



New Rules

**Navigating film's
unfixed future**

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Every film is a prototype. There are no rules for making it in the film industry. Not here, not in any other guide you might read. Every film ever made is attempting to do something no one's ever done before, and that nobody's asking for. No one is clambering at the door of any filmmaker asking them to deliver a new film, yet they are still out there, making them, putting their blood, sweat and tears into their work, receiving no after no. But filmmaking is a marathon, not a sprint.

Securing funding is an uphill battle, making a film is another, and, after all that, getting it seen by the right people—or any people—is a whole 'nother struggle. The rules for financing, production and distribution are ever-changing.

With film, there were never any rules to begin with.

What you will find here is not solutions, but honesty: Unvarnished insights from people who have made films their art and their career. Filmmakers who have knocked it out of the park with their debut features: Molly Manning Walker, who won the Un Certain Regard prize at Cannes with “How to Have Sex;” Charlotte Regan, whose “Scrapper” picked up the Grand Jury Prize for the World Cinema Dramatic Competition at Sundance; and Rich Peppiatt whose worldwide hit, “Kneecap,” was the first Irish-language film to ever screen at Sundance and now, Ireland’s Oscar entry. Not all filmmakers have the same inspiration sources, either: we speak to writer-director Janicza Bravo, who made the boundary-pushing “Zola,” inspired by a 148-tweet-long Twitter thread, and multifaceted filmmaker Amrou Al-Kadhi, who took inspiration from their own life to make “Layla.”

Created in collaboration with Women Under the Influence (WUTI), an organization that challenges the misconceptions of the film industry, the filmmakers interviewed in this series are not here to offer a one-size-fits-all solution either; there’s no perfect pitch method or shortcut to funding. Neither do they all have the same entry point into the industry: Al-Kadhi started as a film festival volunteer; Walker was a cinematographer; and Bravo was a production designer. Some of them have made dozens of shorts, like Regan, while others have made branded content, like Peppiatt. Some make films out of their own experiences, while others elevate other people’s stories.

What these conversations reveal is the thinking—strategic and creative—behind the ways they made their films. Creative roles are malleable and multifaceted. Writer-directors are expected to think about budgets, as well as stories, which Regan points out has made her “wonder if my ideas are capable of getting financed or not.”

It would be easy to separate “us” (the filmmakers) from “them” (the industry)—but that’s not what we’re going for here. The insights collected here include not just filmmaker voices, but distributors, producers and executives, too. People who hold the metaphorical purse strings are not the enemies of storytellers, but rather their champions. Farhana Bhula, experienced development executive and currently head of creative at Film4, is honest about the fierce competition, and is interested in debut films that “announce the kind of filmmaker they want to be.” Distributors, like Graham Fulton from Conic, are constantly searching for films they fall in love with. Distribution is not just a sale: it’s a partnership, and “the right partner is the one that is in love with what you’ve created and will fight for it,” he says. The film industry is still reeling from the WGA and SAG-AFTRA strikes that paralyzed it last year. Budgets for public funders have been slashed, and private investors are more cautious. After all, every film is a massive gamble. But there is a sense of optimism underlying this guide that comes from experience. Octavia Peissel, producer of Wes Anderson’s “Asteroid City” and “The French Dispatch,” reminds us that “people are out there looking for good stories.” There have been crises before, and there will be new ones again. That has never stopped filmmakers from telling their stories—and it shouldn’t stop you.

The most exciting thing about the industry, a constant that has come up in conversations about pitching, studio expectations, funding and distribution, is the importance of creating and nurturing a community. In film, this can be an audience who hungrily devours stories, who go to the cinemas and talk about what they’ve seen. It can be the distributors, buyers and sellers of films, who convene at international festivals to pore over the films that excite them the most. It can also be filmmakers themselves, who find each other, in spite of often being pitted against one another. “There’s still lots of aspects of filmmaking that feel incredibly lonely,” says Bravo, but this is changing. A growing community of cinephiles and makers alike are putting on screenings, mentoring each other and finding ways of telling the stories that they want to tell. In the end, it comes down to people: people’s stories, working with people, sharing a film with people.

Film is an industry built on relationships, on community as much as ambition. If you take anything from this guide, it’s not that it’s how-to-make films, but how-to-approach making films. There are no closed doors here. Just opportunities, sparks, new avenues of thinking. Like producer-turned-writer and director Joy Gharoro-Akpojotor says, “A no is never really a no.”

——— **AB:** Anna Bogutskaya

AB: Anna Bogutskaya is an award-nominated London-based author, critic, film programmer, podcaster and creative producer. She is the co-founder of the horror film collective The Final Girls, a screening series turned popular podcast, and previously was the films and events programmer at the BFI, where she curated many seasons and created the Woman With A Movie Camera Summit. Her new book, “Feeding The Monster,” is out now.

**With film,
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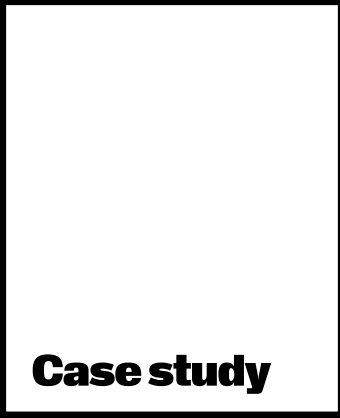
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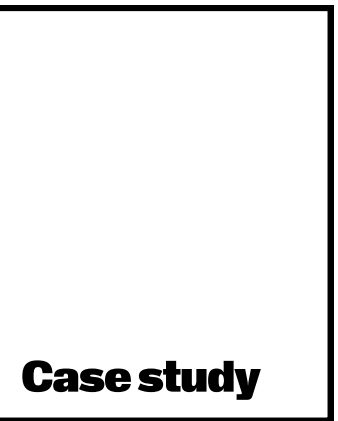
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Finding your audience

JB: Janicza Bravo is a writer and director based in Los Angeles. Her feature film debut, “Lemon,” which premiered at Sundance, was distributed by Magnolia Pictures. Her second feature, “Zola,” also premiered at Sundance, and was distributed by A24 and Sony International.

GF: Graham Fulton is co-CEO of Conic, and has ten years of experience selling and distributing films direct to cinemas, film festivals and distributors in more than a hundred countries. Until 2022 he was director of international sales at distributor Park Circus.

MMW: Molly Manning Walker is a director, writer and cinematographer. Her debut feature, “How to Have Sex,” won the Prix Un Certain Regard at the Cannes Film Festival in 2023 and was distributed by MUBI.

FB: Farhana Bhula is head of creative at Film4. Prior to that, she was a development and production executive in the BFI’s Film Fund. She’s the producer of “How to Have Sex” and “All of Us Strangers,” among many others.

TD: Tabitha Denholm is a director of music videos, documentary shorts and commercials. She is the founder of Women Under the Influence (WUTI), an organization championing women and storytellers in film through bespoke events.

How film distribution is changing

Today, the toughest part of filmmaking might not even be making the film, but getting it seen by the right audiences. First, that's the festival programmers who put on international film festivals like Sundance, Cannes, Berlin and Toronto. Then, the critics who review the film, and the sales agents and distributors who buy and release them. And, finally, the audiences, the people who go to the cinema, or click 'Start' on a streaming platform.

It's no secret that the distribution landscape has been radically shifting for years. The revolution in viewing habits, introduced by streaming platforms like Netflix, (which went from 24 million subscribers in 2012 to 277 million this year), cinema attendance still being lower than pre-pandemic levels, a record amount of new releases in cinemas (1,013 films in 2023) and good old-fashioned inflation have created new challenges for filmmakers and distributors alike.

Nowadays you need strategic thinking, collaboration with a distributor and community-building to get your film seen not just by audiences but by the *right* audiences.

TD: In the current distribution landscape, what would you say are some of the major new barriers to getting your work into the world?

FB: One of the first things that has definitely become more of an issue in the last year or so is just the rising cost of production, and the market not supporting the size of the budgets that are needed. Filmmakers are wanting to make really ambitious work, but actually needing to find more innovative ways to raise that finance. At Film4, we make about four debuts a year. And every year, it feels like there's a lot of competition for those slots.

GF: I think the change has been at an audience level. For starters, ticket prices have gone up, so audiences are economically-stretched. And, from a distribution standpoint, there are more films falling through the gaps, because we're still working in a slightly old-fashioned model of paying a potentially big fee for a film that's maybe premiered at a big festival [instead of looking outside of that system].

TD: Do you think it is important to look at distribution in innovative ways?

MMW: I think we actually need to talk about cinema in a different way. If the film community started talking about each other, it would spiral outwards into culture, too. I think we could be more generous as a community.

JB: There's cultural currency to what you've seen, how much you've seen. Even outside of creative spaces, if I were on the subway or if I were standing in line at a coffee shop, there would be someone talking about a film.

TD: What makes a really good partnership between the distribution company and film?

GF: From our point of view, we've got to fall in love with the film before we even start the discussions. The right partner is the one that is in love with what you've created and will fight for it and spend the money, but also dedicate all their resources to find that audience and get it out there and get the most exposure. When we pitch, we put a plan together as to what we'll do for that film for the first few years of its life and how we'll take care of it. ■



Scrapper (2023), Charlotte Regan, behind the scenes

Graham Fulton

“The right partner is the one that is in love with what you’ve created and will fight for it.”

How to Have Sex

Molly Manning Walker's debut film, "How to Have Sex," starring Mia McKenna-Bruce as a teenager who has a traumatic experience while on holiday abroad, premiered at the Cannes Film Festival in 2023, and won the Un Certain Regard prize. Walker worked closely with Farhana Bhula during the film's production, which was undertaken by Film4. After receiving rave reviews, it was released internationally by MUBI. Before her filmmaking debut, Walker had already established herself as a talented cinematographer working on short films and music videos, as well as Charlotte Regan's "Scrapper." Since the shorts she directed were made during the pandemic, the Cannes premiere of "How to Have Sex" was the first time she saw one of her films screened in a cinema with an audience.

TD: Molly, you won Un Certain Regard, the newcomer prize at Cannes. The film was already sold before you were at the festival, but did you feel that momentum shift after you got the award? How did that help "How To Have Sex?"

MMW: It was a massive shift. We finished the film on a Friday, and we went to Cannes on a Tuesday. So there wasn't really a moment where we were sitting on it and wondering what it meant. It was more just like, "Finish, finish, finish." I went to Cannes with the mindset of "Let's celebrate this amazing experience that we all had." The whole cast and crew were a very tight-knit team, and the pressure of Cannes was different, because everyone was happy the film was alive and celebrated by an audience. It made the team so happy. I was so naive I didn't even know there were awards in Un Certain Regard! I didn't know there was the possibility of winning anything. When I left Cannes, I didn't think I was getting called back, so I packed my passport in the middle of my suitcase, because I was going by car. So when we got the call to come back, it was all very hectic.

FB: Festivals can be a really important launch pad, especially for a debut. And launching at a festival is often the first part of connecting with audiences when you're an emerging filmmaker. Because when you're making a debut film, you're not necessarily thinking about the audience in the traditional sense. You're thinking about launching yourself as a filmmaker. The festivals are often the place where you're first able to do that. And from an audience perspective, what the Cannes audience was enjoying in "How to Have Sex" is probably very different from what a younger audience watching that film in a cinema would. I remember people saying for a film to work at Cannes, it has to be really poetic. But actually the energy of "How to Have Sex" was also part of what made it a really fun experience to screen there.

