

Commercial Movie Development

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The Big Picture

It takes a lot of people to make a motion picture, whether it's straight out of Hollywood, or from an independent filmmaker. It's not unusual to see hundreds of cast and crew members listed in a movie's end credits. Here's a fairly concise explanation of the people involved in the development process, and how they work together. There are a lot of variations on this scheme; what I'm describing here is the way it's usually done in higher-budget American movies, of the sort you usually see in theaters.

Unions have a lot to say about the ways in which the various people do their jobs. Crew members on film projects belong to different unions than those working with television and video, and that makes the process much different. Video cameras are also simpler to run than film cameras, and that requires smaller crews. What follows describes the typical process of making a movie on film, following the procedures typically prescribed by American film unions.

In the early days of the movie industry, a few big studios such as Paramount and MGM made most of the movies, and they could do everything in-house. They employed permanent staffs of producers, directors, and actors, who worked together on one movie after another. Today, the industry is much more fragmented – big studios own and control resources such as stages, lights and technicians, but most of the creative people no longer work permanently for one studio. The studios join forces with independent producers, directors and actors only for the duration of one particular picture. Most producers have their own production companies, and spend most of their time looking for their next movie, either creating the story themselves, or reading scripts others have written. One way or another, the producers come up with a script, get a studio to support it, and then hire the actors.

The most important people on any movie's development team are the **producer**, the **executive producer**, and the **director**. In most movies, the producer is in charge of everything, like the CEO of a company. For the duration of the project, he or she is the boss of virtually everyone who works on the film. The producer comes up with the movie concept, hires a script writer to put the story into the language of acting (the *screenplay*), hires a storyboard artist to give the story a visual treatment, and works with both of them to develop the story far enough to secure financing (called *pitching* the idea) from movie studios and/or investors.

A movie can cost anywhere from a million dollars for a small independent project, to \$150 million or more for a special effects blockbuster. The person who is in charge of the financial arrangements for making the movie is called the **executive producer**. This is often someone in a major studio who represents the studio's interests in the film, and secures the resources (movie lots and stages, personnel, etc) needed for the production. Executive producers generally aren't the "idea people," but since they're investing a sizeable amount of money, their wishes are honored. Executive producers generally care most about such

things as the movie's target audience (who will see the movie, and why they'll like it); the stature of the director, writer and stars; the timing of the movie's release to theaters; and how the picture will be advertised. In other words, their main concern is usually making money.

There are a lot of variations possible in the relationships between the individuals in a movie's top development team. Sometimes the executive producer has the idea for the movie, and secures the services of the other two. And in some cases, the director is the leader, as is the case with Steven Spielberg or some other well-known moviemaker. But on the typical movie project, the producer is the leader of the team.

There are basically four types of movie:

- a **feature film**, made by a major studio, to be shown in theaters;
- an **independent film**, to be shown in smaller theaters (called *art houses*);
- a **network television movie** (often called a *movie of the week*);
- a **cable television movie** (made for services such as HBO).

Each of these movie types represents a separate market, with different audiences that have different tastes and expectations. There are also different budgets, different arrangements with the stars, and so forth.

There are four phases in making a movie:

- **pre-production** (the initial planning for the movie);
- **production** (constructing the sets and shooting the movie);
- **post-production** (editing the movie); and
- **distribution** (getting the movie into theaters and other venues).

As a general rule, pre-production takes longer than the actual production phase, and post-production takes the longest of all. When the distribution phase begins, most of the movie's crew has moved on to their next project, and the movie's fate is largely in the hands of advertising and public relations people, not to mention the critics.

In the **Pre-Production** phase, the producer:

- comes up with the idea (which may be from a book or existing script);
- sells the idea to a studio or network, or arranges independent financing;
- selects a writer for the script;
- selects a director;
- works with the director and studio to select the cast;

- works with the director to select the rest of the creative team.

Next to the producer, the **director** is the most important person. Directors are usually “hired guns,” selected because they have a good track record with the type of movie the producer wants to make. The director makes all of the artistic decisions involved in bringing the producer’s vision to life. And this makes the director the boss of everyone who acts in the movie or otherwise contributes to what happens on the screen or in the soundtrack.

