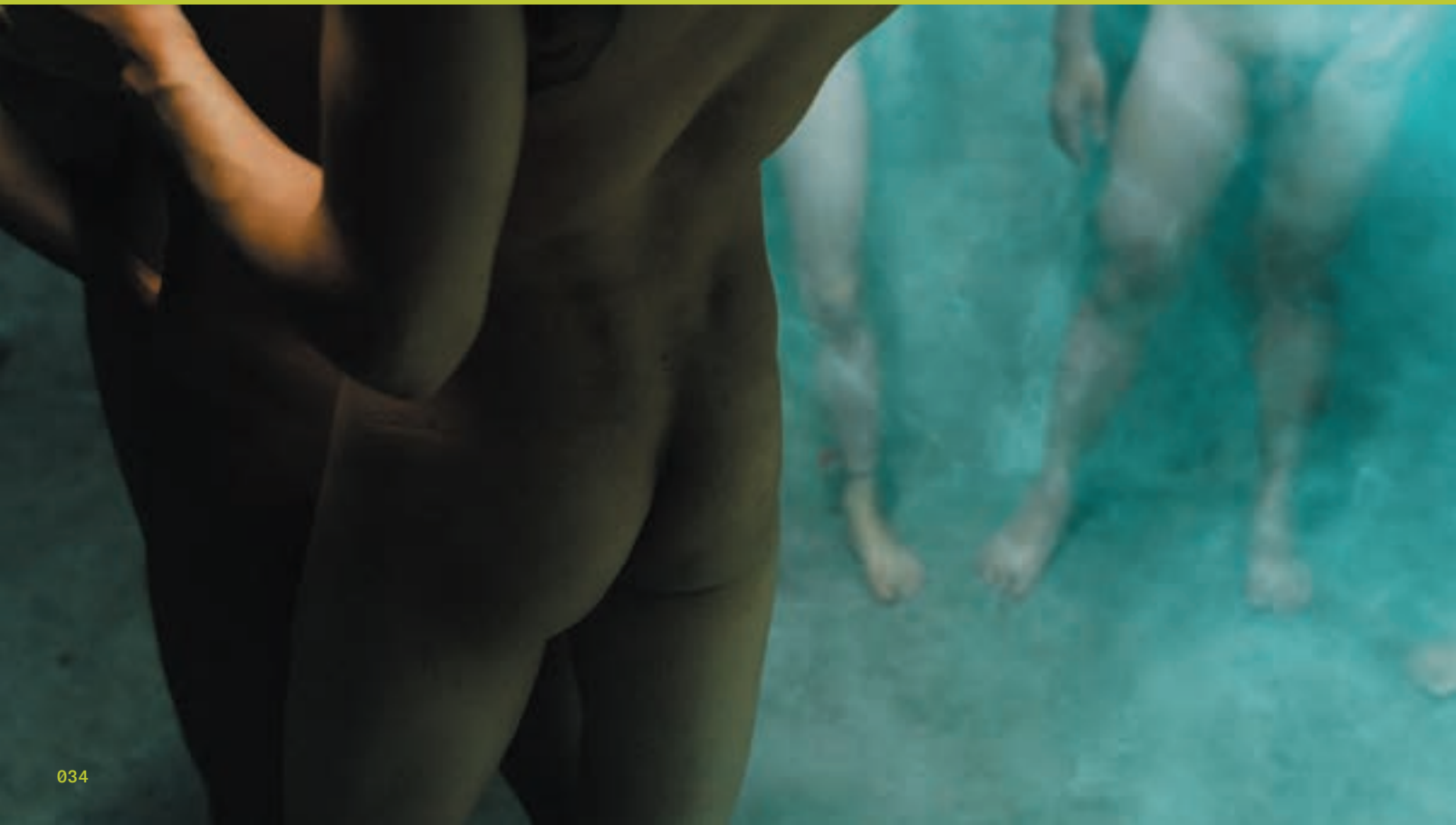
government funding," the Taiwanese multihyphenate countered. "But we began the international tour during COVID, which meant everything suddenly went online. I do distinctly remember receiving an email from the Venice Biennale (2021) explaining that they'd ultimately decided against putting our project on the official VR platform. They wanted to make a special onsite screening instead. And since then, while we've played 13 festivals so far and even won jury awards around the world, we've not been allowed to be distributed online and still have been barred from North America (including from Venice's satellite shows in Canada)."

As for the future, the undaunted artist seems to be thinking outside the VR box: "I've actually already made a second version of the piece, in which 20 people walk around in an expanded space and can eventually jump in and out of the film. It conjures that mixture of personal experience with the collective, like in a theater. And right now, I'm working on a third part in which you own the main character's body through an avatar. So, it's a trilogy. I also hope to soon start working on a project called *Free Your Head* that's based on my interest in how VR equipment itself affects the user."

With *Earth Mama*, a drama about a pregnant young woman battling the foster care system while considering open adoption, writer-director Savanah Leaf has made an astonishing debut that's intimate in focus and communal in its concerns. Filmmaker Derek Cianfrance speaks with Leaf and Matt Mulcahey speaks to DP Jody Lee Lipes in a sidebar interview (pg. 49). Original portrait by Ibrahem Hasan.

DECISIVE

MOMENTS

There are two long back-and-forth tracking shots in Savanah Leaf's wise, emotionally full debut feature, *Earth Mama*. In the first, the pregnant Gia—a 24-year-old Oakland single mother fighting for custody of the two young children she already has lost to state-sponsored foster care—purposefully strides across a playground, the camera focused on her as she passes expensive strollers and children playing in the background in soft focus. Moments before, she has asked the owner of the photo studio she works at for a cash advance: "I don't want my baby coming out with no clothes or nothing," she says. (Leaf cuts before we learn the answer.) The dolly move slows, and Gia kneels down and swiftly grabs a handful of diapers from one of the strollers. The dolly reverses and Gia, her pace quickening, walks back to her car, keeping her composure as off-screen voices notice her theft and cry out, "Stop!" A few scenes later, after submitting to her court-mandated drug test to check that she hasn't relapsed, Gia, who struggles to meet the onerous demands of her social workers, meets a counselor and discusses giving up her new baby for adoption.

The second extensive tracking shot occurs much later in the film. Gia has just attended a successful prenatal check-up with the warm middle-class family with whom she's agreed to an open adoption, but she's quietly wracked with indecision over that choice. At 37 weeks now, her t-shirt stretched tight over her swollen belly, she goes to meet friends at an outdoor nighttime sideshow, again the camera dollying alongside her. A car doing donuts appears in flashes as Gia pushes through the crowd and argues with her friends about her plans—she's not a mother if she gives up her child, one disrespectfully says. Gia's face hardens, and as she leaves frame she appears on the verge of something irreversible.

The extraordinary, heart-rending E*arth Mama* is a film about choices—choices born of maternal love, self-doubt and strength, while being bordered by economic realities and bureaucratic structures. Leaf captures the process of these choices with bold intentions of her own, creating a film that's both socially aware and, at times, invitingly poetic. Working with DP Jody Lee Lipes, Leaf repeatedly allows the camera to simply linger on Gia's face in her in-teractions with co-workers, administrators, her own children and the mothers she's in a treatment program with. A pattern of slow zooms establishes a patient rhythm, one that creates a tension given all of Gia's external stressors. And Leaf's confidence as a writer and director grants her the unexpected, such as meditational moments expressing Gia's inner life, or even a startling moment of body horror. Playing Gia is first-time actor Tia Nomore, an Oakland rapper whose first child was born during the pandemic and who was training as a doula when cast. Nomore's performance is a revelation, conveying shades of tenderness, defiance and vulnerability, along with her character's guarded stoicism and sense of internal mystery.

For the past decade, Leaf—who competed in the 2012 Olympics as part of Great Britain's volleyball team—has been an accomplished director and photographer working in commercials and music videos. Nominated for a Grammy for a video for Marvin Gaye's "What's Going On," she also made a short documentary in 2020, *The Heart Still Hums*, that is something of a nonfiction prelude to *Earth Mama*. It begins with footage of Leaf's adopted sister Corinna, then 10, and a title card, in which Leaf, who cut her sister's umbilical cord, relates that "her birth mother said she wanted me to be the role model she couldn't be." But rather than focus solely on her sister, during its 28 minutes *The Heart Still Hums* engages with a chorus of women grappling with their own choices of whether to keep their babies or place them up for adoption. That generous point of view continues in *Earth Mama*, as Gia's experiences are frequently presented alongside those of other young mothers, several of whom speak in documentary-style direct camera address.

Speaking with Leaf for *Filmmaker* is another writer-director whose work has drawn from family history, Derek Cianfrance (*Blue Valentine*, *The Place Beyond the Pines*). Their conversation touches on Leaf's aversion to "TV coverage" and her choice to shoot in 16mm, but also on topics such as the question of consent when drawing from real-life inspiration and whether or not to be vulnerable in interviews. *Earth Mama* is in theaters on July 7 from A24.—*Scott Macaulay*

HOW THEY DID IT

Production Format
Super 16mm

Camera
Arri 416

Film Stock
7219 500T

Editing System
Avid Symphony

Color Correction
DaVinci Resolve, v. 17,
at Light Iron New York

I watched your movie again this morning. Do you remember, the first time after seeing the movie, I couldn't quite get my words together? It kind of made a mess out of me. The same thing happened today.

Wow.

I find it to be just a beautiful, mysterious movie, almost more like a meditation than a narrative. Do you have any thoughts on that?

It's very observational. It's not really trying to manipulate the audience, and it's aware of itself being a movie, in a way. Like, these mothers sharing their experiences [are] all people [who] aren't actors—it's really just documentary moments where they're sharing themselves. It's kind of like, how could we create this story arc in a very observational tone and sit with people as they're going through life, asking plain and simple questions? In that way, it's like a meditation on parenthood, trying to take away the idea that it's one mother's story, because it has these draws that are so universal as well.

Can you talk about your way into this story? I know you'd made a short before.

The first draft was this story I had been itching to tell of how my sister came into our family. My sister was adopted when I was 16 years old. I had met her birth mother; I didn't know everything she was going through but heard little snippets. So, the first draft was me imagining what she was going through at that time, knowing these little things. I cut my sister's umbilical cord and named her, so I had this very close connection to my sister, but I also felt a really close connection to her birth mother. We were similar ages but going through different things in our lives.

Being from the Bay Area, I wanted to bring out so much of all the mothers [who] had impacted me. I made this short doc, which was me going into a lot of different mothers' experiences, [those] who have children in the foster care system or gave [them] up [for] adoption because of addictions or financial difficulties. That research allowed [*Earth Mama*] to [go] beyond just my own story. I kept doing research and hearing other people's stories, and that created this collective story.

It's your process through documentary. The moments in the film that are the most emotional to me are where your family meets the mother. The specificity, and pain and love, and the giving and sacrifice, and the nurturing and the nature, it's all in those moments. In real life, those moments seem like they were profound for you.

Yeah, real moments [that] stick out to me in my memory, [like] when my sister's birth mother talked to me at 16. That moment at the end between my sister's birth mother and me is very real because, in reality, she told me to be the role model that she couldn't be at the time. I was 16 and felt really empowered but also really inspired by her, and I felt sadness at the same time. In the documentary, someone says her soul was humming when her child left because she still wanted to breastfeed, she still wanted to do all these very physical things, but her child wasn't there, so [her soul] was just humming. I felt that hum when my sister's birth mother said this to me, so I wanted to create that kind of hum in the film. And there's that moment at the end where she's talking about basketball, there is that kind of hum there.

You created the hum. It's this life force. Your sister's birth mother, did you keep in touch with her?

No, and maybe that's why I have an eagerness to make this, because I definitely think about her. And my sister is my favorite person in the world. She's funny and really outgoing, very different than me.

You're not funny and you're not outgoing?

I don't think I am that outgoing. Maybe sometimes a little funny. But my sister? Sometimes, I'm like, how lucky am I to have her in my life? She's moved me in ways that she doesn't even realize changed my life, like maybe how people feel when they have a child. I don't know, I don't have any children, but a lot of people talk about having this greater purpose when they have a child that's outside of themselves. And my sister kind of makes me feel like that because we're such different ages, you know? She's way younger than me.

16 years younger.

Yeah.

Has she seen the film?

Yeah.

And what are her thoughts on it?

She says she really likes it, and she keeps watching it. I thought she would watch it once and be like, "This is too emotional." But she's very excited about it. She's actually in the movie for a split second.

Who is she?

There's a girl in between two guys, and they stand in front in the portrait studio in front of a red backdrop, a lighthearted moment. The guys next to her, they're like brothers to me—I've known them since I was like, 12, 13. So, she loves to see all these people in the film. And we don't live in the same area, so I think seeing the film or any piece of art that I put out is like her connecting to me, even from afar.

I understand that.

Do you feel that way?

Yeah, because my family's all in Colorado, and every movie I make is somehow related to family. There've been movies I've made that are direct gifts to members of my family.

Do you ever get nervous about sharing?

Of course, because you're opening up. Your job as an artist is to express your imagination. Sometimes, that's your fear; sometimes, that's your vulnerable, embarrassing hopes, and you really have to put it out there. So, it's exposing, and sometimes, your family hasn't agreed, [hasn't] taken that same oath as an artist to just lay it out there for the world to see. That's very personal art, but that's what this movie is.

Yeah, and that's what your work feels like to me.

It's like a family picture, and you're all naked together.

That's exactly what it's like. And they haven't signed up for it.

Yes, there's an issue of consent. Do you think about that?

I totally do, and that's something I struggle with emotionally. I've tried to write stuff that's not deeply personal, and I just physically

can't do it. I just can't figure out what happens next. So, I've realized the only way I can write is through stuff that's really happened to me or people [who] are close to me, stuff I've felt deep inside of me. And I always worry that the people around me are going to feel not-represented or really don't want to be seen. Or, my viewpoint on something is through my lens, not their lens, so they might feel it's inaccurate. That is something I am constantly [thinking about], at least now in this phase of sharing a film. Before, when you're just writing for yourself, no one's seeing it. But as soon as you start sharing it, even to one person—probably the biggest anxiety around art is that not everyone might emotionally consent. Your actors, everybody physically part of it, have consented to be in it, and you can go deep with them about how much they want to share. But the people you're writing about might not always [want to share], and I get really emotional about that. But, I also think maybe there's a greater purpose beyond just me and them, and maybe it's hearing people's personal responses to the film that are broader. But I don't know. I'm still dealing with that. I think that's just part of making stuff.

The thing that I've learned is that if you open yourself up in that way to people, they'll come back and open themselves up to you all of a sudden. I mean, it's interesting that your central character works at a photography studio. Photos, it's normally like, "Here's the artificial backdrop, and we're going to capture this one happy moment of smiling faces." But what your movie does is show what's behind all of that. Everyone's got this smiling, beautiful picture of themselves, but for me, it's always hard to relate to those pictures because I know that's not the truth.

Ever since I was really young, you go to people's family houses, and they've got all these photos all over their house of how perfect they are. People used to send Christmas cards of their happy families. And every time, it feels so forced but also really sweet because that holds a value for them, you know?

For sure. It is beautiful.

Yeah, it is beautiful to see people sitting around together and generations, or sometimes even just friend groups, constructing what they want to be their happy family. But there is so much more behind that. And I think Gia's kind of like me. She's in this place and making these photographs, but she's also trying to dive beyond that.

You're in the beginning of your press tour with your movie. My movies are completely vulnerable and open, and I never know if I should be that way in the interviews, too.

I don't know, either.

I don't know any other way to be.

Yeah, and that's kind of me. I've been getting really nervous and emotional about how you make a film, and you're about to put it out. How is that portrayed and who am I talking to? There're all these avenues to do press stuff, and all I really want to do is have one-on-one conversations and hear how people emotionally respond to the film because that's what's interesting. And I struggle to not be genuine. If I catch myself [doing that], I get really exhausted and just want to leave. Do you get like that?

Yeah, but at the same time—when *Blue Valentine* came out, it was a movie based around a childhood fear of my parents getting a divorce. Then, the movie is released, and on the front page of the newspaper in my hometown, it talks about "local kid turns the pain of his parents' divorce into art." And my mom and dad and all their friends get that paper.

But did that, in fact, bring you closer because they could feel what you were going through, maybe?

I wouldn't say that, no. They're supportive, and they're fucking great. But my whole life, my dad would be like, "You've got to stop." Because I would shoot everything my whole life. I would shoot our family fights.

Oh, really?

I used to shoot family arguments, yeah. I used to try to take pictures of people crying in my house. I got in trouble a bunch, my dad just saying, "Stop taking these pictures. These are not pictures anyone wants to see."

Now, they get it.

Maybe.

That film, in particular, I actually can't relate to the fear of parents getting divorced because I never had that. But the emotion of falling in love and then it falling apart and that yearning or grieving process, is so relatable. I've been thinking a lot about that grieving process, recently, especially with a film. Do you get that when your film's over?

PROBABLY THE BIGGEST ANXIETY AROUND ART IS THAT NOT EVERYONE MIGHT EMOTIONALLY CONSENT.

YOUR ACTORS, EVERYBODY PHYSICALLY PART OF IT, HAVE CONSENTED TO BE IN IT, AND YOU CAN GO DEEP WITH THEM ABOUT HOW MUCH THEY WANT TO SHARE. BUT THE PEOPLE YOU'RE WRITING ABOUT MIGHT NOT ALWAYS [WANT TO SHARE], AND I GET REALLY EMOTIONAL ABOUT THAT. **"**

I've always *thought* I would have that. I heard when Sam Peckinpah finished *The Wild Bunch*, he went and cried against the fence.

In relief? (laughs)

Yeah, in relief, catharsis. I've always thought, "OK, I'm going to have that catharsis now," and it's never happened to me. The only thing that I ever feel, being done with a film, is empty, like, "It's gone now." Maybe that's the grief. "It's not there anymore."

Someone put it really interestingly. I made this movie about birth and letting something go. I'm in this other version of that now, and it is like a hump, which is interesting.

Well, now it has its own life, and it's going to hopefully live for a long time. I wanted to ask about your aesthetic choices. I think it's so interesting how you take these naturalistic moments of behavior and see them with this incredibly heightened, very particular observational cinematic eye. And you shoot on film, and the color of the film is so specific. The movement of the camera is almost in a trance. Our dear friend Jody Lee Lipes shot your movie. Can you talk about your aesthetic choices with Jody?

This is a heavy film, tough subject matter, but I don't want to impose that with the camera. I'd rather keep a distance from the people in front of the camera. We were using a lot of people [who] haven't acted before, so we wanted to have a language where we didn't have to keep having them repeat themselves. There's limited coverage, and we have the camera far enough away from the subjects so they don't feel like they're being intruded on. And the color palette—I want them to be heroes of their own stories and allow them to be in light. Just because it's about people going through tough shit doesn't mean you have to make the image rough.

Jody's really talented with responding to what's in front of the camera in a very fluid way. He's always reacting rather than forcing something ahead of time, so a lot of that came naturally. We also chose a lot of the frames and thought about the blocking ahead of time; then, there were light subtle shifts as he was panning slightly to keep people in frame or adjusting things like that, based on what was actually happening. But the majority of the blocking was thought about beforehand. The camera's either static or on a dolly the whole time or zooming. And it was really just about giving the actors the freedom to just do the scene once and [not] need to repeat it.

Some of these choices about giving these performers their space also really allow them to not be self-conscious, to not be so aware of the fact that something is being expected from them. One of my favorite parts of your movie is the performances. Tia is so amazing. I think you are allowing Tia her own journey in this film. Correct me if I'm wrong. As I'm watching it, I'm not imagining that she's following every single screen direction or parenthetical of, like, "Tears start forming" or "She laughs." She feels free. It feels like you've set up this situation, and you're watching.

That's kind of what it is. I tried to take out a lot of stuff in the script that might be prescriptive.

Why?

Because I didn't want her to force anything. I wanted her to have that freedom, like you said. She's never read a script before. The first thing you do when you've got someone that's never read a script before is [say] like, "OK, this is dialogue, this is action"—and then, "Don't pay attention to this stuff. The most important thing is this specific goal in this scene." This is what you want, and [you] try to make it as simple as possible so that other things can come through. For me, what was really important was creating physical things that emotionally affected her. That's in the writing process as well, knowing that I was going to have some people [who] had never acted before. For example, when she's giving birth there's this plastic sheet, and it's claustrophobic.

It's a barrier.

There are physical barriers or claustrophobic settings or scenarios. For example, the sound of trains, that's just naturally in the space. There are ways to create physical barriers or obstacles or things that are uncomfortable for her. Seeing a bunch of babies or children playing in the playground and having to walk through that to get diapers. How do you create that in the writing, so that when you place somebody there they can just react to that space being uncomfortable? And that was the freedom. You set up physical obstacles, and she has to maneuver them in her own way.

That scene in the playground reminded me of one of my favorite filmmakers and favorite films, Lucrecia Martel's *The Headless Woman*, in that there's no need for an establishing shot. When she enters the playground, you're tracking with her, and the playground exists offscreen. And when you finally do see the playground, it's abstract, impressionistic, out of focus, but the sound is doing so much of the work for you, and your camera has created Gia's world to be claustrophobic. She's under a microscope in that moment. You hear the other mothers talking to her, but you never see them. It's so bold, the way you shoot it. What is the process of convincing your producers and financiers to pull off a scene like that? Because you didn't have any other coverage, right?

No, we didn't. I was really lucky. There are definitely times when people are telling me like, "Man, you've got to get some coverage. This is crazy."

Like when?

That scene, but the biggest one was probably the sideshow, where the cars are doing donuts. We had the shortest night of the year [when] we were shooting that, and we were shooting overnight. So, we had very limited time and were going to shoot it all in one take. And they were like, "Come on. There's no way we can get this in one take." We drew a storyboard version of it to try to make people understand what was going to be done. I'm lucky because I had a budget size where we don't have people from our financiers on set all the time. But even when we're editing, people are like, "Do we not have any coverage of this scene?" And it makes me feel multiple ways. I'm like, "Shit, should I have had it?" but at the same time, I'm so proud of not doing that because it does feel bold and like we set out to do that. We set out to give a strong tone throughout. I'm tired of seeing the same shit on screen all the time, which is TV coverage. I think that's just a bunch of fear. Not a lot of people are really taking bold choices. They're so afraid to even shoot on film. I mean, it's financially tough, and there's not a backup. I get it. But that's why you start to see so many movies looking the same, and that's boring to me.

There's something about a long take in a film because there are no lies in it. You can't hide a lie in a cut.

Exactly, [and] you're stopping them from just living the scene out, you know? Every time we'd call a cut before the whole scene is over, it's like you're stopping their emotions from going to the next thing. And it's really tough to do that, especially with non-actors. But even actors, I imagine—I haven't really worked with tons of well-known actors or anything, but I imagine that's tough every time, having to stop and move onto the next thing or maybe go back to the thing before. You have a similar approach, right?

For sure. When I was doing *I Know This Much Is True*, the first day Rosie O'Donnell came on set we had a 10-page dialogue scene with her and Mark [Ruffalo]. And in the middle of the scene she was like, "You're going to shoot the whole scene in one?" I was like, "Yeah." She was like, "Wow, that's a lot of dialogue." Well, forget the dialogue. You know what you want out of this scene, right? You know what the intention is of the scene. You're sharp. Take over. Say whatever you want. I don't care about the words on the page, anyway. So, we started shooting, and two minutes into the scene she got stuck and was like, "Line." And I was like, "I'm not going to give you a line. I'm not going to help you here."

Yeah, keep going.

"Just go into yourself. I believe in you. If you get lost, get lost. It's OK." And it's what I'm hearing from you: You are allowing your actors, your performers, to behave. There's nothing I feel like they can do wrong in your movie. There's no right way or wrong way for them to do a scene, I don't think. Or was there?

Not really, no. Not while we were shooting. Everyone was experienced in a way. Tia's not had this life experience specifically, but she created Gia and brought what she was going through at the time or what she might've been through previously. Before you cast that person, it could be so many things. Then, once you cast Tia as Gia, it feels like nobody else could play that role.

I totally believe that.

She had a child a year before but was still breastfeeding even when we were shooting. And I think she was training to become a doula at the time.

Which makes so much sense.

> "I'M TIRED OF SEEING THE SAME SHIT ON SCREEN ALL THE TIME, WHICH IS TV COVERAGE. I THINK THAT'S JUST A BUNCH OF FEAR. NOT A LOT OF PEOPLE ARE REALLY TAKING BOLD CHOICES. THEY'RE SO AFRAID TO EVEN SHOOT ON FILM. I MEAN, IT'S FINANCIALLY TOUGH, AND THERE'S NOT A BACKUP. I GET IT. BUT THAT'S WHY YOU START TO SEE SO MANY MOVIES LOOKING THE SAME, AND THAT'S BORING TO ME."

It makes a lot of sense. And she was really willing to just try stuff, you know? I think it's really difficult to act in a film. Not to mention, she wasn't pregnant at the time, so she's carrying this fake belly, [which requires] many hours of prosthetics sometimes. She's in almost every scene, it's a very difficult role and we went through a wave of emotions while shooting. Sometimes she was frustrated because it's tough.

How would she get frustrated and why?

You're lacking sleep, wearing uncomfortable prosthetics, shooting many hours a day, then waking up and doing the same thing the next day, and you're doing it for 26 days, and you've never done this before.

And you're the one making her do it.

Exactly. I'm the one encouraging her to do it.

OK, you're not *making* her, you're encouraging her. It's consent.

It's really difficult, and I'm putting her in tough circumstances, not a happy script where you're joking around all the time. So, it wasn't easy. The beauty, looking back on it, is that Tia really kept going every day, "Yesterday was tough, but let me wake up and figure another angle of how to approach this today." It's not even about being better every day, it's just, "How can I be as truthful today?" I think we were able to maneuver together through all the ups and downs that come with creating something and the difficulties of that.

When you're encouraging someone to do something and you see the cost that it takes, do you ever think about just letting them know, "Don't worry about it, we don't have to do that?"

Yeah.

As I'm producing my first film right now, I'm having some talks with the director about it. Where is the line where you push and where you stop pushing? What is more important, the real people behind the scenes or what you're trying to make on the screen? This goes to our discussion about family, too.

I just feel it out, scenario to scenario. As an athlete, I would sometimes be so upset with my coaches. There's times where I walked out—I got kicked off a team and then brought back. And there were times where I felt like I was pushed too far. So, for me, it's about trying to listen to one another, trying to figure out what each other needs. I'm constantly thinking about ways to make people feel safe while they're doing stuff that's so vulnerable, and it's tough because you've got producers, directors, financiers—how does an actor trust all of those people? It takes honesty on both sides, [with] the director being as honest as possible. I try to show up and be

Photo by Ibrahem Hasan

vulnerable as well, and I think that's the only way you can build that sort of trust. And the fact that I wrote the script and was putting myself on the line, too, helped her feel that I was being vulnerable, too. If it wasn't my words or if I didn't reveal stuff to her about my personal life while we're prepping a scene or something like that, it would've been a whole different situation. Even with the women revealing their lives [who] open and close the film, I'm sitting right there next to the camera as they're telling their experiences. That's me off-camera telling them about myself.
I always think about sports when I make movies.
I've heard you talk about this in an interview before—about being the coach?
Yeah, I feel like a coach. But, like, your frustration with your coaches you walked out on [is] because coach can't play.
Yeah, coach can't play.
Coach can't play, coach is telling me what to do. She's pointing her finger and I'm supposed to go there.
And I hate that feeling of being a robot. But I look at the best case scenario—maybe because I didn't always love my coaches, I think directing is more like being a team captain. I used to run Marin [Avenue], which is this very steep hill in Berkeley, California. It's really exhausting, And if you make it to the top, you're just drenched in sweat, and it takes the [most] mental strength. So, I was like, "Maybe I should tell Tia this is what acting is like, and run to the top of it [together]." I thought it might've been too tough, too early on, but I kind of like the idea of doing a physical activity with an actor. Maybe next time, I'll do something like that, where we can physically go through it together.
Yeah, but you're going to win. You're going to get to the top of the mountain—you know, it's unfair.
No, because it's like being on a team. You've got to do it together. Nobody makes it to the top without the other person.
That's what I was telling the director I'm working with right now. I was telling him, "You're leading everyone to the top of Everest." And he said, "People die going to Everest." And I was like, "They're not going to die with you. That's the point."
Yeah, and they only go to the top when they're with a squad.
Exactly. You can't go alone.
I want to hear about how you relate filmmaking to sports.
Every day that you start shooting, the dynamite is lit. You've been dreaming about this moment forever, and now you're on set, and the dynamite is lit, and you have just the length of that wick to get it because once that dynamite goes, it's over. When you're making a low-budget film, it's really, really hard to go back, so you have to get it that moment.