TD: How were you engaging your viewership after the festival run?

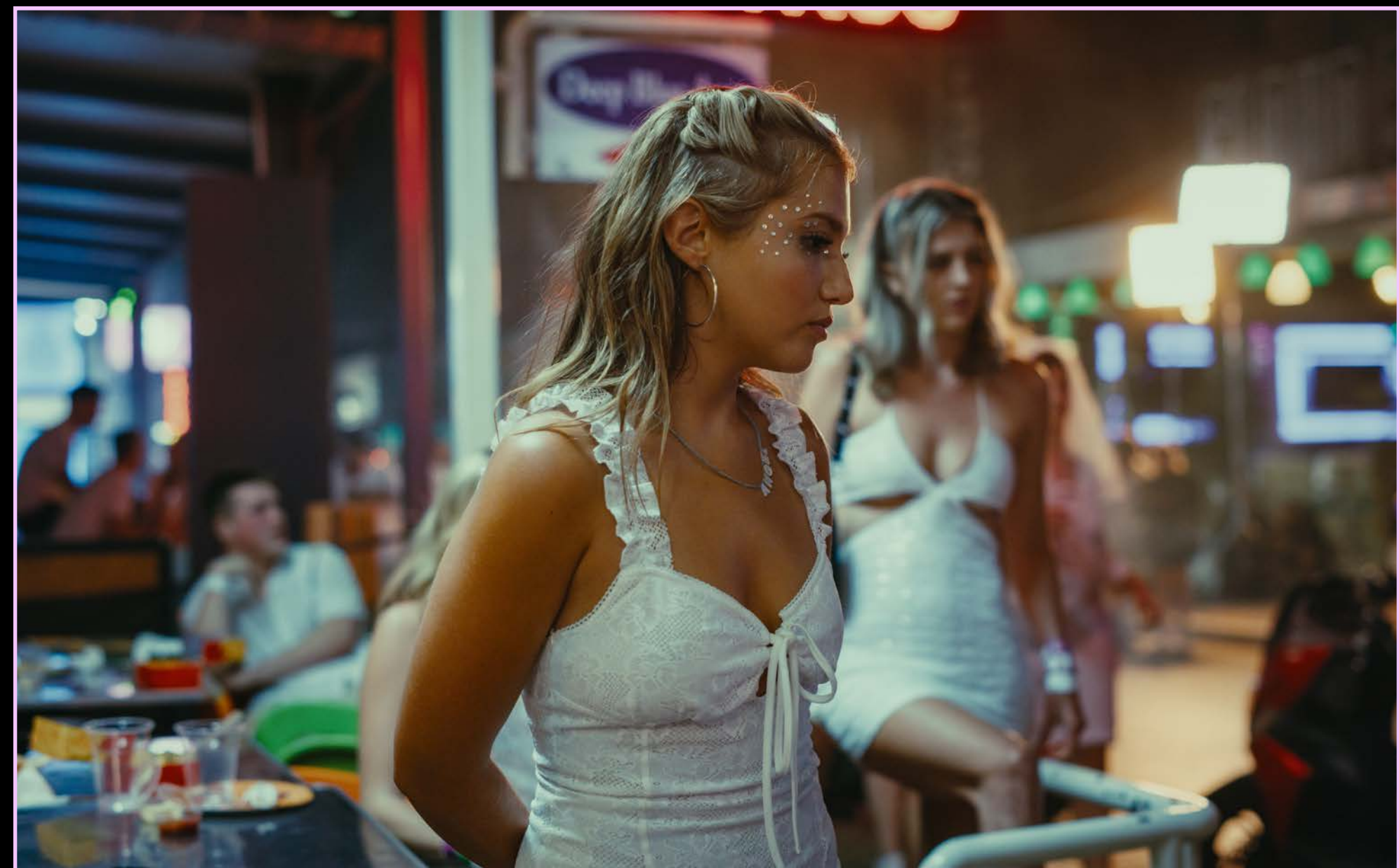
MMW: We definitely tried to get the cast involved to share as much as possible on social media, and we were on platforms where we knew our younger audience were, like TikTok. But we also went into schools and did workshops with younger people to engage them, which was really important to me.

FB: With a film like "How to Have Sex," you would imagine it was made for younger audiences, but actually the way the campaign took hold, it was marketed towards cinephile audiences, and then the younger audiences came later. And, actually, I think sometimes the people who you think something is going to be for maybe need a bit more help to get to the film; you need to create a long enough runway to make sure that they will be able to access it at some point in the journey.

MMW: You can't necessarily second-guess who your audience is going to be. We thought that it was a younger audience, and then we realized that all of those people that went on those holidays have grown up and also need this film. So it was kind of a strange evolution of the audience.



How to Have Sex (2023),
Molly Manning Walker



TD: You released “How to Have Sex” with MUBI, but had a theatrical release as well. Was that important to you?

MMW: Yeah, of course. That was how it was intended to be seen, and the way that we built the sound was very obviously for that theatrical moment. So it would’ve been really sad if we didn’t get that. But also, you don’t think about who or where the audience is when you’re making a film, you just hope there is an audience.

FB: At Film4, we are all obviously aware of the streamers, but the films that we’ve made in the last few years that have done really well, and that have done well at the box office, are those that have a singular voice and are authored—films like “Poor Things,” “The Zone of Interest,” “All of Us Strangers” and “How to Have Sex.” Those are films that could only have been made by those filmmakers, and that, to me, just continues to demonstrate that making very singular work will always stand the test of time. So yes, we should be thinking about the audience, but artistic expression and creative excellence has to come first, because that’s what will make sure that cinemas continue to have a reason to exist.

TD: How did the distribution deal with MUBI come about, and why did you decide to work with them?

MMW: They really loved the film, and they fought for it. They’d had a good run with “Aftersun” the previous year, and thought that it would be a similar audience.

FB: Culture vultures. That’s what they called the audience, and it was one that they understood.

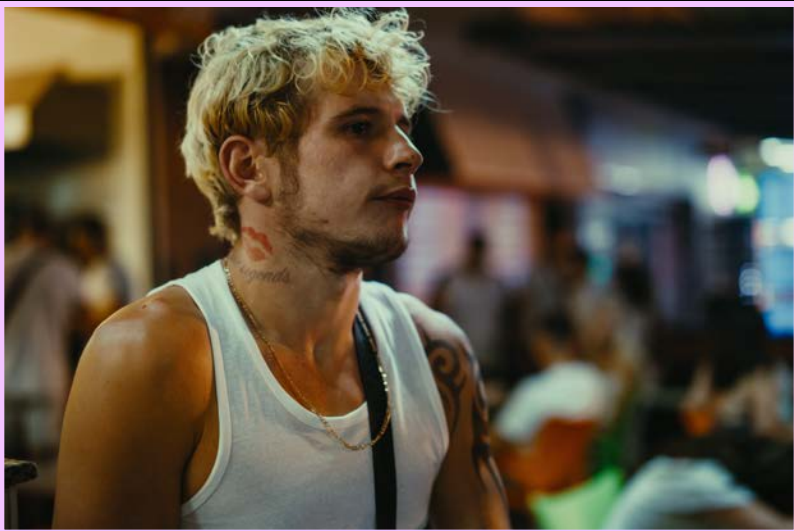
MMW: But also, I just really liked the people, and they liked us. It was a good combination of humans that were fighting in the right direction, which I think life is about.

TD: Do you have any advice for emerging filmmakers, Molly?

MMW: Someone asked me the other day, “Why do you make films?” And I was like, it’s because of people. You like people’s stories, you like audiences, you like people on crews, you enjoy people’s company. And so, I think, try and enjoy other people. ■

Molly Manning Walker

“If the film community started talking about each other, it would spiral outwards into culture, too.”



All images: How to Have Sex (2023), Molly Manning Walker

Zola

Janicza Bravo has been making films since 2011, and her short, “Gregory Go Boom,” won the Sundance Short Film Jury Award for US fiction in 2014. Her first feature, “Lemon” (2017), premiered at Sundance, as did her second, “Zola” (2020), based on the viral 148-tweet thread by A’Ziah “Zola” King, which was dubbed at the time “Twitter’s own Citizen Kane.” Starring Taylour Paige, Riley Keough, Nicholas Braun and Colman Domingo, the film was released by A24 to near-universal acclaim, and was nominated across seven categories at the Independent Spirit Awards.

TD: What were the distribution experiences like with “Lemon” versus “Zola?” And, were there any lessons you learned with “Lemon” that you brought to “Zola?”

JB: How much time you got! With “Lemon,” the answer to that question is slightly different when you haven’t made anything yet, or when you have no calling card. Making my first feature took five years. And whether or not I wanted to answer the question of who the audience was—or if there even was an audience—I realized that part of it was selling myself, and pushing a narrative of who it was for, because it would come up, and because the question of value was something that hung over the worth of the piece itself.

With “Zola,” we premiered at Sundance at the beginning of 2020. I was a deeply unfun person in that experience. I cared about it so much, and I really wanted it to have this life that I had imagined for myself. And then that was over. By the time it came out ... it was coming out in an environment where there wasn’t even really an audience to watch it [because of COVID-19]. Theaters were at half capacity. I was waiting—I don’t know what I was waiting for—like there was going to be some answer or some door that would say, “Now you get to celebrate.” I just thought that was really unfortunate, because the way it arrived was not at all how I had wanted it to.

The film was based on a Twitter story that had been told some years before it. I found myself really thinking about how the internet seems to thrive on how you get things wrong. I’m not on Twitter, but I felt we needed to embrace that platform, and also allow the audience to partake in what their experience was of the film and allow them to be very loud about whether they felt we got it right or didn’t get it right.

Were “Lemon” and “Zola” different? Yes. Did I learn lessons? Absolutely. The top lesson from both of those experiences was to celebrate the small stuff and to not wait for this future where I thought I had deserved or earned celebration, or some sort of ease, or some moment where my shoulders dropped. ■

Janicza Bravo

“The top lesson was to celebrate the small stuff and to not wait for this future where I thought I had earned celebration.”

How to work with distributors

For filmmakers that don't have an A24, Film4 or MUBI backing them, the most important people for their film's journey are their producers and the contacts they make. When it comes to getting your film distributed (of course there are always exceptions to the rule), the traditional pipeline is: a sales agent might come on board a film at script stage, ensuring some of its financing through international sales, filmmakers will premiere their films at festivals, aided in part by the sales agent, who then aims to sell their film to local distributors, who, in turn, design bespoke release campaigns for each territory.

As our panelists attested to, it can be a small industry, and distributors from all around the world will often share knowledge personally, too—having drinks and talking about the films they see at festivals, and whether they plan to acquire them or not. A sales agent or a distributor can be instrumental in securing a spot at a prestigious festival that starts this journey for a filmmaker, but, as the industry landscape continues to shift, festivals might not be the right fit for every film or every filmmaker.

TD: When you're starting a project, should you be already thinking about your audience?