The director works closely with:

- the **director of photography**, who makes camera, film and lighting decisions;
- the **production designer**, who is the architect of sets, locations, props and effects;
- the **casting director**, who auditions and selects most of the actors;
- the **writer**, who often has to adjust the script to suit the actors or locations;
- the **distributor**, to schedule the film in theaters or on TV when it’s done.

After the director, the **director of photography** probably has the most influence on the look of the movie. There are numerous important decisions to be made concerning the kinds of cameras, the type of film stock, and the placement of lights.

On larger movies, there is also an assistant producer, called a **production manager** or **line producer**. The production manager oversees most of the production staff, which frees the producer and director for more creative involvement in the film. On smaller projects, however, the producer handles it all.

It may be that the producer doesn’t have a distributor for this movie, in which case the movie will be shown at film festivals in the hopes of making connections with a distributor. Most of the time, however, there is an arrangement with a distribution company from the very start. Keeping to a schedule is vitally important, so that the movie can be released to theaters or television networks at the proper time, and to keep the cost within the movie’s budget.

The Pre-Production Stage: “Development Hell”

A lot of work goes into making a motion picture, and a lot of people get involved. In the beginning, this work is all about the big ideas behind the movie, and attracting support from a studio or other sources of money and resources. As the work progresses, there are more and more details to manage, and more and more people come on board to do the work. It’s not unusual for the pre-production stage to take the longest of all of the stages. In fact, sometimes a producer will work on a movie’s pre-production details for years.

After the producer finds a studio who likes the movie's overall concept, it's time to nail down some of the details. The studio usually wants to approve, in this order, the writer, the script, the budget, the director, and one or two lead actors. When these things are all agreed upon, we say that the movie has the "green light," and the producer can begin the actual production work.

One of the main decisions to be made is where to shoot the various scenes. Studio sets are the easiest to work with, since there's no problem with weather, sound, light, and so forth. Studios often have generic sets for houses, offices, streets, and other common locations, and can make modifications easily to suit the production's requirements. But there may be some, perhaps even many, shots which require a real-world location such as a train station, or an outdoor setting like a park. For these, the director and production designer must "scout" for a location, and consider all of the necessary steps to bringing the actors and equipment to this place. This requires permits, extra transportation, generators for power, crowd control and guards, many decisions regarding the lighting, sound and camera placement, and how to supply food and other facilities for the crew. And in case the weather turns bad, they need to formulate a backup plan.

Time is Money: Creating a Schedule

A great deal of the pre-production work centers around the movie's budget and schedule. The script and the budget have a lot of influence on each other, in terms of the number of shots it will take to tell the story, the cost of each of those shots, and the scheduling of all the resources (people, equipment, sets and locations, etc.) each shot requires. This is mostly the responsibility of the **first assistant director** (or First AD), who makes up an exact list of shots in the movie, when and where they will be shot, and how much they will cost.

If there is a unit production manager on the movie, he or she will also have a lot of input into the creation of the schedule and budget. The production crew rents virtually all of its equipment from the studio or from outside suppliers, which makes scheduling even more important. It's the unit production manager's job to know exactly when everything will be delivered, where it will be stored, how all the electrical equipment will be powered, and where everyone will eat their meals. If the movie is shot on location, this also means knowing where everyone will stay overnight, and how they will travel to and from the shoot.

For a location shoot, the unit production manager will secure the services of a **location manager** – someone familiar with the area who can handle details such as housing, food, and obtaining the necessary permits to stop traffic and shoot the movie in public. Most states in the U.S. have departments to assist movie production companies in orchestrating these myriad details, and can provide an experienced location manager early on in the development process.

It's important to understand that movies generally aren't shot in the order you see them in the theater. For example, if a well-known actor appears in only a few scenes throughout a movie, those shots would be scheduled back to back, to minimize the time that actor spends on the set. The same is true of real locations, such as shots in the streets of a large city. There are also backup plans to be made, such as alternate dates for outdoor shots that require the sun. The first assistant director needs to know in advance how much each shot costs, how long it will take, and make sure the movie stays within its budget.

