

BECOME A MOVIE DIRECTOR AND/OR MOVIE PRODUCER

A Learn-It-Yourself Course In

Directing, and Producing Movies,
and in Financing, Making and Selling
Independent, Low Budget, Micro-Budget,
And No-Budget Movies

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CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE:

SCRIPT PLUS

It was very interesting to listen to the commentary on the DVD of the multi-Oscar-winning Best Picture of the year movie *Crash*. Paul Haggis, that movie's director, co-producer, and co-writer, said that one of the first things that they did with the script when it was finished was to get the script to the much-admired and acclaimed actor Don Cheadle and offer him a role as producer as well as actor, because Haggis knew Cheadle *would pull in a cast*. This is a prime example of the use of what I call *script plus*. Paul Haggis is one of the very top screenwriters in Hollywood. His script for *Million Dollar Baby* was nominated for an Oscar for Best Screenplay, and won Best Picture of the Year before *Crash*. His script for *Letters From Iwo Jima* was also nominated. Haggis has a long and distinguished, much admired television career as well, as a screenwriter, story editor, and producer on popular TV shows.

When Haggis went out to finance *Crash*, his screenplay was turned down by “everyone” much in the same way scripts for many other successful movies were rejected. I don’t know whom exactly Haggis pitched *Crash* to while trying to independently raise \$7,000,000 to make the movie. (One million went to financing fees and six million went into making the movie.) I also do not know how much of the stellar cast was committed to the movie before financing and how many joined after it was financed. When you look at *Crash*’s cast and how much many of its star actors have been paid to be in big studio movies, one pitch that could have been made is the list of top stars involved in the project. It would have been reasonable to project that with all those movie stars and name actors, the movie could easily earn back its money from DVD sales, cable TV, and foreign sales.

However *Crash* was financed, very successful TV writer-producer Haggis reached out to a highly-respected actor to *pull in a cast* (who would know it was a quality project because Cheadle was involved, and perhaps they wanted to work with him as well). Getting Cheadle involved was one of Haggis’s first actions to get the script made into a movie. That’s *script plus*. He did not rely only upon the quality of his screenplay. When you add *script plus*, the script becomes a *project*, not just a screenplay. On the DVD commentary of *Reservoir Dogs* Quentin Tarantino, when describing how the movie was financed, pointed out that when Harvey Keitel committed to the script, it was not instantly financed, but Keitel’s commitment gave the project *credibility* in the eyes of Hollywood players. That is again, *script plus*. Once Tarantino and his producing partner

Lawrence Bender had name actor Keitel, a man with a long and respected track record and box office value, they were no longer in the same league as the thousands of other guys and gals running around town waving a script in the air and hoping someone would finance their wonderful words typed on white paper.

Even the greatest, very well-written words are often not enough to impress people with money and convince them to finance your movie. Those words can, however impress actors whose names have value, or even “bankability.” An excellent script may not be recognized by money people but it very often is instantly recognized by actors. Good scripts can impress and attach actors to the project and give it *script plus* punch.

Here’s another very different example of *script plus*. I had written a screenplay about a very specific type of telepathic monster. A foreign sales company that had distributed one of my earlier movies was interested in the script and brought a Canadian producer into the deal. The Canadian producer put up some pre-production money. We used that money to make a small scale model of the monster out of clay. A lawyer who was a friend of an associate of mine wanted to be a producer. He liked the project from reading an early draft of the at that point sketchy and flawed script. He told me he could get a meeting with a very famous and powerful female executive who was a long-time friend of this lawyer. I saw that a very makable and sweet deal was possible if we could sell this executive and bring the home video company into the deal. The financial risk could be split between the foreign distributor, the home video company, and the Canadian producer. Each of the three could protect and recover their investment from the territory

or market of their expertise, and they could share in profits from the other two partner's areas. I knew that if we got the home video company into the deal it would solidify the whole deal. It would lower the amount of money that the Canadian producer and the foreign sales company would have to risk, and it would boost their confidence to see this solid well-known home video company also believing in the project, and putting their money into it.

We got the meeting with the executive and her assistant, who had read the script. The executive hadn't read it. The assistant was "iffy" about the script. He didn't like it that much and asked questions like "How's this or that going to work?" He wanted to know if I was sure that these things would turn out as I explained. To be fair to him, the script was weak at that point and not that polished. Later, another writer improved it enormously. Anyway, the meeting droned on, touching on various bases, and it looked like it was heading for a non-conclusive stalemate. I did not have a lot of chemistry with either executive. Then I said, "I'd like to show you something." We had the model of the monster in a shoebox. I put that on the table, let a little anticipation build, and then I pulled the monster out of the box and set it on the table. The assistant shut up, which improved the meeting a lot. The female executive looked at the monster model, smiled, and her face lit up. She did not take her eyes off the monster. After a long pause, she began to talk with us again. Reading the look on her face, my guess is that she was thinking "free movie" when seeing that monster mockup. At the time there were about 40,000 video stores in North America. She knew how much profit her company made on each video that they sold, and she knew that with that monster and its picture on the video

box, her company could sell at least one tape to almost every video stores that had a decent horror movie section. She knew that even if the movie was weak the monster would sell enough videos to more than cover her company's investment. I think that she also saw that if we made a model of the monster at that early stage, we knew what was important and would get the on-set monster right.