JB: For me, at the end of a project, that comes up a lot. I have a sense of who I believe the audience is, or who I would like the audience to be. But when it comes to writing or directing, I'm thinking, first and foremost, how to feed myself and how to take care of the people that I've invited into this world-building experience. By the time you're in post-production, it definitely comes up with the people who've given you the money to make the thing. They bring it up, and it certainly lingers. But I gotta turn myself on first. I'm not saying that's the hard-and-fast way to do it. It's just the thing that works for me, to nurture myself first.

FB: I think as a financier, we are thinking about creative excellence first. Hopefully, if something is really good, then the people will come. If you're trying to second-guess an audience, I'm not sure that always leads to the most truthful work.

MMW: You can feel it as an audience member if people are trying to pander to an audience.

FB: With debuts in particular, it really is about filmmakers being able to make something that is going to be the best expression of their voice, and something that is going to announce the kind of filmmaker they want to be, or the spark or the voice that they have that's going to launch them. That's the reason we make the debuts. Once you've made it, then you may want to bring on a sales agent. I think what's more important is making something that is important to you, that you feel represents you, that is a story that you think is worth telling in a way that you want to say it. When you're making your first feature, you should be slightly unburdened by some of those commercial considerations, which will come later on in your career, when you want to make bigger budget work.



Slow (2023), Marija Kavtaradze

“When it comes to writing or directing, I’m thinking first and foremost, how to feed myself.”

Janicza Bravo

GF: Let’s face it, the whole film industry is just everyone taking massive gambles. So if you’re taking something that’s already had a good critical response, and you’ve got some people around you saying, “This is great” ... that makes me feel a little bit better about investing in it. But certainly other than that, the public don’t care about what actually happens at the festivals. When it comes down to a couple going for their date night on a Friday night, deciding if they’re going to spend £16 a ticket on the new Tom Cruise film or the Ukrainian thriller that played at Directors’ Fortnight, festivals won’t affect their decision. There’s been plenty of examples recently of films that have not played big festivals and have found great success. We find the smaller, more regional festivals really useful, because it is more of a public, paying audience. So you can see how they’re attracted to the film and the program.

TD: And, from a filmmaker point of view, once you have your distribution in place, is it a collaborative process, or do you trust them because they know what they’re doing?

JB: I feel very involved in what the life of the film is once it exists. It’s really tough not to be. It feels like it’s my DNA, for better or worse. Probably for worse, because I’m sure my whole mentality is completely irrational, but it does feel like a part of me. It’s like some part of my soul now exists in this product that’s a line sheet on someone’s account book. I imagine that sometimes a film’s success is very much connected to how the distributor and the filmmaker have danced about. I think the best version of that is to be hand-in-hand.



FB: Totally. You have to believe that the distributor understands you—and understands the film—so that they can talk about it and put it out in the world in a way that you feel represents the work.

GF: We’ll always have an introductory call with filmmakers to get their input and see how much they want to be involved. And it’s always extremely helpful. For example, if we know that the director’s got family in Newcastle, then let’s do an event there, because it will have an audience. If you didn’t include the filmmaker, it would devalue the release.

FB: I think it is tricky territory, because for some film-makers, their work has done the talking, and I question how appropriate it actually is for them to have to delve into personal experience when they’re out promoting the film. And I think some filmmakers really want to talk about their experience, and really want to open up in that way, but not many do. For many, it’s already in the work. ■



All images: Slow (2023), Marija Kavtaradze

“Trying to second-guess an audience does not lead to the most truthful work.”

Farhana Bhula

How to work with streamers

Big streamers like Netflix, Amazon Prime Video and Apple TV+ have restructured the way that films are produced, released and even watched. Prior to streamers, films would make their costs back by being released in cinemas and on DVD/Blu-ray. With the rise of streamers, the latter has been decimated. Plus, streamers have leveled the playing field of film and series, and increased the audience for documentaries, tripling the amount of documentaries produced.

Alongside the big streamers, one of the bright spots has been the emergence of the more curated platforms, such as MUBI (who also release films themselves), Curzon Home Cinema, BFI Player and Criterion Channel or Shudder. By specializing, each streamer is creating their own audience and recognizable brand: BFI and Criterion, for instance, favor classic, arthouse and international cinema; Shudder specializes in horror films; and MUBI will instantly conjure up a type of film—edgy, boundary-pushing, filmmaker-driven art films.

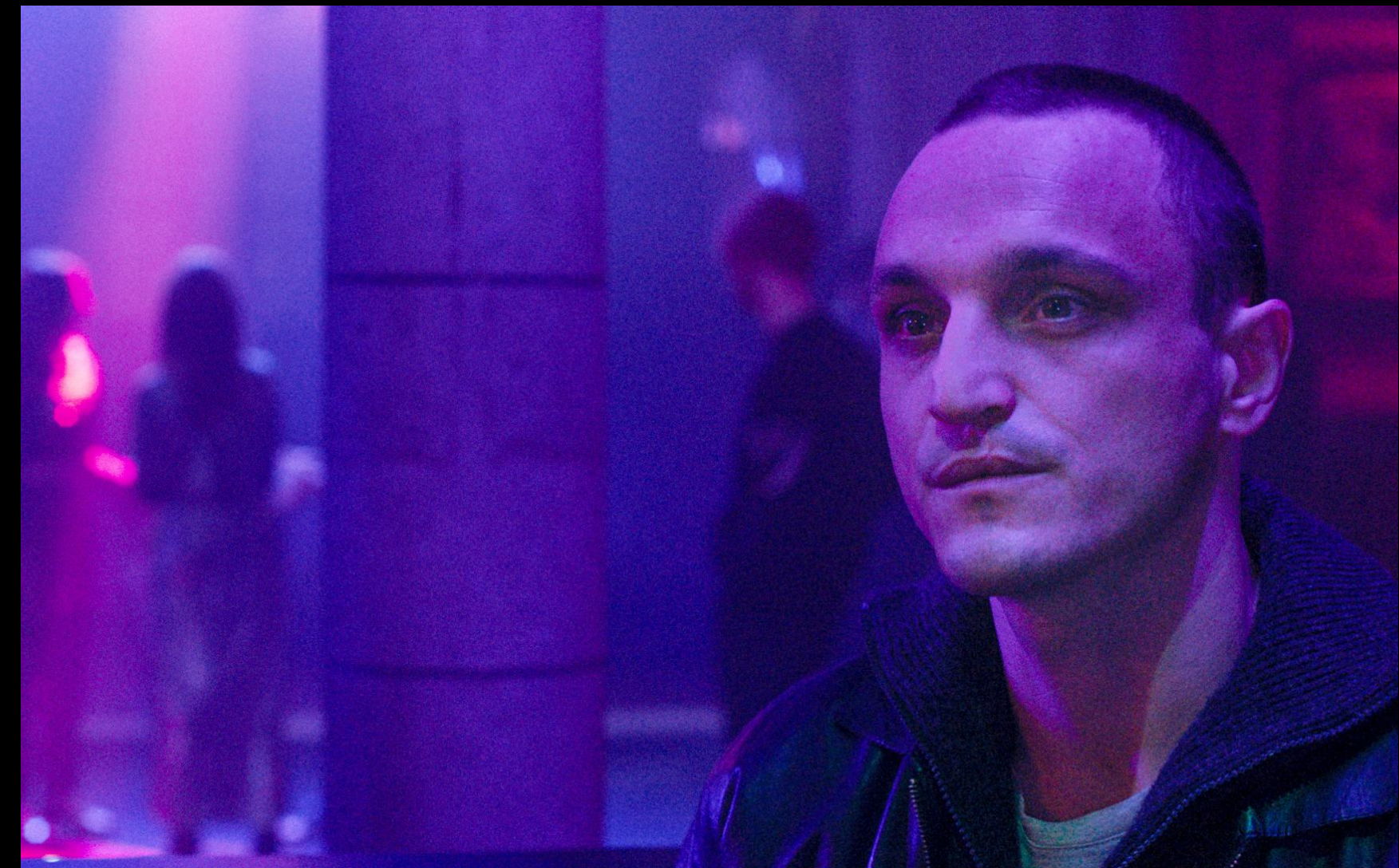
GF: The landscape is changing all the time. The streaming services seem to change their buying habits every six months. There are advantages, though. For example, there are audiences in the UK and US that are now more open to foreign-language films, and reading subtitles, because of [shows] like “Squid Game.” They’re also more open to documentaries that may seem on the surface to be depressing or more difficult. It’s the cultural footprint, though, that can be really difficult to build. Films that are released on Netflix [without any marketing] can just [go unnoticed].

MMW: MUBI, who distributed “How to Have Sex,” were very collaborative, very good at welcoming the filmmaker into the process and understanding it. They care a lot about what a director thinks of the campaign. But also, there’s a point where you have to give over a bit of trust to be like, “They understand what they’re doing. I’m not a marketer. I don’t understand that process.” That was a tricky thing when you feel like you’re giving your soul over.

JB: Exactly. Sometimes the audience is changing, and sometimes where it lives is changing, and you kind of have to trust that journey a little bit.

GF: The most effective way to get people to go and see a film is still word-of-mouth.

As a distributor, we release a film on a Friday, and then we speak to all the cinemas that are showing it on the Monday, because they make the decision then whether they’ll keep it on for the following week. And if it’s just somehow not picked up, or really taken flight in any significant way, and they’ve got another 20 films being released the following Friday, you’re getting dropped. Just quite recently, it feels like it’s changing a lot. We’re trying to go more hyper-local, working with a lot more local grassroots consultants. Obviously, that is a more independent model. If you’ve got a major studio behind you, you’re on buses, you’re on bus stops, you’re on billboards, you’re on TV, radio, and that builds the campaign. ■



Disco Boy (2023), Giacomo Abbruzzese

“The most effective way to get people to go and see a film is still word-of-mouth.”

Graham Fulton



How to tailor the campaign to the audience

Speaking to an audience you're trying to reach means speaking their language. With "Zola," Janicza Bravo knew A24 might not be able to reach the specific audience whose endorsement and approval she wanted for her film. So she took matters into her own hands, even if it was just sending Instagram DMs herself. Similarly, Molly Manning Walker had the kudos of the prestigious Cannes Film Festival and a MUBI distribution deal, but she wanted to make sure young people would see the film, even if it meant screening it for free at schools and losing out on income.

Neon, who released the zeitgeisty horror film "Longlegs" in 2024, engineered a campaign to create buzz and word-of-mouth through the deployment of enigmatic trailers, a fake voicemail, fake blog posts and other stunts (including releasing a recording of actress Maika Monroe's heart rate spiking when filming a scene) that got audiences engaging with the film before it was even in cinemas, or anyone knew what the plot was. "Barbie," arguably the biggest film released in 2023, capitalized on the pink color palette, hosting a massive pink carpet, instead of the traditional red, put up the Barbie house as an AirBnB listing, had star Margot Robbie dress in vintage Barbie clothes in every single appearance, and engaged with the unexpected pairing of "Barbie" and rival release "Oppenheimer" to create the world-wide phenomenon known as Barbenheimer. On the more independent side, UK-based curators-turned-distributors We Are Parable based the campaign of their first release as distributors, "Earth Mama" (2023), on the goodwill from their cinema relationships and the inbuilt trust with audiences. People who had attended their previous events knew they would likely enjoy their first release and therefore supported the film.

All of Us Strangers (2023),
Andrew Haigh, Film4.
Courtesy of Searchlight
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20th Century Studios and TSG
Entertainment Finance LLC.