The first assistant director also pays close attention to the running length of the movie as a whole. This is particularly important for television movies, which generally need to fit into a precise two-hour time frame, and provide spaces for commercials every fifteen minutes or so. For theater movies, there is usually a target length between 1½ and 2 hours.

Another consideration is the organization of a **second unit**. This is a second camera crew, generally smaller than the main crew, which takes care of less-important shots. This frees the director from having to personally oversee all of the movie's camera work. Things such as establishing shots can be handled by the second unit, as can other shots that don't require the principal actors.

As the pre-production period comes to an end, the **editor** sets up shop. Every day's film will be developed immediately at the end of shooting for that day. The resulting film is called the "dailies," or "rushes," since they're rushed back for review by the director and other creative team members. The editor and his or her assistants are responsible for storing and cataloging all of the film shot on the production, which can easily add up to miles of film.

It may surprise you to learn that, in most movies, there is little rehearsal. The major actors are getting a substantial amount of money for their time, which is a key consideration. The producer and director generally count on these actors arriving with their lines memorized, and ready to bring their characters to life. The director and director of photography go through a process called **blocking**, in which they design the positions and movements of the actors and cameras in each shot for best effect. Since a movie is shot in small pieces, it isn't a problem for the director to guide the actors verbally before each shot.

The Final Week of Preparation

The week before shooting begins is a very busy time for all of the production personnel. In this period, most of the sets will be built, all of the props and equipment will arrive, and many of the production personnel will begin setting up their offices and work stations. Costumes will be delivered from the studio, or from independent rental houses. The production designer reviews all of this material, to ensure that everything on the sets and the actors looks as intended.

Two more important people go to work during this time – the gaffer and the key grip. Both of these individuals work under the director of photography, and they play a large part

in the appearance of the movie. The **gaffer** is the person responsible for setting up and testing the lights, colored filters, cables, controls, and power supplies for the lighting gear. And if this is a location shoot, all of the electrical gear needs generators and dry storage places in the event of rain. The **key grip** is responsible for setting up and testing the devices that hold and move the cameras. Devices such as dollies, cranes, tracks, Steadicams, and the like are all within the key grip's domain. Both of these individuals will participate in shooting some test shots, to ensure that the movie will look as intended by the director and the director of photography.

The production designer oversees the work of the **set dresser** – the person responsible for decorating the sets. They have the same kind of relationship as an architect and an interior decorator. The production designer also oversees the procurement of props, which are any items handled by the actors. These items are organized and maintained by the **property manager**.

The key **makeup** and **hairstylists** arrive and set up shop, usually in trailers near the studio or location. The appearance of the principle actors is discussed with the director. Any special items, such as wigs and prosthetic appliances (which may make an actor look older, or simulate scars) are designed and developed. Such things will also require a camera test, to ensure the director that the actors look good on film.

Virtually all of the cars seen in a movie are driven by professional drivers, headed by the **transportation captain**. Most of these cars are rented, and they start arriving at the location during the week before shooting. If these are cars from some particular historical period, their appearance will be carefully checked by the production designer, to ensure that they look convincing. And if cars need to be damaged during the shoot (as, for example, in a collision), the cars may need to be prepared by the special effects technicians. It's also the transportation captain's job to ensure that all of the actors in a location shoot are provided with transportation to and from the location each day.

Extras are recruited during this time, these being people who are in front of the camera, but who have no lines. Extras are the people casually walking by in a street scene, or seated at tables in the background of a restaurant scene. They generally supply their own clothing (unless the movie has special costume requirements). If there are a lot of extras, as might be the case in an airport terminal or a riot scene, they will be organized into teams, each reporting to a team leader who knows where to place them and what they're supposed to be doing. There are casting agencies who specialize in extras casting, and these companies go to work during the week before shooting begins.

The principle actors arrive, and if necessary, major scenes are rehearsed (although there is generally little rehearsal). If there are song and dance numbers, or other shots requiring the actors to follow specific choreography, these will be rehearsed. If the actors need to speak in a dialect, coaches will arrive and teach the actors how to speak their lines.