To me, that's like a shot clock, like a game. You can practice all you want, you can have all the team meetings you want, but when the game starts, it's here and the clock is going, and there's no way to reverse that. That's where the pressure of making films comes from, but that's also the joy of it. And I love sports.
Yeah, I think about this a lot. When I was an athlete, I really resonated with AI in the sentiment of not loving to practice.
What *A.I.*? The Spielberg movie?
No, Allen Iverson.
Oh, OK, gotcha. Practice.
Practice. I loved the game. I loved being physically in the game. I loved reacting. My best self was never in practice. I was not a practice player. I needed to be in the game to show myself. I thrive in that countdown mode. I love the pressure.
And getting what you get in the moment.
And making a mistake, then having to figure out how to correct it in that moment.
I think in athletics, confidence is very important. And in art, or at least making movies, I think confidence is dangerous.
Yeah, while you're physically making it. But I guess it also helps you get it made.
Well, yeah, but confidence has never helped me out in art. It can be too much like cockiness or something. You have to embrace your own delusion but know that what you're believing in may be a delusion at the time.
Yeah, how do you deal with that idea of what you're believing in might be a delusion?
I just embrace it. I embrace that it doesn't have to be good, it doesn't have to be loved, it doesn't have to be right, it doesn't have to be wrong. It's what it is at that moment. Follow that inner voice and follow everyone else's inner voice in trying to make something, and hopefully it's not too much of a disaster and you get money to make something else.
OK, I wanted to bring up this. The first line of your movie is off screen: "Why should we care if you make it?" And the person on screen, Tiffany [Garner], responds, "It's my journey. No one else's journey. Nobody can walk in my shoes. You can hold my hand; you can look back from a distance. You still won't feel what I feel. You still won't look at that from my point of view." I think that's such a beautiful opening statement about empathy and whose stories we tell, and who's worthy of a story and who's worthy of our attention.
When she was talking in that moment, it felt like it really needed to open the film because it is a statement about empathy—not being able to walk in my shoes, but you can stand right by me. And that is like a challenge. We always talk about fully empathizing by imagining or putting

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yourself in somebody else's shoes. It's not actually possible in a lot of scenarios, you know? That doesn't mean you can't feel or connect. I feel myself as a very emotional and empathetic person, so I always feel like when someone says a story and I connect, I feel like I'm imagining myself as that person. But I think I really connect to what they're feeling, rather than imagining myself as that person. I wanted to challenge people to feel for her and not make these quick judgments off of people [who] might be different than them or have gone through difficult situations that led them to make difficult decisions.

So, you didn't write that line?

No.

Did you ask the question to get it out of her?

No, what happened was I started asking questions. It's just me talking to Tiffany, because Tiffany's also in the short film and I know her and I connect. Then, halfway through, Erika [Alexander], who plays Miss Carmen, starts asking questions. And I think I might've given her a couple of questions, but a lot of them were her just genuinely asking them. That particular moment was completely unscripted.

And did you know when it was happening that you were getting the opening of your film? Or did you find it later in the edit?

I knew that she could be the beginning of the film. I didn't know how it would fit into anything else other than the beginning or the ending, and it didn't make sense in the ending. But I knew when we were filming it, there's about 15 minutes that she's speaking that completely moved me

I know. When I heard it, it spoke so clearly to me, too.

Yeah. That and the ending, too.

About wanting to protect her kids because no one was there to protect her?

Exactly. That was also unscripted. I was asking her questions, and she's just saying how she feels. And that ties back in with these generations and the weight that you carry from your parents, and then maybe pass on or don't want to pass on. How do you stop a cycle from happening? And the heartbreak of knowing some things are just destined to happen. Breaking the cycle—I hate that term, but it's just so difficult. I really relate to that, this need to protect someone you care so deeply about, even though you know you might be hurting them at the same time sometimes.

How would you be hurting them?

Maybe mistakes you make sometimes, bad habits you have. You've learned something at some point in your life, and you do it and you don't want to be doing it.

Epigenetics, I think?

Yeah, maybe. Do you ever feel that way? I mean, that's what I make all my movies about, basically. I heard that some scientists did an experiment on mice. They hooked a mouse up to all these electrodes, and every time it would sniff a cherry blossom, they would shock the mouse. Then, the mouse had babies, the babies came out, no electrodes on them, and those babies would not go near the cherry blossoms. So, there's an idea of DNA, that it takes thousands of years to turn something on, but I think it can be just get turned on in a moment. And then, how long does it take to turn that off? I think it's generations and generations.

I definitely feel that in myself.

Maybe that's why you're making movies.

Definitely why I'm making them. I'm still learning. That's a really beautiful analogy. I've never heard of that.

The mouse? It might not have really happened. Who knows what stories we tell? But I think it's true.

Images: Tia Nomore in *Earth Mama* (pg. 37, 38, 41, 44); Jody Lee Lipes and Savanah Leaf on-set (opposite, pg. 49), all courtesy of A24.

EARTH MAMA CINEMATOGRAPHER JODY LEE LIPES

By Matt Mulcahey

Jody Lee Lipes likes to ask questions—so many, in fact, that the cinematographer says it can sometimes annoy directors. However, Lipes found a collaborator with an equally inexhaustible inquisitiveness in Savanah Leaf.

"Savanah wanted to go through every scene together [during prep]," said Lipes. "I loved it because that's my favorite thing to do. We would talk about a scene for like three hours. We went literally word by word through the script." Lipes, whose credits include *Manchester by the Sea*, *Martha Marcy May Marlene* and *I Know This Much Is True*, first met Leaf on a commercial. They developed a rapport, and Leaf began pitching the DP on a script she'd been working on. "It's very common for a commercial director to have a script in their back pocket, but it's really hard to make a movie, so a lot of the time they don't ever get made," said Lipes. "So, I didn't really take it that seriously at first, but then the script came to me through my agent, and I was really impressed by what I read."

Blending social realism (practical locations, non-actors in many roles, an emphasis on long takes with an objective point of view) and magical realism (Gia's inner life is expressed through daydream-like escapes to the nearby ocean and redwood forests), the film was shot over 26 days around the Bay Area. During prep, Lipes and Leaf went through the script together three separate times in minute detail as they shotlisted the entire movie. "We really distilled things," said Lipes. "Obviously, that plan can change on the day and get better or shift because problems come up, but we did what we planned like 90 percent of the time. It just really felt like a mind meld where we were speaking the same language."

I watched Savanah's documentary *The Heart Still Hums* (2020)—which focuses on the story of women dealing with similar issues to Gia—and the doc is actually more stylized than the fictional variation you've made with *Earth Mama*.

When I first read the script, I kind of assumed that it was going to be this super real, very gritty story, almost like a Dardenne brothers feeling. I know Savanah has a lot of respect for them—*The Son* was one of the films we watched during prep—but I was really surprised and excited when I first met with her about the project and she said that wasn't going to be the language. We watched a lot of Michael Haneke films in preparation. There's actually a screening at BAM that is Haneke's *Code Unknown* and *Earth Mama* playing together because that movie was such an influence on Savanah.

One of the biggest scenes in *Earth Mama* is very directly inspired by *Code Unknown*. It's the scene in that film following the opening vignette of the children. There's a lateral tracking shot that moves along the street for a really long time and then tracks all the way back as this [confrontation] unfolds. That was a really big influence on Savanah for the scene when Gia goes to what's called a sideshow, which is like a party in the streets in the Bay Area where people do crazy things with cars.

Did you shoot mainly on location?

Almost entirely. The photo studio where Gia works was an empty storefront inside of a mall that Juliana Barreto Barreto, our production designer, really transformed from scratch. I think that was the biggest creation for her. There's another moment where Gia is in her house and sees redwoods through the window. That was actually [a facade with a wall and a window] that Juliana built [in the forest].

The movie is around 100 minutes long, and if I had to guess, there might only be 250 shots total. You're often distilling scenes down to their essence. It felt like you were asking yourself, "What are the one or two places I can put the camera in this scene that will tell the entire story?"

It's not always the right approach for everything, but if it works—and not just because you don't have time or don't know any better—then that's the best, right? If it's working for the performances and telling the story and you can do it in one shot, that, to me, is all I ever want to do. You don't need to dress it up. Savanah really had confidence in herself, and she knew the story so well that she was able to commit and make visual choices that were bold in their simplicity.

You shot on Super 16 film with ARRI/ZEISS Master Primes, which is a lens set with an extensive number of focal lengths. Are you a cinematographer who likes to narrow down the language of a film to a few specific lenses?

No, I think we probably used them all at some point. One of the reasons I like Master Primes is actually for that very thing—there's a lot of options, so there's a lot of very specific choices you can make. Those lenses don't have a lot of character, but I didn't feel like we needed a lot of character from the lenses for this film. I thought the 16mm was enough and that it had its own voice. We also needed the speed of those lenses because we weren't going to have a big lighting budget. I had an incredible focus puller, so I wasn't worried about shooting them at a T1.3. We also used a 24-290mm Angénieux Zoom and did a lot of long zoom-ins, which is something that several directors I've worked with have responded to.

Why was Super 16 the right choice?

The way Savanah described the movie to me was this mixture of being really pretty and thought out and graphic, but also very gritty and real. So, how do you get both of those things simultaneously? I think [the former characteristics] come from the shot choices, the camera movement and the focal lengths we chose. I think that grittiness and rawness comes from the lighting and the fact that the format is 16mm. Somehow they went together, the lighting style and the format blending with the lensing and the formalism of the coverage choices to make this interesting brew.

Did you process the 16mm normally or did you push it a stop?

I processed it regularly, but the movie is very underexposed in terms of how the film is rated. We only used [Kodak] 7219, which is 500 ASA tungsten, but I rated it at 1,000. Even though the film is in some ways overlit, at least for me, in terms of how there's light everywhere and it's not shaped very much, the negative is really starved, and that makes a grainier image. The other thing that accentuates that is the grade, where we wanted it to almost feel like it was developed in a drugstore. I like low-contrast grades, and it's been hard for me to get out of that habit. I just naturally go that way.

The lighting looks very naturalistic, but that doesn't mean you didn't go to great pains to make it feel "found." How much were you relying on practical sources and how much were you carefully curating that naturalism?

It's a mixture. We had an incredible lighting team that worked really hard and did a lot. There were definitely some bigger units used for things like pushing through windows, but it's a period film, so a lot of it was just switching out practicals to make sure things were color-correct and period-correct. We wanted to make sure that the color was a choice rather than just letting it fall where it falls.

There's a three-and-a-half-minute shot early in the film when Gia has supervised visitation with her kids that really establishes the rhythm and the style of the film.

Savanah had really specific ideas about the way she wanted that room to be laid out—where the supervisor would be, which doors people could come in and out of, the relationship of the room to the parking lot. She based it on research she had done. So, I started to draw out the room with her just so I understood [the geography of what she wanted]. It was really hard to find a room that fit. We ended up finding this room that I think was an Education Department office or something, and at first Savanah really wasn't into it. The space seemed too big, but the way we designed the shot, you were never going to see half of the room. So, it actually worked perfectly because then we had all this extra [off-camera] space logistically just for [equipment and crew in the room]. Once we found that room, it became about simplifying the shot, which often happens with a complicated oner like this one. [The moves start] getting less and less [elaborate] and the actors start to do less and less. It becomes simpler and simpler, and that's when it gets better and better. I was also worried about whether the kids were going to be able to pull this off for a shot this long, but Savanah is an amazing actors' director, and the kids were fantastic.

Let's circle back to that oner at the sideshow that you mentioned earlier, which is set in a mall parking lot. Is that just done on a long stretch of dolly track?

Yes. We looked at a lot of locations to find that. Sideshows are not secret back-alley things. They happen at a super busy intersection in the middle of the street. It's not hidden—that's part of the point. We needed a location where it felt like you could park a car and then, as Gia walks toward the party, the crowd could grow and get bigger. It's a night scene, so we were also looking for a location that could light itself to a certain extent. Once we picked our mall, which is ironically right in front of a police station, it was then about finding the right spot where we could lay one really long, straight stretch of track. We needed the ground to be level enough that we didn't need any sort of crazy scaffolding or system underneath to build up the track. We needed it to just be track on the ground [leveled out] with wood.

We did a test shoot at that mall just to make sure there weren't too many flicker problems with the parking lot lights. Then, we basically begged this mall to replace 50 light bulbs that lit the side of their building. They had stopped using that exterior lighting a long time ago, so a bunch of the bulbs were dead. We had to get them to turn the lights on for us and then put in replacement bulbs. It was a very big job to get them to do that, and it took a lot of work from the locations department and the electricians to make that happen. We also put a light in the glass elevator shaft in the mall that Gia walks by. That was pretty much it. It's kind of crazy how something that epic—at least, something that's epic to me—had no [non-practical] lighting really to speak of, except for one little light in an elevator to glow the glass. I love the way that scene turned out.

There's a shot where Gia leaves a support group meeting, and instead of following her, the camera focuses on a woman from the group who's outside crying. That moment personifies this sense in *Earth Mama* that all the peripheral characters—whether it be the women in the support group, the customers getting their family portraits at Gia's photo studio job or the people hanging out under the carports by Gia's apartment— have their own stories as well.

That is totally true, and that was Savanah's idea—that all these people, including Gia, are worth looking at and understanding.

Droit

HOW THEY DID IT

Production Format
2K

Camera
Alexa Mini with a series
of Cooke S4

Editing System
Avid

Color Correction
DaVinci

Filmmaker Stephen Winter talks with
writer-director Ira Sachs about Sachs's
nuanced, emotionally spiky *Passages*,
a love triangle of sorts set within the
Parisian film industry.

There are acclaimed films about filmmakers set during production—Fellini's *8 1/2*, Truffaut's *Day for Night* and Fassbinder's *Beware of a Holy Whore*, to name three. But there are far fewer set during what might be an even more psychologically fraught time: post-production. For some directors, it's when a film wraps that things become unstable. The ersatz family of cast and crew retreat, the militarized schedule lessens somewhat and the adrenaline rush of shooting is replaced by introspection, anxiety and self-doubt.

In Ira Sach's *Passages*, we see just enough up top of Franz Rogowski's arthouse director Tomas's on-set behavior to know that he is, as Sachs dubs the character in this interview with Stephen Winter below, "a piece of work." In the movie's first scene, set during the briefly observed Paris-based film-within-a-film's final shoot day, Tomas erupts in anger over the inauthentic walk down a staircase of a bewildered actor. Hours later at the wrap party, he dances with an attractive teacher, Agathe (Adèle Exarchopoulos), before sleeping with her, then returning home to his graphic designer husband, Martin (Ben Whishaw), and casually revealing his infidelity. We sense this isn't the first time.

While completing his film in time for a Venice premiere, Tomas, played by Rogowski with sneering impetuous force, keeps upping the drama, first by professing his love for Agathe and then, when his marriage implodes, being unable to accept that he has surrendered Martin. Needing all the love, all the adulation, he's a walking personification of numerous listicles that outline "10 Warning Signs You're Dealing With a Narcissist"—a personality type that might be incompatible with mature contentment but not with the business of making movies.

It's, of course, tempting to read the character of a film director as a stand-in for a film's actual director, but there's no ventriloquist effect being attempted here. Sachs brings the knowledge gleaned from seven features not to a depiction of one emotionally messy artistic fireball but rather to the more complicated ways in which creative lives intertwine, giving all three characters in his love triangle aching, full arcs. Whishaw is beautifully understated, registering frustration, hurt and quiet strength, while Exarchopoulos—pointedly, a teacher of young children—conveys the excitement of this sudden affair but also Agathe's skepticism that someone like Tomas is down for the long haul. Also worth highlighting is the fluid cinematography of Josée Deshaies, a first-time collaborator with Sachs who previously lensed Jacques Nolot's *Before I Forget*, one of three films he cited to Winter—whose films include *Chocolate Babies* and *Jason and Shirley*—as inspirations. Below, the two colleagues and directors discuss drawing inspiration from an earlier era of queer cinema, revealing character through sex, mixing realism with glamour and more. *Passages* enters theatrical release via MUBI on August 4, with streaming to follow.—*Scott Macaulay*

It is so wonderful and thrilling to see this film come from you at this time, not just in terms of where you are in your artistic trajectory, but in terms of where the world is right now. It is so human-forward, sex-forward and audacious. You rarely see sex in a movie anymore, and you've got these accomplished, unique, sexy sex scenes. Which came to you first, the story, characters and idea of this film, or that you were going to explore sex in your next story?

I have two 11-year-olds and I've been thinking about the birds and the bees. How do you talk about sex with your family? And what do you know about sex? In some ways, it's easier for me to do that in cinema than it is in life. Cinema gives you freedom. It also gives you collaborators, who make certain things possible that you maybe wouldn't be able to make as frank or as straightforward without them. So, in terms of your question, I would say the story came first. But before the story came the idea of making an intimate, character-based drama about people in their bedrooms, in their apartments, who are in the middle of questions of love and relationships and sex. So, I had a *kind* of film that I wanted to make, and then there was the story itself about these three characters. And I felt the film would be more alive, more accessible and more exciting for people to watch [if it were] not closeted—to make it in a mature way that was [true] to my own experience and also to my own relationship to cinema.

Your films always have this "ripped from your diary" quality, but you've also said throughout your career that the autobiographical qualities in your films are also quite fictionalized. I have been meeting a lot of young filmmakers who are doing autobiographical material, who try to work with their real stuff and keep it honest and effective. How do you create work that is drawn from your life and yet is so completely different? What advice do you have for someone that wants to attempt such a thing?

I would agree that my work is personal. I would not say that this is an autobiographical film. I think other work that I've done—particularly *Keep the Lights On, The Delta* and *Forty Shades of Blue*—are, from the beginning, much more autobiographical than this film. But I seem to make a lot of films about men, particularly white men, trying to understand their power and place in the world, which seems to me less a mea culpa [than] an autobiography, really. Meaning, I'm interested in my own position in the world, the power I have and my feelings around power, and I think that is central in this film. This is a film about a director and a friend of a director. And the questions of what it feels [like] to have power and then to lose power are ones that are deeply personal to me.

I know the character of Tomas is not autobiographical because he is—

A piece of work.

He's a piece of work. He is sexy and selfish, equally. Beautiful and almost hateful. You're so drawn to him, but you also cringe from him. He's so beautifully embodied by your actor, Franz Rogowski. Is he a sex addict or a narcissist in your mind? What does love mean to him?

I will say, I wrote the film for Franz. So, when you talk about autobiography, in a way, this isn't his autobiography either in any way, shape or form. But I think I try to make films about people that I have known and do know in the process of making the film. I would say to younger filmmakers that you maybe start in a place of autobiography, but, eventually, your film becomes about the people who are in front of the camera, and you always have to be open to that. The film feels pulled from life because it is. Something interesting Franz said to me when he watched the film is that it shifts between being about Tomas, Agathe and Martin, the three characters who are in the script, to being about Franz, Adèle and Ben, the three actors. You're always watching both. And I think allowing that to be the case for the viewer is part of my strategy.

Tomas is a film director. You're a film director, and you're also a film scholar. The character of film directors has been essayed all kinds of ways across cinema. What was a thing you wanted to do differently in depicting a film director?

Less what I wanted to do differently and more what I got from certain representations. What really inspired me for this film is movies in which the film director plays the central character, because I was interested in exposure. I'm thinking about films like Frank Ripploh's *Taxi zum Klo,* Chantal Akerman's *Je Tu Il Elle* and Jacques Nolot's *Before I Forget*. What's impressive about those three films is the maker is actually front and center. The maker *is* the film. I'm not a good actor—I'm not a good presence, I'm too uncomfortable—so I can't do that. But I've felt like the risks that those three filmmakers took were ones that carried me; specifically, *Taxi zum Klo* and the Akerman film, where there's no great distinction between the physical relationship between characters and the actors and the rest of the story. [The sex] doesn't stop the film, it doesn't change the film. It's central to the purist texture of the film. I think that's an interesting way to think about sex in cinema.

You mentioned Ben Whishaw, the movie star, actor and genius. He is so kind, detailed and gentle here. Everything that comes out of him was so real and honest. And when his character has a turn, which I won't reveal, it is magnificent. I have

heard many, many gay men of all walks of life describe him as their dream husband.

Understandably.

He's played gay in films before, he's played sex scenes before, but this is probably the first time he's played a gay husband who has these intense sex scenes that have been beautifully executed and where the sex seems to be part of the arc of the character. What was it like for you and Whishaw to collaborate on this character, who seems very much to be the heart of the story? What was it like to collaborate with this out gay actor, especially coming from the era when you and I started, when it was hard enough to get an actor to consider a gay kiss in a movie, much less gay sex scenes? Now, we have movie star actors who are also out and who will do that with you.

Stephen, you're implying that there's been progress, which I always have to question because I don't see the history of queer cinema as a story of progress. The body in cinema has been more and more difficult to find, and the nature of global capitalism is such that gay sexuality is more and more difficult to finance. The inspiring movies I'm referring to are these films that were made in the late 1970s and the early '80s. I guess that's what the initial impetus was, to make a truly independent film. I had to watch images that I wasn't seeing in cinema today. I'm just saying, we're in conflict with the images that we see and we make. We're in conflict with our times.

This is also the second film you've done set in Europe and produced in France by Saïd Ben Saïd.

My hero.

You've made a shift into becoming almost a European filmmaker, at least in terms of funding, casts and locations. Are you going in this direction because it's more hospitable for the kind of filmmaking you want to do? Or is it a result of your own evolution of interests?

It's a combination of things. It's a result of the stories that I've wanted to tell in the last five years. It's also certainly in response to a financial possibility that I've found in Europe that I have not consistently found here [in the United States]. I'm an American filmmaker, and I'm influenced by European cinema, Asian cinema and—particularly and probably most significantly—French cinema. But my relationship to French cinema was less a reason to make this film here [in Paris] than my relationship *to* Paris, which is decades long, very familiar, very comfortable. I've had relationships there, dear friends there. It's a place I could make a life, and so could my characters.

Speaking of collaboration in Paris, and all the details that go into making a film, I want to shout out that fabulous halter top that Tomas wears to meet

Agathe's parents. The costumes in your film, the style vocabulary for each character, are so specific and gorgeous. Your costume designer, Khadija Zeggaï—who is this fabulous person?

She's most fabulous in all realms, and she's a great collaborator. She worked on Isabelle Huppert's clothes in *Frankie,* and we became very close. In this production, what was the crucial moment for us was knowing that we were working in a realist style, but the costumes could be something beyond realism, something that elevates the movie to what I would call the level of cinema, which is a level of glamour and icon and fabulousness. That was important: You're both watching realistic cinema and you're watching a movie. So, Adèle is playing an elementary school teacher, but she is consciously dressed like Brigitte Bardot and Jeanne Moreau. We're thinking of an iconic body, an iconic face, and that was a big decision because it was one rack or another rack. And we chose the rack that had the elements of glamour. I think those two planes are very important to play with for this film.

You were [styling] Adèle like the '70s romantic adventures that starred Leslie Caron, Jacqueline Bisset and Julie Christie.

Well, we watched, for example, Rossellini's *Voyage to Italy.* I mean, the clothes that Ingrid Bergman wears are just something else, and they have another language that speaks to the audience. Khadija understood that and went off and found amazing things. But I have to say, to find amazing things is one thing, but then to find actors [who] can pull them off in a natural way is another. We actually had these three actors who have the looks as well as the strength. It's not pretty if you put that halter top on me.

Or me, as well. I think maybe for one weekend in 1992.

The other thing about this film—which has been nice to discover, which I can't say was my intention—is that it has a lot of humor and joy. This is something I learned from Rip Torn when I worked with him on *Forty Shades of Blue.* I learned a lot from him, and one thing was that tragedy means comedy. He understood that deeply as an actor. You can't play tragedy. You have to play pleasure; you have to play joy in order to bring a depth to things. The three actors I worked with all understand that intrinsically and organically.

Brilliantly so. I would say this is the most propulsive movie about a dark, sexy love triangle that I can recall. The heart of it is full of intense, dark feelings and actions, but the thrust of it is happy. You're happy to be with these people. You're happy to be in Europe instead of [the] U.S.A. You're happy to be with these folks because they're trying.

And even though they might be sometimes failing spectacularly, sometimes winning small victories, the yearning they have to try to make things right is so wonderful. And every shot is a feast. How do you prepare for a day's shooting in terms of getting these wonderful aesthetics with the people and the faces placed just so in your frames? Does the terminology come first, or the action?

My pre-production is a lot of work. I don't rehearse with my actors before I shoot—I spend time with them, but we don't have official rehearsals. Strategically, I don't want them because I don't want to have conversations about motivation and subtext. I avoid those kinds of conversations with my actors, but we spend a lot of time in the wardrobe. I remember Franz was like, "I've never met a director who wants to spend so much time trying on costumes." But I like costumes, and I like aesthetics—I think they're important. And just trying on clothes is a way to get to know people, a great rehearsal process. On the other hand, in the five weeks before I'm shooting, I'm spending six hours a day with my cinematographer talking about the visual language of the film and creating storyboards shot by shot, scene by scene, which don't dictate what we do in production but really are a way of working out a visual strategy, which has continuity and fluidity and consistency and thought.

Going back to Ben Whishaw, how did the two of you work together and build this character? Did you have a pre-existing relationship with him as you did Mr. Rogowski?

Ben and I met on Instagram Message. I can't remember what started it off, but there was some sort of like, wink or hello to each other at some point, but no more than that. When I was casting the film, he was my ideal person for this role, and we share an interest in everything around queerness, art, familiarity and belief that life is about people and relationships and friendships. There's a kind of familiarity to him as a person for me. But that all came through the process of making this film. And the thing about Ben—have you seen *Who Am I This Time?*

No.

It's an *American Playhouse* [1982 film directed by Jonathan Demme] with Christopher Walken and Susan Sarandon, a small-town story. Walken plays an actor who's just this modest person, then he plays Stanley [Kowalski], and he's something else. Ben is like that to me. He doesn't need or want attention. Chris Cooper is like this, also. Their modesty is profound until they work. And in the moment in which the camera is on, something else happens, which has a level of genius.

Swoon to all that.

I want to just add one other thing, which is that Ben is a risk-taker. You can discuss with actors what you're going to do, but eventually they're the ones who take off their clothes and position themselves in front of the camera. Ben was a daredevil, and he also has a lot of pride in who he is and his sexuality and his body. He has pleasure in those experiences that I think is central and not something I could direct without [him] bringing it to the movie.

You and I grew up in a world where the gay and queer men of the generation before us were in the process of leaving prematurely or had already gone from HIV and AIDS. Does the sex that you put in this film fit somehow as a tribute to the lost generation of queer men that we came up through? They were so sex positive, lust forward, passion forward in their lives, and so are these characters.

It's funny, I thought you were going to end the sentence by saying, "And so are these actors." The characters are having sex privately, without shame, in their own rooms, but it is the actors [who] are saying, "This is part of storytelling." It's interesting which comes first. In the conversations I had with Ben, Franz and Adèle, I would put images in front of them that gave them liberty.

And you feel that made the crucial difference in not only executing these wonderful sex scenes within the wider drama but also keeping the film so alive overall?

