

COMMERCE & POLITICS

the
new
studio
system

BY IAIN WEATHERBY

Far from the big budgets and bright lights of Hollywood and Bollywood, a new way to make films is developing – one that blurs the division between studio and audience.

PARIS. Père Lachaise cemetery: afternoon. Tourists, crows, the occasional cortège. A cry goes up: “Silence, s’il vous plait!” A clapperboard slaps shut. “Action!” Two actors amble into shot. So far it looks like what it is: a small movie crew on location. But at the end of the day, the routine is different. We look at rushes, but we also check the film’s website: how many people have signed up? What ideas have come in? How many executive producers have joined today? How much money have we taken?

The film, *Oscar and Jim*, is still months from completion, but the marketing effort and the distribution channel is already humming away. This is an entirely new approach to making, funding and distributing movies. It’s microstudio.



The old Hollywood dictum ‘put the light where the money is’ melds two fundamentals of filmmaking: money and technology. Technology, of course, is racing ahead: lightweight digital formats and editing in Final Cut Pro is cutting production costs. At the other end, TV and computers are converging, video-on-demand is coming and handheld devices are carrying more content.

There should be an explosion of interesting, authentic content. Instead there is YouTube, great for sketches and clips, but limited. Meanwhile the old power structures – studios and networks – still have content locked down. Distribution is where the movies started (theatre owners needing a spectacle to pull in punters) and distribution still holds the key. Without the means to get your film out there you might as well not bother.

But what if you didn’t have to go cap in hand to the networks or the studios? What if you could make your film and find your audience direct, with the people who work on the film owning it? And how about if the people watching films had a deeper involvement too – taking a leaf from web 2.0, “the people formerly known as the audience”?

It’s starting to happen: in the US, the web series *Dr Horrible’s Singalong Blog* picked up more than 200,000 viewers. In music, Radiohead and others are experimenting with bypassing traditional distribution. In film, some are pushing the crowd-sourcing model to its limits. A Swarm of Angels (aswarmofangels.com) is a large, open-source movie collaboration, allowing its members to decide everything from plot to casting.

Co-producer (coproducer.yougov.com) is another that claims to have 90,000 ‘producers’. While both projects are valid, there is the concern that they might replace one kind of creation by committee with another. Good drama depends, doesn’t it, on a singularity of vision?

And you still have to answer the money question: many

filmmakers will work for very little but everybody needs to eat. Our own microstudio, Anchovy Pictures, the company behind *Oscar and Jim*, decided to keep the budget small and then build a community allowing users to back the film or sign up to see it. Think of it as the ground-up Barack Obama model of film-making.

On the site, we ask advice from the community and gradually build interest. Meanwhile, we’re taking micro donations and sign-ups from users on every continent. The money coming in is making a serious contribution to the film. And it’s not only individuals who feel warm towards the project – Eurostar took the cast and crew to Paris and back and let us shoot a scene on one of their trains.

Anchovy does everything that a Hollywood studio does – funding, making and distributing movies – but at a fraction of the cost and risk. Freed from having to persuade gatekeepers to release vast amounts of capital to greenlight a project, we can take risks and back hunches. It’s our hunch that you don’t need a huge amount of money to make interesting drama.

Nor do you need a giant advertising and PR push to capture a moment before another immense project comes down the slipway. *Oscar and Jim* will be there, for

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download on its own site, in perpetuity. We plan to charge a nominal fee, a low number, a micropurchase to see the film. There will be versions for a cinema screen, an iPhone and everything in between. Will people pirate it? Yes. Do we mind? Not as much as we would if there was a vast amount of money at stake. Above all, we want to get the film out there and prove that microstudios can work.



“Cut!” Back in the cemetery, a take is spoiled by aircraft noise. As we wait for the plane to clear, a woman stops and asks what we are doing. I use my broken French to explain and to direct her to the website.

Perhaps we have we just met our next Executive Producer. ■



IAIN WEATHERBY is the writer and co-director of *Oscar and Jim*. Find out more at oscarandjim.com