Fight scenes will be choreographed, and **stunt men** and women may rehearse special action shots.

One of the unsung heroes in the movie industry is the **boom operator** – the person who holds the microphone above the heads of the actors, just outside the visual frame. This is done by hand, and it takes considerable physical strength to hold that boom for hours on end. During the week before shooting begins, some tricky shots will be rehearsed with the boom operator, to ensure that the operator knows how to move with the actors, and can keep the microphone out of sight.

For a movie shot on location, one of the most important events in the last week before shooting is the technical scout. This is a trip made to the shooting locations by the producer, director, unit production manager, assistant directors, director of photography, production designer, gaffer, key grip, transportation captain, and chief audio engineer. They need to pin down such details as where the generator can be set up, where the camera will be positioned for each shot, how to light the shots, any audio problems (such as traffic noise), information for drivers if cars are to be used, crowd control (normal foot and vehicle traffic needs to be stopped), and where food, equipment storage, rest rooms, and other amenities will be located. Mistakes on any one of these details can cause expensive delays.

Before the shooting begins, the assistant directors have prepared an exact list of shots in the movie, and itemized and scheduled all of the people, equipment, and supplies needed. The actual shoot is a matter of coordinating lots of people and things, and accounting for all of them. While the director concentrates on what's happening in front of the camera, the assistant directors concentrate on managing everything else. There are a few directors who like to improvise things before the camera; but most of them carefully organize everything in advance, in a desperate attempt to stay on budget and schedule.

Production: Shooting the Picture

Most movies are shot in two to four weeks. To stay on schedule and budget, everything must be in place in advance, and everyone must know his or her job. By the time the shooting starts, absolutely everything is accounted for in a schedule, and must happen like clockwork.

By this time, the producer may have been working on the project for a year or more. But now, control of the project largely passes from the producer to the director, supported by the assistant directors. The **first assistant director** is generally the manager of setting up the stage, the lighting and sound, the props, and special effects, while the **second assistant director** handles things in the background. The second assistant director is also generally responsible for managing the extras. The **second second assistant director** is the 'marshal,' making sure the cast is made up and onstage when they need to be.

If the movie has a second unit, they may go into action at this time. The second unit takes some of the burden of less-important shots off of the director. The second unit may also handle some special technical work, such as staging a car crash or an explosion. Such shots often involve **stunt doubles** who resemble the primary actors at a distance. For example, the second unit may shoot a spectacular car crash with the stunt doubles, and the director will then shoot the real actors crawling out of a wrecked car at another time. The shots will be spliced together in editing, and the audience won't realize that they were shot at different times with different people.

Actors often spend an hour or more in the makeup trailer before the day's shoot. The **key makeup person** and the **hair stylist** are responsible for seeing that the actors hair and skin looks the way it should, considering the lighting conditions to be used. These people also need to have the social skills required to put the actors at ease between scenes. And if unusual skin effects are required (such as major wounds or artificial aging effects), the services of **prosthetic technicians** are required to create and apply special skin coverings, generally made of latex rubber. And if unusual accents are required, there will often be a dialect coach here to assist the actors in getting into their character's speaking mannerisms.

Personnel known as **script supervisors** become very important during the shoot. In addition to having copies of the day's shooting scripts available, they take extensive notes on the placement and movement of people and things in front of the camera. For example, if an actor takes a drink from a glass, the script supervisor notes where the glass was before and after being picked up, and how much liquid was consumed. This is in the interest of maintaining continuity – the consistency of what's seen from one shot to the next.

The appearance of the sets is the responsibility of the **swing gang**, who install and remove set decorations and props previously designed and procured by the set decorator and property manager. If this is an outdoor shoot, or if there are live plants involved, there will also be a **greens keeper** to perform this work. For the appearance of the actors, the **wardrobe supervisor** is responsible for having the necessary clothing ready for each shot. If custom-made clothing is being used, this person will be assisted by one or more seamstresses and/or tailors, to make sure the clothing fits comfortably.