Above and below:
Paradise Is Burning (2023),
Mika Gustafson

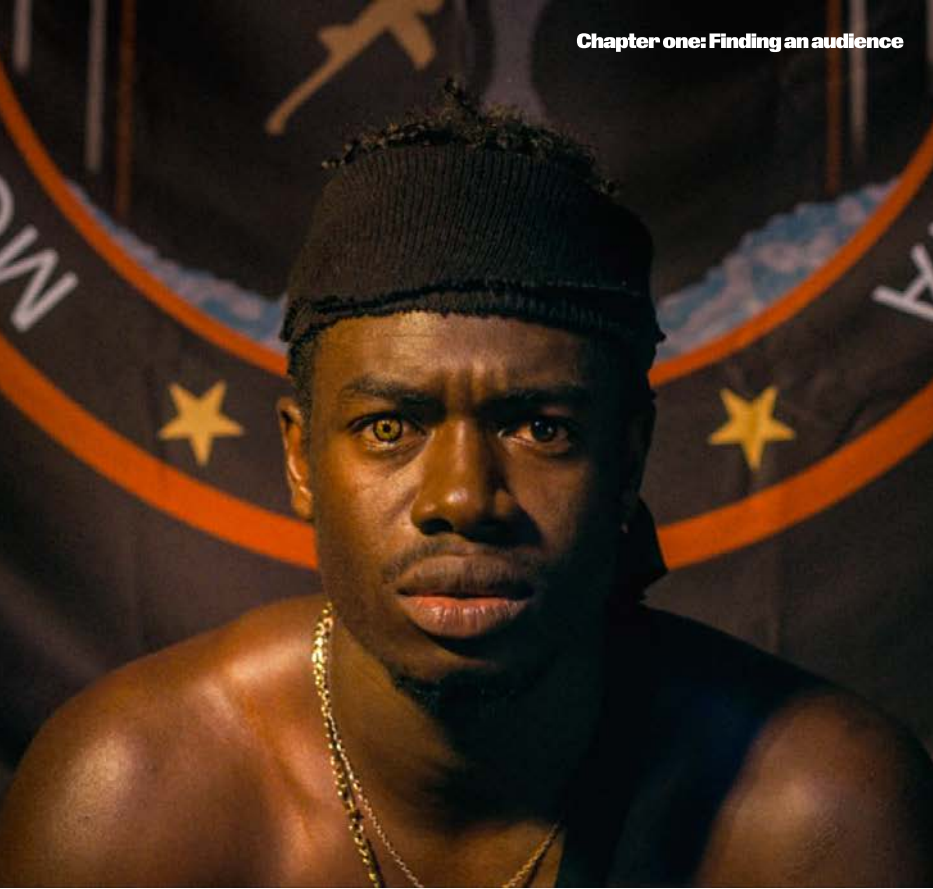
“With debuts it really is about filmmakers being able to make something that is going to be the best expression of their voice.” Farhana Bhula

JB: The two priorities for me with regards to releasing “Zola” were that I wanted Black people to see the movie, because I didn’t feel that A24 really had a record of pushing their movies to Black audiences. The movie is Black, the lead is Black, and I’m also Black. And then the other thing we needed was the allyship of sex workers and people who worked in the sex industry. If they approved, then I felt we had done it, because the film is very much about sex work as work. None of us knew how to get the movie out to sex workers. I didn’t know anything, and the distributor didn’t either. So I would write to people on Instagram, and I think I was writing a really different kind of message probably than some of the messages they were getting. I was like, “Hi, my name is Janicza. I’m a filmmaker. I made this movie, and it was based on this story that was on Twitter.”

MMW: Obviously the cinema campaign was one of the elements of “How to Have Sex,” but for me, it was really important that we got it into schools, because that was the place where it felt like it could change people’s emotional experience with life. So we partnered with a charity called the Schools Consent Project. That had to be a conversation with the distributors, because they had to agree for it to be shown for a very small fee or for nothing. MUBI got on board with that, which I think is quite a rare thing, because it’s getting shown to a lot of people for not a lot of money. But it was something that everyone was really fighting to do.

JB: When we finally had the experience of getting to watch the movie in a mixed audience, which happened a year and a half after its Sundance premiere, it was so thrilling, because there were things that worked for young Black people and things that worked for white people, and things that worked for both of them together. The multiculturalism of that experience was so essential to the movie. The movie is very much about a relationship between a Black and a white woman. You need race play in the audience because the movie was all race play, so we really needed Black, white dynamics or just mixed dynamics. ■

Left: Paradise Is Burning
(2023), Mika Gustafson
Right: Disco Boy (2023),
Giacomo Abbruzzese



Paradise Is Burning
(2023), Mika Gustafson



How to build a community

Whether a film gets a cinema release or goes straight to a streaming platform, is shown at festivals or only through event screenings, the point of getting work seen becomes a question of community. Building a community around a film might be around its subject matter, like “How to Have Sex” did with their campaign to increase knowledge around consent, or it might be taste-based, building trust over the long-term with an audience who learns to trust that you’re going to put on a cracking screening, like We Are Parable did for almost a decade before they released “Earth Mama.” Or it might be about established filmmakers mentoring emerging ones.

Film collectives like Milk Tea Films, which organizes screenings of East and Southeast Asian films, or Reclaim the Frame, which puts on screenings of films made by women and marginalized voices, can be great advocates for your film because they’ve already built an audience around an interest or cause. They already have the database, the systems and the relationships with venues. At its simplest, a community can be built just based on watching and loving films.

TD: There are obviously many ways to go about building anticipation and community for your film. Have you ever considered getting established executive producers on board to use their names and networks to help with promotion?

FB: I think the US is better at seasoned filmmakers supporting emerging filmmakers with their name and helping them. There’s just that culture of an experienced filmmaker putting on a screening for a new filmmaker to show their work and inviting all their friends. I think we could definitely do more of that in the UK.

JB: I think the work we do can be so isolating, and the onus is on us to reach back or reach forward. When I first started, I felt very alone, and there’s still lots of aspects of filmmaking that feel incredibly lonely. But there’s this really big gap where it’s not at the forefront of my mind to reach out, and it’s because I wasn’t reared like that. I hope that younger filmmakers are undoing that. I’m also trying to change my own relationship to how I asked for care, but it wasn’t there when I arrived.

MMW: I might feel very lucky to have Charlotte Regan in my life, because we grew up together making films, and now we have each other. It’s also not easy to have those relationships, and to be able to rely on each other and navigate your own ego in different ways is so important. It takes work, but the most exciting thing about filmmaking is community, and having people around you just will take time and work.

TD: Which takes us back to the beginning, the full circle, that it is important to try and find your partners, your allies. How do you feel about the future?

FB: I feel excited about the filmmakers that we’re working with, and I feel really optimistic about the new audiences they will bring with them. I think it would be disingenuous to not recognize that there are a lot of people who are out of work, and I think we are still suffering from the knock-on effects of the strikes.

GF: Every year I go to festivals, and there’s always at least two or three films that blow your socks off. Sometimes they’re rough around the edges, but they’re just bringing something that makes you excited. I don’t believe people when they sit there and say, “I didn’t see anything good.”

JB: Hopeful. Molly, of course, because you’re here.

MMW: Very hopeful because you’re here, too! ■

Top: Paradise Is Burning (2023), Mika Gustafson
Bottom: Disco Boy (2023), Giacomo Abbruzzese



Left and right: "How to Have Sex" (2023)
Molly Manning Walker

“It takes work, but the most exciting thing about filmmaking is community.”

Molly Manning Walker

Finding and protecting your ideas

CM: Crystal Moselle is a writer and director known for her documentary, “The Wolfpack,” which won the US Grand Jury Prize at Sundance. Her distinctive style-bending documentary narrative is evident in her feature, “Skate Kitchen,” and its HBO adaptation, “Betty.” Later this year she will be releasing her new film, “The Black Sea.”

AA-K: Amrou Al-Kadhi is a British-Iraqi writer and filmmaker and performer, known for their work exploring queer identity and Middle Eastern heritage. Amrou directed the award-winning short film, “Anemone” (2018), and their first feature, “Layla” (2024), debuted at Sundance Film Festival.

OP: Octavia Peissel is an independent producer and longtime collaborator of Wes Anderson, producing films such as “Asteroid City,” “The French Dispatch” and “The Grand Budapest Hotel,” among many others.



The Wolfpack (2015), Crystal Moselle, behind the scenes

Crystal Moselle

“Once I’m inspired, I’m obsessed and I don’t stop until something is made.”

How to commit to a project

Whether it's a documentary or a narrative project, finding an idea is not the challenge: committing to one is. Making a film is often a years-long commitment, so believing in your idea is paramount. You'll have to pitch it, explain it and sell it over and over again, to collaborators, funders and, ultimately, audiences.

Over the past few years, there has been a familiar grumble circulating in the film and TV industries: everything is a remake, a requel, a prequel—there’s no original ideas anymore—all anybody wants is existing IP and inbuilt audiences.

IP stands for intellectual property, and that can range from making films out of toys (like “The Lego Movie” or “Barbie”), or remakes of older films or TV shows (“The Crow” or “A Star is Born”), or magazine articles (“Hustlers” or “The Bling Ring”) or books (“Normal People” or “Priscilla”). Anything can be IP, and it doesn’t mean it’s necessarily bad or inaccessible to emerging filmmakers, you just need to know what you’re dealing with and how to use it.

TD: When you are starting a project, what gives you that initial spark? What is it that hooks you in?

CM: For me, it’s always a person. “The Wolfpack” (2015) was a group of boys that ran down the street past me and they had this long hair and they were all dressed the same. Once I’m inspired, I’m obsessed and I don’t stop until something is made.

AA-K: For me, for the longest time, creativity—whether it was drag shows or writing or making my film—is a real process of sublimation of a personal trauma or a personal experience. I find the only way I can really make sense of things is to write it and turn it into something else. But also, I quite like creating worlds that haven’t happened to me as a form of wish fulfillment. I’m really interested in flipping narratives as much as possible, because the way that I move through the world, as someone who is queer and Arab and Muslim, there’s obviously a lot of things that are projected onto me.

OP: Usually it is one of those split-second things. When choosing to be part of a project, especially with the type of auteur-driven, independent films that I do, you’re always going to be in a space where as a producer you’re working unbelievably hard. So you really want to be with a story that speaks to you, that you want to live with for years, but also with a filmmaker or a group of people who are living and breathing what they’re doing. They’re passionate, but also a bit obsessive. That’s very reassuring. ■



How to hook people on your project

So you've got an idea, and you think it's brilliant, fresh and absolutely fundable. But how to make others see that so that you can actually make it? Can you sell it in 30 seconds or less? Can you compare it to other, successful and well-known films to draw in your audience? Pro tip: Speak about it as if it already exists. Because it does, it's just that it currently exists only in your head.

TD: When you are trying to sell people on your wonderful ideas, how do you hook people? How do you get people on board?

CM: If I really believe in something and I'm passionate about it, they can feel that energy and they can feel that this person isn't going to give up until this is made. And, you can't go wrong with a great logline. If you can pitch it and make it sound exciting in 30 seconds, you can just get people right in. I have a film that I did a page one rewrite on, and when I used to pitch it before it was this long pitch: "My dad worked at this hospital in the seventies as a music therapist." And now I'm like, "My dad fell in love with one of the patients at the hospital that he worked at as a music therapist." Then people go "aah."