She was correct, if that's what she was indeed thinking. Her company did sell at least one video to almost every stores in North America that had a sold horror movie section. The tone of the meeting changed dramatically after she'd looked over the monster model. There was no more talk about whether or not they would invest. The talk shifted to *how* they would invest, what they would get, etc. The assistant saw that his boss was sold. He stopped sniping and making objections and began talking about various possible mechanics of the deal. The executive said, "Have the foreign sales company call me. We'll work things out." And they did.

The fact that we had a *script plus* in the form of the model monster closed the deal. If we'd just had a script, I doubt that the meeting would have ended with a deal.

This was all another example of *script plus*. The model monster was something physical and tangible, something you could *show* people. It spoke for itself. It was not just the ideas or opinions that we had about it. For a lot of people, a script is just a lot of words on paper, leading to opinions or criticisms. In reality, a script is something that exists in the writer's and reader's minds alone. It is much more a part of the "ether" than the physical

world. When I said, “I’d like to show you something” and brought the model out of the shoebox “lair” I moved the meeting from ideas and objections into the world of *physical reality*, where real movies are made, not just talked about. This illustrates the difference in a script and *script plus*. This quality pulls the project out of the purely mental realm.

Let me make a couple of points about the script in question before I move on. The early draft that I wrote was weak, unperfected, and deficient in some aspects but it had a very good concept, one that gave it excellent commercial potential for a low budget movie. This less than excellent script was the one we used to make the deal that financed the movie, however. By the time we shot the movie, though, the script was excellent, particularly for a low budget movie, thanks to another writer’s improvements. I then touched up some of what he wrote while doing the shooting script. Then during rehearsals, the dialogue was fine-tuned even more. By the time we shot the script, it was as good as or better than almost every low budget movie I had seen to that point except for excellent “break out” low budget movies like *Night of the Living Dead*.

It is a paradox that usually a movie’s script and its concept are most often the *single most important element in determining and influencing a movie’s probability of success*. In contrast, with low budget movies in particular, the script is usually *not* the most important element that causes a movie to be financed.

On another movie, my business partner and I had struggled for a while, very energetically and with a lot of activity to finance *Starship Invasions*, which at that time was titled

Legion of the Winged Serpent. It looked like we'd come to a dead end. We had both tried everything that we could think of to finance the movie. We'd approached over one hundred people or companies, and all we had to show for it was two very "iffy" flakes that said they could fund the movie. My suspicion is that they were actually out to try to steal the project from us, and thought they could contractually entangle us so that if they did come up with the money they would ruin it by amateur meddling during production or pre-production. My business partner wanted to take their deal and sign a contract with them, but I said no. He asked what else we could do. I said, "Every day we are going to sit in your apartment (our "office" at the time, basically a room with a mattress for a bed and a telephone), from 9:00 in the morning until 5:00 in the evening until one of us comes up with another idea of how to finance this movie, and if we agree it's good, we'll try it. So we sat there and read and reread *Variety*."

Then one day in the mail came a pamphlet from the Canadian government that listed every film production company in Canada, virtually every filmmaker in the country. These companies made industrial films, educational films, TV commercials, TV shows, and movies. I spent about half an hour berating the government bureaucrats and griping about how useless they were. I asked my partner how many written pictorial presentation booklets we had. He counted them up. He'd been diligent in retrieving each presentation and script every time the project was rejected. We had over eighty presentations. I said, "We will go through this booklet and we'll pick the eight strongest prospects and send them each a presentation and cover letter pitching the project and we'll send just the cover letter to every other company in the booklet."

There were over 300 companies and filmmakers listed. We would hit them all with either a presentation and cover letter or simply a letter. The company that eventually funded the movie was sent a presentation because my partner thought that they were a good prospect. I didn't think they were, but he knew something about that company so I went along with his instinct. A day or so after they received our package, we had an early morning meeting with a toothless, feeble distributor. When that meeting ended my business partner checked his answering service and sure enough, the "hunch" company had left a message asking us to call. My partner reached the lead "money man" at the company, who invited us to come straight over and talk.