Sex scenes, there's no dialogue. My films, in a way, have moments of improvisation, but mostly they are scripted. Sex scenes are not scripted. You have actors who are writing sentences and paragraphs and commas and exclamation points in a way that is difficult and which these three actors do very, very well. They tell stories within those scenes. That's why the scenes work. My direction isn't what makes them interesting. My direction is maybe part of the rigor and openness of the scenes, but what makes them interesting is the narrative that these three actors create within those scenes, which to me is just brilliant acting. It doesn't mean it's *all* acting. Nothing is happening physically between people, but there is a story being told in each of these sex scenes. You can watch them and be like, how did they make that up so well that we all believe it?

It gives one life to see such radically honest yet straightforward depictions of life.

I'm glad you said "life" because it's not to me just sex, it's life. And I want to answer your question, which is, I never would've theorized about the honor I hope this film does for a previous generation that we've lost to AIDS. I never would've thought of it in that kind of way. But, yes, I'm constantly going back to the period of artists who were making work right before I came to New York and were bold motherfuckers.

You want to throw out some names?

I want to talk about the entire punk movement. I want to talk about Jack Smith, Klaus Nomi, Cookie Mueller, Arthur Russell—many, many people, who lived in a less bourgeois moment and had different expectations. Obviously, each had their own [expectations], and I can't say what these people wanted and didn't get. But I would say because work was, in a way, less global, it had more individuality. It was trying to appeal, partially, to people's own communities, and that was valuable. Understanding the value of making work for your friends—maybe that brings us back to the beginning of this conversation, which is, this film I made because I wanted to see it.

Speaking of legacy and community, let's pivot to Queer|Art, the amazing organization that you founded.

It is an organization I founded in 2009 and is still going strong with a wonderful group of people who now run it. Not me, but I'm still very involved in it. Stephen, I would say we know each other because of Queer|Art more than because of the history of our individual filmmaking, which is why I asked for you to do this interview with me. We share a history, which has meant so much to me. And that history is one as queer people in New York City, who survived the AIDS epidemic, who wanted to make art, who share in loss and who also share in a lot of pleasure. And through Queer|Art, I think we're allowed to be with each other without having necessarily an economic reason to do so. That's

> **MY FILMS, IN A WAY, HAVE MOMENTS OF IMPROVISATION, BUT MOSTLY THEY ARE SCRIPTED. SEX SCENES ARE NOT SCRIPTED.**

YOU HAVE ACTORS WHO ARE WRITING SENTENCES AND PARAGRAPHS AND COMMAS AND EXCLAMATION POINTS IN A WAY THAT IS DIFFICULT AND WHICH THESE THREE ACTORS DO VERY, VERY WELL. THEY TELL STORIES WITHIN THOSE SCENES. THAT'S WHY THE SCENES WORK. MY DIRECTION ISN'T WHAT MAKES THEM INTERESTING.

really what I'm talking about in terms of the '70s and '80s—people were gathering for reasons that were less industry-produced. I mean, it's hard to find the words for how necessary it is for me to remember different ways of being as I try to sustain a career that is honest with myself.

I agree with you. I think we became friends in the Berlin Film Festival, when I was there with *Chocolate Babies*, and we circled each other's circles for the decade to follow. It was when Queer|Art [launched that] we had a non-business reason to

come together to enjoy cinema, to enjoy film, to enjoy each other, to enjoy our queerness and to develop and strengthen intergenerational friendships and relationships. I think it's remarkable that an organization that was originally about, "Let's get together at IFC Center and watch *The Children's Hour* with Shirley MacLaine and discuss it" has evolved into this amazing mentorship program, which I believe seems to be primarily serving the people in our community who require the most attention in terms of what they need to

do culturally for their lives: Black people, brown people, women, trans people, working-class artists. And one thing I admire about your films is they always talk about race, class and gender without sometimes being directly about that. Reflecting on your position as a cisgender gay white man, what do you think about making art today in these trying times, when you see how the legacy of the Queer|Art organization has moved together with your films?

All times are trying. Is this time worse? I would say you can't really ever say that. It is not a coincidence that this film premiered at Sundance and Berlin Panorama because, as even a person who's been able to maintain a career making feature films for a long time now, to do so within the industry is not easier. Look at most of the queer filmmakers we grew up with. They're either working in series to sustain their lives, or they're working in non-queer narratives. Often, the films included in festivals are straight films by gay filmmakers or gay films by straight filmmakers. Maintaining a career of making queer personal work year after year is next to impossible because of the systems in place, because of the patriarchal men who run these places. What makes me happy about Queer|Art is that it is an apparatus counter to that that I can be a part of because I need to be able to create these images. I need to be able to find the support emotionally, financially and creatively, so I have to create alternative systems. And if my time ends up being over, that's all right, too, because I've had the power. I think this film is to some extent a question of what happens to everyone *around* people like me. People think I was thinking of Fassbinder with the character of Tomas, but it wasn't really that. It was more Agathe's position as a woman, her position from a different class than these two men who were controlling her life. And you could also say this about *Keep the Lights On*, but there's a bit of a horror genre to this film.

Yes, but also very much Fassbinder—for me at least. It's always equal parts drama, comedy and straight-up horror.

That's right. *Fox and His Friends,* for example—in a way, [*Passages* is] a remake of *The Innocent* by Visconti. But it's also highly influenced by the idea of being the third wheel among powerful rich men that you see in a film like *Fox and His Friends.*

I think, like Fassbinder, you are fascinated and appalled by Tomas's character, who's so selfish and narcissistic, but your heart is with the woman. Your heart is with Agathe.

I hope your heart shifts in the course of watching the movie. I don't know if that happens to you. I feel like my heart is with all of them, and that's the only position from which I can direct. And I feel that ambiguity around identification is part of what gives the film a suspense.

All your films have that. There's always an underlying tension with the way you present narratives, whether it's about real estate, gentrification or, here, which side of the love triangle you are focused on. But in the end, I feel you get all three of them.

Yeah, I think that the strategy is that in some ways I direct the camera and give the actors action, and there's a script, which Mauricio Zacharias, my wonderful co-writer, and I have created together, that gives the film narrative order. But everything else is up for grabs. It's all about space, and all that ambiguity, which makes the film interesting.

That's an understatement. Okay, last question. How many shooting days, 20 or more?

24.

24. I was close.

I wanted 31.

You wanted 31?

It never gets easier. I've had 30, and it wasn't easy. It's always hard. Every day is hard, so that's the way it goes. Sometimes, it seems frustrating to have all of these people together and to spend all of this money and time and to just have 24 days. It feels brief. But what you do is get serious before you start shooting and figure out, as much as you can, what you need. And you have to know what you're doing. That's it.

What is your favorite part of the differences between the way that European crews work versus U.S. crews?

My favorite part is every weekend every single person on your crew has gone to the movies and seen the newest X, the newest Y, and none of them are from Hollywood. In France, they are really, really engaged with the world of cinema as both pleasure and interest.

PUNCHING DOWN

Referencing both John Hughes and *Fight Club* and infused with queer energies, writer-director Emma Seligman reinvents the classic teen comedy with *Bottoms*, co-written with star Rachel Sennott. Natalia Keogan speaks with Seligman about comedic blocking, moving up in production budgets and Charli XCX.

Bottoms, the sophomore feature from *Shiva Baby* writer-director Emma Seligman, takes the concept of blood and guts in high school to a queer, campy pinnacle. Co-written by Seligman and Rachel Sennott—who starred in *Shiva Baby* and returns to act in *Bottoms* alongside frequent comic collaborator Ayo Edebiri—the project embraces a streak of absurdist satire that's been present in Sennott's sensibility since launching her highly popular, if now infrequent, Twitter presence. Coupled with Seligman's directorial desire to "always do a different genre," *Bottoms* is narratively refreshing yet gleefully referential, riffing on iconic teen comedies—*Grease, Wet Hot American Summer, Mean Girls*, a medley of John Hughes staples—while elevating the genre to an unparalleled plane of delightful weirdness.

Sennott and Edebiri play PJ and Josie, respectively, two queer, outcast seniors at the type of high school typically conjured in age-old nightmares about realizing you've forgotten to put on pants while roaming the halls. The laws of physics (and general rationality) need not apply as the plot ramps up and the girls decide to establish a fight club—i.e., an after-school women's self-defense group overseen by the school's "feminism" teacher Mr. G (Marshawn Lynch)—as a ploy to hook up with two svelte cheerleaders they've long been eying. After all, they'll be heading to college in the fall, and no one wants to arrive on campus with the stench of virginity trailing them.

Cocky despite her wild unpopularity, PJ focuses on courting the stony Brittany (model Kaia Gerber), while insecure Josie pines after Isabel (Havana Rose Liu), currently involved with football star Jeff (Nicholas Galitzine), whose literal rule over the school's social hierarchy manifests through posters (and even a Sistine Chapel–esque painting) of his visage plastered on every surface. Despite all odds, they genuinely do bond with the cheerleaders (and several other queer-coded "losers") through the club; slaps, punches and kicks draw blood, bruises and, above all, wild desire.

For Seligman, who uses she/they pronouns, *Bottoms* is a response to a genre that "queer people haven't been able to be part of" historically. Yet unlike other recent high school comedies with queer characters, such as *Booksmart* and *Love, Simon*, *Bottoms* refuses to play into a grating, overly tender sentimentality. PJ and Josie aren't kind-hearted, misunderstood individuals who've fallen victim to homophobic prejudice; they're just as eager to punch down, exploit others and cause bodily harm as the macho jocks who ostensibly oppress them. This is what makes them so genuinely funny and compelling to follow: They don't play into the "liberating" tropes that still render queer characters as one-dimensional protagonists and sidekicks. Don't queers deserve to be just as toxic as everyone else?

I spoke to Seligman (who made our 25 New Faces of Film list back in 2020) in the weeks leading up to the release of their new film, which hits theaters on August 25 from MGM and Orion Pictures. Our conversation included insights on how much improv occurred on set, the gender dynamics inherent to embarking on a "scaled-up" production, the foundational homoerotic text of *Fight Club*, collaborating with hyperpop queer icon Charli XCX and much more.

Where did the seed of the story come from, and what was it like going from writing *Shiva Baby* solo to collaborating on the script with Rachel?

I started writing *Shiva Baby* at the same time that Rachel and I started writing *Bottoms*. I met Rachel after we did the short film for *Shiva Baby*. She's so ambitious and was 21 at the time. She was like, "What ideas do you have?" I pitched her my one comedy idea, then was like, "Would you want to act in it or write it with me?" She said yes, took out her planner and was like, "We should meet once a week, and you should come to me with pages for *Shiva*, then we'll work on *Bottoms*." She held me accountable [while] writing *Shiva*, so I had a deadline to meet. Then we were writing *Bottoms*.

It was so much fun writing with her and a completely opposite experience than *Shiva* in that I think most writers experience a sort of masochism when they're writing: "This is horrible, no one's ever going to want to watch this." But writing a comedy with another person, especially someone like Rachel, is so much fun because she's so free and, in the beginning stages, not so concerned with structure and having things make sense. I learned a lot from her in that way. The script took many forms over the last few years, but I'm grateful to have a partner that was able to weather the storm of notes and get it to where it needed to be while still maintaining our voice.

How long was that process, approximately?

We started writing it in 2017, six years ago, and shot the movie [during the] spring of 2022, so five years all in all.

How faithfully did actors stick to the script?

There was a lot of improv—mostly from Rachel and Ayo, but we knew that going into it

because they're both comics, and they've worked together so much. I'd also say Marshawn improvised so much. So many of his scenes don't involve an active scene partner. He's just doing his thing—it's the perfect setup for someone to just go off. I wanted the other actors to feel comfortable ad-libbing, but most of them weren't comedians. There was quite a lot of improv from [the cast], sometimes unprompted, where I was like, "What are we doing?" But it was a learning experience for me to figure out how to let the actors feel free while also making sure we were still on track time-wise and getting the scene done in the way that we needed at the end of the day.

Rachel and Ayo have this collaborative past, as do you and Rachel. How did you foster chemistry amongst cast members when several of you are already very close friends and collaborators?

On a creative level, we have [Maribeth Fox], a wonderful casting director. We made sure that with each person we were not only hiring a great actor who understood the role and could play their performance really straight, which

we think is funniest, but also fit the chemistry of this world we were creating. Life always imitates art in a weird way. The cast became kind of like a high school group. They're not high school students—they're in their early- to mid-20s, obviously—but they started bonding and grouping up as if they were in camp. It's a testament to the newer actors—who aren't comedians—that they all bonded so much, because that was a difficult environment for them to come into. In my mind, I was like, "We're all young, we're all the same age, it's chill." But actually, there are still other dynamics at play, especially for actors who are already so vulnerable, many doing comedy for the first time. On a friend level, they all got along quite well. That is something that might've been a challenge initially for the outsiders, but they all seemed to get along in the end.

In the past, you've stated that with *Shiva Baby*, you strived for naturalism in terms of performance and tone. *Bottoms* feels a lot more like it's leaning into slapstick and the uncanny. What prompted you to pivot?

Rachel and her tone. If I was writing this on my own or with somebody else, it probably would've been more straightforward—maybe still like a studio high school comedy but not so campy. Once we just started writing the jokes, I never had a moment where I was like, "Wait, this is shifting tones. This is weird." It just was like, "That's funny," and we kept on writing the jokes. *Wet Hot American Summer* was a north star for us when we were first feeling free and wanting to create something stupid. I hope to always do a different genre. I really, really don't want to do the same thing twice, and my favorite directors are those who do different genres. So, I think it's just an exciting new challenge, but I didn't think too hard about needing to do something totally different.

What were some of the challenges and creative boons of scaling up with *Bottoms* in terms of cast, location, sets and the story itself?

Everything. Everything was a gift and an opportunity to prove myself as a director who could handle a bigger scale, and I'm very grateful to MGM and Orion in particular for that.

The stunts were challenging. I've never done that before. Getting my handle on VFX and how to prepare for that when shooting on the ground was not challenging but [rather] a learning experience. I think most challenges were the boring things, like overnights. I'd never done overnights before, and I was like, "I'm never writing night scenes outside ever again." And it wasn't a challenge, but understanding how much time it takes to do big crowd scenes, where there's so many extras. It takes so much time to funnel them in and out and place them in the right spaces. Big, big crowds. With *Shiva*, we had background actors, but so much of the time that was like, four people, and we were just crowding the frame in the right way. I relied heavily on my DP, Maria Rusche, who had never shot a movie on this budget level but had certainly been on set in G&E on massive movies, much bigger than *Bottoms*. Any time I was confused by why something was happening, she filled me in. I didn't like base camp. I didn't like the fact that the actors weren't in front of me—that was a challenge. I wanted to be able

HOW THEY DID IT

Camera
Atlas Mini LF with detuned Atlas Orion lenses

Editing System
Avid

Color Correction
Filmlight Baselight, colored at Assembly

to go talk to them, then go talk to Maria, then back and forth. There's probably a million more things that were really, really hard. But every challenge was just more information in my back pocket to go forward. But I did keep saying I was getting sick of the learning experiences. When will I have learned everything I need to know?

Did this learning curve and the hassle of hiring extras go into the gag about the other team's fans not showing up?

That's just a technical thing we tried to cover up. Actually, I think it came more from a storytelling level. Like, yes, it would've been a massive hassle to just double the amount of people. Also, at the time we were still shooting under stricter COVID rules, so 200 extras was the cap. But the football field could fit so many more people in the stands, and we had to make it look full. We were more concerned—I don't want to spoil it—with the ending. We didn't understand why the opposing team would be comfortable with what's happening and not doing anything.

We kept on being like, "We'll figure it out, we'll cover it up with some joke," and then thankfully Ayo eventually did.

You talked about reuniting with your DP, who also shot *Shiva Baby*. What conversations did you have when it came to nailing the film's visual language, particularly when it's so different from your previous collaboration? It seems like both of you are still in places in your career where you're kind of learning from doing.

Totally. I think in a similar way [to how] we did *Shiva*, we watched a lot of references together, then created a language and shorthand where, when we were on set, we could reference things very quickly with each other. The cornerstone of my visual references on this were Edgar Wright movies like *Scott Pilgrim* [*vs. the World*]. Then, she brought in *The World's End*, which I'd never seen before but is an ensemble movie. We had to choreograph our fight scenes, just the two of us, so we looked at that a lot because we wanted the girls to be *fighting*. We wanted the camera to

> "EVERY CHALLENGE WAS JUST MORE INFORMATION IN MY BACK POCKET TO GO FORWARD. BUT I DID KEEP SAYING I WAS GETTING SICK OF THE LEARNING EXPERIENCES. WHEN WILL I HAVE LEARNED EVERYTHING I NEED TO KNOW?"

be connecting the fighting in a fun way, without being all forced perspective and just throwing in stunt doubles, so we looked for something that could be funny and also look badass.

Very quickly, just from the references I was showing her, we figured out the blocking and compositions that we liked. Everything needs to be centered when we're shooting the football players and very even when we're looking at the authorities or people who have power. Then, with our girls, everything is asymmetrical. I mean, it's so silly, but eventually the way that we shoot the girls is the way we start off shooting the guys at the beginning of the movie. We looked at a mix of action-y movies and comedies that have things happening on multiple focal planes, like levels of humor in the background and foreground and midground, etc., where you can catch different things, like *Anchorman* and *Zoolander*—especially *Zoolander*, [which is] shot very dramatically. I rewatched [*Zoolander*] when we were getting into shooting, and [originally] I just didn't realize the way that his visual storytelling emphasizes the comedy so much. When you really look at it, it's a lot of very tight close-ups and push-ins for dramatic effect. Maybe now that's been co-opted by the studio comedy.

We also pulled from a lot of old Americana movies because we wanted the movie to feel nostalgic. Technically, it doesn't take place in a specific time period. We wanted to create a feeling of an old American teen movie because I felt like we're catching up on so many eras of teen movies that queer people haven't been able to be part of. I wish that I could've seen a queer *Grease* or *American Graffiti* growing up. So, we pulled from those or John Waters, like *Cry-Baby* and other movies. That's what created the color palette that we used. Also, *Attack the Block* and *Super 8* and these sort of adventure movies, where it's a group of boys trying to save the day. And *Bring it On*, which was always a comedic reference, but Maria kept on bringing it back in as a visual reference because that movie's actually so good at blocking their ensemble in a funny and dynamic way. The frames are very interesting.

To that point, I wanted to ask about the gonzo production design. It possesses this absurdist quality that adds a lot to the visual gags, and it has this almost cartoonish vibe to it in a way that is very theatrical and campy. How much of the budget went into set decoration, wardrobe and overall aesthetic execution? How much of that are we seeing onscreen?

Honestly, I don't know. I need to become a better internal line producer within myself. But I had incredible conversations with our production designer, Nate Jones, who was local to New Orleans, where we shot the movie. No matter what his budget was, he always executed my vision. He was quite experienced, which was very helpful. I'm sure that, internally, he was fighting for more or being savvy. But he was always able to get what I wanted, and he was also so game for the absurdity of it all. We kept on joking that he was making *Grease* and my DP was making *Kick-Ass*. It was like an action movie within a John Hughes world. He understood our color palette and was so game, especially when we were location scouting, trying to find high schools that had old brick and textures that are a little more timeless.

In terms of the set decoration of the crazy signs and the sort of Sistine Chapel painting, he was so excited. I think I was like, "Well, I want crazy stuff like this," and it allowed him to be creative and suggest ideas. It's always fun when you can create a collaborative, free environment. Most of those signs were probably Rachel's ideas and were written in the script or came about while we were brainstorming on set with Nate. It takes people who really understand the tone and are really down to offer their ideas.

You mentioned the choreography and orchestrating these fight scenes, which are really intense and funny. I'm curious if working on *Shiva Baby* and painstakingly blocking and maneuvering in a single location primed you for this?

100 percent. With *Shiva Baby*, I used a little LEGO set of the only location in the house to tell my DP what I wanted and be able to communicate like, "The camera goes from here to here." But I also used that with our producers and AD to make them understand everything: how many extras we needed, if we had that actor there that day, if we needed to change the shot. I really feel, and especially Maria feels, like blocking, understanding your geography, is everything. It informs so much, and it's the way to communicate how you're going to capture a scene, especially in the edit, as well. And with an ensemble like this, it was challenging. We abandoned the LEGO set, but Maria had a big white board that had little stick figure people. We would draw the sets and move these little people around, like a board game. I really, really am grateful for Maria, because especially for the big set-piece scenes, like the final homecoming game sequence, there's so much going on at different points. And Maria was like, "Josie's over here doing this at the side of the field. What are the cheerleaders doing at this point?" And I was like, "Who cares? This is where we are. Let's just try to get through this and shotlist this." And she would be like, "It's important for understanding how this will cut in the edit, and understanding what's going on by the time Josie gets back to the center of the field." I'm very

grateful that Maria always has an eye for that and cares about departments that aren't hers and how the movie's going to effectively work on a storytelling level.

It's cool that Maria insisted on a physical component you can use with your hands to visualize what's going on in a scene since you had done something similar on *Shiva Baby*.

Actually, the LEGOs were something my professor suggested for *Shiva*—I came to [Maria] with the LEGO set that I built. I always feel so anxious about my shotlisting because I didn't come up through cinematography or photography. I'm always just wanting to prep as much as possible and make sure my DP understands everything I'm trying to communicate, because I feel like I'm trying to overcorrect for some sort of lack of knowledge—which I think is, unfortunately, a little bit more common in female directors, but that's a digression. But, yeah, Maria loved the LEGOs and was like, "Let's do that again." I was like, "Should we build LEGO sets?" And she came much more prepared with something that we'll probably use going forward.

I did want to ask about the experience of being a woman/nonbinary director on set. Obviously, with your first feature you had this very tight-knit collaboration with lots of women or nonbinary folks who you may have worked with or known in the past. Did "breaking into the industry" also come with navigating a more male-dominated territory or getting pushback from men in certain instances?

I think that it's weird because most of my directing mentors and peers, up until very recently, were men. What's so interesting is that the pushback or discomfort didn't come from our studio, which is entirely female. I feel like some people have stories of not being listened to by their bosses, but it wasn't like that for me.

You know, I was a little naïve. I thought, "There are many more of us"—in terms of female directors. I didn't think that there would be problems. Now, I haven't met one female director who scaled to a bigger budget and *didn't* experience people questioning her, calling her difficult or—and I hate to use this word because it's been overused, but—gaslighting her. I don't want to shit on the men that I worked with, because everyone did such a wonderful job. I don't think anyone was malicious or trying to knock me down, but I feel like there's a weird hesitance toward telling a young woman that she can't get what she wants because they don't want to upset her. Maybe they could tell a man, "That's not achievable," a little straighter. But it ended up driving me in circles and making me go a little crazy because people would say, "Yeah, we can achieve that," and then it wouldn't be done. I

would say, "Where is this thing? Weren't we prepared to do this today?" And they would either say, "I don't remember that conversation"—obviously just the definition of gaslighting—or skirt around the fact that they told me that we could do it. I almost feel like there's sort of something happening on both ends, where no one wants to say they yelled at the female director, especially a young female director. No one wants to say they made her cry. They're dancing around your emotions and don't want to get in trouble. But it's weird because I sometimes would've preferred if anyone—not that I think anyone *would have* yelled, but that someone would've yelled at me, as opposed to treating me like I was this delicate flower!

Again, these things can always be tricky. I hope it's clear that I don't want to shit on anyone because I did really have a wonderful crew. But it was weird. Thankfully, none of this pushback came from people who were compromising my vision in terms of the people giving us the money at the end of the day and the people whose names are on the line. It was more just a human level of learning. I don't really have many men in my life, so this was so foreign to me, even beyond the little interactions that [bolstered] my understanding of how to work with a different gender that I hadn't worked with before.

Obviously, we need to talk about the film's queer inversion of *Fight Club*, David Fincher's film in particular, which has been long associated with a certain type of "film bro," as people love to call them. Yet *Bottoms* and Chuck Palahniuk's original novel are both entrenched in a queer perspective and posit that drawing blood is just as sexual as swapping other bodily fluids. They're both great takedowns of heterosexual masculinity. Can you talk to me about drawing from the film and the novel and this idea that fighting is perhaps linked to sexual repression and desire, particularly in terms of queerness?

Firstly, I haven't read the *Fight Club* novel. However, I do know that the intent of the novel and of the film, to a certain degree, were not understood by a lot of their audiences that love them the most. So, that was definitely in the back of my mind in terms of fighting being an outlet for men in that movie to experience intimacy in a way that they're not allowed to in other ways.

I tried not to rewatch *Fight Club* while we were making it. I didn't want to copy it. I worried that it was going to sink in my head. Even in the writing process, I didn't want to make [the film] an homage to anything. But then, my DP did bring it in eventually, and we looked at clips together. Then, I was like, "Fuck it, I'm rewatching this." So much of the time with filmmaking,

> ## I DON'T THINK ANYONE WAS MALICIOUS OR TRYING TO KNOCK ME DOWN, BUT I FEEL LIKE THERE'S A WEIRD HESITANCE TOWARD TELLING A YOUNG WOMAN THAT SHE CAN'T GET WHAT SHE WANTS BECAUSE THEY DON'T WANT TO UPSET HER.

not to be so cheesy, but it's subconscious. I don't think Rachel and I were really thinking about the deeper themes or the queerness that has now come out of our understanding of the origins of David Fincher's *Fight Club*. But it's all in there.

At the end of the day, that is [Josie and PJ's] strategy for how to get physically closer and more intimate with the girls that they want to sleep with. Drawing blood is an outlet. It is sexy to many people. There's a deep connection there. And the way that *Fight Club* is shot a lot of the time is incredibly sexy, in a weird way, and trying to capture a similar excitement was really important to us. We didn't want to make it look like these characters didn't know what they were doing or that they weren't excited to do it and they just wanted to get it over with in order to fuck these girls. We wanted to make sure that all of those characters—especially the other girls who think it's this pure form of solidarity or coming together—were particularly excited to be there the way that the characters in *Fight Club* are excited to be there. It's not just this sad self-defense thing, but it's fun, cathartic and hot. When I think about some of the things that *Fight Club* and our movie have thematically in terms of what you're asking, there are probably more connections than I thought.

I'd be completely remiss not to ask about collaborating with Charli XCX on the music for the film. I know that she contributed a song to *Bodies Bodies Bodies*, which Rachel also starred in. I also know that Rachel and Charli have crossed paths socially and professionally. How did you all come together on *Bottoms*, and what was the sonic vision there?

When we first were writing the movie, the playlist that inspired me was almost entirely Charli. I'm a huge fan of hers. There's a reason why she's a queer icon beyond her doing good

work for the community. She's got a sonic style that's really interesting, unique, fun and poppy, but also emotional and unexpected in a way that always makes you want to dance.

We got very lucky. She'd seen *Shiva*, was a fan and reached out to Rachel. Rachel and [Charli] became friendly. Then, she was doing a song for *Bodies* and offered us the same thing and said, "If you wanted me to do anything musically for this, I'd be happy to." I pushed it further and asked if she would do the score. She wasn't necessarily apprehensive, but she was like, "If I were to do the score, it probably wouldn't be a typical score. I would want my voice to be an instrument, and I'd want to bring on my two producers, A.G. Cook and George Daniel," whom she collaborates with frequently and are incredible artists in their own right.

The studio and I paired her with another composer, Leo Birenberg, who's incredible. So, Charli and her team created the palette for the movie—all of the instruments, the sounds, the theme for the movie that replays multiple times and many other key moments and cues for the score. Then, for all the transitional beats and for the big action climactic sequences, Leo took their sound and implemented it in a way that mixed it with a little bit more of a traditional score in the places that we needed it.

I'm very grateful that Charli, A.G. and George really created something unique, dynamic and fun. I think it was only one day—the way that they work is they just improv in a studio together, and it's very impressive. And I'm very, very grateful for Leo taking it, implementing it and cutting it to picture, because that is incredibly hard. It was a beautiful collaboration in the end, and I'm very grateful I got to work with one of my favorite artists of all time. I got into her top one or five percent of [Spotify] listeners this year, and I was very proud of myself.