AA-K: My logline for "Layla" was "'Romeo and Juliet,' but on opposite sides of the gay community." I said: "Imagine if someone who organized Pride was dating someone who was protesting Pride."

OP: What you want is someone to ask follow-up questions. You want them to open that door. Then you can go deep and really bring them into your world and your vision. But you have to get that foot, literally, keeping the door open. I always tell the directors and writers and people that I'm working with—often emerging filmmakers who are very concerned with getting it all across at once—that it really is just about piquing that interest, hooking them, or getting the foot in the door, because if that initial hook is successful, you're going to have all the time afterwards to really express yourself.

AA-K: My difficulty with pitches is in getting the tone across. My tone is always really funny, but there's often such deep trauma behind it. And so, one way that we started to get everyone on board was just getting them to come to my drag show before pitches. But I've never seen as cautious an industry as I have right now. I have noticed that the stuff that is selling is genre-based, where people know what the rules are, or it's got such a clear comp [comparison to an existing film], or it's existing IP. I've really found that in my pitches, I'm having to really show how my ideas are going to work commercially.

OP: We're seeing so many productions based on IP, board games or articles from years ago. It's about reassurance. You really are reassuring people and often executives that don't know the ins and outs of filmmaking. But you're essentially showing them, "This has possibility, this has an audience, this story will connect with people, this will resonate."

AA-K: Sometimes you really can fudge new comps, too. Imagine "Clueless," but it's a horror film and it's all dinosaurs. People are like, "Okay, we know 'Clueless,' here's some money." ■

Skate Kitchen (2018),
Crystal Moselle, behind the scenes



Above: Skate Kitchen
(2018), Crystal Moselle
Below: The Wolfpack
(2015), Crystal Moselle



**“If you can pitch it
and make it sound
exciting in 30
seconds, you can
get people in.”**

All images: The Wolfpack
(2015), Crystal Moselle

Crystal Moselle

What is IP and how can you make it work?

“IP” might sound like a dirty word for creatives and filmmakers, but it doesn’t have to be. Talented artists can work within the strictest of confines: Chris Miller and Phil Lord made “The Lego Movie” (2014) into a beautifully animated deconstructed blockbuster; Greta Gerwig took the most famous doll on the planet and turned it into the culture-defining hit “Barbie” (2023); and Matt Johnson took an old phone brand and transformed it into a story of hubris and failure with “BlackBerry” (2023). IP can hold great opportunities if you’re willing to look for them.

But IP need not just be the property of studios and big production companies. IP can be an article, a short story, a graphic novel, or an existing short film. It can be something that only you know, love and believe can be translated onto the screen. Richard Linklater turned articles by Texan reporter Skip Hollandsworth about local oddballs into the films “Bernie” (2011) and “Hit Man” (2023). Crystal Moselle parlayed a short film commission by fashion brand Miu Miu into getting funding for the feature-length film “Skate Kitchen.”

Skate Kitchen (2018),
Crystal Moselle

TD: Do you think there’s a silver lining to the prevalence of IP? Is there a way you can make it feel your own?

AA-K: That’s sort of what drag is, actually, where you borrow from mainstream culture and then repackage it. That’s what a great lip sync does. You take a song that was designed for, say, a Pepsi ad and then you do something so deeply moving that you didn’t know was inherent to the meaning. I actually love the challenge of plundering mainstream culture and doing something completely new with it.

CM: There was an IP that I’d been chasing for seven years, and then I was brought on by a production company and a big studio to write for it, and they just kicked me off of it, but it was something that I had initially brought to them, and now they have it and I’m not on it anymore, which is crazy. But then the same week, I came across another book about a certain time in the world, in Los Angeles, that was really interesting that I know a lot about, that I’m able to really sink my teeth into. It is pre-existing IP, but it’s also something that I really can make my own.

TD: Why are people so obsessed with having films be based on pre-existing IP?

CM: People are obsessed with this idea of IP, but it’s quite ridiculous, because it’s everything that ranges from a little poem on some little website to a *New York Times* article or a book. It gives people some sort of security, but it can be anything, and you can create it yourself. Some people are literally like, “Let’s go write an op-doc for the *New York Times* about working at this place.” And then [once it’s published] and people are interested you can say: “Hey, A24, do you want to make a film about working at this place that’s really popular?” It can give you more opportunities.



TD: When you were making the short version of “Skate Kitchen,” did you have it in mind that you’d like to make it a feature?

CM: I met the girls from “Skate Kitchen” on the subway, and the little spark went off. I instantly knew I wanted to do something with them, and I thought it was going to be a documentary. Then I got hit up by Miu Miu to do a film for Women’s Tales, and they were like, “We want to do something that’s youthful.” And I pitched the skater girls ideas to them. They were like, “Yes, this is perfect.” The proof of concept, the short film, is really important when you’re trying to make something bigger. Because I made the short with Miu Miu, I got that opportunity, and then we went to Sundance that year, and people saw the short, loved it, and without even a script, they said, “Okay, we’re going to fund your movie.” Of course, times are a bit different these days, but when you’re looking for funding, showing people something that already exists and works really helps.

OP: Again, we’re talking about reassuring people, and there are different ways of doing that. Making a proof of concept—or at least having a body of work that is aligned with what you’re trying to make—is extremely important. If you haven’t done anything in the vein of what you’re trying to push through, then a proof of concept short can be a really good way to do it. I think any director or filmmaker can benefit from just making more. So whether it’s accepting to do a music video or a short, or maybe you’re going to work in documentary even though you’ve always done fiction or do something that seems small or off-piste, you’re going to be able to try out new stuff, try working with new collaborators, and new material. It’s a skill that needs to be honed. Banking those hours, practicing your craft and becoming more comfortable—anything that gets you to that point is worthwhile and all the better, if it serves the larger picture of what you are trying to create as a filmmaker. ■



All images: Skate Kitchen (2018),
Crystal Moselle

“I love the challenge of plundering mainstream culture and doing something completely new with it.”

Amrou Al-Kadhi

How to protect your ideas

When making a film, filmmakers have to be and do so many different things: they come up with ideas, they rally the team, they run the set, frame the shots, edit the movie, as well as an unpredictable list of other miscellaneous tasks. However, as multifaceted as they are, they cannot also be intellectual property lawyers. It's vitally important to research or get professional advice to know how to protect your original ideas legally. This might range from keeping an email trail of any pitches between you and a company, or even having a standard non-disclosure agreement (NDA) signed by potential production companies or distributors. Intellectual property is treated and protected differently depending on the country where you're based. In the UK, ideas can be protected through patents, copyrights, trademarks, trade secrets, and confidentiality agreements, but are at risk if there isn't any form of record. In the US, copyright law doesn't protect ideas or concepts.

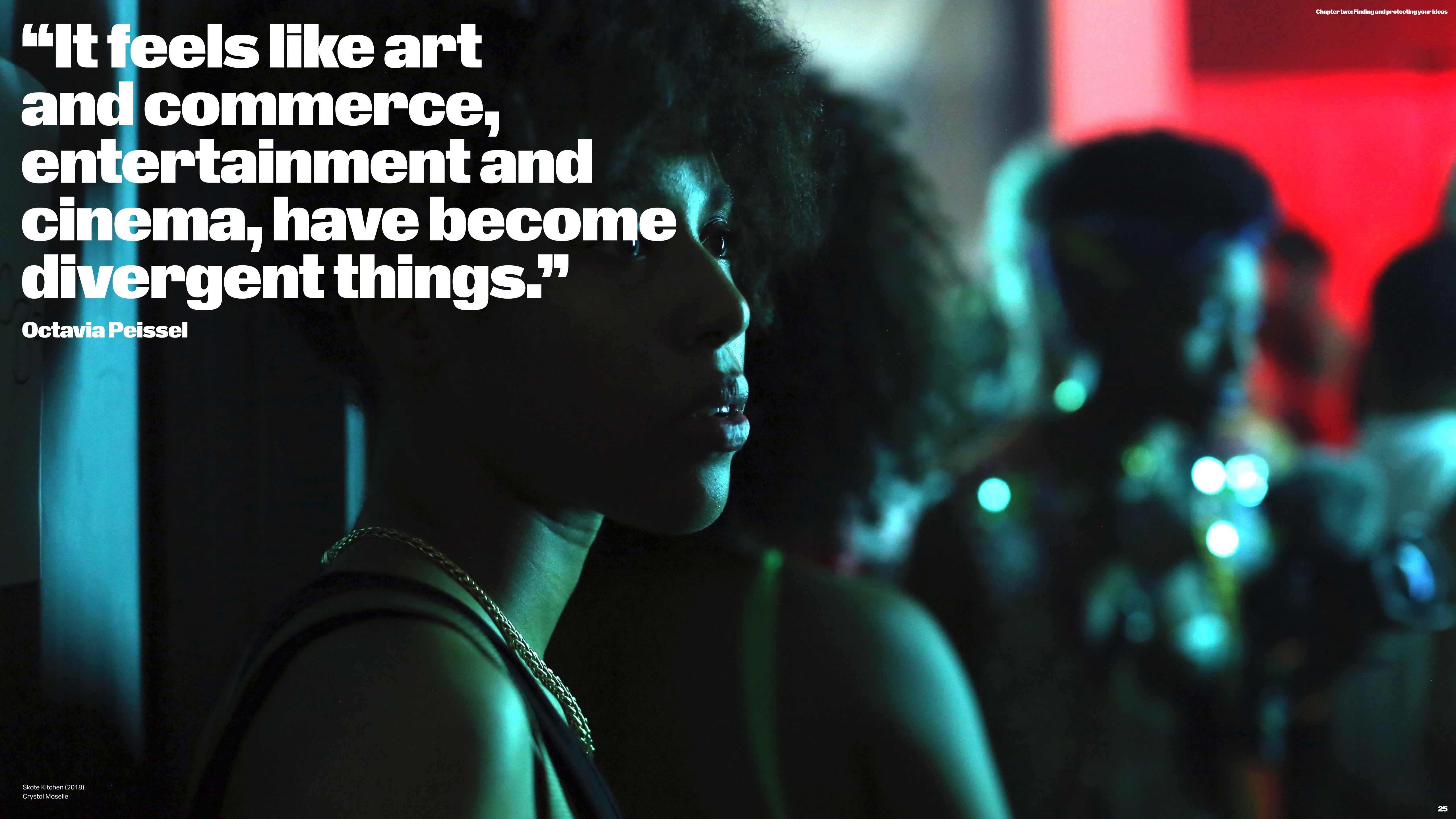
TD: As a filmmaker, you might not know about your legal rights, you might just be so excited to share your fantastic ideas that you don't think of it. What can people do to make sure their original ideas are protected?

OP: Do be careful and mindful before sharing anything at all. It's delicate because IP and authorship and ownership of ideas are treated differently according to local laws in different countries. Often, you'll have to have a developed enough idea to have at least your logline, main themes, characters etc. Inform yourself and just stay very guarded, frankly, at first. Because until you go through the process of literally, physically protecting what you've created, it could be up for grabs.