Lighting each shot takes a substantial amount of work, and there are extensive notes on the lighting plan. The gaffers are responsible for setting up and moving lights and power cables, and they must do their work quickly between scenes. There may be subtle changes required within one scene, such as a conversation with over-the-shoulder shots. It isn't unusual for the lighting to be changed between shots, meaning that the conversation will be shot in its entirety over one actor's shoulder, then the gaffers change the lights, and the same scene is shot over the other actor's shoulder. There is an assistant known as the **best boy**, who is essentially a senior electrician. There is a large amount of paraphernalia related to lighting, such as the lighting instruments themselves, reflectors and diffusers, power cables, filters and bulbs. And if this is a location shoot (on a city street, for example), the **generator operator** is also an important person.

The camera department is of critical importance during the shoot. In addition to the director of photography, the personnel consists of the **camera operator**, the **focus puller**, and the **clapper loader**. The camera operator runs the camera, of course. The focus puller is responsible for setting up the lenses and filters for each shot, and measuring the distance from the camera to the actors. The clapper loader sets up the clapper – the board held up in front of the camera at the start of each shot to denote the shot number and other important information. The sound of the clapper snapping shut gives a visual and audible mark for synchronizing the audio and visual components. The clapper loader also makes marks on the stage to note where the actors are supposed to be at certain times. Clapper loaders also change the camera film cartridges, and keep track of them before they're processed. Adjustments in camera position, lighting and sound are often made using stand-ins – people of approximately the same physical size as the real actors. This allows the camera crew to set up while the real actors are still in the makeup trailer.

The camera operator is assisted by **grips** – the people who move the camera when required. Most of the camera movement is manual, the camera being mounted on a dolly or a track. Grips hold and move the camera as required. They're also responsible for setting up rails for a tracking shot, under the direction of the director of photography. If more significant work is necessary to prepare the day's scenes, a **rigging crew** may be employed to run cranes and perform heavy lifting.

The editing department becomes the center of a lot of activity as the shoot begins. The editors must manage the raw film shot each day, and have it developed as soon as possible. The day's work is reviewed at the end of the day (often late at night) by the director, the director of photography, and other key members of the production team. Today, it isn't unusual to have both film and digital video copies of the raw footage, which allows a scene to be reviewed immediately without developing the film. But developing the film quickly is still important, since there are many factors such as lighting and filters which will look different between video and film. The editing department must manage all of the visual output from the project, and be able to locate any part of it quickly.

The **production sound mixer** has a work station (often a mobile cart) which holds a variety of audio recording, filtering and mixing devices. This person monitors the audio that comes from the boom mic, to ensure that the actor's speech is clearly recorded. If the nature of the shot prohibits a boom mic, there may be radio mics concealed under the actors' clothing. The sound mixer also operates the headsets used by the director to hear the audio. In special situations such as dancing or lip syncing to a prerecorded song, the sound mixer is responsible for playing the prerecorded material for the actors, often through concealed ear pieces connected by radio.

If the movie requires shots of automobiles, the **transportation captain** is also a key person. It's the transportation captain's job to manage the cars used in action shots in front of the cameras (called action cars), and the inactive background cars used as set dressing. This can be especially tricky in period films, where the cars must look like vehicles in use in

some particular year. It's not unusual to have duplicate cars for critical shots – one for exterior shots, and another for filming the actors driving or talking inside, in which special provisions have been made for cameras, lights and sound. Action cars may have special mounts on the outside to hold cameras. Another vehicle called an insert car may actually be towing the car with the actors inside, so that they aren't really driving. The insert car also provides power and recording equipment, as well as providing a seat for the director and camera operator.

A movie shoot employs a large number of people, all of whom need to eat. The **caterer** is an important member of the team, providing regular meals to all. There is also a table stocked with beverages and snacks called **craft service**, which keeps the cast and crew happy between meals. And if this is a location shoot, someone needs to arrange for rest rooms and first aid facilities in the vicinity of the shoot.

All of the above can burn a lot of money in a short period of time. Managing the expenses and writing the checks is the job of the **production accountant**. This person maintains day-to-day lists of expenditures, and keeps the director and producer informed of exactly how much the shoot is costing.

