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**Independent or Feature: Discrepancies in the Film Industry**

1. Introduction

According to the Motion Picture Association’s “2019 Theme Report,” in 2019, the global theatrical and home/mobile entertainment market reached $101 billion. On an 8% increase from 2018, there is no doubt that the film and television industry is growing (Jenks 8). As the industry expands and population grows, more and more prospective filmmakers flood the field. Young professionals are faced with countless decisions and among them this: will they pursue work in studios or independent film? This paper will discuss the financial, cultural, creative, and structural similarities and differences in job experiences between independent production and studio work.

1. Financial

Over the past decades, film production has moved outside of southern California. In reaction to this movement, studios have developed in states across the country. These state-specific film bureaus exist to support films in the area. The interest in moving production benefits these states, so the bureaus were created to encourage the interest. Not only do the bureaus work to have high-budget films shot in their state, but they encourage independent films to shoot there. In fact, bureaus are “directing independent producers toward potential funding sources within their state and even devising ways of generating seed capital” (Edgerton 45). In this way, independent and studio work are very similar: they both are searching for the best way to save money on the production of a movie. The difference lies in how much money they expect to spend in the first place.

While budgets for feature films can vary from less than $10 million to more than $400 million, independent films range from almost no money at all to $100 thousand to $50 million in extreme cases (Connolly). For example, feature film *Juno* (2007) cost $7 million in production (“Juno (2007)…”), while the feature film *Pirates of the Caribbean: On Stranger Tides* (2011) cost $379 million in production (“Pirates…”).

It’s clear that making a film with a studio provides more opportunities; more money means higher quality equipment and software, more time to shoot, more time to edit, and even greater numbers of crew working on the picture. In their animated short film made for their senior thesis, Beth David and her partner Esteban Bravo used the popular crowdfunding platform Kickstarter in order to contract a composer. They otherwise operated on no budget, animating everything themselves. This is the case for many independent projects, especially student films. In contrast, David now works at Blue Sky Animation Studios, where she is one of approximately 70 animators in her department. Though they work on a much longer piece, there are many more of them participating, and they are being paid for their work. Glassdoor puts the average base salary of a 2D animator at $69K (“Salary: 2D Animator”).

Rose outlines the three types of crowdfunding models thus:

There are several different crowdfunding models including basic, reward, and investment. Crowdfunding allows creators to maintain complete control over their projects without being accountable to donors or investors. An example of basic crowdfunding is the website GoFundMe. In basic crowdfunding models, there is no potential financial gain, so donors give to projects based purely on which projects align with their interests. Two of the most popular websites to employ the reward model of crowdfunding are Kickstarter and Indiegogo, where donors often receive small gifts in exchange for their donations, like a signed copy of the album they supported or a walk-on role in a film they helped fund. Investment-based crowdfunding is a newer model, where funders are given equity in a company in exchange for their financial assistance. With investment-based crowdfunding, donors not only help a business or project that they have interest in but there is also the potential of a reward with the possibility to earn money in the future from their investment. An example of an investment crowdfunding website is Crowdfunder (Rose 14).

By using each of these methods of raising money, independent filmmakers can make money to compensate themselves for their work or pay others for their contributions to a project. This is very different from the studio form of funding a movie. Hollywood blockbusters are partially funded through product placement that companies pay for, merchandising, and profit from previous films (Toothman).

Ryan Connolly of Film Riot, a YouTube channel that teaches filmmaking from a DIY and independent perspective, says, “It feels like you have less money the more money you have. I’ve felt under much tighter constraints, a much tighter belt, and a lot more stressed about pulling *Ballistic* off, with that much money, than I did with things that cost $5,000 to make.” (*Ballistic* is a 2018 short film directed by Connolly. The picture cost approximately $120 thousand to make.) He goes on to discuss that a higher budget will not make a film *better*. It may cause the movie to look prettier or sound nicer, but it will not improve the actual content (Connolly). Though the financial aspects of feature and independent films vary wildly, both must deliver on substance.