> ## MAYBE THEY COULD TELL A MAN, "THAT'S NOT ACHIEVABLE," A LITTLE STRAIGHTER. BUT IT ENDED UP DRIVING ME IN CIRCLES AND MAKING ME GO A LITTLE CRAZY BECAUSE PEOPLE WOULD SAY, "YEAH, WE CAN ACHIEVE THAT," AND THEN IT WOULDN'T BE DONE.

ACTING THEIR AGE

Writer-director Dustin Guy Defa and actors Michael Cera and Hannah Gross speak with Darren Hughes about *The Adults*, a surprising and intimate comedy drama about family and the paradoxes of midlife.

"It was a highly anticipated scene for me," Hannah Gross told me with a laugh. "It's just so absurd. For anyone who has a complicated relationship, spoken or unspoken, with a sibling, it's the ideal scenario: to get to express your grievances through the safety of these voices."

I'd asked her about a memorable moment near the end of *The Adults*, Dustin Guy Defa's follow-up to *Person to Person* (2017). Gross, Michael Cera and Sophia Lillis star as estranged siblings still reckoning with the death of their mother and still adjusting, unsuccessfully for the most part, to the disappointments of adulthood. The moment in question is the inevitable climax of a film like this, when simmering tensions boil over and people who dearly love one another start throwing cruel, straight-to-the-heart barbs with a precision only possible for those raised under the same roof. But what they say isn't nearly as memorable as how they say it. In a fit of dissociative, Brechtian playacting, Eric (Cera), Rachel (Gross), and Maggie (Lillis) deliver their most vicious lines in the accented, off-putting voices of characters they'd created as children. Gross describes the process of finding those voices—and of choreographing songs and dances from their imagined childhood—as a "brilliant mechanism" for building their backstory. It's a tricky balancing act, though, as they needed to stay just on this side of alienating the audience. The result is a delightfully strange variation on a familiar scene.

When *The Adults* begins, Eric has just returned home for the first time in years, ostensibly to spend time with his sisters, but within minutes of checking into the hotel he starts changing plans, lying shamelessly in order to sneak away to his old poker game. He's become a better player since he left town, and he's determined, *compulsively* determined, to prove it. When the three siblings finally reunite the next morning at a local diner, they all order their favorite items on the menu—chasing nostalgia is one of the unspoken games they're playing here—but only after making a few jokes at the expense of their elderly waitress. What begins as sweet-natured goofing between Rachel and Maggie turns awkward and uncomfortable when Eric jumps in. He's just not very funny, and his flailing attempts to join in on the fun trigger hostility in Rachel and wide-eyed codependence in Maggie.

That sly revelation of conflict is a good illustration of Defa's knack for dramatizing specific, tangled and immediately recognizable dynamics between characters. Cera and Gross, both longtime friends and collaborators of Defa's, signed on early to the project in part because of the clarity of his writing and the creative freedom on his sets. "It's very rare to read a script that activates you as an actor," Cera said. "Instead of trying to hit a narrow bullseye that you've all agreed upon, Dustin conjures a feeling that we're all wordlessly feeling and chasing after." *The Adults*

feels old-fashioned in that sense—a studio theatrical release on a small, human scale, like a throwback to the pre-IP days. (Maybe it's because of his work with Elaine May in the 2018 revival of Kenneth Lonergan's *The Waverly Gallery*, but I'm suddenly imagining Cera aging into a Walter Matthau type.) Whatever healing the characters discover happens in an ecstatic dance scene that is itself a throwback to the 1980s by way of the French New Wave. There's no resolution to the story, exactly—"everyone describes it as watching a train wreck," Gross admitted—but *The Adults* does end with a touch of grace.

The Adults premiered in the Encounters program of the 2023 Berlinale. I spoke with Defa in Berlin, then talked separately with him, Cera, and Gross ahead of the film's U.S. premiere at Tribeca Festival. *The Adults* will be released theatrically by Variance Films on August 18.

At a key moment in the film, Rachel tells Eric, "You do not like me as a person." That's such a brutal realization to come to as an adult.

It's sometimes hard to decide how deep I should get into my own relationship with my sister, but that's immediately where I want to go when I think about that line. I don't know if it's making the movie or working through things or what, but I'm having a moment with my family. It's all very intentional. I'm getting close to my sister now, and that hasn't been the case since we were in our early 20s. There's no way we're ever going to be as close as when we were children. When we were kids, we were each other's world. We're not strangers to each other now, but we've both gone through so many experiences, and she's been shaped by things I don't know about. That line is basically saying,

or screaming, "You liked me and loved me as a child, but I'm not that person anymore, and you don't like who I've become. You don't like who I am." [Eric] *doesn't* like her. She knows him in a way that nobody else knows him, and I think that is very threatening and scary to him, so he keeps his distance. He doesn't like her, but he loves her. They deeply love each other, which is what the movie's about to me.

I'm not surprised to hear you use the word "intentional" because it was easy to imagine the script-writing process being therapeutic. During the dance scene at the end, I wondered if I was seeing a kind of wish fulfillment.

No, no. Wish fulfillment. Wow. Well, if it is, it's very unconscious. Oh, boy. Interesting. [pause] I don't know. [pause] Well, OK, maybe it is wish fulfillment.

When you drink and dance, something can happen that is childlike, or there's an abandonment that wouldn't occur otherwise. Sometimes there's no other way to make that happen. Drugs or alcohol or even just dancing can unlock something playful and walls can come down. It's playing. That's how I've been able, as an adult, to access a childlike place with other people.

And how did the cast feel about the dancing and the performances within the performances?

The movie doesn't explain too much about their childhood world. I wanted to let it seep in, and I hoped that people would get it. When you're a child, that's what you do. You make these worlds and have these characters. I think we all related to that and were excited by the performances within the performances.

Once your ideas start taking shape as characters, do they ever surprise you?

Oh, yeah. The characters were a little bit different at first—two brothers and a sister—and I was going to make a short film with Michael. But I felt like the timing wasn't right, so we didn't do it. Then I wrote a draft that we were going to shoot at the beginning of COVID. That didn't happen. Then, I rewrote that draft and changed 90 percent of it. Hannah was already cast, and that rewrite was really based on talking with Michael and Hannah. During that phase, the characters started becoming more alive to me. Like, I discovered Eric's lying. The first draft didn't have any poker. Michael and I are poker players, so having that started unlocking his character more. I started understanding him. But they surprised me more when we started working on them together. During the rehearsal, we started talking about the characters and I started seeing the movie more. It felt more tight-knit, and it started feeling very personal.

"WHEN YOU DRINK AND DANCE, SOMETHING CAN HAPPEN THAT IS CHILDLIKE, OR THERE'S AN ABANDONMENT THAT WOULDN'T OCCUR OTHER- WISE. SOMETIMES THERE'S NO OTHER WAY TO MAKE THAT HAPPEN.

DRUGS OR ALCOHOL OR EVEN JUST DANCING CAN UNLOCK SOMETHING PLAYFUL AND WALLS CAN COME DOWN...

THAT'S HOW I'VE BEEN ABLE, AS AN ADULT, TO ACCESS A CHILDLIKE PLACE WITH OTHER PEOPLE. "

HOW THEY DID IT

Production Format
Digital

Camera
ARRI Alexa Mini

Film/Tape Stock
Digital camera cards

Editing System
Adobe Premiere

Color Correction
DaVinci Resolve at Dungeon Beach

When you were doing interviews for *Person to Person*, you seemed to emphasize that you filmed what you wrote.

Because I was always asked about improv, is that it?

Maybe. I just got the impression that writing was a point of pride for you, in the sense that you had really worked that script into shooting shape. So, I'm curious to hear you say you made new discoveries during rehearsals.

The script didn't change much. Characters have an abstract element to them. They're like a dream. They're not concrete, and then they start to become concrete. When you're actually witnessing the characters in "real life," there's no way to know how that's going to be. It's really a very different, amazing experience.

Can you give an example of when one of the actors brought something—maybe even just a gesture—that made you see the character in a different light?

It wasn't an individual, it was actually the family unit. I think we had five rehearsals together, and it was probably the beginning of the third when the family unit started happening. Michael and Sophia didn't know each other. Michael and Hannah barely knew each other. So, it was a discovery of how these people would be together, how they would interact, which is something I didn't prepare. I knew what I wanted in a certain way, but I also let them find that interaction. I realized, "Oh, Sophia is gonna be like this, and that's gonna make Michael do this." That's the discovery.

The first scene when they're all together is in a diner. Michael is on one side of the table, Hannah and Sophia are on the other, and you can already see the history of their relationship in their body language and in their expressions: Sophia is so open-hearted, Hannah is harder. How much of that is just casting?

Those are the characters, for sure. They are written *as* those things. Hannah is way more open than that character. She's not really like Rachel. Sophia is more like I'd imagined Maggie, but she's even more... what is the right word? It's not more open, and I wouldn't call it more loving. It's not more curious. Every word I'm coming up with is not the right word.

This probably isn't the right word either, but there's something desperate about her.

Yeah. Well, is it desperate? But she's not willing to be desperate. Whatever it is, whatever the Sophia-ness is—this is something that I didn't know Maggie would be. But in the script she was open, desperate, wanting his love. They both want his love and his attention. Sophia was the person I knew the least. She was the mystery, but in the movie her character is also sort of this other element. We have two people, Eric and Rachel, and you can automatically see that something is going on between them, and Maggie is sort of like their child. I originally thought *The Adults* is like a divorce movie, in a way—two people who are getting divorced, with a child caught in the middle.

There's a scene at the party near the end, when Eric is in the room alone with Amanda [a friend of Rachel's, played by Kiah McKirnan] and he says, "Why am I here? If you have an answer, I'd love to hear it." That tells me that you don't hesitate, as a writer, to plainly express the big ideas at work in your films.

I try to be careful!

No, I enjoy it. I think it's a strength of your writing. I'm wondering, though, if there was ever a version where Amanda answers? Did you work through what her response might look like, even as a thought experiment?

No. I mean, we wonder, too. Why *is* he really in town? If he doesn't want to connect with his sisters, why is he here? His conscious answer is probably, "I want to beat the old poker group. I'm going to make the trip about my sisters, I'm going to do my best to be nice to them and check on Maggie, but I'm also going to play poker and I'm going to win." When the person who takes his money asks, "Why are you here?" he says, "You mean in town?" We're also asking this question in the audience: "What is he really looking for?" I think it's unconscious: He doesn't want to have that connection, but it's just happening. Life is keeping him in town so that he can finally have a moment of connection with someone who was once his best friend and was the closest person he's ever had in his life.

But, yeah, I definitely do that [express the main ideas in dialogue]. To me, the line that really lands is, "You used to think I was the funniest person in the world." I think Rachel and Maggie both thought he was funny. Younger siblings often look up to the older person so much. They're the greatest person, and they're the funniest person. And now he's not nearly as funny to them as he was.

This is why dad jokes are a thing. When I first figured out how to make my kids laugh, it was the greatest dopamine rush of my life. But, of course, they gradually age out of that phase, and dads keep chasing the high.

Exactly. They grow out of idealization. It's the same thing. You go from being the world to just being another person.

I was really happy to see a film at this scale with an original, acoustic score. When you were putting the film together, was that on your wish list?

Yeah, I've never had that. I've wanted it. I've always been afraid of it in some way. Maybe I just hadn't found the right person. I wasn't able to figure out how to communicate with a composer. Alex Weston did the score and I learned a lot in terms of realizing how much I do need to talk. I don't have to direct the score, but I need to try to really express what I'm looking for and when I'm looking for a certain mood. Alex is brilliant in his way, probably because he's worked with such a variety of filmmakers—from people who can't figure out what they're looking for at all to somebody who's very precise. I'm thankful for Alex because he always listened to me and never thought I was wrong. And even if he did think he was more right or something, he would try the other thing and explain why it didn't work.

Is it a piano trio? I wondered if there was one instrument for each of the main characters?

They are a quartet, actually. And [the different instruments] did mean things to him, yes—there's three characters and the house. I can't wrap my head around that. But this was my first time talking to a composer, and I was like, "OK, I'm trusting whatever you're saying." Because I think I just needed to respond to what he gave me, to understand how it would work with the image.

You said you were rewriting during the pandemic, so the movie came together quickly.

It came together quickly. The big rewrite, when we really focused and homed in on the movie, was in February and March. We were shooting in November. It happened pretty fast.

How did Universal end up with the rights?

The script went out through Michael's agency to Universal [Pictures Content Group], then they came back. That's just how some of those things happen. It's all been very easy. They've been very supportive and amazing. I mean, there were no notes on the script, which is a good sign. Same with the production—there was nothing. They just let us make the movie. Then, during the edit, there were notes, but no expectation that we had to do any of it. There were some good notes, actually, that helped a lot. It's still a small movie, an intimate movie. And also it's not. I don't 100 percent feel like I've worked with a studio, but I have. It's both things.

***The Adults* was shot mostly in the Hudson Valley. Was that location written into the original script?**

I went to high school in Southern Oregon, so in another world I probably would have shot it in Oregon. But, logistically, I knew we would shoot in upstate New York because taking people places starts to cost money. Upstate New York [and] the Pacific Northwest feel very similar in some ways.

What are some of the pros and cons of making, essentially, a regional film at this budget level?

Both *The Adults* and *Person to Person* are really small, but *Person to Person* was sort of an impossible movie for the budget. That movie was crazy. We shot it in 19 days, and there were so many locations and characters, and we were moving almost every day. It felt chaotic and difficult, and my brain was scattered. I thrive on a little bit of chaos. There's an energy to it that can be quite fun and actually help, but for the most part I like to concentrate and focus, so my intention now is to try to ensure calmness. With *The Adults*, we sort of created our own world, a bubble. Prior to COVID restrictions, you would go out a little bit more, you know—we'd all go to a bar during the weekend or something—but instead we were playing games together. Being upstate created an idyllic environment for what I like.

This is your first time working with Tim Curtin as DP.

I had never met Tim, but he knows a lot of people I know. He's been a camera operator on

> "I THINK WE HAD FIVE REHEARSALS TOGETHER, AND IT WAS PROBABLY THE BEGINNING OF THE THIRD WHEN THE FAMILY UNIT STARTED HAPPENING. MICHAEL AND SOPHIA DIDN'T KNOW EACH OTHER. MICHAEL AND HANNAH BARELY KNEW EACH OTHER.

> SO, IT WAS A DISCOVERY OF HOW THESE PEOPLE WOULD BE TOGETHER, HOW THEY WOULD INTERACT, WHICH IS SOMETHING I DIDN'T PREPARE."

so many movies—his IMDb page is really incredible—but he DP'd two Jonas Carpignano movies. A friend of mine, Ryan Zacarias, produced those movies and recommended Tim, so I had an interview with him. Tim has now shot movies in Italy and the Dominican Republic, but *The Adults* is his first as DP in the States.

Once you'd brought on Tim and knew you'd be shooting upstate, what were your points of reference for the film's visual style?

Oh, man, what did we talk about? I plan every shot, but I'm still poor at describing my vision. Mostly, I talked about warmth and humanness. I know we talked about *À Nos Amours* [Maurice Pialat, 1983], but when I look at *The Adults*, it's hard to understand the connection.

Pialat was a reference?

When I watch one of his movies, I don't understand how it happened. I don't know how he gets the performances. It doesn't really make sense. It's just astounding, the intimacy and the reality of the performances. *We Won't Grow Old Together* [Pialat, 1972] was a reference for the script because of the circular motion of the plot, the going away and coming back. In *The Adults*, Eric tries to leave town but can't quite. [laughs] I mean, they're almost opposite movies, but I love that structure. It's frustrating, but it's so incredible. The jumps in time—they just broke up, oh, wait, now they're together—and also the feeling in the viewer of wanting them together and wanting them to not be together. The tension in that structure is so incredible.

Hannah, Michael and I talked about that movie in this long conversation before I wrote that big draft. All three of us love that movie, and we love that relationship. [laughs] I mean, we don't love the relationship. It's just such an exciting, energizing, difficult, hard-to-swallow movie. I also thought of *The Adults* as being like a love story. Eric and Rachel cannot get away from each other, like magnets.

How much time do you spend shooting reaction shots? So much of *The Adults* is told in reactions.

I did a lot of that initially. Then, before picture lock, I flew to Columbia, Missouri, and spent four days with Robert Greene, who's a friend of mine. Robert is an amazing filmmaker and a great *thinker* of film, and he's such an incredibly talented editor. Part of what he pushed for was this very thing—spending more time on people not speaking and their reactions. I think that way too, but we added even more.

Sometimes, the reaction shots, obviously, are just being shot. They're happening between the two actors while one person's listening to the other person. When I realize that we are going to need something very specific, I will sometimes let a take run past a normal cut, or even

do one take just concentrating on looks so that I have variations for editing. I don't do it a lot, but sometimes it's the smartest thing to do for coverage.

There's a long tracking shot of Eric and Rachel talking as they walk through a zoo. What inspired that choice?

I'm often trying to figure out how to make sure that the movie keeps moving and doesn't stay in one place. It's strategic in a way. It was the right time in the movie for something like that. It opens up the movie in a way; it's different from any of the other shots before it. But the scene itself just felt like it needed to be *this*.

Tim gets hired so much as a camera operator because he is incredible at pulling off things like that—walking with actors at the right speed, keeping the camera steady, not tripping, making

it look good. That was a very stressful moment because it was a heavy day, and time was running out. The take in the film was the last, or the second-to-last, and there was no more light. If you're not a big movie and you can't just light up the whole world, you're in trouble. It was a huge relief when they pulled it off.

How many days was the shoot?

23—still not a lot when you tell certain people who are not used to small movies, but *Person to Person* was 19. The dream is, "Man, if I could shoot a movie that's *40 days*, I'm gonna be so happy. It's gonna be the greatest!" But even this felt like that to me. Unless we got rushed, 23 days allowed us to spend enough time on a scene to really get it, and to talk about it and work through it. And that's what I need. I would be in the happiest place in the world if I could do one scene a day. One scene for *two* days would be unbelievable!

Creating a calm and friendly set seems to be a priority. Any tips?

The producers and I were very conscious of the crew, of wanting to take care of them. Two of the producers [Allison Rose Carter and Jon Read of Savage Rose] proposed 10-hour days. As the director, I had a little bit of resistance, because 10-hour days are short. It's hard to do. When you're making a small movie, you want as much time as you can get. But a 10-hour day for the cast is actually a 12-hour day for the production assistants because they have to drive the trucks to the place, then drive their trucks back and everything.

But the producers wanted to do that, and I agreed to it. I would imagine it's easier to do 10-hour days when everything is running like a perfect machine, when everybody knows what they're doing. We had a lot of green people on the set, so any mistakes would make everything really hard on us. But we tried to stick to it and make the spirit of everything a little easier on everybody, less fatiguing. We had a couple of 12-hour days, maybe one 13, but it worked. Everything was very high-spirited, and it felt terrific to take care of the crew in that way.

YOUTUBE FILM SCHOOL

What's the worth of film schools when so many tutorials are online?
By Jacob Pincus

"How much time will you need for the shot-up?" the assistant director asks the DP. The DP looks at the grip crew for answers and responds, "Uh, 10 minutes?" "Shot-up in 10," the AD announces to the crew. The DP isn't sure how much time she'll need because she isn't sure how to use the lights she just rented. She had seen someone use them once before on set but had never used the new LED lights herself. So, to figure out how to use them on the fly, she does what many Gen-Z filmmakers do when we have questions—we watch YouTube tutorials.

Some version of this scenario has repeated itself every time I have been on set during my first year as a film and television production student at the University of Southern California's School of Cinematic Arts. It hasn't mattered whether the crew member is an experienced senior or a naive first-year student. With the democratization of knowledge and technology, the unique assets that higher education can provide, especially within the arts, are narrower than ever. For most of cinema history, the most accessible way to learn how to make high-quality films was to work your way up from the bottom

as a PA or in the mail room, or to attend film school (specifically studying film/video production). These two avenues were really the only ways to gain knowledge and use the proper equipment to make films. Now, anyone with a phone and an internet connection can be a filmmaker. Before applying to and now attending film school, I asked myself what is to be gained by paying so much in tuition when everything about filmmaking appears to be online.

Toward the beginning of the year, I eagerly signed up to be a script supervisor for a project with graduate students. I had never been a script supervisor before but thought I could fake it well enough. I watched a few YouTube videos until I got the hang of it. A week before production, the film's producer told me that the first AD had pulled out and asked whether I could be the AD instead. So, I got to work watching videos about what an AD does because, again, I had no idea. When the director asked whether I could line the script for coverage, I said "sure" and did so next to my computer, lining the script in unison with a video.

It was a strange predicament I found myself in. I was attending a top film school but was learning filmmaking the same way I had always learned—from the internet. After we wrapped the two-weekend shoot where I role-played as an AD, the director asked how many times I had been an AD. I said that this was my first time, which came as a surprise as he thought I had done it at least a dozen times. I tell this story not to make myself out as an incredible AD (I didn't particularly enjoy being an AD nor did I think I was particularly good at it), but because this interaction helped reveal to me what film school really is about.

This group of filmmakers were in their second year in the graduate program at USC, and, thanks to just a few YouTube videos, thought I was just as experienced as they were. It was a good tone-setter for the rest of the year, wherein I learned that no one had any idea what they were doing—everyone was pretending, just like I was.

This trend continued when a friend asked if I could be a gaffer on her music video. I said yes and watched more YouTube. When I was asked if I could set

up a menace arm for a key grip position, I said yes and followed the same ritual. I'm sure that I missed a step or two or wasn't as careful as I could've been, but no one seemed to notice.

As the year continued, I would often find myself asking upperclasspeople about their film school experience: "Does the program heat up?" "Do you feel like you are learning things that you couldn't have otherwise?" The responses were mixed. Many people seemed to conjure up answers to justify the financial, emotional and time burden that they have put themselves through. Many had expected more consistent rigor and found themselves accomplishing more outside school than in school. The novelty of filmmaking at a young age is no longer mutually inclusive with film school, and making films independently is always an alternative. As my first year went on, I realized that many of my peers and I were placing unrealistic expectations on the film school. If USC is ranked so high, boasting alumni such as George Lucas, Ryan Coogler, Robert Zemeckis, Kevin Feige and Robert Yeoman, there must be a reason for its glory that we were not fully appreciating.

During welcome week at the film school, the program chairs have a tradition. They ask us to look to our left and right and tell us, "These are the people that will be hiring and firing you for the rest of your lives." Admittedly, this phrasing felt a bit cutthroat and intense, especially for the first day of school, but it is very telling of what film school can offer. In my conversations with more advanced students, almost everyone has pointed to the people as a key reason to be here. Coming from Cleveland, Ohio and knowing virtually no one in the film industry, film school was my first time being surrounded by people eager and motivated to tell visual stories. Film school's greatest asset, I realized, is the people that I would meet and the personal and professional relationships I would cultivate.

After reflecting on my experiences on set watching students subsidize the filmmaking knowledge the school doesn't provide with free YouTube tutorials, I have a different perspective. It is because I am at film school that I have the opportunity to be on set as a PA or grip and learn how to be an AD, gaffer, key grip or associate producer. Watching more experienced students work allowed me to learn how to lead those positions myself on later projects. The infrastructure and ecosystem of film school contextualizes and puts into practice the knowledge accessible on YouTube. You can't actually know how to do something from a tutorial until you do it yourself in real life. Film school puts that knowledge into action on a regular and consistent basis if one seeks it out.

None of the projects that I worked on this year were part of my curriculum; it was my being in proximity to fellow filmmakers that offered me these consistent opportunities. The low stakes allow young filmmakers the freedom to make mistakes and discover their unique voice and style. I can pretend I know how to use the light panels because I've been on sets and seen other people pretend to know how to use them. I call it "Freedom to Fuck Up." Film school attracts others seeking that same freedom. Going straight into the film industry doesn't allow for the same dedicated time to work on your own craft, nor the same freedom to make mistakes.

As I write this now, I feel myself attempting to justify and reconcile this commitment that I have made. No matter which direction young filmmakers take— whether it be studying film production, critical cinema studies or English, or no school at all—there will always be a voice asking: What if I took a different direction? The question of whether film school is worth it is a personal one despite the numerous articles and videos claiming otherwise. Nevertheless, "Freedom to Fuck Up" is a fleeting privilege that is uniquely nurtured at film school, allowing young artists to do what we seek most—explore.

The following is a list of YouTube channels that have taught me so much about filmmaking:

Independent Filmmaking/Storytelling:
youtube.com/@DannyGevirtz
youtube.com/@vanneistat
youtube.com/@filmriot/videos
youtube.com/@DSLRguide
youtube.com/@PeterJackson/videos

Cinematography/Technical:
youtube.com/@lewispotts
youtube.com/@aputurelighting
youtube.com/@CinematographyDatabase/videos
youtube.com/@DeityMicrophones
youtube.com/@ThisGuyEdits/videos
youtube.com/@nofilmschool/videos
youtube.com/@MAKEARTNOWCHANNEL/featured

Critical Analysis:
youtube.com/@TheRoyalOceanFilmSociety
youtube.com/@Nerdwriter1

Jacob Pincus is a student at the University of Southern California where he studies Film Production and Politic,al Philosophy. Born in Pittsburgh and raised in Cleveland, Jacob has been making films since he was in middle school. His films have screened at festivals around the world and he plans to pursue a career in independent filmmaking as a writer-director and cinematographer.
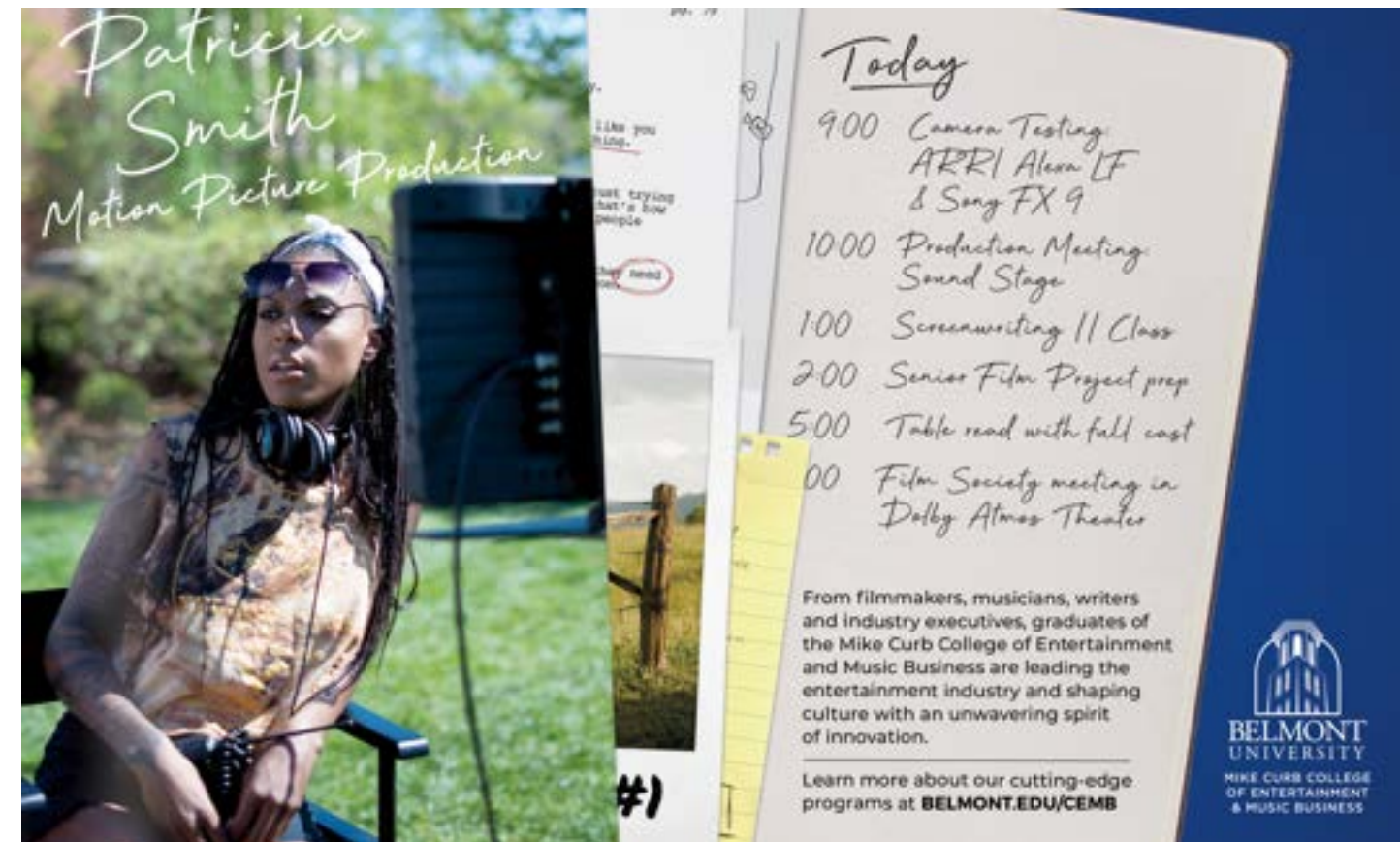
LIFE (AND WORK) AFTER FILM SCHOOL

William Connor Devlin asks, do film schools do enough to prepare students for the aftermath?