Post-Production: the Assembly Process

Post-production, often just called "post," is the process of assembling the film into a finished movie. During the shoot, the editing department has been developing and cataloging all of the raw film footage, and making digital copies for editing. Now begins the arduous process of selecting the best shots, putting them in order, mating the audio tapes with the filmed material, and adding music, titles and credits, and visual effects. Post generally takes longer than shooting the film, lasting anywhere from twelve weeks for a small television movie, to as long as 48 weeks for a major motion picture. But post begins when the first scenes are shot, so the editor can work concurrently, to some extent, with the shoot. The editor may give feedback to the director regarding scenes that need to be reshot.

Post is divided into three periods: one third of the time is spent editing the visual footage, another third is spent adding music and other sound enhancements, and the final third is spent printing and copying the finished production back to film. But the cost here is much less than for the shoot; whereas production employed 100 people or more, post requires only four to eight people at any one time.

When post-production starts, the line producer or unit production manager turns over control to the **post-production supervisor** (who may be listed as an **associate producer** in the credits).

Very few film editors actually touch the film itself. Today, virtually all of this work is done digitally on computer systems, of which the **Avid** is the industry standard. An Avid system is a fancy version of the iMovie and FinalCut software systems used in schools. The Avid

allows the editor to work on a digital copy of the film, stored on large computer hard drives. When all of the editing has been done digitally, the decisions made are used to cut and paste portions of the actual film, during the printing process.

The editor usually works closely with the director, and in fact, may be considered a part of the creative team. The editor selects which shots to use, and decides where they are cut, in order to create the proper sense of drama and continuity. As the film shot each day pours into the editing department, the editor assembles the shots into scenes, more or less in the order in which they are shot.

By the time the shoot is finished, the editor has assembled most of the film into a preliminary form, called the **editor's cut**. The director and editor then work together over the next six weeks to refine anything that isn't to the director's liking, into another version called the **director's cut**. This is a version of the movie without music or sound effects, but it's good enough to judge whether the scenes are successful or not.

The director's cut is then shown to the producer, who often makes some suggestions for editing changes. This results in the **producer's cut** of the film. This version is then handed over to the studio backing the project, which has the final say on any more editing changes. Sometimes the resulting film is considerably different than what the director wanted, and this can lead to a struggle between the director, the producer, and the studio. Even famous directors have sometimes lost control of their work during this process.

The producer's cut may be shown to test audiences, to gauge what the public response will be. Sometimes it's decided that part of the movie should be reshot. This is a difficult undertaking, since by this time the sets have probably been torn down, and the actors and production personnel have moved on to other projects. But there are other situations in which it is relatively easy to shoot more material, such as adding a character's point-of-view shot of a prop, to help explain something to the audience.

Eventually, the basic editing is complete, and the movie is said to be **locked**. This means that no further rearranging of shots or shooting of film can be done. There is more editing to be done, but it's mostly in the audio domain.

Sound editing is technically quite complex. The sense of space of a movie set, and its connectedness with the outside world, can be completely changed by an expert audio editor. In fact, the audio can affect the audience's experience almost as much as the visual material.

The director guides the basic decisions, such as where to insert sound effects. The audio editor takes the director's wishes and creates a **sound design** for the film. A list of sound effects and audio modifications is made, which details exactly where in the movie the audio effects are to be made. A major film may use as many as 1000 audio tracks by the time it's completed.

Sometimes the actors' voices need to be replaced with studio recordings. This happens when there's extraneous noise such as outdoor wind or traffic, when the lines originally spoken don't have the proper dramatic feel, or when the lines have been rewritten. This is done in a process called **automatic dialog replacement** (ADR), or **looping**. Portions of the film that need dialog replacement are formed into repeating loops, and the actors recite their lines, attempting to match their voices with the movements of their mouths in the loop. Several takes are usually needed, which is why the film clip loops over and over.