1. Cultural and Creative

In episode 233 of *Just Shoot It*, a filmmaking podcast, hosts Matt Enlow and Oren Kaplan and guest Ryan Connolly discuss how the film industry is made up of connections. It’s often more about who a professional knows and how they portray themselves than the quality of their actual work. In order to get anywhere in the industry, networking is vital. A conversation with someone may not develop into any opportunity right away, but it may lead to a relationship that leads to a job opportunity years later. According to Rose, “networking is the predominate method of learning about a job opening.” She goes on to point out that since fewer women are included in the powerful networks, fewer women find out about opportunities and fewer women are employed on the higher-budget jobs (9). This is reflected in the gender composition of theatrical film directors and writers: in 2017, 12.6% of jobs in both categories were done by women (Hunt 29, 39). This makeup has an impact on the culture and interactions of a studio. Julianna Baggot, a screenwriting professor at Florida State University, answered some of my questions in a personal email interview. She said she is “often the only woman in the room when in the sci fi or horror genre,” and she has “had to withstand some sexism on the negotiating side” (Baggott). In a personal interview, Beth David shared her thoughts on the culture of BlueSky Animation Studios. She highlighted that the members of her department are very willing to learn from each other and collaborate. When prompted about her experiences there as a woman, she shared that her department is heavily male-dominated and off-color comments are sometimes made, but the women of her department have a strong camaraderie and stand up for each other when necessary. In contrast, she also shared that her classes at Ringling College of Art and Design were majority female, with an approximate 70/30 split (Chicerelli). While both of these women’s experiences represent room to grow with respect to equality in the film industry, great strides have been made. The UCLA “Hollywood Diversity Report” of 2019 shows an 82.6% increase in female-directed theatrical films from 2016 to 2017 (29). Even though the percentage of female directors is nowhere near equal to the percentage of male directors, the gap is closing.

Beth David shared that the forms of creativity are different in independent work versus studio work. Specifically, she says that in Blue Sky, her choices are much smaller; her creative points include acting choices for characters like the raise of an eyebrow or hand movement (Chicerelli). In her independent work, she had complete freedom over the concepts and character designs, but it had a much broader focus and it was more difficult to create small moments.

In his YouTube video *What is Low Budget?*, Connolly discusses what he learned from watching behind-the-scenes footage of blockbuster movies. He says,

I’ve been watching the *Knives Out* behind the scenes and they’re obviously operating on a much higher level than I’m currently operating on. […] If you just pay attention to the concepts…what Rian Johnson is doing in the scene, how he’s setting up the scene, what he’s doing with the camera, how he’s interacting with the actor…these are the takeaways that you’re really looking for. And to complain about what camera someone’s shooting on in their BTS seems as silly to me as being upset about going to film school and them teaching you on an Alexa instead of an iPhone. It reminds me of something I have talked about on the show of when I was younger and, you know, shooting on a VHS camera and editing from VCR to VCR. My favorite show was “Movie Magic”, which was a show that showed you behind the scenes of how they made things like *Terminator 2*. Obviously, as a kid of that age with a VHS camera, I couldn’t replicate anything that they were doing, but it taught me the concepts, the ideas, the ingenuity behind what they were accomplishing. Not only that, but most importantly, why they were doing it. I learned things like forced perspective, using miniatures, montage, and those concepts are really what’s going to help you learn and build toward creating something that’s effective for your audience.

By highlighting examples of creativity he has taken from looking at feature films and applied to his independent work, Connolly shows that both modes value problem solving and creative solutions. A filmmaker can learn tricks from feature to apply to indie and vice versa. Really, the forms aren’t so different in this respect.

1. Structural

In feature film work, there are people who take care of specific tasks, such as lunch and stunts. However, in independent work, there are not as many people involved with the production of the film. When a filmmaker switches from independent film, where they must shoulder most of the work, to feature film, it can be difficult to remember that they don’t have to take care of every necessity (Enlow). In the podcast episode, Connolly says that when he is presented with a problem, he has a hard time allowing others to take care of a task because of his background in doing everything by himself (Enlow). It’s very much like a school project in this way. If you’re assigned the project on your own, you must fill every role, whether it be artist, material manager, editor, or presenter. If you have a group, you can delegate types of tasks based on who would excel at them: the artsy kid is in charge of diagrams, the outspoken kid is the presenter, etc. Even though group projects are often more work than individual projects, the labor is distributed among more people.

Beth David described a role akin to quality control supervisors. Their task is to look over work done by animators in their section and critique it so that it fits with the aesthetics of the entire feature. There are overseers for each character to make sure that in each and every frame of the movie the characters’ appearances, mannerisms, and personality match the intended concept (Chicerelli). Thus, in studio work, there is an employer to answer to. Executives in the studio manage content and employee behavior. If an animator or writer does not perform to a certain standard, they will no longer work for the company. In independent work, there is only the court of public opinion. The audience controls success or failure more directly in the independent model. They can choose to fund projects on Kickstarter or pay for content on Patreon. If content does not reach their standards, creators will only be “fired” in that they are not making money.

1. Conclusion

Similarities and differences in financial, creative, cultural, and structural aspects abound between the independent and feature film industry. Though jobs in the independent industry allow for more creativity and freedom, jobs in the studio system offer stability and higher budgets. Job certainty is a huge factor in career path choices. However, it’s important for young professionals seeking jobs to understand that the sides of the industry really aren’t that different from each other. Knowledge learned on one side can be transferred easily to the other. Success in filmmaking is ultimately about creativity and dedication, whatever form of movie one is making.

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