It could be getting advice from someone, a friend who's a lawyer, who is going to advise you on intellectual property in your country. Yes, it's the most collaborative industry, and there's a lot of people working together on these massive projects, but that little nugget, that thing that is yours that you've created is extremely precious. So get legal advice, or start with research online. If you have to fill out a complicated form or do some sort of administrative process, just take the time. You won't regret it.

AA-K: I've been having quite a tricky time with the concept of what an original idea is and who owns what, because so much of what I write about is based on my personal experience of being an Arab drag queen. Often, I'll sell something to a production company where there's an element of that, and it'll creep into another project in a very different way. I have had disputes with production companies saying, "We own you as an Arab drag queen now. Why has this appeared anywhere else in your work? We bought this script, which is your personal story, so we own your personal story." And I'm like, "Well, you don't own all 34 years of every single thing that's ever happened to me for ten grand," or whatever they paid for an option. I've sold a character based on me. It's a really complicated thing and I'm right in the middle of that right now. But I've got agents and managers and lawyers who can actually really help with that, and I'm relying on them, because I don't understand the law. But I do have a lot of white studio execs telling me they own Arab drag queens now because I've sold them one script. ■





“It feels like art and commerce, entertainment and cinema, have become divergent things.”

Octavia Peissel

How are studios deciding what to fund?



Whether you're aspiring to the cool factor of A24 or the large budgets of Amazon Prime Video, Disney or Netflix, pitching a project to a room of studio executives can be a daunting prospect. They will rarely tell you what they're looking for, but they will know if something works when they see it. There are noticeable trends in the entertainment industry: literary adaptations are always a solid source of ideas, pulling from both new, hyped releases (like Kalia Bradley's "The Ministry of Time," which will be produced by the BBC, or Yomi Adegoke's "The List," being co-developed by HBO Max, BBC and A24) as well as new visions of established literary IP (AMC+ recently acquired most of Anne Rice's estate, and have produced a new take on "Interview with the Vampire" for TV); stories built around actual, recognizable brands had a moment with "Barbie," "BlackBerry," "Smokin' Hot" and "Tetris;" and the success of "Rye Lane" and "Anyone But You" reminded everyone that there is an appetite for romantic comedies and not enough of them out there.

TD: What do you think studios and commissioners are looking for right now? And should you keep that in mind when pitching?

OP: I think there's a difference between what studios and executives think audiences want and what audiences today show that they want. I think that's a nuance. You can make a movie out of anything. You can take that story and make it your own and show audiences something that they're going to connect and feel with. And that can be a board game or a doll, or you can take a slice of life that you've encountered and use that. That was the story for me with "Barbie;" it was given to a talented filmmaker and was surrounded by talented people who were able to make a story that spoke to huge audiences. It shows that you can make a film about anything, including an old toy.

“There's a difference between what executives think audiences want and what audiences today show that they want.”

Skate Kitchen (2018),
Crystal Moselle

Octavia Peissel

AA-K: I find that you really come up against studios saying, “This is what we want and this is what’s going to work.” It was funny, around the time “Baby Reindeer” came out, I think Netflix released a statement about a week before saying something along the lines of, “We don’t think authored or auteur-driven TV works anymore. It’s now all about the returning story of the week procedural. That’s the only way streaming is going to survive.” And they [released] “Baby Reindeer” [Richard Gadd’s hit Netflix series which was seen by nearly 60 million people in its first month on the platform] without any real marketing. And then it became the most watched show this year. Good stuff just finds audiences. I really am an optimist in that sense.

CM: The zeitgeist hits, and people want to see something totally different. There’s fatigue now. People are so sick of the same shit, the same thriller, the same format.

TD: Have you noticed this shift into over-reliance on existing IP?

OP: It feels like what might be happening is that art and commerce, entertainment and cinema, have become divergent things. What I’ve noticed more is that separation of the tentpole blockbuster based on IP on one side and the story-driven arthouse cinema on the other. And I really want to see more overlap. I think anyone who’s immensely talented can work within constraints. Any talented person given a specific framework will be able to work within it.

AA-K: At the moment, I think markets are trying to dictate what audiences think they want, and that’s why we’re in this very delicate time in the industry. Essentially, if you boil it down, streamers lost loads of money and so did studios, interest rates went up, and now people are scared about money and they’re trying to dictate audiences. I don’t think that’s how audiences work. I actually hope markets really fail a bit more right now so that they trust audiences more. Markets predicting audiences isn’t going to be the answer, but I think audiences will have to talk in the end.

CM: The most important thing right now is that we make the effort to see films, to fight for original thought and to support new ideas. Take “The Bear” or “Baby Reindeer.” Those are original thoughts and they are getting all the accolades. So it’s like, hello, people want these things. Quite often I’ll look for something to watch and there’s nothing. How can there be nothing to watch? There’s millions of things to watch, but I want to watch something that feels fresh and makes me feel something. ■



All images: Skate Kitchen (2018), Crystal Moselle



“The most important thing right now is that we make the effort to see films, to fight for original thought and to support new ideas.”

Crystal Moselle

How to stay true to your ideas

What has come through the conversation is the need to stay true to your ideas, no matter how insane they might seem to others. Robert Eggers, director of “The Witch,” “The Lighthouse” and the upcoming “Nosferatu,” had pitched to, and been rejected multiple times by, the same producer until he presented an intense look book to explain his vision for “The Witch,” including the 17th century dialogue. Michaela Coel, when pitching her series “I May Destroy You” to the BBC, sent mood boards before she sent scripts, trying to make the commissioner understand the mood she was looking to create. Rich Peppiatt, director of the Sundance hit “Kneecap,” recalled changing his pitching strategy from talking about his film ideas in the maybe to speaking in the definitive. When putting your ideas out into the world, know when to stay true to your ideas, connect with the right people, and, sometimes, move on from a pitch to another idea.

TD: Looking to the future, where do you think cinema is headed in relation to IP and originality? Are you feeling optimistic?

OP: I think if you’re really motivated, which you should be, if you want to make your film, look up what’s happening at festivals, small or large. There will be pitch sessions. There will be workshops. All of these kinds of things exist in film markets and at film festivals. And remember that people are out there looking for good stories.

CM: Put yourself out there. Filmmaking is a social career. I really got my foot in the door when I did the Tribeca Pitch session, where I met every single distributor. They started tracking my movie, and I was able to have more of a community with other filmmakers, too.

AA-K: One of the best pieces of advice I’ve had is not to rush, because once you’ve made the thing, it exists, and you can’t change it. I made five shorts before I decided I was finally ready to make a feature. And I’m glad I waited that long because once you’re making it, you only have the skills that you have at that point. You should want to do as many shorts as possible and really figure it out, because filmmaking is so complicated, and you’re constantly learning. There’s a hundred factors going on every single day. It’s about choosing the right people as well. My producer is a person who knows me inside and out, and has become a person I can call up at midnight, whether I’m weeping or celebrating. ■



Skate Kitchen (2018),
Crystal Moselle

“One of the best pieces of advice I’ve had is not to rush, because once you’ve made the thing, it exists, and you can’t change it.”

Amrou Al-Kadhi



Funding your vision

JG-A: Joy Gharoro-Akpojotor is a producer and writer-director, who runs Joi Productions. In 2019, she produced the hit film “Blue Story.” In 2020, she was named a Screen International Star of Tomorrow and a BAFTA Breakthrough, and Joi Productions received a BFI Vision Award. Her debut film as a writer and director is in development with Quiddity Films/BFI/ BBC Films.

CR: Charlotte Regan is a writer and film director. She has directed many music videos, and her short films have been shown at major international film festivals. In 2023, her debut feature film “Scrapper” won the Grand Jury Prize for the World Cinema Dramatic Competition at the Sundance Film Festival.

RP: Rich Peppiatt is a writer and director, working across film, TV and commercials. His debut narrative feature, “Kneecap,” had its world premiere at the 2024 Sundance Film Festival. It was the first ever Irish-language movie to play at the festival, going on to win the NEXT Audience Award, before playing at SXSW, Tribe and Karlovy Vary. “Kneecap” has been selected as Ireland’s entry for the 2025 Academy Awards.

How to get your film financed

That's the million dollar question. In the UK, there are several key funding bodies that invest in filmmaking: the BFI Film Fund pour over £26 million of Lottery funds into making features, while the the BFI Network invests £3 million into developing new filmmakers; Film4 invests £15 million into producing films; BBC Films is the feature filmmaking arm of the BBC, investing in around 15 films a year.

In the US, meanwhile, soft money like this doesn't really exist, so filmmakers pitch to production companies directly, who then finance the films through distribution deals. In both territories, though, these conversations are usually brokered by producers, who deal with all the budgetary aspects, or with agents (more so in the US), who will connect their clients with other talent or with production companies.

A film's development can take a long time, so sometimes producers will seek development money, which can pay the screenwriter to write drafts of their script, secure adaptation rights, cover research costs or contribute towards the producer's overheads and legal costs. This early investment comes with its own strings, and it usually involves a longer period of time and a lot of notes from executives who are in charge of distributing the funds.

TD: If you want to make your film, you're going to need financing. As filmmakers, what is that process like?

CR: For me, it's kind of changed as I've learned more about the industry. I didn't use to think about it at all and my producer would, which sounds really easy. But now I'm more conscious of it when I'm writing. As I write, I wonder if my ideas are capable of getting financed or not and where we would go for that money. I think it changes the writing process in lots of ways.

RP: You have to put yourself a little bit in the producer's head and go, "Is this a commercial proposition? Am I going to have to tailor my creativity to that a little bit or work on a lower budget and do things in a really independent way?"

TD: Joy, you are typically in the producer role, although you're now moving to directing. At what point do you come on and are you constantly thinking about the funding aspect as you're hearing an idea?

JG-A: When somebody pitches an idea, the first thing we think about is "Who's going to want this and how are we going to make it?" Obviously we want to be free and we love stories, but we also have to think about money. But I do think your first feature is where you're really allowed to just go wild to an extent. And after that, with your second feature, funders are a bit more interested in seeing a return on their investment.

RP: When you take the money early, it comes with a cost, and that is control. The later in the process you can hold off taking anyone's money, the more control you retain. In an ideal world, if you had a script which you've completely written on spec, and that you're in a position to then take it to market, you're in a stronger creative position than if you had taken money very early on from a production company or a fund, because they're going to have a say in the script and the direction it takes. It's important that filmmakers or aspiring filmmakers are aware of the trade-off that comes with that early money. ■

Rich Peppiatt

“When you take the money early, it comes with a cost, and that is control.”



Public funding vs private money



Scraper (2023), Charlotte Regan, behind the scenes

Public funding demands a more grueling process: applications, interviews, meetings, more meetings, and a lot, a lot of time. Private money, whether that’s from production companies, streamers, brands or even generous donors, always comes with strings attached. Those strings might take the shape of creative input into the film itself, or a pressure to see a return on investment. Both sources of funding are increasingly strained. In the US in 2023, private equity and venture capital investments in films were at their lowest level in six years, totalling \$2.77 billion (down 73.5 percent from the \$10.46 billion in 2022). By contrast, one in five films made in the UK receives public funding, and in 2024 the British government introduced a tax relief of up to 40 percent for films that have budgets up to £15 million (\$19 million) as long as they pass the “British Film Institute test,” meaning it reaches a minimum of ten to 25 percent core expenditure in the UK and qualifies as a co-production.