For sound effects such as footsteps or the dropping of an object, a **foley** studio is used. The foley is named after its creator, Jack Foley, who was a director at Universal Studios in the 1940s. This is a sound studio which produces incidental sounds of all sorts, such as footsteps, doors closing, pouring coffee, or punches during a fight. A typical foley studio has a variety of surfaces such as wooden floors, gravel walkways, water tanks, sand, and so forth; professional walkers create the sound of footsteps by walking in place. For fight scenes, foley artists provide the sounds of punches and kicks. And for crowd scenes such as parties, train stations, or ball games, a number of extras will be assembled to create vague background voices and sounds (called a **walla**).

Music is a major concern during the later post-production. A **composer** has been hired, and he or she will create music that fits the mood of the movie, as well as matching any events that need a musical accompaniment. **Music cues** are added to the sound design, indicating the starting and stopping points for musical pieces. The orchestral score may take six to eight weeks to complete. The composer often composes the basic ideas for the music on a synthesizer while watching the movie, and then fleshes out the score for an orchestra. A recording studio is rented, musicians hired, and the music is performed while an audio engineer records it on tape. It is now up to the **music editor** to blend the orchestra recordings and the composer's synthesizer tracks into a finished music track for the movie, taking care to time the musical track with the existing audio and visual material.

After the music is completed, a final mix will be created. The video, voices, sound effects and music still exist as separate elements at this point. The director, producer, editor, composer, and sound editor get together in a **dubbing facility** to create the final mix. Modern movie theaters have sophisticated surround sound equipment, and the final mix places all voices, sounds and music in combinations of five or six channels to produce surround-sound realism and dramatic effect. The dubbing facility resembles a real theater, and the various personnel can evaluate the audio quality from anywhere in the room. They will also make a version without voices, which will be used by foreign distributors to make foreign language versions by dubbing in the voices of other actors.

When the final mix is completed, the studio executives and executive producers come in to review the project. They have the right to make changes, and occasionally do.

At this time, the movie exists as one master digital copy; it's time to make an actual film version, and create duplicates for shipping to theaters and/or television networks. The

negative cutter is the person responsible for taking a list of all changes made on the digital editing equipment, and piece together clips of the film into a master copy, called a **composite print**. The Avid editing system remembers where each component of the movie came from, and prints out an **edit decision list** – the reel number and the starting and stopping frames for each clip. The negative cutter works on a computer-controlled assembly machine in a room that's dust-free and temperature controlled to keep the film as perfect as possible.

At this time, the **color timer** also goes to work. Under the supervision of the director of photography, the color timer performs sophisticated light and color adjustments on each clip of film to make the colors match up as perfectly as possible. For example, shots made on location on different days may look different, due to changes in sun position or atmospheric conditions; color timing attempts to make these shots look identical in color. Shots may also be lightened or darkened for dramatic purposes.

For copies of the film to be shown in theaters, the sound is optically printed onto the film, in audio channels alongside the visual material. For television movies, the final result is a magnetic master tape, which has the audio and video in separate channels on the tape. Networks often want the numerous channels of audio mixed down into two stereo channels.

Distribution

By this time, the movie is completely finished, and ready to be shown to the public. In the old days when the studios controlled everything, this was a simpler process. Today, the movie is generally owned by a consortium of people, with those who financed the film (the executive producers) at the top of the list. Various other people may also have a stake in the film due to the contractual agreements; for example, some stars receive a percentage of the profits when the movie hits the theaters, or is shown in reruns on television.

In most cases, the producer already has a **distributor** secured for putting the film into public venues. For independent films, however, the producer may start sending copies of the film to various **film festivals** in the U.S. and abroad, such as Sundance and Cannes, in an attempt to attract a distributor.

There are several phases to distribution: **first-run** films are hitting the theaters for the first time; **second-run** films have already been shown in the bigger movie theaters, and are now hitting the smaller theaters; **cable television** services such as HBO, are next; then **network television** gets their chance; and finally **DVD sales** are made to the home market. Each of these phases is an opportunity to make more money off of the movie. And then there's the **aftermarket sales**, such as soundtrack CDs, posters, merchandising such as action figures, and video games. There are also reruns on the various tv networks and specialty channels. Each one of these stages in delivering the film to the public has its own logic and financial considerations.