When I graduated film school after years of grueling work, I really felt like my university should have rolled out a cannon and launched me directly at the Hollywood sign. With my diploma in hand, the industry was my oyster. I knew everything there was to know—I thought.

Instead, it was as if somebody had forgotten to aim the cannon properly, because it felt like I was hurled at a brick wall, Looney Tunes style. As stars and birds circled my head, I thought, "Now hang on—wasn't film school supposed to be a literal launchpad into the industry? Didn't I do everything right? Why didn't my academic success automatically translate into a career?"

As good a student as I was, my big mistake was that I thought I had nothing else to learn after school. But succeeding in film school and then translating that into industry success is a two-part process. In the three years since receiving my Master of Fine Arts from Loyola Marymount University, where I had studied screenwriting, I've realized that my education had some understandable gaps. Although my writing became stronger during those years of laser-focused work and constructive critiques, academia and the real world are two distinct spheres.

Patricia Smith
Motion Picture Production

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10:00 Production Meeting Sound Stage
1:00 Screenwriting II Class
2:00 Senior Film Project prep
5:00 Table read with full cast
00 Film Society meeting in Dolby Atmos Theater

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I wish I had known a few things when I graduated that took some time to learn afterward.

That started with a desire to better understand how production worked—especially when considering the relationship between an individual show and its financiers. While film school is very much a microcosm of the real thing, when you really factor in the demands of studio executives and all the other cooks in the kitchen, those small film school sets seem too cozy. On top of that, it's wild how many things can go wrong during a day of filming. The stakes are less costly in film school, but on a big show, you need million-dollar solutions at a moment's notice.

Why do I wish that film school had prepared me better here, even though I was a screenwriter? Because the better you can understand and work within a larger-scale production, the smoother the transition from school to set will be. As a writer, my increased understanding of the process on large-scale sets has impacted how I approach my scripts, and they now feel more attuned to production demands and consequently more able to be greenlit.

Then, there's the matter of time. During school, I was fortunate to have teachers who kindly told me that it might take years for my career to take off. Conversely, I had others who swore that simply having a degree from this university guaranteed employment. I wish I'd found a way to marry both those lines of thinking while attending classes.

The truth is it *does* take a while to make it in the film industry. It's not impossible to stumble on one's big break quickly—I've seen it happen—but that wasn't my story. Managers showed interest in my work, which was exciting. Less thrilling were the rejections that followed. I wish I'd been better prepared for what to do afterward when it became apparent that a consistent writing career might still be on the horizon for me. It is vital to stay patient after film school. Easier said than done, as I am not a patient individual.

There was an adjustment phase where I had to buckle down and realize it was the beginning of my journey. While I waited—while I continue to wait—it dawned upon me that I had to stay prepared. But how was I supposed to fill in the gaps between the end of film school and my eventual breakthrough? For me, this has been the biggest struggle. Film school provided a great, reliable routine. That constant creative output undoubtedly sharpened my craft because of the steady stream of content to produce or revise. But after graduation, that old routine gets thrown out the window. Everything is trickier once you're worrying about paying bills.

All this meant I needed a new routine, one where I could still meet the demands of adulthood while satisfying my creative impulses and desire to further my craft. My film school didn't necessarily tell us what we should do to be functioning humans if our launch into the industry wasn't instantaneous. It made me feel like I was expected to become a starving artist, working my tail off at multiple part-time jobs and praying I still had the energy to be creative. But that's a very insular way of looking at things, I believe.

One of the greatest blessings I stumbled upon after graduation was a job working as an accounting clerk for a major studio production. The job was incredibly straightforward: the usual office work, from filing to data management. But it was great because it allowed me to better understand the minutiae

William Connor Devlin is a writer living in Los Angeles who received his MFA in Writing for the Screen from Loyola Marymount University. Although he loves discussing and studying films of all kinds, he is most passionate about the horror genre, and also enjoys collecting retro video games.

of production, meet actual people working in the industry and pay my bills. As a bonus, production accounting is the rare department that works standard business hours, so I always knew I'd have my evenings free.

I have friends who have found ways to balance a creative schedule with other kinds of jobs, working as coordinators at a studio or copywriters for ad agencies. For some, choosing a job outside the industry and separating work and creativity has been better. Ultimately, the most important thing is to remember that being adaptable is a crucial skill for working in this industry.

I'm glad I attended film school. Naturally, there are things I believe film schools could do better to help prepare students. The focus is very much on the craft itself, but there could be more taught about the application of the craft. What could be helpful are classes or seminars on how best to position yourself after school. Many universities bring in former alumni to speak about their breakthroughs, but it often feels like the speakers are those whose careers came about because they caught lightning in a bottle. Perhaps having some alumni who played the long game discuss what they did between graduation and their break could be encouraging. And I've always felt that film schools could have better job counselors to offer advice on what jobs might be most helpful right out of the gate.

Ultimately, it's important to acknowledge that no school or program can ever completely prepare anyone for the industry. It's ever-changing and evolving, and the best way to keep up is to follow its lead and be the same way. And it's important to never settle or think you've learned it all—which is what keeps me going on this marathon.

FILM SCHOOL GUIDE

Returning here is *Filmmaker*'s now annual guide to note-worthy film schools across the United States. As before, this is a factual and hopefully useful list of schools, complete with average tuition and deadlines, that range from institutions that focus heavily on production to those that mix critical theory with practice. There are public and private schools, universities with storied histories and relative newcomers to the film education field. Information contained here is a mix of material collated by our staff as well as provided by the schools themselves.

Prospective students should remember that the choice of film school can be a career-defining decision, setting a filmmaker on a clear professional path or perhaps stranding them with a heavy debt burden. Accordingly, we recommend all readers headed to film school do their own further research on the schools included here before applying.

1. Address
2. Degrees available
3. Admission deadlines
4. New initiatives 2022–2023
5. Student resources
6. Notable faculty
7. Notable alumni
8. Financial aid (merit/need-based/both)
9. Undergraduate student average tuition
10. Graduate student average tuition
11. Additional information
12. Website

*Responses in quotes come directly from the schools or their websites.

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Academy of Art University
1. 79 New Montgomery St, San Francisco, CA 94105
2. Undergraduate, Graduate
3. "Completing an application online is the quickest, easiest way to apply to Academy of Art University. Keep in mind that while we accept general admissions applications on a rolling basis, there are deadlines for specific programs and we encourage you to apply early." No deadlines can be easily found on the website without beginning the application process.
7. Chris Milk (director, founder of WITHIN)
8. Need-based
12. academyart.edu/art-degree/motion-pictures-television/

AFI Conservatory
1. 2021 North Western Ave, Los Angeles, CA 90027
2. Graduate
3. Applications for fall 2024 enrollment will open on Sept. 7, 2023 and close on Dec. 1.
4. Courses introduced for academic year 2022 to 2023 include "Advanced Pitching" and "Post-Production Producing."
6. Joseph Garrity (production designer), James L. Brooks (director, producer, screenwriter), Marjorie David (screenwriter)
7. Ari Aster (director), Affonso Gonçalves (editor), Rachel Morrison (cinematographer)
8. Merit-/need-based
10. $70,487 (tuition and fees, 2024-25)
11. "The AFI Conservatory's curriculum is rooted in a practical, hands-on, collaborative approach in which Fellows actively participate in the entire life cycle of a film, from development through production and exhibition."
12. conservatory.afi.com

Arizona State University (The Sidney Poitier New American Film School)
1. 1001 S Forest Mall, Tempe, AZ 85287
2. Undergraduate, Graduate
3. Nov. 1 (spring), Feb. 1 (summer), May 1 (fall)
5. Hollywood Invades Tempe, Entertainment Business Association, Women in Film at ASU (WIFA)
6. Cheryl Boone Isaacs (film executive), Alex Rivera (director, producer), Cristina Ibarra (director)
7. Sidney Poitier (actor/director/producer)
8. Merit-/need-based
9. $12,698 (in-state), $32,442 (out-of-state)
10. $13,714 (in-state), $34,356 (out-of-state)
11. "To commemorate the bicentennial of diplomatic relations between Mexico and the United States, the Sidney Poitier New American Film School at Arizona State University, the Centro Universitario de Arte, Arquitectura y Diseño at the Universidad de Guadalajara, and the Mexico Institute at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars have launched the US-Mexico Bicentennial Kaleidoscope: A Short Film Contest and Festival."
12. film.asu.edu

Belmont University
1. 1900 Belmont Blvd, Nashville, TN 37212
2. Undergraduate
3. "Admission decisions at Belmont are made on a rolling basis, and all candidates with completed application files are given equal consideration throughout the admission cycle."
8. Merit- and need-based
9. $43,120
11. "With a 250 seat theater / sound mixing stage, we're the world's only school whose students learn to mix in Dolby Atmos on a feature film sized mixing stage."
12. belmont.edu/curb/undergrad/motion-pictures/index.html

Biola University
1. 13800 Biola Ave, La Mirada, CA 90639
2. Undergraduate
3. Nov. 30 (Early Action I), Jan. 15 (Early Action 2), Mar. 1 (regular)
4. Film Music Guild, Impact Film Club
6. Tom Halleen (film executive), Jim Hope (TV writer, producer), Sandra Lee (screenwriter, director)
7. Scott Derrickson (director), John Mabry (producer)
8. Merit-/need-based
9. $46,704
11. "100% of Biola students receive internships. The school has an in-house internship department to assist them with finding internships, networking and employment opportunities. The upcoming studio facility will add 56,500 square feet and will include a third soundstage for students along with additional edit suites, production offices, motion capture, foley; scoring stages, mixing rooms, classrooms, offices, and a full theater for screenings as well as to host lectures, forums and live events."
12. biola.edu/film

California Institute of the Arts (CalArts)
1. 24700 McBean Parkway Valencia, CA 91355
2. Undergraduate, Graduate, Certificate Programs
6. James Benning, Pia Borg, Betzy Bromberg (directors)
7. Pete Docter, Eliza Hittman, Akosua Adoma Owusu (directors)
8. Merit-/need-based
9. $56,704
10. $56,704
12. calarts.edu/admissions/explore-calarts/school-of-film-video

California State University, Northridge (CSUN)
1. 18111 Nordhoff St, Northridge, CA 91330
2. Undergraduate, Graduate
3. Undergraduate: Oct. 1 to Nov. 30 (for fall 2023) Graduate: Begins Oct. 1
7. Joan Chen (actor/director), Tracie Graham (producer)
8. Merit-/need-based
9. In-state (2023-24): $7,090. "If you are not a resident of California, add $396 per unit."
10. In-state (2023-24): $8,524. "If you are not a resident of California, add $396 per unit."
12. csun.edu/mike-curb-arts-media-communication/cinema-television-arts

Chapman University
1. One University Drive, Orange, CA 92866
2. Undergraduate, Graduate
3. Nov. 1, 2023 (undergrad). For fall 2023, this year the graduate application deadline was Dec. 1.
7. Justin Simien (director)
8. Merit-/need-based
9. $62,400 (2023-24)
10. For 2023-24, cost per semester ranged from $24,172 to $28,858 depending on the program.
12. chapman.edu/index.aspx

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Colgate University
1. 3 Oak Drive, Hamilton NY 13346
2. Undergraduate
3. Nov. 15 (Early Decision I), J
an. 15 (Early Decision II & Regular Decision)
7. Joe Berlinger (director), Jeff Sharp (executive director, The Gotham Film & Media Institute)
8. Need-based
9. $66,622 (2023-24)
12. colgate.edu/colgatecommitment
colgate.edu/fmst

Colorado Film School (Community College of Aurora)
1. 9075 E Lowry Blvd, Denver, CO 80230
2. Associate, Certificate Programs
3. "Applications should be completed at least two weeks prior to the start of the semester."
8. Merit-/need-based
10. Certificate: $5,500 (in-state), $17,000 (out-of-state)
Associate: $5,675 (in-state), $17,800 (out-of-state). (All costs from fall 2022.)
12. coloradofilmschool.co/

Columbia College Chicago
1. 600 South Michigan Avenue, Chicago, IL 60605
2. Undergraduate, Graduate
3. Jan. 17 (undergraduate),
Jan. 15 (graduate)
4. "The Cinema and Television Arts Department, in close collaboration with the College's Interactive Arts and Media Department, is offering coursework and building a minor in Virtual Production that trains film and television artists in the mechanics of the Unreal Engine and advanced physical and virtual filmmaking techniques."
5. Animation Association, Experimental Film Society, Table Write
6. Wenhwa Ts'ao (director), Susan Kerns (co-founder, co-director of the Chicago Feminist Film Festival), Dan Rybicky (producer)
7. Janusz Kaminski (cinematographer), Lena Waithe (screenwriter), Christian Sprenger (cinematographer)
8. Merit-/need-based
9. $32,520
10. $30,480
11. "The Cinema and Television Arts Department at Columbia College Chicago provides opportunities to study and intern at the College's Los Angeles campus via Columbia's Semester in LA program."
12. colum.edu/ctva

Columbia University
1. Dodge Hall, 2960 Broadway, New York, NY 10027
2. Undergraduate, Graduate
3. Undergraduate:
Nov. 15 (early decision), Jan. 1 (regular)
Film MFA: Dec. 15
Film and Media Studies MA: Feb. 1, 2023
4. "The 2023-2024 academic year will see the first class of the newly created Writing for Film and Television concentration. There is also the William Goldstein/Dr. Phibes Award for Screenwriting. In partnership with Columbia University, William Goldstein, 1955 alumnus of Columbia's General Studies, author of the cult-classic horror series of *Dr. Phibes* films and books, has established a prize of $10,000 to be awarded annually for the best horror script created by a Columbia film student."
5. FOCUS—Filmmakers of Color United in Spirit
6. Ramin Bahrani (director), Hilary Brougher (screenwriter), James Schamus (screenwriter)
7. Shari Springer Berman & Robert Pulcini (filmmaking team), Kathryn Bigelow (director), Greg Mottola (screenwriter, director)
8. Merit-/need-based
9. $65,524
10. $69,152
11. "The program supports filmmaking itself as the best model for collaboration, collegiality, and a supportive artistic environment. The capstone of the program's first year is a collaborative effort, 'the 5–10 minute film,' which is a collaboration of first-year writer, director, and producer teams."
12. arts.columbia.edu/film

DePaul University
1. 243 S. Wabash Ave, Chicago, IL 60604
2. Undergraduate, Graduate
3. Undergraduate: Nov. 15 (early action), Feb. 1 (regular)
Graduate: Dec. 15 (priority action), May 15 (final)
7. Alex Thompson (director)
8. Merit-/need-based
9. $43,365
10. $918/credit hour
12. cdm.depaul.edu/about/Pages/School-of-Cinematic-Arts.aspx
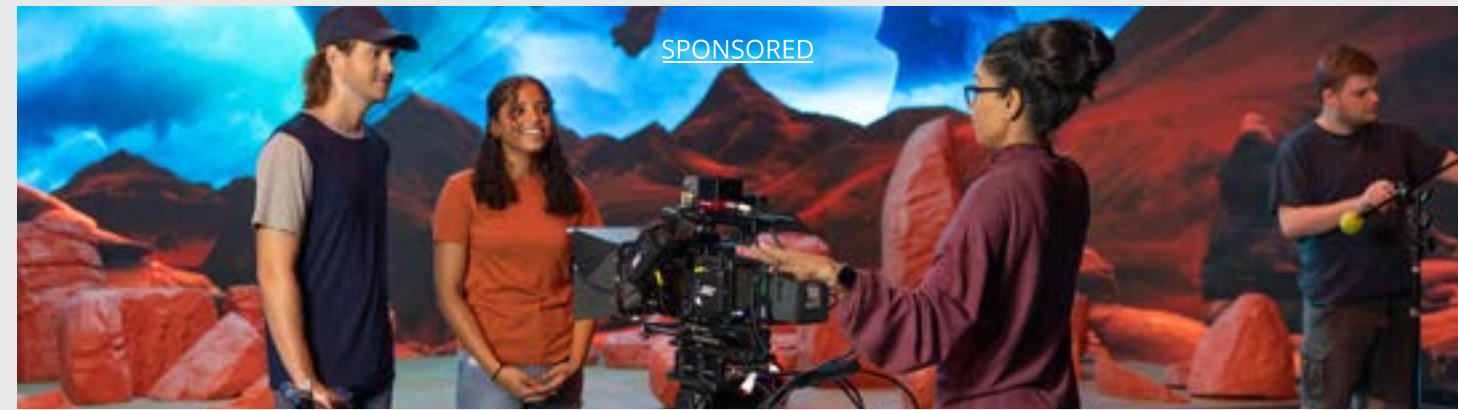
Duke University
1. Durham, NC 27708
2. Undergraduate, Graduate
3. Undergraduate (2022-23 cycle): Nov. 1 (early decision), Jan. 3 (regular decision), Mar. 15 (transfer students)
Graduate: Jan. 31
7. Robert Yeoman (DP)
8. Merit-/need-based
9. $63,450
10. $50,924
12. Undergraduate: cinematicarts.duke.edu & MFA in Experimental and Documentary Arts: gradschool.duke.edu/academics/programs-degrees/master-fine-arts-experimental-and-documentary-arts/

Emerson College
1. 120 Boylston St, Boston, MA 02116
2. Graduate
3. Film and Media Art MFA: Feb. 1
Writing for Film and Television MFA: Feb. 1
5. "Emerson's Writing for Film and Television features a Semel Chair every fall and spring semester, a guest lecturer who is a working Hollywood screenwriter. Previous Semel Chairs have included Adele Lim, Mara Brock Akil and David Magee."
6. Elaine McMillion Sheldon (director, producer, cinematographer), Georden West (director), Jessica Hill (director of advertising at Warner Media)
8. Merit-/need-based
10. $1,402/credit
11. "Emerson's Writing for Film and Television MFA is a low residency, online program."
12. emerson.edu/majors-programs/graduate-programs/writing-film-and-television-mfa-low-residency

Emory University
1. 201 Dowman Dr, Atlanta, GA 30322
2. Undergraduate
3. 2022-23 cycle: Nov. 1 (Early Decision I), Jan. 1 (Early Decision II and Regular Decision)
8. Merit-/need-based
9. $59,920
12. filmandmedia.emory.edu/index.html

Full Sail University's Film Programs: Preparing the Next Generation of Filmmakers

Full Sail University's accelerated film degree programs provide student filmmakers with the classes, technology, and educators they need to make their way in the industry. Film students learn to balance creative storytelling with technical skills for a comprehensive filmmaking education.

Full Sail's Film Degree Programs

Full Sail's film degrees are hands-on programs that are focused on providing students a wide range of experience in their industry.

In the Film bachelor's program, students tackle every step of the filmmaking process, from scriptwriting and set-building to camera setup and post-production. Each student takes on a key role or a crew role during dedicated film days, where they work together on set and experience a real-world shooting schedule.

The Digital Cinematography bachelor's program is an online degree that prepares students to develop individual film projects. The classes cover lighting, directing, post-production, and more. Full Sail ships professional equipment to all Digital Cinematography students to help them complete their coursework.

Graduate students can sharpen their skills and focus on their individual interests, like documentaries or web pilots, in the Film Production MFA program. They also learn about business strategies for releasing their completed work.

Full Sail's Film Technology

Providing access to current film technology is essential to Full Sail's film degree programs. All film students receive a LaunchBox, which contains professional camera gear and a MacBook Pro with scripting, editing, and budgeting software. Campus students also take advantage of Full Sail's hands-on production environments. They can build sets on professional soundstages, film in front of pre-built sets on the school's dedicated Backlot space, use visual equipment in the Camera Lab, and work with audio on a Dolby-approved dubbing stage.

The university's commitment to the latest tech is clear in Studio V1: Virtual Production, an over $3 million on-campus virtual production studio, complete with a 40-foot-wide and 16-foot-high LED wall, Brompton LED processors, and game engine technology. Film students can work on virtually produced films and commercials from outside clients, as well as their class projects, in Studio V1.

Experienced Educators

Full Sail hires educators with industry experience to help Film, Film Production, and Digital Cinematography students succeed. Instructors must have at least four years of professional experience before they begin teaching and many of them continue working in the film industry while they're at Full Sail; by bringing these backgrounds into the classroom, they can provide real-world instruction to students.

Alumni Successes

Full Sail graduates are frequently credited on Oscar and Emmy-nominated productions. At the 2023 Academy Awards, 121 grads were credited on 27 nominated projects in 20 categories, including Best Picture nominees *Top Gun: Maverick* and *Everything Everywhere All at Once.*

At the 2022 Primetime Emmys, 288 graduates were credited on 228 nominated projects, including *Stranger Things 4* and *Ted Lasso.* Fifteen graduates were nominated for their own Emmys.

To learn more visit fullsail.edu

Fairleigh Dickinson University
1.   285 Madison Avenue, Madison, NJ 07940
2.   Undergraduate, Graduate
3.   Undergraduate: Dec. 1. "After December 1: Applications will be accepted on a rolling basis provided space remains available."
Graduate: "Students are encouraged to apply at their earliest opportunity to allow ample time to complete the application process prior to the start of classes. Most graduate applications are processed on a rolling admissions basis throughout the year."
8.   Merit-/need-based
9. $33,624 (as of fall 2021)
10. $987/credit (2022-23)
12. fdu.edu/film

Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT)
1.   227 W. 27th St, New York, NY 10001
2.   Undergraduate, Associate
3.   Jan. 1
6.   Michelle Handelman (artist and director)
7.   Joel Schumacher (director)
8.   "FIT scholarships, which may carry the name of the donor, are usually awarded to students with superior potential to succeed in their major areas, meet the donor's requirements for the scholarship, and demonstrate high financial need, which is determined by the FAFSA."
9. $7,170 (in-state), $21,692 (out-of-state)
10. $5,290 (in-state), $15,870 (out-of-state)
12. fitnyc.edu/academics/academic-divisions/liberal-arts/film-and-media/index.php

Feirstein Graduate School of Cinema (Brooklyn College)
1.   25 Washington Avenue, Steiner Studios, Brooklyn, NY 11205
2.   Graduate
3.   Rolling
5.   BIPOC Filmmakers, Women's Film Collective
6.   Livia Huang (director), Rick Lopez (TV director), John Hadity (producer, Executive Vice President of the Incentives Group at Entertainment Partners)
7.   Saleem Gondal (filmmaker), Mandy Marcus (filmmaker), Joe Stankus (director)
8.   Merit-/need-based scholarships
10. $21,134 (in-state),

$31,564 (out-of-state)
11. "Feirstein is the only film school on a working film lot."
12. brooklyn.cuny.edu/web/academics/schools/mediaarts/schools/feirstein.php

Florida State University
1.   282 Champions Way Suite 5100A, Tallahassee, FL 32306
2.   Undergraduate, Graduate
3.   Undergraduate: Nov. 1
Graduate: Dec. 1
Transfer: Jan. 14
5.   Diversity & Inclusion in Cinematic Entertainment
6.   Mark Vargo (cinematographer, special effects artist), Julianna Baggott (novelist, producer), Dustin Cawood (sound designer)
7.   Barry Jenkins (director), Joi McMillon (editor), Adele Romanski (producer)
8.   Merit-/need-based
9. $5,656 (in-state), $18,786 (out-of-state)
10. $21,569 (in-state), $49,982 (out-of-state)
12. film.fsu.edu

Full Sail University
1.   3300 University Blvd., Winter Park, FL 32972
2.   Undergraduate, Graduate, Certificate Programs
3.   Students accepted on a continuous basis
6.   Julio Cesar De Modesti (visual effects artist), TJ Doctor (Production Supervisor for the Sundance Institute's Feature Film Development Program), Jennie Jarvis (screenwriter, director)
7.   Derek Prieur (lead technical director, Nickelodeon Animation Studios), Candice Ray (production supervisor, DreamWorks Animation), Darren Lynn Bousman (director, screenwriter)
8.   Merit-/need-based
9. $733/credit hour, $88,000 degree total
10. $621/credit hour, $36,000 degree total
11. "In 2023, Full Sail University celebrates 20 years serving as the primary sponsor of the Florida Film Festival, an Oscar-qualifying festival presented by Enzian, Central Florida's full-time, not-for-profit independent cinema. Full Sail also boasts Studio V1, the university's

on-campus virtual production studio that is one of the first, largest, and most technologically advanced virtual production studios on any college or university campus in the nation. In 2023, 121 graduates were credited on 27 Oscar-nominated films at the 2023 Academy Awards. 86 graduates were credited on nine Oscar-winning projects across 18 categories."
12. fullsail.edu/area-of-study/film-television

Georgia State University
1.   P.O. Box 3965 Atlanta, GA 30302
2.   Undergraduate, Graduate
3.   Undergraduate: "Students who wish to be considered for scholarships or the Honors College must have their application for admission and all required documents submitted by November 15. The regular priority deadline is April 1."
Graduate: M.A. in Communication, Film/Video Concentration Fall: Mar. 15
M.A. in Communication, Concentration in Film, Video, and Digital Imaging: Feb. 15th for funding consideration, otherwise Mar. 15th for fall; Nov. 15th for spring
Moving Image Production Fall: Feb. 15th for funding consideration, otherwise Mar. 15th.
Doctor of Philosophy in Communication Studies, Concentration in Moving Image Studies: Priority consideration: Dec. 1
Final: Feb. 10
7.   Scotty Mullen (screenwriter, casting director)
8.   Merit-/need-based
9. $10,628 (in-state), $29,306 (out-of-state)
10. $11,680 (in-state), $32,344 (out-of-state)
12. fmt.gsu.edu

Harvard University
1.   Massachusetts Hall, Cambridge, MA 02138
2.   Undergraduate, Graduate, Certificate Programs
3.   Undergraduate: Nov. 1 (early action), Jan. 1 (regular)
Graduate: Dec. 15
6.   Ross McElwee, Robb Moss, Joana Pimenta (directors)
7.   Damien Chazelle, J.P. Sniadecki, Andrew Bujalski (directors)
8.   Need-based
9. $54,269

10. $54,032
12. afvs.fas.harvard.edu

Hofstra University
1.   111 Hofstra University, Hempstead, NY 11549
2.   Undergraduate
3.   Nov. 15 (Early Action 1), Dec. 15 (Early Action 2), rolling (regular). "While there is no deadline for Regular Decision applications, students are encouraged to apply early so as to receive the fullest consideration."
5.   Hofstra Filmmakers Club, Hofstra Entertainment Access Television (HEAT) Network, Zeta Phi Eta (National Professional Fraternity in Communication Arts)
6.   Kelcey Edwards (director, producer), Carlo Gennarelli (editor, director, producer), Russell Harbaugh (director)
7.   Francis Ford Coppola (director), Fellipe Barbosa (screenwriter, director), Holly Fischer (cinematographer)
8.   Merit-/need-based
9. $52,215
11. "Hofstra University recently introduced a new BFA in filmmaking that

guides students toward the complete process of creating a film, and a BFA in Writing for the Screen that provides students with the necessary skills for writing across all platforms."
12. hofstra.edu/undergraduate/film.html