TD: What is your experience of public funding? Are there certain types of films that are good bets for those kinds of funds?

JG-A: There’s certain things you kind of have to say to cut through the noise. It’s about talent but also, you really have to know what your story is, who it’s for, why you want to say it and why now.

RP: We are very lucky here in the UK, in Ireland as well, compared to America, because we have this soft money. When you go to America and you have conversations about funding out there, everything is seen through that commercial lens. The idea of making a film that feels like your voice is met with “Huh? Is it going to make us money?” Money is pretty much the only real arbiter of whether a film gets made or not. And that means independent film in America has a tough time.

JG-A: From my point of view, it’s always a case of you’ve got to do that one film, or whatever it is, for everyone else to then be able to do your other ideas. Sometimes with the other ideas, it might just be that the budget is too big at the time. After you’ve done one film, and it’s done well, funders might feel like they can trust you with a bigger cast or a bigger budget. Nothing is ever dead and there’s never really a no. I always say I can get ten nos, but it’s just the wrong people. The industry is always just going around in circles. Right now everyone is like, “We don’t want limited TV series.” In two years they’re going to want them again. It’s swings and roundabouts.

RP: It is important that you remember who gave you the no. It’s very easy to get wrapped up when bigger companies start turning up. But the people who are prepared to spend that time engaging with you when you haven’t really got anything to give them are better than the people who turn up wanting to be your mate when you have something they want.

Joy Gharoro-Akpojotor

“Your first feature is where you’re really allowed to just go wild.”

JG-A: Those people are also the ones who are on the same wavelength as you, they get your work. Down the line if you're working with them, it's an easier conversation.

TD: Can the no be constructive as well? Can it help you tailor your project?

JG-A: A hundred percent. What's important is what is the no behind the no. You have to decipher that sometimes. If we get several rejections in a row, then we look at the project objectively and figure out what the common theme is amongst all of those rejections. But sometimes those nos can just be about where the industry is at the moment.

RP: Exactly. Like the music biopic, everyone was like, "Music biopics have been run over 50 times." But I did it in a way that gave the genre a new spin. Because of the time it takes to make a film, the thing that's unfashionable right now sometimes is the thing you should be working on.

TD: Are there innovative sources for funding films?

JG-A: We are not that creative with our funding. Part of funding a project is also figuring out how investors work together. Usually you end up reverting back to having the traditional financing structures, just because it's a lot of work pulling what everyone wants into a way that makes everyone happy. When you think about brands coming in, it becomes tricky. For example, Nike had a moment of doing more sports films. But in that situation, especially on a creative level, you can't really have other sports brands in that film because you already have one. Or if you're working with the BBC, you can't have branded content when you're making a BBC film, so you've got to be really careful as to making sure you haven't got too many logos visible, for example.

RP: In the ecosystem of the film world the public funders know all the people from the festivals. So if you have a film with them, you are within that world where, from an early stage, even at script stage, they're talking to people and seeding the fact this film's coming down the pike. That it's something they're excited about. There is a little bit of the mentality that if other people in the industry think it's good then it must be good. It is not necessarily a healthy thing, but it is what it is. ■



Scrapper (2023), Charlotte Regan, behind the scenes

Scrappper

Charlotte Regan grew up in London and started shooting grime videos when she was 15. Before she made her debut feature, “Scrappper,” she had directed more than 20 short films, including the BAFTA-nominated “Standby,” “Fry-Up” and “Dodgy Dave.” Her narrative feature debut “Scrappper” follows a resourceful 12-year-old Georgie (Lola Campbell) who, following her mother’s death, continues to live alone in their council flat. She’s keeping social services off her back until her absentee father Jason (Harris Dickinson) shows up. Unimpressed by this new parental figure, Georgie has to confront her mother’s death and learn to live with, and maybe even like, her dad. “Scrappper” premiered at the 2023 Sundance Film Festival, where it won the Grand Jury Prize for the World Cinema Dramatic Competition. It was nominated for 14 BIFA Awards in 2023.

TD: When you made “Scrappper,” you had already made a lot of short films and a lot of music videos. How did you get it made?

CR: We started “Scrappper” through iFeatures, a development program which isn’t around anymore. It was this incredible scheme where they took 12 projects, and at the end they would fund two ... in the year we won, the BFI and the BBC would just decide if they wanted to take your projects onto their slate. It wasn’t money that you could get by on or just solely write your script on, but it was nice to have the support of commissioners early on. I think that engages them in the project a little bit earlier. Especially when it’s places like BFI and BBC, where their end goal is to let you make a film that really represents you and who you are as an artist. They’re not thinking how are you going to smash the box office.

TD: How did the jump from shorts to features feel?

CR: When you’re making your first film, people don’t really know what your style is because your shorts are all over the place. You can get people that come on board based on a script, a treatment or a pitch and, once you deliver an edit they’re like, “Oh God, what’s that? That’s not what we said we wanted to make.” Especially when you’re making your first film where both the shoot and edit are such a discovery process, so the final film is not what it was on the page at all. It definitely wasn’t for me.

TD: What was the process of working with funders like?

CR: We’d have conflicting notes on “Scrappper.” Everyone has a totally different creative opinion, and when you sit in an edit, a film can be a thousand different films. So to get everyone to align is always really hard. I was always really adamant that we stay under a certain budget level, which obviously really stressed out Theo Barrowclough, my producer, who’s the one who’s actually dealing with the money.

TD: Is it important to find a champion within a funding organization?

CR: I like the support of someone because I am very unsure of my ideas and my writing. Having someone like that who protects you from those additional voices really helps. You kind of find an anchor, someone you really trust, and often that’s your producer, but often it can be an exec, too. Eva Yates at BBC Film and Farhana Bhula who used to be at the BFI and is now at Film4 were those anchors for me. I just really trusted their creative opinions. ■



Scrappper (2023),
Charlotte Regan

“Everyone has a different creative opinion, and when you sit in an edit, a film can be a thousand different films.”

Charlotte Regan

Case study one



Kneecap



Kneecap (2024).
Photo by Peadar Ó Goill

In an inventive, madcap send-up of the music biopic, Rich Peppiatt's narrative feature debut tracks the misadventures of real-life Irish-language rap group Kneecap, who play fictionalized versions of themselves. "Kneecap" was the first Irish-language film to play at the Sundance Film Festival, where it had its world premiere and won the NEXT Audience Award. Selections at SXSW, Tribeca and Karlovy Vary film festivals followed, as well as its Irish premiere at the prestigious Galway Film Fleadh, where it picked up a trio of awards for Best Irish Film, Best Irish Language Film and the Audience Award. "Kneecap" has been released in the UK by Curzon and Sony Pictures Classics in the US. While it's enjoying its worldwide release, it has been selected as Ireland's entry for the 2025 Academy Awards.

TD: Can something that might seem like a weakness to some people in terms of putting money into a film, actually be its super power? For example, "Kneecap" is in Irish, which might have seemed like a gamble, but then you found money from many different Irish film funds.

RP: Public money often targets underrepresented voices. If you're making a film that is telling stories that are on the periphery, they tend to be more favored. With "Kneecap," it was a world that I felt no one had ever really put a camera on. I think that, for public funders, made their ears go up a bit, because it ticked some boxes. It wasn't deliberate, it just happened.

TD: How did you handle so many funders?

RP: We got eleven different funders to get to our budget. That involved everyone from the BFI through to Screen Ireland, Northern Ireland Screen to the Irish Language Broadcast Fund. There were all sorts of different bits of money that we got. It was just how it came together. A consequence of that, obviously, is that you're getting lots of different notes. It's difficult as a filmmaker to get six or seven different sets of notes on a script. Especially when what the Irish language Broadcast Fund wants the film to be is not necessarily the same as what the BFI thinks the film is. And, creatively, the truth doesn't rest in the middle.

TD: What did you learn from the process?

RP: One thing to always bear in mind is that no one in the industry has all the answers and knows everything. Don't think just because someone's senior in the industry instantly means they're right. Because everyone's bluffing it. I'm bluffing it. Realizing that stops you from putting people on pedestals. ■



Above image and far right images:
Kneecap (2024), Photos by Peadar Ó Gaill
Middle image: Kneecap (2024), Rich Peppiatt

Rich Peppiatt

“Don’t think
because
someone’s senior
in the industry
that means
they’re right.”



Blue Story

Written, directed and narrated by British rapper-turned-filmmaker Rapman (Andrew Onwubolu), “Blue Story” is a South London-set crime drama about two childhood best friends turned gang rivals, Timmy (Stephen Odubola) and Marco (Micheal Ward). Despite a disrupted distribution after Vue and Showcase cinema chains canceled the showings of the film, “Blue Story” grossed £4.7 million on a budget of £1.4 million in the UK box office, and won Ward the BAFTA Rising Star Award.

TD: What was your experience working with Rapman on “Blue Story?”

JG-A: Producer Damian Jones emailed me, because I had made a short film called “Haircut,” and he was looking for a producer to work on “Blue Story” with. Rapman was doing “Shiro’s Story” at the time, which was doing quite well on YouTube. We met up, we talked, he said: “Got this thing, do you want to work on it with me?” He sent me the script on Thursday, we met on Monday and I was on board. As soon as I said I was on board he started sending out emails to get it moving.

TD: What was it like working with another producer on the film?

JG-A: The good thing about working with Damian was that he was always open to questions. No question is stupid. I’d only done very low budget feature films up to this point. I’d done two feature films for 35k. This was a great way to learn. And he also let me run the set. He didn’t want to be hands-on, so I got to do everything myself. A lot of the stuff that I brought in was stuff that I learned from making shorts and having no money on set. It’s all about people. It was more about bringing in the right people and letting people feel like they had a voice, that everyone’s idea was welcome.

TD: How did you get it funded?

JG-A: We went to the BBC first. They were the first ones on board. And then we went to every single studio in town and ended up with Paramount. It was a hard shoot. It was a four-week shoot and it’s a first-time feature film, a low budget, but they’re expecting it to feel like a studio film. But we managed to find the right people who were putting in 200% to make it feel like it was a big studio film. We couldn’t make that film now, not on the money they gave us. ■



Blue Story (2019).
Joy Gharara-Akpajotor

Funding short films

Short films, documentaries and feature films all operate in different funding ecosystems. Short films are traditionally self-funded, occasionally will use crowdfunding platforms like Kickstarter or IndieGoGo to raise money, in-kind partnerships with brands that might provide shooting equipment free of charge. In the UK, alongside grants and competitions, the BFI Network is the main source of support for short filmmakers who are seeking to make live action, animation or immersive work, whereas documentary-makers can apply through BFI Doc Society. For Irish, Welsh or Scottish filmmakers, organizations like Northern Ireland Screen, Short Circuit and Ffilm Cymru Wales provide funding and project development for shorts. Some brands, like MiuMiu and WeTransfer itself, have also started funding short films.

TD: What is the funding process like for shorts?

JG-A: I think it's harder now because there's not a lot of short film funds anymore. You just have the BFI Film Network.

RP: All the shorts I've done have been self-funded. I used to make commercials and branded content, and I would just take money from those jobs and use them to make shorts. When it comes to shorts, a lot of people get stuck in that moment where they're waiting for permission, waiting for someone to give them some money and give them permission to go make a film. You have to go out there yourself and just do it. Somehow. Find a way.