Of course, if the movie was made for network television to begin with, the distribution process is a lot simpler, since it may be shown only two or three times on one network. In the description below, I'll stick to the major movies intended for showing in theaters.

For the producer, there are two ways to work with a distributor: **leasing**, and **profit sharing**. In the leasing arrangement, the distributor pays a predetermined amount for the right to show the film in theaters and other venues for a specific time period. In the profit sharing arrangement, the distributor gets a percentage (usually 10 to 50 percent) of the profits. The former is more common in cases where a movie is certain to be a big hit, while the latter is usually the case with all other movies. When theaters lease a film, it's a gamble, and they're only willing to do that for a film that looks like a guaranteed money-maker. This process can get very political, and may include deals for a series of films from the same studio.

Bear in mind that the success or failure of a film is often a result of reviews and word-of-mouth publicity, or "buzz." It's also a matter of the competition – a great film may be pushed aside by a more popular one of lesser quality. People go to theaters for many different reasons, and the distributor's job is to predict the market for this type of film (action adventure, teen comedy, romance, family film, etc) and generate publicity in advance. The name recognition of the stars and director is also a big factor in predicting success, and that's one reason why stars get millions of dollars for acting in a film.

It may surprise you to learn that theaters make very little money on ticket sales. Most of that money goes back to the distributor, who then passes a lot of the profits back to the film's owners. Theaters make most of their money on **concession sales** – popcorn, candy and sodas. In the profit-sharing arrangement, the theater gets a certain fixed amount (called the **nut**) for their basic operating expenses. Profits over the nut mostly go back to the distributor, with the theater getting only 10 percent or so. That's why popcorn costs so much in a theater!

In either the leasing or the profit-sharing model, one of the first things the distributor will do is arrange **screenings** for critics and theater owners. The result of the screenings and the deals made for showing the film determine the number of **prints** the distributor needs to make. A print is a copy of the master film, and costs about \$2000 for each one. The prints are sent to the theaters a few days before the opening, and are returned to the distributor at the end of the movie's engagement in that theater.

The distributor not only sends prints to theaters, but also mounts a **marketing campaign** to attract people to those theaters. During production, a **photographer** is on the set to take still shots for use in advertising. The distributor makes posters for theaters, advertisements for newspapers, and promotional ads for television and radio. There is often an agreement with the principle stars to go on the "talk circuit," which means they are booked into late-night talk shows and other public venues to promote the film. There are

also **premieres** to attend, generally in Hollywood or New York, in which the stars get to show off for the press reporters and photographers, generating more publicity for the film.

The distributor will hold **screenings** of the movie for critics in magazines, tv shows, and local newspapers, hoping to get a favorable review as the movie opens in theaters. A favorable review is almost essential for a movie to be a hit.

These days, the distributor almost always contracts with a **web designer** to set up a web site for the film. Internet word-of-mouth can generate a lot of interest in a film, and a web site is a great advantage. There are also many sites on the Internet, such as movie fan sites, review sites, and the Internet Movie Database (imdb.com) where a favorable mention will be seen by lots of people.

For a major motion picture, there may also be **marketing agreements** with fast food chains, theme parks, and other family entertainment venues. For example, “action figures” may be packaged with meals at hamburger restaurants, and promotional tee shirts sold at theme parks. This is only for movies thought to have a huge appeal among youngsters (such as Star Wars, or Batman) – but for those films, merchandising can bring in a huge amount of money.

In the past decade or so, the **home market** has become increasingly important as a source of revenue. Many critics and parents complain about the large number of movies that are action-adventures, sex comedies, or teen silliness. But these are the movies that sell on DVD in large numbers. The distribution business is all about making money, and the more sensational movies are much easier to market to teens and young adults with money to spend.

That’s a Wrap!

Next time you watch a movie in a theater, stick around at the end, and watch the credits. Whether it’s a movie by a big-name director like Steven Spielberg, or an up-and-coming new director you’ve never heard of, chances are you’ll see hundreds of people listed in the credits. And hopefully, after reading this, you’ll understand more about what those people do, and how they work together to make films we will all remember.