The money man loved the presentation, which included a letter of commitment from the agent of actor Robert Vaughn and lots of drawings of proposed costumes, the special makeup that would determine the look of the aliens, designs for UFOs, storyboard type drawings of various important shots and scenes, and special FX shots. It also included information on how much money various sci-fi movies had made. That was over a year and a half before the debut of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* as released and about a year before *Star Wars* was released. No one in Toronto at that point knew anything about these movies or the success any new sci-fi movie might have. We showed the money man our 16mm UFO test film. It looked very impressive. I had funded a very inventive special FX man with a few hundred dollars that I'd earned driving a cab between movies. The money man was stunned the first time he saw the test film. He thought it looked great.

“Did you have a crane holding the UFO?” he asked.

I explained that we had a tiny two-inch in diameter UFO model on a piece of moving glass right in front of the camera. I had operated the camera myself while crawling around in mud in a vacant field, shooting through the special FX device. The money man asked if he could watch the UFO test again, so we projected it a second time. After that, he literally started jumping up and down around the viewing theater!

“Wow, wow, wow!” he exclaimed. “This is great! Making a movie is like having an asshole. Everyone has one, but this is *special!*”

We finished the meeting and the money man kept the UFO test to show to his brother, who was his business partner. When my business partner and I walked out of the building, we were both silent for a while, then we looked at each other, smiled, and broke out laughing. *We knew we had a deal!* Despite the serious bumps in the road we’d endured, we had a deal. We made the movie, Warner Bros. distributed it in theaters, and NBC showed it in prime time! We never would have made the movie without *script plus*. The money men did not even like the script. It was weak and in some ways defective, but again, it had an excellent concept with superb commercial potential.

When Burt Reynolds was one of the biggest movie stars in the world, screenwriter Steve Shagan gave him a script that became a movie that starred French beauty Catherine Deneuve called *Hustle*. Burt liked the script and told Shagan, “I’ll get this made.” Shagan

explained that it had been “everywhere” and been turned down all over. Reynolds responded it, “It might have been everywhere, but it hasn’t been anywhere with me attached.” Reynolds was right. A studio financed Robert Aldrich, a top director, to direct it. This was once again *script plus* with a major star actor. Reynolds got a script made that had been turned down by “everyone.”

Sam Raimi made an approximately 40-minute 8mm movie called *Evil in the Forest* and used that as a demo to convince investors to finance his first professional feature length, enormously successful cult classic horror movie *The Evil Dead*. That was a major serious use of *script plus*.

One distributor that distributed two of my movies was also making a sci-fi movie that starred one of the cast members of the original *Star Trek* TV series. Part of the movie was to be shot on a planetarium’s very realistic and convincing looking moonscape. I asked the executive that actually sold the company’s movies to foreign territories if the script was any good. He said it was “a piece of crap.” And he was right; I learned that as soon as I saw the finished movie. That executive told me that even before the movie was shot he had deals in progress all over the world that were less than half an inch from closing at a top-notch sale price, just based on the *Star Trek* actor’s name and some promotional stills of people in astronaut costumes on the moonscape. He was positive that the movie would make money, and again he was right. Despite the “piece of crap” script the movie sold virtually every territory in the world at a good price for a low budget movie. It also sold extremely well in the home video market, and was a profitable movie. Why did they

make a movie from such a bad script with an undistinguished director? It had *great script plus!*

One real filmmaker who was a partner in a distribution company I worked with on a movie greatly admired and enjoyed my film. When I later sent him a script (with no *script plus*), out of professional courtesy he told me the truth. He explained that his company was not even reading scripts that had nothing but a director attached. They were looking for scripts with name actors attached and some money attached as well. They would only read the script if it was a *project*, not just a script. He didn't give me some excuse about the script. As this example illustrates, sending only scripts that have no script plus to low budget distributors is virtually always completely useless. Most of these low budget distributors do *not have enough cash to finance an entire movie alone*. They will almost never take a chance solely on a script. Executives and producers or money men in the movie business usually have had the experience of reading a script that did *not* impress and then seeing that script become a very successful movie, and they have also had the experience that runs in the opposite direction, reading and admiring a script that is then turned into a mediocre or lackluster failed or barely successful movie.

I had an experience like that. I read the scripts for *Basic Instinct* and *The Last Boy Scout* well before either movie was released. Just reading the script for *Basic Instinct* did not impress me. After watching the movie many times, however, I recognized that the script was one of the most important elements of the movie. It was a great script. I didn't recognize that until I saw the completed movie. And when I read the script of *The Last*

Boy Scout I thought it was one of the best I'd ever read, and that included Oscar-winning and nominated screenplays at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences library. When I saw *The Last Boy Scout* movie, though, I was very disappointed. It was a very unimpressive movie. There were things about its production that I did not like at all, and there were things about the production of *Basic Instinct* that I thought were absolutely perfect, but the difference in the two productions was only part of the overall story – I had simply misjudged both those scripts with regard to movie potential despite being a screenwriter, producer, director, and editor who had studied a lot of scripts and movies.