My first short film was set in a mate's flat, because we literally had no money. It doesn't need to be set in the apocalypse or outer space. Short films are about the process of finding your voice, learning how to work with actors and learning how to deal with a crew. If you approach it as a playful thing rather than a career-defining moment, an experimental process where you're trying things out that maybe you're not seeing elsewhere, then people are more likely to get involved.

You're not pretending to be Martin Scorsese; you're going out there to have some fun and play around. That would be my tip: not taking it too seriously.

JG-A: When I first started doing shorts, I'd only had one short that was funded by Film London. Everything else we spent £2-3,000 on, and a lot of that was "steal, beg and borrow." It was cheaper to make films back in the day. Now it's very expensive to just hire out kit. Even four years ago, you could probably convince a rental house to give you kit for two or three days for about two grand. You can't do that anymore.

TD: Is it helpful to make short films if you want to make a feature?

CR: I waited until Eva Yates at the BBC told me I had to do a feature because I've done too many shorts. I was still thinking "I'm not ready. I need to do 35 shorts before the feature." But Eva encouraged me to move on. There can be such a thing as too many shorts.

JG-A: When it comes to shorts, they're such a great training ground. Sometimes we also get sent shorts where I'm like, "Why are you driving cars all around London? Just be in a house. Just go get a mate's house and spend two or three days in a house." Because it is all about character, it's all about the emotional connection with the audience. No one really cares about big set pieces, they just want to know if you can tell a good story in ten minutes.

“Short films are about the process of finding your voice, learning how to work with actors and learning how to deal with a crew.”

Rich Peppiatt



Scrapper (2023), Charlotte Regan

The current landscape of funding

There are two angles to thinking about the future of film financing: what stories do film-makers want to tell, and what funds are available for them to tell those stories. It's easy to feel pessimistic about the present and future of film financing: arts organizations have had their production budgets slashed, private investors are more cautious about the entertainment industry, and crowdfunding seems to be a thing of the past. Yet these setbacks are not new. The state of the industry should never be a reason to not make a film.

TD: Is building your community a really important part of being able to access funding?

CR: I think it doesn't just impact getting finance on a film, it also affects the impact the film has. Because when you're going with those financiers who are so embedded in the industry, and have seen this journey hundreds of times before, they really know how to protect you. They know how to make a film that places you in the best position to continue your career. I would always go the traditional financing way just so that you end up with those people, because they're the ones that are going to protect you.

RP: Finding good producers is a difficult thing. Being lumbered with a bad producer, and I've had them, is really difficult because it makes the whole experience of making a film a nightmare. They hold a lot of power and you end up in a situation where you're trying to make your film in spite of someone rather than with them. It's not nice. But a good producer is someone who is in the trenches with you. On that day when everything's going to absolute shit, they can run towards the danger and protect you. When you find those people, keep them close. A good producer understands part of the role is to protect you as the filmmaker, and a bad producer just sees everything through the lens of what's best for them.

TD: How do you think the funding landscape has changed over the past few years?

JG-A: There's less money. Whether that be BFI, Film4 or the BBC. They've all had to cut back on how they finance, what they're financing. Now, everyone wants something commercial. Whereas I feel like a few years ago, they were all about the art, all about you as a filmmaker.



TD: Are the streaming platforms offering any types of new opportunities?

RP: They’re quite risk-averse. They’re not really homes for new talent. I made my first documentary, “One Rogue Reporter,” in 2014, which was picked up by Netflix. My second film has come out in 2024. There are ten years between there. But even with a film that got on Netflix and was doing well, it still took me a long time to convince people to give me the amount of money to make a narrative feature film. I had to make shorts and commercials in the meantime. I remember someone saying to me: “This industry is a marathon, not a sprint.” A lot of people fall by the wayside because they can’t deal with the marathon, they can’t deal with the level of rejection over such a long period of time. And you need to ask yourself, “Can you do that?” You better keep going despite how many knocks you take.

TD: But does the lack of funding exclude certain people?

JG-A: There was a point at which the BFI was actively looking at projects from people who they hadn’t funded before, because they were mindful of always giving money to the same people. We are lucky in that we have access to public funding, because when you look at other countries, there is no sort of safety net.

TD: Have you ever had a film that was a bad match for the people that funded it, or is it just nice to get money?

JG-A: There was a project where we didn’t take money from someone in the end, because it wasn’t a good match. It was one of the financiers who wasn’t really settling in with the other financiers, so it made sense to not go forward with them. When we go into anything, we have two different budgets: our ideal budget and our worst-case scenario budget. People sometimes pull out when you’re about two weeks from a shoot. It happens. So we have to keep in mind that anything is possible. I’m always thinking “It’s never going to work out,” until it works out.

TD: Is knowing what amount to ask for kind of a skill?

CR: It’s such a great skill for a producer to have. I read a lot of projects from young people that have no understanding of different elements of cost, and that really makes them struggle. They write these shorts that are in the apocalypse and my reaction is always, “Cool, but expensive.” Writing to budget, being willing and not precious to rewrite is really important. There was a lot of ideas we had in “Scrapper” that we just did not have the

money to do. You have the option of cutting it, or you can do it in a cheap way, and it’s going to look like total shit.

TD: Looking to the future, how do you think that the funding landscape might evolve? Do you think it’s going to continue just getting more difficult or are there bright spots?

JG-A: I think it’ll get better. I feel like we’ve been through this before in that everyone gets a bit bored of this idea of everything needs to be super commercial. Also, in the UK, we’re in this weird place where we’re in competition with America, because we’re English-speaking, but actually, we’re not as commercially-minded as they are.

CR: A lot of first features have recently come out of the UK that have been really risk-taking. Prior to that, we were stuck in this working-class trauma cinema that Britain is known for in festivals. But things like “Rye Lane,” “Hoard” or “How to Have Sex” were so different to what we expect from British cinema. The fact that these films are doing so well critically and at the box office will hopefully reflect on the financing.

TD: And, finally, are there any lessons that you’ve learned about funding that you wish you’d known at the beginning?

CR: The problems with funding starts with who gets into the industry. If you’re someone who’s applying for financing, you’re already in a privileged position of being surrounded by people who have encouraged you to make art, which is a privilege in itself. So beyond the financing, it’s about how we access those communities that are being told that art is not a career. If you’re applying, you’ve got a laptop, you’ve got a parent who’s encouraged you to apply, or you are surrounded by a community that sees art as a possible avenue. That’s a small percentage of people.

RP: Don’t be asking for permission. That’s not to say that it’s easy because it’s certainly not. But I think that, ultimately, there always is a way to do it if you’re prepared to just bang your head against the wall enough times and knock on enough doors and badger enough people.

JG-A: No is never a no, it just depends on who you’re speaking to. ■



Scrapper (2023), Charlotte Regan behind the scenes

“Beyond financing, it's about how we access communities that are being told that art is not a career.”

Charlotte Regan



Contributors

Left to right

- MMW:** Molly Manning Walker
- GF:** Graham Fulton
- FB:** Farhana Bhula
- JB:** Janicza Bravo
- AA-K:** Amrou Al-Kadhi
- CM:** Crystal Moselle
- OP:** Octavia Peissel
- JG-A:** Joy Gharoro-Akpojotor
- CR:** Charlotte Regan
- RP:** Rich Peppiatt

United Kingdom

BFI Network: England Short Film Funding: funds from £5,000 to £25,000 for a short film up to 15 minutes

BFI Network: Early Development Fund: for feature projects, between £3,000 and £5,000, to support writing a treatment and creating related materials

British Council Film: Festivals Directory: a handy list to cut through the festivals worth submitting and going to

Beacons: Short Film Funding: up to £25,000 for directors born or based in Wales

Made Of Truth Fund: up to £25,000 for documentaries between five and 40 mins

BFI Network: More Films For Freedom: up to £25,000 for films that explore LGBTQIA+ global human rights, intersectionality or diaspora identity

Short Hand: a ten-part podcast guide through the various stages of a film's production

Bafta Crew: list of directors, producers, writers and film crew.

Short Circuit: first feature development fund for Scottish filmmakers

British Council Travel Grant: to attend a film festival that's showing your film

Screen Skills: a free access film freelancer toolkit

Northern Ireland Screen: several funding pots for Irish filmmakers

Ffilm Cymru Wales: funding opportunities for Welsh-born/resident filmmakers

Screen Scotland: funding pots for Scottish-based or Scottish-born filmmakers and producers

Roundhouse Film Fund: grant supporting three emerging filmmakers to create new short films, exploring social and political issues from their unique perspectives

Film London: opportunities for emerging filmmakers and training, accommodation and travel bursaries

United States

Dcp-o-matic: free, open source DCP conversation

Impact Partners: sources for documentary financing

SAGindie: film commissions and production incentives by state

Lawyers For The Creative Arts: primer on film law

Forbes: a guide to legal entities in film

Center For Media And Social Impact: a guide to fair use

Chicken & Egg Pictures: funding women filmmakers

Cinereach: grants between \$5,000-\$50,000 for non-fiction features

The Filmmaker Fund: supporting emerging and established filmmakers with funding and resources

Frameline: funding for emerging LGBTQIA+ filmmakers

Hot Docs Pitching Tool: handy guide to pitching docs

Amplifier Fellowship: year-round support and \$30,000 for six Black artists

Film Independent: organization with several grants and fellowships for filmmakers of different backgrounds

Global

Berlinale World Cinema Fund: funding films from regions with a weak cinema infrastructure

Hubert Bals Fund: completion funds for innovative filmmakers associated with the Rotterdam International Film Festival

Resources

Directory

WePresent is WeTransfer's arts platform, acting as the company's cultural torchbearer to a monthly audience of approximately 3 million in 190 countries. Collaborating with emerging young talent to renowned artists such as Marina Abramović, Riz Ahmed, FKA twigs or David Sedaris, WePresent showcases the best in art, photography, film, music, literature and more, championing diversity in everything it does. The platform's commissions range from editorial features to films, illustrations, photography series, events, and exhibitions, with an aim to offer a fresh take on the magic and mystery of creative ideas. WePresent is the commissioner and executive producer of the acclaimed short film "The Long Goodbye" by actor and musician Riz Ahmed and director Aneil Karia, which won an Oscar in 2022 for Best Live Action Short Film.

WeTransfer, the most creative platform for sharing ideas, makes it easy for creative professionals and creators to share and distribute content, and collaborate with teams. With an average of 80 million monthly active users in 190 countries, WeTransfer is a certified B Corporation™ and a long-time champion of using business as a force for good. Since its founding in 2009, the company has donated up to 30 percent of its advertising real estate to raise awareness for artists, creative work, and the world's most pressing issues. In 2021, it launched the Supporting Act Foundation to support emerging artists through bursaries and grants.

New Rules is a series from WePresent that will interrogate how to thrive as an artist in unstable creative industries that are changing beyond all recognition. Nothing about existing as a freelance worker in the creative landscape is easy right now—and it's likely only going to become more of a challenge. Between crumbling media platforms, stagnated rates for jobs and the looming specter of AI that will impact everyone from photographers and videographers to writers and musicians, artists need to feel empowered to take risks and think outside the box. New Rules is here to say that this situation is far from helpless—it's a chance to be more creative than ever, together.

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Disco Boy (2023), Giacomo Abbruzzese

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