Howard University
1.   2400 Sixth St NW, Washington, DC 20059
2.   Undergraduate, Graduate
3.   Undergraduate (for 2023 cycle): Nov. 15 (early action/decision), Feb. 15 (regular)
Graduate (for 2022 cycle): Jan. 31 (early), Apr. 1 (regular)
7.   Ernest Dickerson (DP/director), Arthur Jafa (visual artist), Bradford Young (DP)
8.   Merit-/need-based
9. $30,584 (2022-23)
10. $32,248 (2022-23)
12. communications.howard.edu/academics/media-journalism-and-film & howardgraduate.film

Ithaca College
1.   953 Danby Rd, Ithaca, NY 14850
2.   Undergraduate, Graduate

3.   Undergraduate: Nov. 1 (early decision), Dec. 1 (early action), Feb. 1 (regular)
Graduate deadlines vary
5.   ICTV, WICB, The Ithacan, Park Productions, Park Promotions
6.   Jack Bryant (screenwriter), Cathy Crane (director), Joshua Bonnetta (director)
7.   David Boreanaz (actor, director), Lauryn Kahn (screenwriter), Bill D'Elia (producer),
8.   Merit-/need-based scholarships
9. $50,510
10. MBA in Entertainment and Media Management: $1,589/semester
11. "From day one, students can create their own productions using state-of-the-art equipment and facilities, become proficient in virtual production using AR/VR technology or even earn a commercial drone license. Ithaca College boasts a Virtual Production Cube—made up of three LED walls, a back and two sides and a ceiling that's made up of LED tubes that gives environmental lighting. Multiple sections of a Virtual Production course have been added to help students gain experience in this area."
12. ithaca.edu/rhp

Johns Hopkins University
1.   10 E. North Ave, 2nd Floor, Baltimore, MD 21202
2.   Undergraduate
3.   Nov. 1 (Early Decision I), Jan. 2 (Early Decision II), Jan. 2 (regular)
5.   Studio North, Writers Room, Johns Hopkins Film Society, HopkinsCinemAddicts
6.   Karen Yasinsky (director, video artist), John Mann (director), Adam Rodgers (screenwriter)
7.   Alexandra Byer (producer) Zach Baylin (screenwriter), Diana Peralta (director, producer, screenwriter)
8.   Merit-/need-based
9. $62,840
11.   "Film and Media Studies is working in collaboration with other humanities programs at JHU to launch a semester-long experiential learning opportunity in Los Angeles, starting in 2025. A summer-abroad experience at the Cannes Film Festival and Paris will launch in 2024. In 2023, FMS unveiled a summer internship grant program and The Marc Lapadula Screenwriting Prize ($4000 award for best feature screenplay)."
12.   krieger.jhu.edu/film-media/

Lincoln University
1.   1570 Baltimore Pike, Lincoln University, PA 19352
2.   Undergraduate
3.   Feb. 1 (priority), Apr. 1 (FAFSA priority)
8.   Merit-/need-based
9. $8,900 (in-state), $14,852 (out-of-state)
12.   lincoln.edu/academics/programs/undergraduate-programs/visual-arts-bs-ba-minor.html

Lipscomb University
1.   One University Park Dr., Nashville, TN 37204
2.   Undergraduate, Graduate
3.   Undergraduate: Dec. 1 (priority), Mar. 1 (regular) Graduate: Apr. 1 (for fall 2023)
7.   Jim Jinkins (animator)
8.   Merit-/need-based
9. $38,824
10. $1,098/credit hour. "Also note that each student is responsible for costs of their own productions."
12.   lipscomb.edu/cinematicarts

Los Angeles Film School
1.   6353 Sunset Blvd, Los Angeles, CA 90028
2.   Undergraduate
3.   Rolling
4.   "In 2023, the Film Program introduced new programming in the Animation/VFX Program that will allow shared classes with the film program, so students can develop on-set skills for visual effects artists and supervisors. The L.A. Film School is building partnerships with several virtual production studios, giving students access to real-time production processes while also expanding the students' professional networking opportunities."
5.   Film School Student Organization Collective
6.   Jon Artigo (screenwriter, director), Gerald Wu (director), Barbara Dunphy (production designer
7.   Phillip Bladh (sound mixer),Angelina Faulkner (audio engineer), Brandon Trost (DP)
8.   Merit-/need-based
9.   Film A.S. Degree Cost: $48,937.50 Film Production B.S. Degree Cost: $92,130
11.   "The campus facilities include the historic RCA Building at 6363 Sunset Boulevard and the studios at 6690 Sunset Boulevard, where students have access to industry-standard equipment, editing labs, dub stages and recording studios."
12.   lafilm.edu

Loyola Marymount University
1.   1 LMU Drive, Los Angeles, CA 90045
2.   Undergraduate, Graduate
3.   Undergraduate: Jan. 15 Graduate: Nov. 15
5.   Delta Kappa Alpha, Animation Club, School of Film and Television Students of Color Organization, SFTV Womxn's Society, Black Filmmakers Rebellion
6.   Janet Yang (president, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences)
7.   Effie Brown (producer), Francis Lawrence (director), Evan Romansky (screenwriter)
8.   Merit-/need-based
9. $54,630
10. $1,457/unit
11.   "We have a low 12:1 student-faculty ratio, with close mentorship between professors and students. Located in sunny Los Angeles on the bluffs above the Pacific Ocean, with a view of the Hollywood sign, LMU was ranked #4 Most Beautiful Campus by Princeton Review."
12.   sftv.lmu.edu

Marymount Manhattan College
1.   221 E. 71st Street, New York, NY 10021
2.   Undergraduate
3.   Nov. 1 (early decision), Dec. 1 (early action), Feb. 15 (regular)
8.   Merit-/need-based
9. $38,400
12.   mmm.edu/academics/communication-arts/film-and-media-production-major/

Massachusetts College of Art & Design
1.   621 Huntington Ave, Boston, MA 02115
2.   Undergraduate, Graduate
3.   Undergraduate: Dec. 1 (early action), Feb. 15 (priority) Graduate: Feb. 15 (priority extended), Apr. 1 (rolling). "We will accept applications on a space available basis, after the Priority Deadline."
7.   Hal Hartley and Debra Granik (directors), Nancy Haigh (set decorator)
8.   Merit-/need-based
9. $15,000 (Massachusetts resident), $33,700 (New England resident), $42,190 (non-Massachusetts/New England resident)
10. $51,000 (anticipated total tuition program and fees)
12.   massart.edu/node/1021

Morehouse College
1.   830 Westview Dr SW, Atlanta, GA 30314
2.   Undergraduate
3.   Nov. 1 (early action), Dec. 1 (regular)
6.   Dr. Stephane Dunn (producer, film writer) Avery O. Williams (screenwriter, director)
7.   Terrance Daye (screenwriter, director, producer), David Fortune (screenwriter, director, producer)
8.   Merit-/need-based scholarships
9. $27,984.00
12.   morehouse.edu/academics/majors/cinema-television-and-emerging-media-studies/

Mount St. Mary
1.   10 Chester Place Los Angeles, CA 90007
2.   Undergraduate, Graduate
3.   Undergraduate Early Action: Dec. 1 Undergraduate: Jan. 15 (priority), rolling admission after.

Graduate: Mar. 1 (priority fall), Nov. 1 (priority spring)
6.   Mary Trunk (director, producer), Roman Zenz (director, DP)
7.   Traci Carter Holsey (producer)
8.   Merit-/need-based scholarships
9. $46,740
10. $1,141/unit
12.   msmu.edu/departments/film-media-and-communication/

New York University
1.   721 Broadway, New York, NY 10003
2.   Undergraduate, Graduate
3.   Undergraduate first-year applicants: Nov. 1 (early decision I), Jan. 1 (early decision II), Jan. 5 (regular) Undergraduate transfers: Mar. 1 (internal), Apr. 1 (external) Graduate: Dec. 1
5.   First Run Film Festival, Fusion Film Festival, Artists in Action, Student Animation League
6.   Spike Lee (screenwriter, director), Kasi Lemmons (director, screenwriter), John Canemaker (animator)
7.   Emma Seligman (director), Dee Rees (screenwriter, director), Reed Morano (director, cinematographer)
8.   Merit-/need-based
9. $63,896
10. $70,864
11.   "NYU will introduce new courses focusing on animation, experimental screenwriting and virtual reality. The upcoming Martin Scorsese Virtual Production Center, the first of its kind on the East Coast, will offer a world-class laboratory for the most ambitious moving image projects."
12.   tisch.nyu.edu/film-tv / & tisch.nyu.edu/grad-film

Northwestern University
1.   Annie May Swift Hall, 1920 Campus Drive, 2nd Floor, Evanston, IL 60201
2.   Undergraduate, Graduate
3.   Undergraduate: Nov. 1 (early decision), Jan. 2 (regular), Mar. 15 (transfer) Graduate deadline: Jan. 15
6.   Christina C Nguyen (director), J.P. Sniadecki (director)
7.   Warren Beatty, Frank Galati (screenwriter, director)
8.   Merit-/need-based
9. $64,887
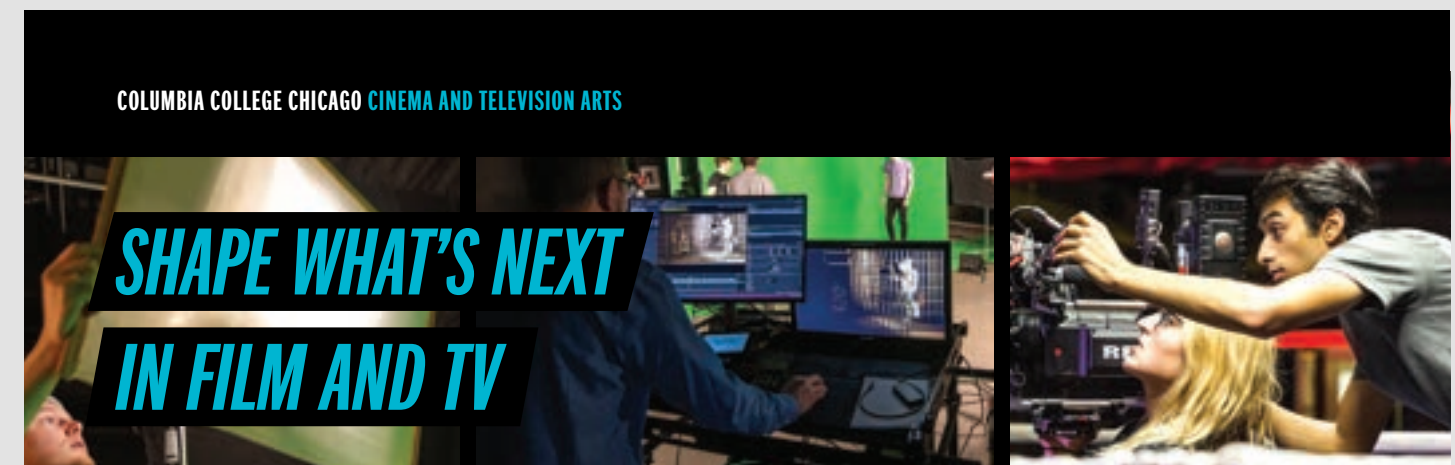10.   Full scholarships for admitted students and cost of living stipend
12.   communication.northwestern.edu/radio-television-film/

Olympic College
1.   1600 Chester Ave, Bremerton, WA 98337
2.   Undergraduate
3.   Rolling
5.   Film Club
8.   Merit-/need-based
9. $4,445 (associate degree), $7,142.85 (applied bachelors)
12.   olympic.edu/academics/academic-pathways/arts-humanities-communications/filmmaking

Pepperdine University
1.   24255 Pacific Coast Highway, Malibu, CA 90263
2.   Undergraduate, Graduate
3.   Undergraduate: Nov. 1 (early action), Jan. 15 (regular) Graduate: Mar. 31
7.   D.J. Caruso (director)
8.   Merit-/need-based
9. $65,990
10. $2,070/unit
12.   seaver.pepperdine.edu/humanities/undergraduate/film-studies/

Point Park University
1. 201 Wood St, Pittsburgh, PA 15222
2. Undergraduate, Graduate
3. Rolling admission
6. Kelly Donnellan (editor, director) Rick Hawkins (TV writer)
7. Tom Savini (actor, director, prosthetic makeup artist), John Magaro (actor)
8. Merit-/need-based
9. $46,150
10. $788/credit
12. pointpark.edu/academics/schools/copa/copadeptsmajors/cinemaanddigitalarts/cinemaproduction & pointpark.edu/academics/schools/copa/copadeptsmajors/lowresmfa/index

Pratt Institute
1. 200 Willoughby Avenue, Brooklyn, NY 11205
2. Undergraduate
3. Nov. 1 (early action FAFSA), Dec. 1 (early action), Jan. 5 (priority), Mar. 1 (FAFSA deadline)
5. Film In Color, 16mm Film Lab, Film Cult
6. Eliza Hittman (director, screenwriter), Matías Piñeiro (director, screenwriter), Jim Finn (director, screenwriter).
7. Owen Kline (director, screenwriter), John Requa and Glenn Ficarra (screenwriting and directing partners), Liz Hannah (screenwriter)
8. Merit-/need-based
9. $57,659
11. "Pratt Institute's Film/Video Department has been consistently ranked as one of the top film programs in the world by *Variety*, *Hollywood Reporter* and *USA Today*."
12. pratt.edu/art/film-video/

Purchase College (State University of New York)
1. 735 Anderson Hill Rd, Purchase, NY 10577
2. Undergraduate
3. (2022-2023 cycle): Nov. 15 (early action), Dec. 9 (priority), Jan. 1 (general) Rolling admissions begin on Mar. 1
5. New Media Club
6. John G. Young (director), Iris Cahn (editor), Courtney Stephens (director)
7. Chris Wedge (director, founder of Blue Skies Studios), Sarah Cawley (cinematographer), Azazel Jacobs (director)
8. Merit-/need-based
9. $7,070 (in-state), $16,980 (out-of-state)
11. "SUNY Purchase launched a Television Studies Minor Program. The college opened a $40-million Center for Media Arts and Film. It features a state-of-the-art digital screening room, fabrication lab, sound stage, performance spaces, new media labs as well as an equipment store for the Film and Video Production Minor. Work was also completed on the renovation of the Film BFA's 5,000 square foot primary soundstage."
12. purchase.edu/academics/school-of-film-and-media-studies/

Quinnipiac University
1. 275 Mount Carmel Avenue, Hamden, CT 06517
2. Undergraduate, Graduate
3. Undergraduate: Nov. 1 (early decision), Nov. 15 (early action), Mar. 1 (regular) Graduate: Rolling
6. David E. Atkins (screenwriter, director, producer), Ashley S Brandon (director)
7. David Rabinowitz (screenwriter), Molly Querim (ESPN host)
8. Merit-/need-based scholarships for undergraduates, merit only for graduate students.
9. $50,400
10. $14,885
12. qu.edu/schools/communications/programs/bachelors-degree/film-television-and-media-arts/

Regent University
1. 1000 Regent University Drive, Virginia Beach, VA 23464
2. Undergraduate, Graduate
3. Rolling admission
7. Nathan Todd Sims (producer)
8. Merit-/need-based
9. $18,986
10. $8,040
12. regent.edu/fields-of-study/arts-communication-degree/

Rhode Island School of Design
1. 2 College St, Providence, RI 02903
2. Undergraduate, Graduate
3. Undergraduate: Nov. 1 (early decision), Jan. 17 (regular) Graduate: Jan. 5
6. Amy Kravitz (animator, filmmaker) Alexandra Anthony (director, editor)
7. Gus Van Sant (director), Ryan Trecartin (video artist)
8. Merit-/need-based
9. $58,690
10. $58,690
12. risd.edu/academics/film-animation-video

Ringling College of Art and Design
1. 2700 N. Tamiami Trail, Sarasota, FL 34234
2. Undergraduate
3. "Computer Animation Deadline: January 15. All other majors, including film, are on rolling admission. Applications open September 1 for the following fall enrollment."
5. ART (All Ringling Television) Network, Social Media Street Team, INDEX program (Industry Experience at Ringling College), Ringling's Center for Career Services
6. Bradley Battersby (director, screenwriter), Patrick Alexander (screenwriter, director, producer), Damon Maulucci (director)
7. Tony Ahedo (screenwriter, director), Natasha Thornton (cinematographer), Jason Letkiewicz (screenwriter, producer, director)
8. Merit-/need-based
9. $50,500
11. "Ringling College of Art and Design has four soundstages, Arri and Canon digital cinema cameras, Fisher 11 dolly, two color grading suites, Foley stage, recording studio, Dolby Atmos dubbing stage, and 15 private editing suites, all available for use by BFA Film students. New for this year is the DJI Ronin 4D with all its accessories and some of the brightest LED lights to date from companies like Arri and Aputure."
12. ringling.edu/film/

Rutgers University (Mason Gross School of the Arts)
1. 33 Livingston Ave, New Brunswick, NJ 08901
2. Undergraduate
3. Dec. 1
5. Rutgers Film Club
6. Thomas Lennon (director), Shawn Snyder (director)
7. Zack Morrison (director), Sam Spencer (director), Andreanna Loukidis (producer, assistant director)
8. Merit-/need-based
9. $12,900 (in-state), $30,600 (out-of-state)
11. "Students at Rutgers have access to an in-house production unit, the Documentary Film Lab, which gives students the opportunity to create and complete full-length documentary films for actual clients, an offering that is widely regarded as Rutgers Filmmaking's biggest draw. The Documentary Film Lab partners with scientists, artists, researchers and community leaders to create documentary films that involve students at every level of production. The Documentary Film Lab received a grant from Johnson & Johnson to make a film in New Brunswick exploring the Promotoras, a group of Spanish-speaking women promoting health in the city's Latino community. Principal photography is wrapped, and the documentary is now being edited. Lab students have also been filming near Tuckerton, NJ, profiling a remote marine field station as scientists monitor climate change along the New Jersey shoreline. This film is part of an ambitious cross-disciplinary Rutgers-led scientific project funded by the National Science Foundation."
12. masongross.rutgers.edu/degrees-programs/filmmaking/

San Diego State University
1. 5250 Campanile Dr, San Diego, CA 92182
2. Graduate
3. Feb. 1
6. Rich Underwood (director), Mary Posatko (director)
7. Russell Carpenter (DP), David McKenna (screenwriter)
8. Merit-/need-based
10. $9,724 (in-state). "Nonresident tuition: Add $396 per unit."
12. ttf.sdsu.edu/programs/program_emphases/mfa-film-television-production

San Francisco State University
1. 1600 Holloway Ave, San Francisco, CA 94132
2. Undergraduate, Graduate
3. Undergraduate: Nov. 30 (priority), Mar. 25 (regular) Graduate: Mar. 1 (priority), Apr. 15 (regular)
6. Scott Boswell (director, producer), Laura Green (director, editor)
7. Steven Zaillian (screenwriter/director), Jonas Rivera (producer)
8. Merit-/need-based scholarships
9. $7,522
10. $4,203
12. cinema.sfsu.edu

Sarah Lawrence College
1. 1 Mead Way, Bronxville, NY 10708
2. Undergraduate
3. Nov. 1 (early action), Jan. 15 (regular)
6. Damani Baker (director), Rona Naomi Mark (screenwriter, director, producer)
7. J.J. Abrams and Jon Avnet (directors/producers)
8. Merit-/need-based
9. $63,128
12. sarahlawrence.edu/undergraduate/arts/filmmaking-and-moving-image-arts/

Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD)
1. P.O. Box 2072, Savannah, GA 31402
2. Undergraduate, Graduate
3. "Applications are accepted at any time throughout the year. There are no deadlines to apply—although students are encouraged to apply at least six months in advance to allow time to arrange for financial aid, and no later than 30 days

prior to the start of their first quarter. Admission results normally take between two and four weeks."

6. D.W. Moffett (actor), Andra Reeve-Rabb (casting director)
7. Madison Hamburg (director, producer), Brian Freesh (camera operator)
8. Merit-/need-based
9. $40,095
10. $41,085
11. "SCAD's Casting Office is the only full-time, in-house university casting office in the nation. Students are earning their degrees while working on film and television series. This year, students worked on Todd Haynes's *May December*, Ava DuVernay's *Caste*, the Apple series *Manhunt*, Norman Lear's *Clean Slate* and Clint Eastwood's *Juror No. 2*. A second office launches in fall 2023 at SCAD's Atlanta campus, and will be overseen by Alpha Tyler, former head Casting for Tyler Perry Studios Casting.
"Single camera comedy, drama, and sitcoms are shot on SCAD campuses in Savannah, Atlanta and Lacoste, France. SCAD's latest sitcom, *Tours and Attractions*, was filmed live on-set in Savannah before a studio audience, and premiered at the 2023 SCAD TVfest. Additionally, the SCAD Savannah Film Festival is the largest university-run film festival in the world."
12. scad.edu/academics/programs/film-and-television

School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC)
1. 36 S Wabash Ave, Chicago, IL 60603
2. Undergraduate, Graduate
3. Undergraduate: Nov. 15 (early action), Apr. 15 (regular)
Graduate: Dec. 1 (priority), Jan. 10 (regular)
6. Melika Bass (director, editor, installation artist), Daniel Eisenberg (director)
7. Hong Sang-soo (director), Apichatpong Weerasethakul (director)
8. Merit-/need-based scholarships
9. $1785/credit hour
10. $1860/credit hour
12. saic.edu/academics/departments/fvnma

SCI-Arc (Southern California Institute of Architecture)
1. 960 E. 3rd St, Los Angeles, CA 90013

2. Undergraduate, Graduate
3. Priority: Jan. 15. Applications accepted on a rolling basis throughout the year.
5. SoCal NOMAs (National Organization of Minority Architects: Student Chapter)
6. Liam Young (designer, director, producer) Alexey Marfin (director, VFX supervisor), Hajnal Molnar-Szakacs (Director of Institute Granting, Sundance Institute)
7. Rick Farin (digital artist), Ainslee Alem Robson (director, screenwriter and media artist), Ina Chen (multicultural experience designer)
8. Merit-/need-based scholarships
9. $53,564
10. $53,564
10. "This year the program has established new relationships with a series of virtual production studios in Los Angeles to explore the emerging technologies of real time rendering and in camera visual effects. This initiative is also in collaboration with a new institutional partnership with Leica, who are now our technology partner and are supplying the program with the latest in sensing and scanning technology for our students to experiment with and develop new forms of media content."
11. "SCI-Arc's MS program in Fiction and Entertainment provides the opportunity for students to learn the techniques of popular media as well as employ a broad range of digital tools to imagine, visualize, and produce alternative worlds."
12. sciarc.edu

Spelman College
1. 350 Spelman Ln SW, Atlanta, GA 30314
2. Undergraduate
3. Nov. 1 (early decision), Feb. 1 (regular)
6. Julie Dash (director), Ayoka Chenzira (director)
7. Linda Goode Bryant (director), Tiona Nekkia McClodden (visual artist, filmmaker)
8. Merit-/need-based scholarships
9. $26,915
12. spelman.edu

Stanford University
1. 450 Serra Mall, Stanford, CA 94305
2. Undergraduate, Graduate
3. Undergraduate: Nov. 1 (early action), Jan. 5 (regular)
Graduate: Dec. 1

6. Natalia Almada (director), Srđan Keča (director)
7. Roger Corman (director, producer), Alexander Payne (director)
8. Need-based
9. $19,231/quarter
10. $18,829/quarter
12. art.stanford.edu/

Stony Brook University (The Stony Brook Lichtenstein Center)
1. 535 8th Avenue New York, NY 10018
2. Undergraduate, Graduate
3. Jun. 1
5. Mastic Beach Film Festival, Killer Crew Up
6. Christine Vachon (producer), Pam Koffler (producer), Shrihari Sathe (producer, director)
7. James Sharpe (producer), Yi Chiang Lin (screenwriter, director, editor), Eugina Gelbelman (director, screenwriter),
8. Merit-/need-based
9. $7,070 (in-state) 24,990 (out-of-state)
10. $11,000 (in-state), $23,000 (out-of-state)
11. "Stony Brook's MFA in Television Writing is a two-and-a-half year graduate program that offers the most extensive TV writing curriculum in the country. MFA students complete three original pilots and one spec script, as well as write and produce a webisode while in the program."
12. stonybrook.edu/commcms/lichtenstein-center/academic-programs/Film_TV/index.php

SVA (School of Visual Arts)
1. 209 E. 23rd St, New York, NY 10010
2. Undergraduate, Graduate
3. Undergraduate: Dec. 1 (early action), Feb. 1 (regular), Mar. 1 (transfer)
Graduate: Jan. 15
6. Ross Kauffman (director, producer, cinematographer), Thom Powers (director, documentary programmer at TIFF), Maro Chermayeff (producer, director)
7. Ja'Tovia Gary (artist, filmmaker), Jenni Morello (cinematographer), Ti West (director)
8. Merit- and need-based
9. $49,140
10. $54,900
11. "SocDoc is a production-focused documentary MFA program focused on graduating working filmmakers. A new, three-year extended MFA program allows

more opportunity for working filmmakers to take part in SocDoc."
12. sva.edu/academics/undergraduate/bfa-film & sva.edu/academics/graduate/mfa-social-documentary-film

Syracuse University
1. 200 Crouse College, Syracuse, NY 13244
2. Undergraduate, Graduate
3. Undergraduate: Nov. 15 (early decision), Jan. 5 (regular)
Graduate: Feb. 1
6. Stewart Thorndike (director), Soudabeh Moradian (director, producer, screenwriter)
7. Aaron Sorkin (screenwriter), Michael H. Weber (screenwriter)
8. Merit-based
9. $61,310
10. $32,436
12. vpa.syr.edu/academics/film-media-arts/

Temple University
1. 1801 N. Broad St, Philadelphia, PA 19122
2. Graduate, Undergraduate, Certificate Programs
3. Undergraduate: Nov. 1 (early action), Feb. 1 (regular)
Graduate: Nov. 15
6. William Goldenberg (editor), Mounia Akl (director, screenwriter)
7. Qiong Wang (director), Elisabeth Subrin (director, screenwriter)
8. Merit-/need-based
9. $17,136 (in-state), $30,864 (out-of-state)
10. $1,184 (in-state per credit hour), $1,513 (out-of-state per credit hour)
12. tfma.temple.edu/fma

The New School
1. 72 5th Ave, New York, NY 10011
2. Graduate, Undergraduate, Certificate Programs
3. Undergraduate: Nov. 1 (early action), Jan. 15 (regular)
Graduate: Jan. 15 (priority), May 5 (second), Jun. 15 (international), Aug. 1 (final)
6. Lana Lin (video artist), Vladan Nikolic (director)
7. Jazmin Jones and Sean Baker (directors)
8. Merit-/need-based
9. $26,858
10. $2,339/credit
12. newschool.edu/academics/

Tuskegee University
1. 1200 W. Montgomery Rd. Tuskegee, AL 36088
2. Undergraduate
3. Rolling
8. Merit-/need-based
9. $33,360
12. tuskegee.edu/

University of California, Berkeley
1. 7408 Dwinelle Hall, University of California, Berkeley, CA 94720
2. Undergraduate, Graduate
3. Undergraduate: Oct. 1 to Nov. 30
Graduate: Dec. 1 (for 2023 year)
6. Nicolas Pereda (director)
7. Joshua Marston (director), Young Jean Lee (director)
8. Merit-/need-based
9. $15,444
10. $15,094
12. filmmedia.berkeley.edu/

University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA)
1. 225 Charles E Young Dr E, Los Angeles, CA 90095
2. Graduate, Undergraduate, Certificate Programs

FILM

MFA

Creative Producing
Screenwriting & Directing
Writing for Film & Television

arts.columbia.edu/filmmaker

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF THE ARTS

6. Phyllis Nagy (screenwriter), Gina Kim (director)
7. Eric Roth (screenwriter), Francis Ford Coppola (director)
8. Merit-/need-based
9. $14,478 (in-state), $47,052 (out-of-state)
10. $12,264
12. ucla.edu/programs/film-tv-digital-media-department/