I can only try to imagine how an executive who has never written a script or made a movie truly feels about their own ability to judge the quality or success potential of a movie by simply reading the screenplay. Many executives cannot even judge a movie's prospects for success or failure by watching the finished movie! Here is a story I was told by someone with a lot of credibility that was in a position to actually know the truth of the situation. The story centers on George Lucas's enormously successful classic masterpiece *American Graffiti*. Apparently, the studio funded the movie on a very low budget based on Francis Ford Coppola's participation as executive producer. According to the story I heard, Coppola walked into the screening from where *American Graffiti* was about to be shown for the first time to studio executives and said, "I hope this is good. I haven't seen a frame of it."

Immediately, some execs got nervous and worried. When the movie finished screening, some of them began griping and threatening to sue Coppola because he had not closely

supervised the making of the movie and had let Lucas make the movie he wanted to make. Coppola apparently called their bluff and took out his checkbook and said, “You don’t like this movie, and you don’t think it has value, I’ll buy it back from you right here and now for what it cost.” Only one executive in the group believed strongly in the movie, which went on to become a huge hit. Some people even consider it to be Lucas’s best movie. The other executives backed down. If Coppola thought it was good and was willing to buy it, they reasoned, suddenly they were not interested in selling it. How confident do you think people can be in their own judgment if they thought *American Graffiti* was worthless? They are *not* confident enough to finance a movie based on just a script!

This is not a one of a kind isolated incident. Wes Craven, the writer and director of *Nightmare on Elm Street*, which launched *nine* “Freddy Krueger” movies, said on a DVD commentary that after the screening of the first rough cut of the movie, the head of the distribution company that financed the filming turned to him and said, “Well, do you think there’s a movie in there somewhere?” He was totally unimpressed by a movie that would turn into a huge chunk of gold at the box office, he had no foresight that the movie and its villain would propel his company from being a small-time distributor of low budget horror movies into being virtually a major studio that would produce the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, make a ton of money, and get a herd of Oscar nominations while winning several Oscars.

This executive was apparently blind to the classic horror movie value of *Nightmare on Elm Street* and its superbly commercial assets, but he was light years ahead of many other distributors in Hollywood. He had financed the movie when everyone else had turned the script down. According to Craven's commentary, he was told the script wasn't scary. Wow, I would love to see those old reader reports! How much confidence do you think someone that turned down *Nightmare on Elm Street's* script down would have in their own ability to judge the value of a movie that would result from just a script alone, with no apparent *script plus*? None.

Here's another incident that involves a very commercial, highly successful cult classic horror movie masterpiece. Sam Raimi commented that when *The Evil Dead* opened in New York, he went to a theater in a classy part of the city, and after the movie finished, the audience seemed confused, even numb. The movie had exceeded the existing boundaries of horrific gore that audiences were used to at the time, and as Raimi emerged from the theater, the distributor said, "We're going to have to do a *lot* of re-editing before the movie goes into wide release.

Raimi, his partner and distributor then went to another less classy theater in a much less classy area of the city. The movie had just ended and the people coming out of the theater were gushing about how great it was. All or some of the evening's shows had been sold out. Raimi and his companions watched the movie again with an audience that totally "got" the movie and loved it, and the distributor said, "Maybe we'll hold off on re-

editing.” On the DVD commentary, Raimi said that was the fastest change of an editing plan he ever saw.

Many very powerful and highly-positioned people in the movie business cannot even recognize the value of a very valuable movie even by looking at the finished film. Nevertheless, I’ve seen many screenwriters shower such people, and others of lesser stature, with scripts in numbers like a hailstorm, then walk away surprised and wounded when the scripts bounce back into their mailbox (if they’re returned at all). There are cases where a movie gets made because someone in power falls in love with a script and makes the movie just because of the script, as in the Reynolds example. The situation does happen, but very rarely. Much more often, it requires *script plus* to get a movie made. Many development people and script readers play ping-pong with screenwriters’ minds and spin their heads around like roulette wheels. That’s why I always advise screenwriters and filmmakers to take their scripts to people who have the power to say *yes*, whenever possible. The legendary movie producer Alexander Korda said that whenever he asked a bank for money he would always ask for a million dollars or more, because he wanted to be sure he was talking to someone who had the power to say *yes*. He was very successful; do you want to be anything less?