University of Central Florida
1. 4000 Central Florida Blvd, Orlando, FL 32816
2. Graduate, Undergraduate
3. Undergraduate: May 1 Graduate: Rolling
8. Merit-/need-based
9. $24,254
10. $24,964
12. ucf.edu

University of Colorado Boulder
1. 316 UCB, Denver, CO 80309
2. Undergraduate, Graduate
3. Undergraduate: Nov. 15 (early action), Jan. 15 (regular). The MFA for Interdisciplinary Documentary Media Practices "is on hold for the foreseeable future." For the Ph.D in Emergent Technologies and Media Arts Practices, Jan. 15 (US-based students), Dec. 1 (international).
7. Derek Cianfrance (director)
8. Merit-/need-based
9. $12,496
10. $36,510
12. colorado.edu

University of Colorado Denver (CU Denver)
1. 1201 Larimer St, Denver, CO 80204
2. Undergraduate
3. Jul. 31
8. Merit-/need-based
9. $11,406 (in-state), $29,598 (out-of-state)
12. artsandmedia.ucdenver.edu/areas-of-study/about-film-television

University of Michigan
1. 6330 N. Quad, 105 S. State Street, Ann Arbor, MI 48109
2. Undergraduate, Graduate
3. Undergraduate: Nov. 1 (early action), Feb. 1 (regular) Graduate: Dec. 15

7. John Nelson (special effects supervisor)
8. Merit-/need-based
9. 2022-23 cycle: $16,736 (in-state), $55,334 (out-of-state)
10. "Financial aid for graduate students is limited compared with what is available for undergraduates. Most aid administered by the Office of Financial Aid is in the form of loan and Work-Study programs."
12. lsa.umich.edu/ftvm

University of Missouri (Jonathan B. Murray Center for Documentary Journalism)
1. 243 Walter Williams Hall, University of Missouri, Columbia, MO 65201
2. Undergraduate, Graduate
3. MA: Jan. 1 (fall semester), Sept. 1 (spring) / BJ: Nov. 15 (fall)
6. Robert Greene (director)
7. Taylor Hensel (director, producer), Adam Dietrich (director), Bailey Synclaire (producer)
8. Merit-/need-based
9. $14,122-$17,722 (in-state) $34,322-$37,922 (out-of-state)
10. $12,809 (in-state), $23,140 (out-of-state)
11. "The Murray Center offers a unique cross-section of opportunities for skill and professional development through the Missouri School of Journalism's Missouri Method, which places students in professional newsrooms on campus."
12. methodmfilms.com/murraycenter

University of North Carolina School of the Arts
1. 1533 S Main Street, Winston-Salem, NC 27127
2. Undergraduate, Graduate
3. Undergraduate (2022-23 cycle): Nov. 2 and Jan. 18 Graduate (2022-23 cycle): Nov. 2, Jan. 18 and Mar. 1
7. Craig Zobel (director), Rebecca Green (producer), Danny McBride (actor)
9. $6,497 (in-state), $24,231 (out-of-state)
10. $9,696 (in-state), $24,399 (out-of-state)
12. uncsa.edu/filmmaking

University of North Carolina Wilmington
1. 601 S College Rd, Wilmington, NC 28403

2. Undergraduate, Graduate
3. Undergraduate: Nov. 1 (early action), Feb. 1 (regular) Graduate: Sept. 9
9. Tuition and fees: $7,317 (in-state), $22,890 (out-of-state)
12. uncw.edu/filmstudies

University of Pennsylvania
1. Fisher-Bennett Hall, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA 19104
2. Undergraduate
3. Nov. 1 (early decision), Jan. 5 (regular)
7. Fred Berger (producer), Matt Selman (screenwriter)
9. $58,620
12. upenn.edu

University of Pittsburgh
1. 4200 Fifth Ave, Pittsburgh, PA 15260
2. Undergraduate, Graduate
3. Undergraduate: Dec. 9 Graduate: Dec. 10
7. Gene Kelly (actor/director), Julie Sokolow (director)
9. $19,760 (per year)
10. $24,962 (per year)
12. filmandmedia.pitt.edu

University of Southern California (USC)
1. 900 W. 34th St, Los Angeles, CA 90089
2. Undergraduate, Graduate
3. Undergraduate: Nov. 1 (early action), Dec. 1 (regular) Grad: Nov. 15
6. Holly Willis (writer and *Filmmaker* columnist), Mary Sweeney (director, producer, editor), Robert Townsend (actor, director)
7. Shonda Rhimes (writer, producer), Kevin Feige (Marvel Studios president), Ryan Coogler (director)
8. Merit-/need-based
9. $66,640
10. $64,666
11. "The Gerald A. Lawson Endowed Fund provides financial support for under-represented students who wish to pursue undergraduate or graduate degrees in game design or computer science."
12. cinema.usc.edu

University of Texas at Austin
1. 110 Inner Campus Drive, Austin, TX 78705
2. Undergraduate, Graduate

3. Undergraduate: Feb. 1 (priority), Mar. 1 (regular) Graduate: Nov. 20
8. Merit-/need-based
9. $11,230 (in-state), $41,774 (out-of-state)
10. $9,996 (in-state), $43,026 (out-of-state)
12. rtf.utexas.edu

Vanderbilt University
1. Buttrick Hall 132, Box 125, Station B, Nashville, TN 73235
2. Undergraduate
3. Nov. 1 (early decision I), Jan. (early decision II), Jan. 1 (regular decision)
8. Merit-/need-based
9. $61,618
12. as.vanderbilt.edu/cinema-media-arts/

Vassar College
1. 124 Raymond Ave, Poughkeepsie, NY 12604
2. Undergraduate
3. Nov. 15 (early decision I), Jan. 1 (regular decision)
8. Need-based
9. $66,870
12. vassar.edu/film

Vermont College of Fine Arts
1. 36 College St, Montpelier, VT 05602
2. Graduate
3. Aug. 1 (priority), Oct. 1 (final)
7. Josh Koury, Emilie Upczak (directors)
8. Merit-/need-based
10. $28,402
12. vcfa.edu/programs/mfa-in-film/

Wagner College
1. 41 Main Hall, Wagner College, One Campus Road, Staten Island, NY 10301
2. Undergraduate
3. Mar. 15
5. Student-run film club and student-programmed Wagner Film Festival
6. Philip Cartelli (director), Nelson Kim (director, film critic), Holly Van Buren (film writer)
7. Richard Baratta (producer), Michael Tadross (producer), Keith Giglio (writer, producer)
8. Merit-/need-based
9. $50,200
11. "Wagner College now has a new, state-of-the-art advanced editing suite reserved for film majors as well as a newly redesigned Film and Media major that gives students a firmer foundation in different production-based aspects of the craft as well as preparing them for the business side of filmmaking."
12. wagner.edu/majors/film-media/

Wesleyan University
1. 45 Wyllys Ave, Middletown, CT 06459
2. Undergraduate
3. Nov. 15 (early decision), Jan. 1 (regular decision)
7. Michael Bay and Jessica Dunn Rovinelli (directors), Akiva Goldsman (screenwriter)
8. Need-based
9. $66,716
12. wesleyan.edu/filmstudies/

Williams College
1. 880 Main St., Williamstown, MA 01267
2. Undergraduate
3. Nov. 15 (early decision), Jan. 8 (regular)
9. $64,540
12. catalog.williams.edu/fmst/

Yale University
1. 53 Wall St, Room 216, New Haven, CT 06511
2. Undergraduate, Graduate
3. Undergraduate: Nov.1 (single-choice early action), Jan. 2 (regular) Graduate: Dec. 15
7. Wesley Morris and Bilge Ebiri (film critics), Jeremy Garelick and Sandra Luckow (directors)
8. Merit-/need-based
9. $64,700
10. $46,900
12. filmstudies.yale.edu/

REACHING THE PEAK

Writer-directors Jonathan Mason and Tisha Robinson-Daly break down the specifics of using virtual production to shoot a proof-of-concept for their independent drama about courageous telecom workers, HIGH.

Given our tech-driven and communication-obsessed culture, it's highly likely that you're reading this article while multitasking on your smartphone. But as is the case with so many commodity industries like data, the true cost of all this connectivity often eludes us. This disconnect is what drove us to write the film *HIGH*, set in the fascinating and rarely seen world of telecom tower climbers. In the aftermath of a tragic accident, team foreman Butch Robbins leads his crew through the brutal Buffalo winter to finish their job on deadline and save the company, all without losing the connection he needs most—to his family back home.

In the summer of 2014, Tisha Robinson-Daly was working in that industry as a project manager when a friend and colleague reported news of a harrowing incident: In the haze of that dense Kentucky summer, Joel Metz (28) and his team worked diligently on the scalding steel to replace an antenna atop a 240-foot tower. Suddenly, a cable snapped. Joel, father of four, was killed instantly, and his body hung in its harness for more than five hours while emergency workers struggled to bring him back down.

As a telecom worker, storyteller and citizen, this was a transformative moment for Tisha—Joel's tragic story and the grief his partner and four young sons experienced was deeply affecting. Determined to shed more light on this hidden world, Tisha's research soon uncovered a grim reality—climbers regularly faced brutal deaths (OSHA called it the most

dangerous job in America), but their working conditions often remained underreported and shrouded in silence.

Over the next few years, Tisha shared stories through social media and documentary work to advocate for climbers via her nonprofit, "HIGH the Movement." In 2017, she workshopped an early draft of *HIGH*'s script at the Sundance Screenwriters Intensive, where Tisha first met fellow Philadelphia-based filmmaker, now long-time collaborator and this article's co-author, Jonathan Mason. From then, the two of us set our goal to write and direct together a gripping, cinematic story about the price of communication and preserving the family unit in America today.

On this journey so far, we've found invaluable development support from partners like EPs Hannah Weyer and Tony Yang, David Rocchio and the team at Stowe Story Labs, Sundance/Knight Foundation and Tribeca. But when it finally came time to inch the film toward production, one question remained on every potential collaborator and financier's lips: How on earth are you planning to shoot atop 300-foot towers with an independent film budget?

## EXPLORING VIRTUAL PRODUCTION ON AN INDEPENDENT BUDGET

We first heard the term "virtual production" as it related to the many VFX-heavy, world-building shows like *The Mandalorian* that hit streamers a few years ago. The trade publications and production blogs all raved about the show's

emerging tech in the same incomprehensible language used to describe the perilous sandy Sarlacc Pits of Carkoon, and all of it was above our heads.

Then, in 2021, Tribeca launched a new initiative with Epic Games called "Writing in Unreal," a month-long virtual production lab described as "pushing the boundaries of storytelling in film." The idea was to teach screenwriters the Unreal Engine toolset and further examine the ways it could make independent filmmakers rethink their ideation process. We were lucky to make the inaugural cut and it was, simply put, a paradigm shift.

We'd already played with Matt Workman's incredible UE-based Cine Tracer app on Steam, a "game" that allows you to test camera/lighting in real time. In similar fashion, we worked with the lab's artist, Phil Donahue, to create a 3D, playable environment of a nighttime tower scene in which we could place, animate and light our sets and characters ("mannequins"). We had the ability to test just about any focal length, depth-of-field and film-back. A quick visit to the Unreal marketplace (where designers sell and trade assets) yielded a perfect model of a guyed tower for our scene. We found some rural landscapes and trees for free and used the built-in tools to modify the sky and cloud cover. We built a few miles of rolling rural Pennsylvania hills for $40 plus tax.

With our basic world designed and our character blocking in place, we used Unreal Engine's Sequencer panel (essentially their NLE) to create rendered clips and edit them, resulting in full
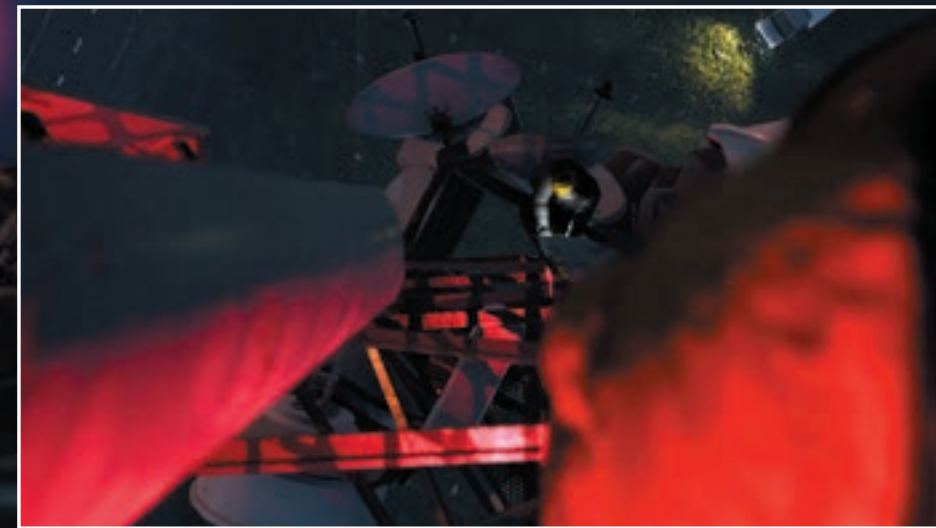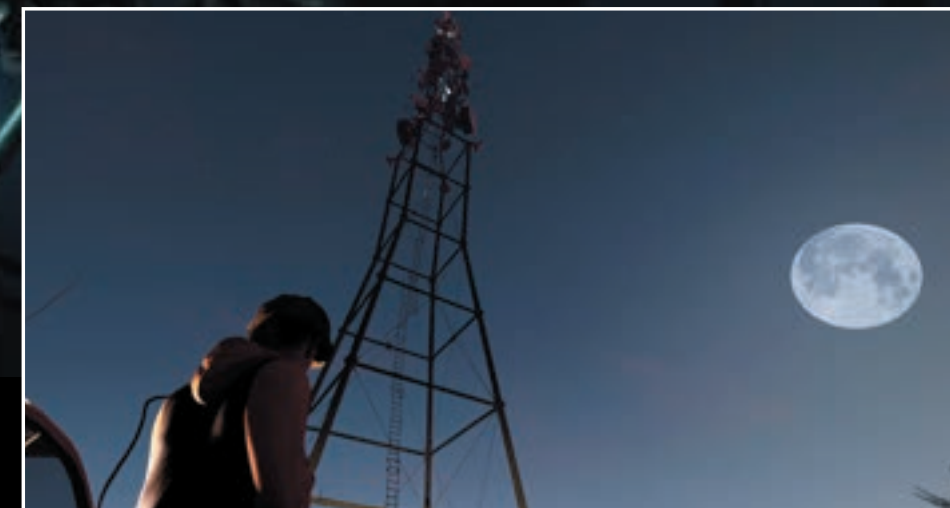
cut-scenes that could be output as movie files. But, unlike with a traditional NLE, we still had the ability to go back into a particular shot and change the lens, camera placement or blocking without affecting our edit, then re-render our output. This was a great and inexpensive way to test and share visual ideas. Simply put, previz is the single greatest asset when it comes to virtual production for indie filmmaking. It costs practically nothing and allows you to visualize and plan for just about anything.

Unreal Engine itself is free. You simply download it from Epic's website and hope your computer can handle it. They recommend a PC with some decent muscle, like a Quad-core Intel or AMD, 2.5 GHz or faster, with at the very least 8 gigabytes of RAM, though at the previz stage we ran it on a M1 Macbook Pro with acceptable results. As of Unreal Engine's 5.2 update, Apple Silicon is now natively supported.

THE PLAN (IRL)

Because we'd never directed together, we toyed with the relatively traditional idea of shooting a live action short as a proof-of-concept. But that came with its own inherent risks, not to mention a protracted timeline. On the flip side, we felt that the fully Unreal-generated sequence we'd made at the Tribeca lab was a bit underbaked and didn't quite allow us to demonstrate working with actors.

So, the idea of shooting a hybrid proof-of-concept in front of a "volume" (an umbrella term that now largely refers to the LED wall itself) seemed to make sense. We figured we could raise about the same amount of money as a traditional short but get more bang for our buck, visually. In this initial phase, we also explored the idea of shooting drone-captured plate shots, or 2.5D imagery (layered mattes) to mimic parallax. But in crunching those numbers, it didn't seem like we'd be saving much money by avoiding a volume

shoot given the very specific location demands of our film. Our mission would be two-fold: Demonstrate the advantages of this specific technology, showing potential investors we could shoot in any condition cheaply, safely and quickly, and showcase our directing in a scene with real actors and its own mini-arc.

A volume, unlike traditional greenscreen, would allow us to show parallax because the backgrounds track the camera and shift in 3D, mimicking the human eye's perception of depth. We also liked the idea that the wall would be emitting most of the light on set, freeing up a lot of floor space and wrapping quite naturally around our actors—another thing greenscreen can't do. And unlike a location shoot, if we wanted to, we could have golden hour all day long instead of that one panicked hour everyone is always chasing.

We identified a three-page sequence from the script, wherein our

protagonist ascends a tower in a blizzard, his partner 20 feet behind him under a veil of blinding ice and snow—all very visual and dramatic. Together, our characters attempt to dislodge a large nest made of razor-sharp branches obstructing an antenna. We'd shoot the same scene several times for day and night, and in different weather conditions (rain, sun, snow).

THE BUDGET

In theory, a volume was a great solution, but we'd need a team of experienced technicians and artists, or what is known as a "VAD" (virtual art department), as early as pre-production. These humans don't come cheap and there is, as of this writing, a scarcity of them kicking around (though more and more private and academic programs are rapidly training experts to bridge that gap). That meant a budget would have to be accurately drawn as soon as possible to understand the steps that would need immediate cash flow.

For this initial vision of our proof, our lead producer at the time (the tireless Gilana Lobel) came back with a very safe rough budget of around $80,000 for our one-week shoot (including COVID prevention costs, safety/stunts and standard contingency). Before you spit out your kombucha, there are a few things worth discussing about a VP budget.

PREPARATION: Early on, it became clear that virtual production would not necessarily be a massive bottom-line cost saver. It turns out that's a common misconception, especially if you're still quite pricey to rent and manage. On the flip side, traditional VFX/CGI are time-consuming and expensive. With VP, what you're getting is better usage of time and more on-set control.

Geoff George, who would become our DP, agrees. "In indie productions, we're often given a much shorter amount of time at any given location or stage because of the budget," he says. "If we can preview our scene before ever stepping on set, we can really get through shots and setups more efficiently than if we were finding them on the day or just walking onto set with a basic shot list. Virtual production is not all about the volume."

VP producer Ben Baker concurs: "The LED wall is just the high-end

end-point of these workflows. What VP really does is bring a set of new tools and collaboration practices that until recently required you to set up a bespoke 3D render pipeline in something like Maya or equivalent, which requires specialized and less accessible infrastructure to indie filmmakers."

People in the VP space love to repeat the truism, "Fix it in pre!" A lot of the costs you would typically see in post-production are moved to the pre-production stage, where you're previzing and tech-vizing and creating all of your assets for the wall to be shot in camera later (ICVFX). This process allows you to simultaneously save money on tech scouts and travel costs because you can easily scan locations and then bring them into Unreal. Department heads can then review sets remotely and place cameras, lights and dressing, and take accurate measurements as needed. In our case, Kourosh Pirnazar used photogrammetry to scan an actual rural tower location in Pennsylvania we pulled from Google Earth.

CONTROL AND TIME: We did also make a practical budget to compare, drawing inspiration from the tower film *Fall* (2022, dir. Scott Mann), which shot its set pieces on the edge of a real cliff. But for our film, which has more complicated blocking, that approach added a whole host of limitations. Ultimately, if we could pull it off on budget, using a volume seemed to offer us the most creative control and safety, right on set.

Though we'd need cashflow faster than on a traditional shoot, it also meant we could raise the money in chunks, and if for some reason we

couldn't raise enough for principal photography, we'd at least have all of the virtual assets done and saved on our drives.

To give you a general sense, back before we had real vendor numbers, our initial rough top-sheet looked something like this for three days of load-in/testing, two days of principal photography and one of wrap (note that this does not include a stage rental):

Pre-Vis, Virtual prod, VFX	$21,000
Tower leg / Platform	$5000
"Micro" crew	$15,000
Cast & Stunts	$10,000
Camera, G&E	$10,000
Travel / Housing	$2500
SPFX Fog & Snow	$3,500
Post	$5,000
Insurance	$5,000
COVID/Legal/Cont.	$3,000
TOTAL EST.	$80,000

At this point, fall 2022, we had about $0 (adjusted for inflation), but this preliminary budget gave us an idea of what we'd have to raise. Quotes for stages at the time ranged from $30,000 to $50,000 per day for rental, so obviously it was out of the question to pay MSRP. It's often the nature of the indie beast to negotiate discounts and favors, banking on the goodwill of vendors to invest in projects they believe in.

Ironically, many of the heavy-hitting virtual production artists we pitched to were attracted to our film's

photorealistic, indie drama nature. It was a fun challenge for them to problem solve at this budget level and to create outside the usual sci-fi/fantasy realm. Through Casey Baltes (VP for games and immersive at Tribeca Enterprises), we met Ben Baker, who, with James Blevins, co-founded Mesh. Ben and his partner are consultants and line producers exclusively in the virtual space. Ben read our script and was intrigued by the premise and also saw the value as a use-case for lower-budget filmmaking. Ben assembled a team pretty quickly, composed of virtual production supervisor Nhan Le and virtual art department lead Kourosh Pirnazar. Calling this pocket of the industry cult-like sounds too pejorative and mean-spirited, but boy are all of these wizards excited about their universe and genuinely eager to bring as many people into the fold as possible. The time and effort they afforded us was incredible.

We also applied for a direct grant from Epic Games (they have a rolling program called the MegaGrant, which provides support to any industry using Unreal Engine). While we waited, we raised some seed funding (around $5,000) from Rowan University, where Jonathan teaches film, which allowed us to lock in our VAD for prep.

Ben Baker and our fearless producer, James Yi, began talking to potential stage partners: Virtual Production House Toronto (whose team was helpful and generous with their expertise), as well as Carstage in Long Island City (co-founded

by indie VFX veteran Josep White). Both of these stages are at the forefront of virtual production but also incredibly filmmaker- and story-driven. In the end, we were tipped into a decision by our lack of funds and a bit of good luck. Through Ben's contacts at media server company disguise and panel manufacturer ROE Visuals, we were generously offered the use of the disguise VP Accelerator Volume in Los Angeles for an entire week. Not only that, but Addy Ghani (who has the tongue-twisting title of "VP of VP" at disguise) got down in the mud himself and was instrumental in helping us pull off this proof-of-concept.

THE PREP

Once we had our stage locked in, we doubled our speed. It's quite important to have real numbers in virtual production, and the fallacy of endless possibilities is a pretty evil siren call. Knowing that our wall was 13 feet tall and 30 feet wide allowed us to map our set in Unreal so that any camera angles we prevized stayed "on the volume." It also allowed us to determine how tall or wide our set pieces could be when taking into account the height of our actors.

By now, we'd added Geoff George to the team, a Chaldean-American warrior of a DP from Detroit. Geoff jumped right into the previz and infused some new ideas into the blocking. But as more concrete numbers and realities came into focus, it also became very clear that we'd bitten off more than we could chew. The test scene we'd pulled from the feature involved too many moving parts, and the stage we were gifted would not allow any practical weather elements. We'd raised about $25,000 in private equity through our executive producers and a fiscal sponsorship from Stowe Story Labs. But we were also turned down for the MegaGrant, which, in a sense, turned out to be the best thing that could have happened to us.

With more details now in place, our budget had dropped from $80,000 to around $50,000 for our one-week shoot. Having less than half of that with the machine already running forced us to refocus. So, instead of picking the budget bone dry to stay the course, we re-wrote an entirely new script that used shots we knew we could realize based on what we'd learned so far about virtual production and the actual space we were shooting in. Like any proof or testing of new tech, there was a lot of learning along the way.

We turned our scene into much more of a teaser or a collection of atemporal climbing shots, which build
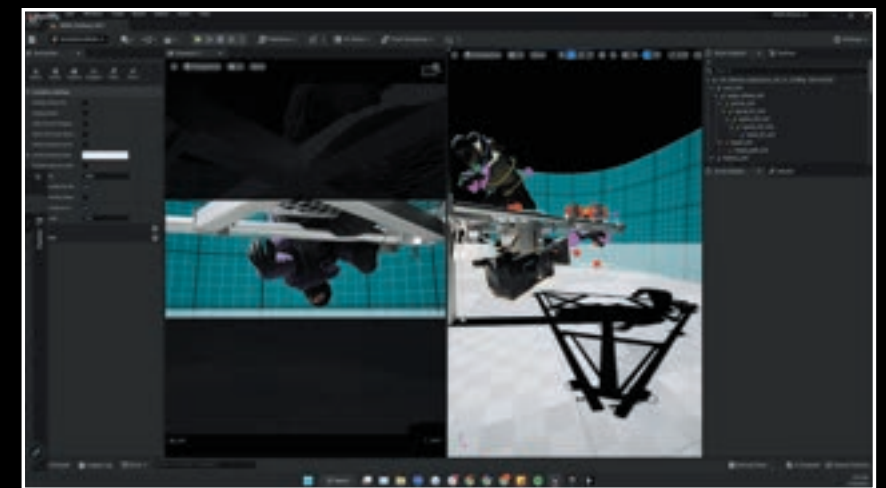

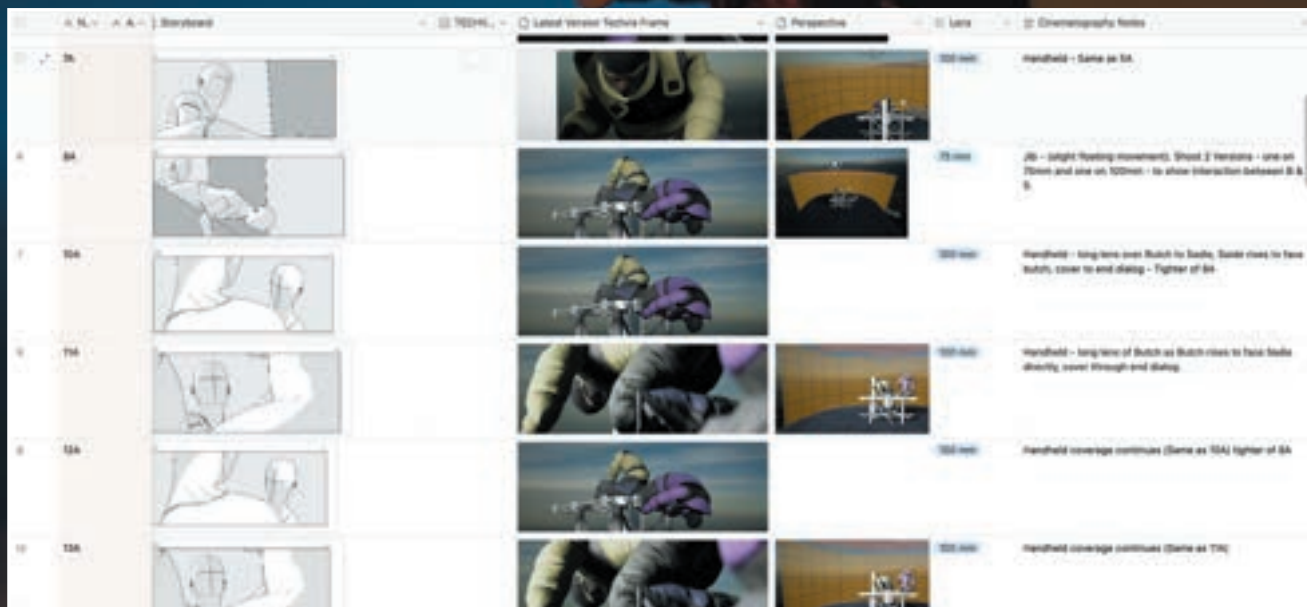Image: Unreal previz by Nhan Le, using ROE/Disguise's stage dimensions

their own mini dramatic arc. We simplified, then simplified some more. No more rain, no more snow. No more stunts. We even removed production sound and dialogue, opting instead for a voiceover: the protagonist's wife leaving him a voicemail (we created a sound mix later using SFX libraries and homemade foley). This guaranteed that no matter what we pulled off on the volume, our VO could be rewritten to adapt and narratively shape what we captured. Of course, we were disappointed to lose some of our more dramatic shots, but we figured stunts and practical weather weren't what we were trying to test and prove at this stage.

Again, one of the advantages of this virtual production workflow is that when we re-wrote, we didn't have to get rid of any of our previous assets. We just had to tweak them. We could just turn "off" the background snow on the tree canopies and change the season to anything we wanted, then simply reposition our mannequins up and down the tower to shot list as needed.

The breakdown of our $50,000 or so budget looked like this: Above the line came in around $10,000, below the line around $35,000, the rest being contingency, COVID and legal. Most of the cost savings came from removing those practical FX and locking in deals on gear and crew. We'd spent $5,000 getting started with our VAD, but we already had something concrete to show for it. So, we reapplied to the Epic grant with a bit more of a fleshed-out plan. We didn't wait to hear back and kept our foot on the ped-

al. Either we'd crash into a wall, or we'd pull it off.

With members in Los Angeles, Detroit, Toronto, New York and Philly, our team met on Zoom regularly and worked through dozens of iterations to get our final shot list locked in. From a director's perspective, the learning curve was not particularly steep for those with even a basic understanding of Unreal Engine's filmmaking toolset. As Koroush told us, "Unreal Engine VP tools were created for filmmakers, indie or not, and once filmmakers have the chance to learn the capabilities and how they can iterate on their vision, it becomes second nature."

A few months out, we were joined by production designer Rebekah Bukhbinder. Her VP experience (*The Mandalorian*, *The Book of Boba Fett*) meant she was able to jump into VAD meetings and be the link between the physical and virtual worlds. But she also understood our budget and was incredibly resourceful in designing set pieces that were beautiful, modular and budget-friendly.

We decided on a triangular top platform, about four feet off the ground, and dressed each side with the exact same set of props (cables, antennas, junction boxes, etc.). That way, instead of having to move the set, which was difficult on a small stage, we could flip our actors' placements and rotate the graphics on the wall for coverage.

With guidance from key grip Amy Snell and a generous assist from the folks at MBS, we settled on using mod truss, which is sturdy enough to support

the weight of two humans and is, well, modular. It also doesn't look like concert truss, which we felt might be too recognizable. The rest was a combination of standard speed rail and set dressing we sourced from specialty prop shops in Los Angeles that deal with aeronautical junk. The overall dimensions of the set pieces had already been decided upon and tested in previz—another benefit of VP.

To cast, we reached out to local climbing gyms, such as Top Out Climbing in Santa Clarita. We found some incredible talent but ultimately cast our two actors, Sharmaarke Purcell and Laura Bellomo, via Backstage. Though neither had climbing experience and Sharmaarke even expressed a slight fear of heights, we felt an instant connection. The beauty of our tech-viz process was that we could actually show our actors a rendered video of our Unreal Engine metahuman mannequins in action. The tower platform would be low off the ground, but they'd be able to see the horizon in the distance and react to their environment in real time. They later told us that it gave them headspace to prepare and gain familiarity with the location.

Much of our gear, including a practically free Sony VENICE, came through the incredibly supportive team at BECiNE. For lensing, Geoff George suggested Cooke's Anamorphic/i FF smart lenses because "the bokeh and lens aberrations [of the anamorphics] add a patina that blends the foreground and background better than with sharper, spherical lenses." To supplement this

idea, we'd also use a handheld glass prism to add more of that somewhat disorienting feeling of being at vertiginous heights. For the aspect ratio, we settled on 2.39:1 to privilege the width of the frame and protect us from the relatively short height of the wall (13 ft). This wasn't a sacrifice. We'd always discussed the idea of shooting wide so that the home scenes, drawing on the geometry of the claustrophobic spaces, could play out in contrast with the vastness of the tower landscapes.

The ball was rolling, and about two weeks before shooting, we received the news that our *HIGH* proof would be supported with a $30,000 MegaGrant from Unreal Engine. Disbursement, however, would likely take several months. Our producer scrambled to secure a gap loan to tide us over, and, in the end, EP Hannah Weyer stepped up and provided it.

By the time we'd put out that fire, we learned that the Sony VENICE wasn't going to work out. It required a team to come in and calibrate it, and the lenses, to the LED wall, and our dates/times couldn't be given priority because the package was being gifted. We ended up using disguise's already calibrated in-house workhorse, the Red V-Raptor 8K VV, which we paired with our Cooke i FF Anamorphics (1.8x squeeze) in 50mm, 75mm and 100mm.

THE SHOOT

The true beauty of virtual production is that with all of the prep work you've done, there are far fewer question marks on set. By the time we loaded in, we knew exactly where to place the camera, at what height and distance from the set piece to place it, where to stage the tower itself and more or less what additional lighting would be needed. Because the wall provides the environment and most of the lighting, we pretty much relied on a couple of Skypanels and some tubes, as well as one practical FAA beacon to motivate some closer moody lighting. The walls cast very broad, soft light, so Geoff and our gaffer Jeremy Graham mostly worked on shaping, bouncing and cutting. We also overexposed by ⅔ of a stop to protect shadows and brought everything down in the grade. We knew ahead of time that planning any hard daylight would work against us in terms of time and firepower, so we leaned into

soft light scenarios. That meant that our lighting setups and resets were extremely quick. That's not to say that hard light is impossible to achieve on a volume. It just wasn't a good idea on a two-day, low-budget shoot where we were trying to get 24 shots on two different sets.

Stage work is always more controlled, but we had a first-day confidence and energy that felt new. On set was the "brain bar," which added Carlos Perez from disguise to our VAD team. And, because we were shooting on disguise's VP accelerator stage, we had access to their workflow expertise, which was key to calibrating the lenses, the screen, practical lighting levels and the color profile we'd pre-determined (color on set was run by Dane Brehm, a legendary DIT and technologist).

As we hit last looks for our first shot, Tisha received a message through her "HIGH the Movement" Facebook page from veteran climber Mike Flenz. "All of us who have climbed remember the first time we stood at the base of a 1,000-foot tower. [...] As we stood inside looking up, the top plate seemed a mile away. [...] We took that first step onto the bottom rung, with a thousand steps ahead of us. But we eventually got there, one step at a time." Tisha read the message to James, who suggested we share it with the rest of the crew. It was a sweet moment, and a reminder of the story behind all of this noise on set. When she finished reading Mike's words, there were a few gruff tears in the crew's eyes:

"You've just taken your first step on that ladder, and I can't wait to see you standing on top of that plate."

Picture was up and our actors harnessed up with gear on loan from technical advisor Bill Butler, a retired climber in Arkansas and our biggest ally in the climbing community. We moved quickly through our shot list. The environments we had seen and tested in prep looked as expected, and we tried to be disciplined about not tweaking them too much on set. We made small changes here and there: moving a background tower, changing the speed of blinking city lights or adding more clouds or stars to a night scene in a specific part of the frame. All of these changes could happen in relative real time. Several of

our setups were shot as series, capturing the busy-work of climbing (hands, boots, harnesses), and we were able to switch from day to night to dusk from one set-up to the next simply by toggling a few settings (maybe the "brain bar" would disagree). On our first day, we pulled off the construction of the tower-top and our 12 scheduled shots under two lighting conditions: five for night, seven lit for golden hour. We made our day with a few minutes to spare.

Day two meant a set break-down and the assembly of our tower leg. This was a simpler build than day one because the set was smaller and featured far less setdressing. We had 12 shots scheduled, this time in three different lighting scenarios (overcast day, dusk, and night). A few hours in, we ran into a computer glitch (an issue with a texture not pushing through and appearing on the wall as transparent), which shut us down for nearly two hours. We'd been warned that pushing any data-hungry program causes crashes, so we budgeted some time for this just in case. But this was our only real crash, and during this time, we rehearsed with our actors. The mood on set was quite serene. We had also planned our schedule to put all "bonus" shots at the end of the day, and by the time the system was back up, we hit our stride again quickly.

Our actors were really struck by how helpful it was to see the world around them. You could see it in their eyes. Our camera team benefited as well, especially in terms of operating. We could see the background parallax shifts, and it made for a much more organic and present choreography.

We made our second day, cutting one shot but sneaking in another before tail lights that involved some im-provised practical set pieces (a couple of tree trunks held up off-screen by our pro-ducer). We shot that with blue screen and tracking and, because we already had our virtual world built in Unreal Engine, it was a cinch to slate in later.

Two days. 57 total takes. 12 shots. Two set builds. One VFX shot.

The two of us flew home the very next morning with a portable drive containing our proxies. Dane Brehm had already done a color pass on set and, save one shot, we didn't have to wait for any VFX work because everything was done in camera. By the time we landed in South Philly, we already had an assembly.

We were very happy with the footage, and ultimately, can confidently say we achieved what we set out to do: demonstrate safe and repeatable ways of shooting the tower scenes on a reasonable budget, while still retaining as much creative control as possible.

Virtual production, especially volume shooting, is not for everything. But it can be for everyone. In our specific case, we're now confident it's the right tool to visually translate "the high," as our climbers call it with perhaps a touch of tongue-in-cheek ambivalence. But VP is not a magic wand. After our experience, we don't estimate it will necessarily save you money. It will, however, reallocate your use of time and make it more focused and productive.

We now view VP as a new set of tools: Some of these will apply, some won't. Being judicious about its use is ultimately what will decide if it's appropriate for your film. Otherwise, VP and LED volumes just become the auto-tune of the VFX world, overused and underconsidered. And even T-Pain knows that to write a good song, you still have to be able to sing a capella.

TAKEAWAYS

A few general rules we think might be useful to filmmakers considering this workflow:

1) Think about why your project specifically benefits from a volume wall as opposed to camera tracking, plate shots or greenscreen, and make that your rallying cry when you appeal to potential partners.

2) Invest in the very best VAD you can possibly afford as early as possible.

3) If you don't know your stage dimensions from the jump, source real ones as a placeholder. Those constraints will keep you in check.

4) If you're going to shoot deep background elements and have very little UE-generated content close to the camera or actors, you might want to consider traditional mattes/plates on your wall. Building out 3D elements that appear to be miles away will choke your system and look flat anyway because you won't benefit from parallax.

5) Avoid hard light scenarios if you can. Play into the benefits of the LED wall or know its limitations and use those creatively.

6) Most affordable panels aren't high-res enough to shoot from close up or with deep depth of field. You'll want to plan for background shots that are always slightly soft, or shoot from further away if you can.

7) Don't make too many environment changes on set. That's what will slow you down. The temptation *will* be there, but remember instead:

8) Fix it in pre

9) Fix it in pre

10) Fix it in pre

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THE COMPANY YOU KEEP

Producer Miranda Kahn on how and why to set up a production shingle.

In today's entertainment industry, owning a production company has become synonymous with having a trainer, manager or overall deal—no celebrity can be seen without! But what exactly makes owning a production company such a crucial and sought-after asset? How can aspiring producers, particularly those who are young and not yet famous or well-established, go about creating one? What are the key factors that contribute to making it successful? Drawing from a decade of observing producers, learning from their triumphs and setbacks, as well as my personal experiences, here I explore the anatomy of a production company, the elements that lead to its success and why it is worth considering for aspiring producers.

DEFINING A PRODUCTION COMPANY

In its essence, a production company is a legal entity established to undertake the operations of a film- or video-making business. It is responsible for producing movies, commercials, television shows and music videos. When setting up a production company, various structures can be chosen, the most common options being S-Corp, C-Corp or LLC. Each structure will incur a different tax obligation for the state and federal government. While dealing with taxes can be quite daunting, it is an important part of a business owner's yearly obligations. Choosing which type of operation you plan to set up, and knowing the tax benefits of each, is crucial in mitigating any unforeseen challenges.

S-CORPORATION (S-CORP)

An S-Corp is a great choice for small businesses, individual producers or freelancers. One advantage of an S-Corp is that profits and losses flow directly to your personal taxes, allowing you to benefit from writing off allowable expenses. However, these profits and losses cannot be carried forward from year to year.

The S-Corp is useful for smaller jobs or continuing overall operations as opposed to specific larger projects with multiple investors. For example, a lot of the commercials and music videos that my company, MIRMADE, produces begin and deliver within a month or two. It is common for me to run these types of projects through my S-Corp. At the end of the year, most of my business expenses are put toward offsetting my personal tax obligations, which has helped me save thousands of dollars each year.

C-CORPORATION (C-CORP)

A C-Corp is subject to corporate taxes on profits. This structure may be more suitable for larger production companies with significant earnings.

LIMITED LIABILITY COMPANY (LLC)

LLCs are commonly used for feature films and projects that are longer term. They provide limited liability protection to the owners while offering flexibility in terms of taxation and management. They are the most common ongoing entity used. As a "pass-through" entity, the business's profits and losses are passed through to the individual owners or members, who report them on their personal tax returns. Thus, they are great for independent films that involve a number of investors and entities.

CHOOSING THE RIGHT STRUCTURE

The decision of which structure to choose depends on various factors, including individual circumstances, the nature of the projects and the state in which the business will be registered. Consulting with accountants and lawyers who specialize in entertainment business structures is highly recommended!

"YOU GET TO BE YOUR OWN BOSS AND FIGHT FOR THE CONTENT YOU BELIEVE IN...."

While professional advice is valuable, online resources such as legalzoom.com can provide guidance for those starting out on a limited budget. I personally used legalzoom.com to set up LLCs for feature films early in my career.

LEGAL REQUIREMENTS AND OFFICIAL REGISTRATION

To establish your production company, it is essential to ensure proper registration at both the state and federal levels. Achieving this requires obtaining Articles of Incorporation and a Federal Tax ID number, also known as an EIN. These documents confirm your company's legal status and enable you to operate. Once you've got them, voila, you're official!

WHY WOULD ONE DO THIS?

There are numerous compelling reasons that can drive the decision to start a production company. For some, it's primarily a practical choice aimed at mitigating tax obligations, which is especially useful for freelance workers. Others embark on this journey to secure insurance coverage for individual projects. Additionally, there are those who aspire to establish a recognizable brand, foster core values and form alliances with like-minded companies. MIRMADE was founded with a vision that encompasses practicality and branding aspirations. Both aspects carry important purposes that may help with the decision to create.

PROTECTION

Production companies play a crucial role in providing protection through insurance. While anyone can create a corporation, production companies are essential for producers because they enable us to obtain insurance policies. Once you progress beyond the initial stage of borrowing equipment and asking friends to work on passion projects pro bono, you'll likely want to rent equipment from rental houses, shoot at beautiful locations and provide workers' compensation. However, these activities require

having insurance policies in place, which can vary in price depending on the length, duration, scale and scope of the shoot.

The primary reason I formed MIRMADE in 2019 was to address this practical need. At that time, I was producing numerous music videos, and label executives started approaching me directly to create content for their artists. Because I didn't have my own entity, I relied on a friend's company to provide insurance in exchange for providing him with executive producer and company credits. This arrangement worked well as I continued to develop my career and save money. Then, in August 2019, I received a call from Weezer's management about producing a video for the debut track on their upcoming album. Thrilled at the opportunity to have this as MIRMADE's first-ever production, I quickly established my S-Corp and secured an insurance package through a broker; within two weeks, MIRMADE was contracted by Crush Music for its inaugural project.

Although insurance may seem mundane, it has proven invaluable throughout my career, especially for the purpose of workers' compensation. On one occasion, a skilled drone operator experienced an unforeseen malfunction while filming below the Chesapeake Bay Bridge that resulted in a severe injury involving his hand. Fortunately, he was totally OK after stitching, narrowly avoiding major artery damage. And while he chose not to file a workers' comp claim, as he had sufficient insurance of his own, this incident could have cost my burgeoning business a substantial sum of money if he had chosen this route and I didn't have a workers' compensation policy in place. It also would have caused me a lot of stress, which was completely gone knowing I had a solution regardless of the route he chose to go. Instead, I could focus on caring for him on set and making sure he was OK emotionally.

Besides protecting human beings, insurance also safeguards valuable gear. A few years ago, while producing a music video for H.E.R., we encountered a

sudden and treacherous blizzard towards the end of the shoot. To ensure the safety of our crew, I decided to end the shoot early and send everyone home before the roads became impassable. Knowing that we had an insurance policy in place, we were able to leave behind a significant amount of equipment that quickly became covered by the snow. Without insurance, we would have faced either the extreme pressure and danger of bringing the equipment to safety, or otherwise the daunting task of replacing thousands of dollars' worth of gear. Having a year-long policy that covered our shoot gave us peace of mind to prioritize safety.

FREEDOM

This example I earlier shared of my own company's formation on the Weezer music video highlights another benefit of starting something on your own: the independence it grants you. Having your own company gives you the freedom to approach artists, bands, filmmakers *and* writers as your own entity. It enables you to have a say in the type of people you hire, the sort of projects you like to work on and helps you develop your producing style. In other words, you get to be your own boss and fight for the content you believe in and want to see put into the world. In such a cutthroat industry, it can be extremely rewarding to have the option to take the lead on projects and be at the top of the decision-making process, even if just once in a while, as you're starting out.

Freedom to choose and work on your own projects doesn't happen overnight. In MIRMADE's first year, I lived from job to job, surviving on bodega sandwiches for lunch and dinner. Then, just eight months after the company's formation, the pandemic struck, disrupting our plans. We had two music videos lined up for SXSW and several promising projects in development, but, unfortunately, none of them materialized. During that period, I instead found employment at a hospital in Harlem, working from April 1 to mid-July 2020. Although I couldn't produce projects and MIRMADE was in a lull, I contributed my producorial skills to helping the hospital staff in many areas of need.

This experience taught me an important lesson: Business freedom is a journey that unfolds over time. While building your own business, it is crucial,

I believe, not to shy away from taking on other gigs, projects or "lower-level" positions. Embracing these opportunities can aid in your personal and professional growth. Reflecting on my own journey, I could have viewed my time at Metropolitan Hospital as a setback, but instead I leveraged the skills and knowledge I acquired there to develop COVID protocols specifically tailored for production, drawing insights from my observations on the nursing floor. I was one of the first small production companies back to work that June, producing a music video for Ela Minus of Domino Records. True freedom also arises from transforming challenging experiences into valuable ones that serve you and your growing business.

BRAND BUILDING

The independence that comes with owning your own production company also brings forth the opportunity to establish yourself as a tastemaker. At MIRMADE, our mission is clear: to amplify female voices and provide support to female filmmakers in front of and behind the camera. When embarking on the journey of creating your own company, it's crucial to reflect on your own values. What types of films and videos do you want to champion? Which creatives do you want to collaborate with? As a bassist myself, my profound passion for music has led me to produce for numerous musicians and labels that I deeply admire. Additionally, comedy holds a special place in my heart, resulting in MIRMADE's involvement in a variety of feature films, short films and ongoing projects within this genre. We also have a podcast in development, Under the Scene, where I interview women in the field. And on our social media channels, I answer questions young filmmakers have about filmmaking.

Possessing a production company grants you the power to express your unique voice. Once you have identified your brand, fully embrace it and wholeheartedly support others who share your vision and values. MIRMADE has practically become an alter ego of mine, and it has been so much fun developing the intricacies of her personality!

ALLIANCES & MENTORSHIP

Having my own company has been instrumental in connecting me

with experienced mentors who have significantly enhanced my skills as a filmmaker. It's also common for these larger companies to collaborate with smaller ones for many reasons, including lessening liability, especially when there is alignment in values amongst the entities. A few years ago, I was introduced to Epoch, a female-run production company based in New York and Los Angeles. Epoch, a much larger company than MIRMADE, boasts a substantial workforce and substantial revenue. It represents a roster of incredibly talented and experienced directors, consistently earning recognition and awards for their exceptional work. Throughout the years, the executives at Epoch have become invaluable mentors, not only providing company-level support for MIRMADE but also offering guidance and encouragement to me as a professional.

Collaboration between companies does not need to be exclusive. Larger companies can engage smaller ones for "production services," and executives from other firms can align themselves with projects developed to support your vision. Embracing such partnerships opens up new avenues for growth and mutual benefit.

The same is true the other way around. Oftentimes, filmmakers younger than I am will ask to rent out an insurance policy for their small project. This has become a great way for me to support emerging artists and for them to align with a larger company that has resources they're not yet able to afford.

THE VARIOUS TYPES OF PRODUCTION COMPANIES

In an industry that is constantly evolving, with AI-generated scripts, agency mergers and ever-changing networks, determining the type of production company you want to establish can be really challenging. It's important to understand the different types of companies that currently exist when making this decision.

PRODUCTION SERVICES

A production service company primarily operates as a service provider. This is what my company does. This means that each project can take on a unique shape depending on the agency, director, label or other production company that has hired us. This structure offers remarkable nimbleness and flexibility. For example, as a production services firm, MIRMADE can provide a range of services, such as line producing for larger companies or executive producing for smaller ones. I can either produce a project solely under MIRMADE or collaborate with other firms to assist in executing their work. The production service formation is akin to being a "freelancer" in the industry, fostering ongoing collaboration that is non-binding and project-based. One notable example of another company excelling in this model is Ways & Means, a Los Angeles–based production company. They produce films, commercials and music videos without relying on a fixed roster of directors. Instead, they select directors and creatives based on the specific

needs of each production. Ways & Means has been a source of inspiration for me, and I've had the pleasure of working with them on multiple occasions.

An example of a time that my company structure has largely benefited me was when I produced a music video for the Safdie brothers. The project was a huge challenge, requiring a build of an entire living-room sitcom set, multi-cam set ups and a mix of older and minor non-union talent. By collaborating with Elara Pictures, we were able to put together an amazing team of creatives and make an extremely challenging and normally quite expensive build happen on a much smaller scale and budget. The result was palpable, and we created an incredible music video that was selected to premiere at the Berlin Music Video awards.

PRODUCTION COMPANY WITH A ROSTER

Some production companies operate with a "roster," a group of directors or filmmakers they represent. Having a roster offers numerous advantages, particularly in partnering with a sales agent. A sales agent plays a crucial role by advocating for the company and, specifically, the directors. Advertising agencies contact sales agents, who then bring potential projects to the production companies they represent. When a project is awarded to the production company, the sales agent receives a commission, the production company creates exceptional work and the director brings their vision to life—a win for all parties involved.

In addition to the commercial space, having a roster of directors in the narrative realm is beneficial, as it allows you to pitch content to networks, series and executives on behalf of your clients. This approach is an excellent way to support the artists you admire and want to collaborate with in the long run. It also provides an opportunity to nurture and develop promising talent.

Epoch, which I mentioned earlier, is a prime example of a production company with a roster. Another notable company in this category is Smuggler (conveniently located next door to Epoch). Unsurprisingly, Smuggler recently earned the prestigious Clio award for Production Company of the Year for continuously delivering innovative and groundbreaking content.

By understanding these different types of production companies, you can make informed choices about the structure that aligns best with your goals and aspirations in the industry.

INDEPENDENT FILM COMPANY

When you embark on creating an independent feature film or television program, it typically involves the collaboration of multiple entities and production companies. In these cases, there are usually one of two common structures involved: the C-corp or LLC, which serves as both the investment vehicle for attracting investors and the single-purpose entity for the film. This entity acts as the SAG (Screen Actors Guild) signatory, accepts investments, hires the necessary personnel, owns the copyright and handles other related aspects, such as signing distribution deals. Alternatively, a more prevalent and professional approach involves having two separate companies for each film. One company, usually an LLC, serves as the primary entity where investments are collected and which pays out to investors. The LLC then owns or contracts with a second company—a single-purpose entity, often a C-Corp, that is responsible for the film itself and often captures tax credits. With this structure, among other benefits, the various liabilities inherent in film production are removed one further step from the investors.

As an example, we recently produced a film called *We Strangers*. The film was made in association with MIR-MADE. However, the LLC for the project is named We Strangers, LLC, while the

single-purpose entity is Pigasus Pictures. These distinct entities worked together to navigate the intricacies of film financing, production and post-production.

THE LOAN-OUT

Another type of company worth mentioning is the loan-out. Unlike the types of companies formed by producers, a loan-out can be established by any individual working within the film industry. In a loan-out, all work and services are billed directly through the company rather than the individual themselves, which means no payroll tax deductions. The company will then pay various ongoing overhead expenses and pay salary to its owner-employees, an arrangement that may allow freelancers greater tax write-offs and benefits in their financial management.

CONCLUSION

The world of production companies is as diverse and intricate as the scripts they bring to life. They serve as platforms for individuals from all backgrounds—whether employers, employees, artists, actors or financiers—to safeguard, create, inspire, uplift and amplify their voices and work. It is a realm where you have the opportunity to shape your own path and make a meaningful impact in the industry.

Owning a production company is a significant undertaking, but with careful planning, strategic decision making and a passion for filmmaking, it can be an extremely rewarding and fulfilling venture. MIRMADE has practically become a part of me, like a home I have bought and continue to foster and build every day. By understanding the different business structures, meeting legal requirements and implementing effective creative and business strategies for success, I believe that anyone can establish a production company that not only survives but thrives in the competitive entertainment industry.

Miranda Kahn is the founder and executive producer of the female-led production company MIRMADE. She produces music videos, short films and commercials and currently has three feature films in post-production. She has worked with Grammy, Oscar and Emmy-winning talent, and interviews women in entertainment on her upcoming podcast Under the Scene.
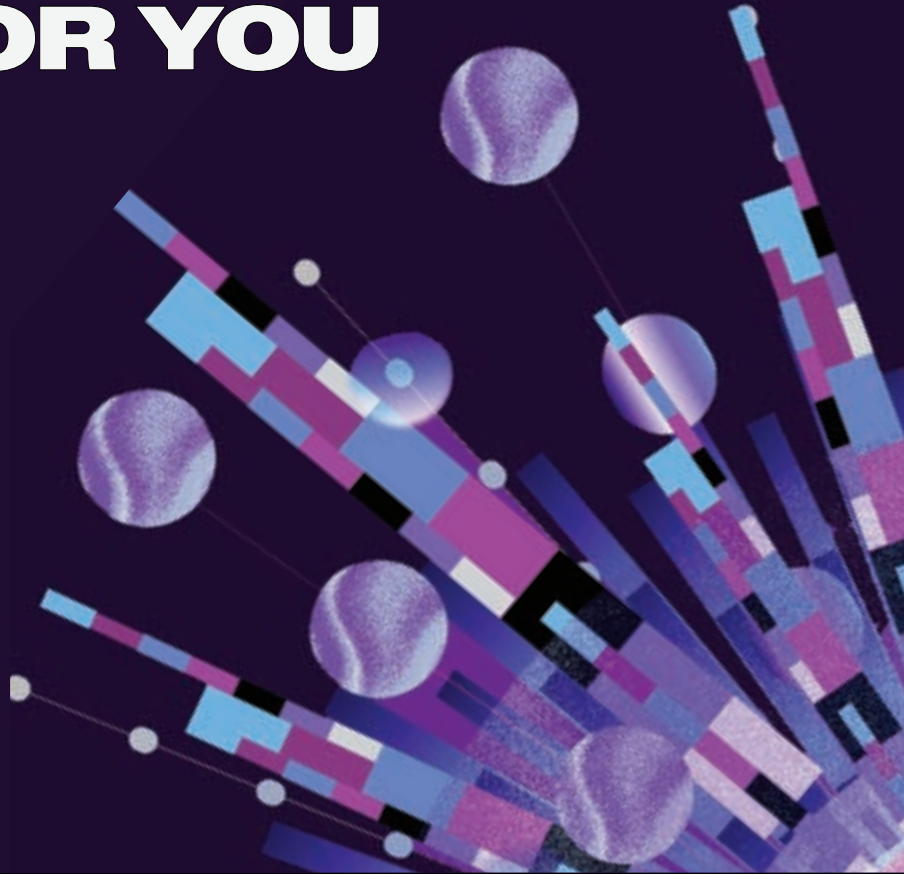
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