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How COVID-19 May Shape the Landscape of Hollywood  
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In this time of quarantine, streaming services have become practically essential for many while the movie theater industry has been severely stunted by the pandemic. Subsequently, with the Black Lives Matter movement gaining worldwide recognition and structural reform being a real conversation within mainstream media, the entertainment industry has some reflection to do.

With precautions being set out by industry guilds and production studios getting increasingly antsy in anticipation of resuming their future projects, many wonder how the filming process may change. Some are even curious as to whether independent filmmaking will temporarily take center stage as smaller productions may be safer in the current situation.

On the corporate side, digital releases have proven to be lucrative, and networks are beginning to push out versions of their own streaming services into the demanding quarantine market earlier than expected in attempts to seize the moment.

Connor Einarsen, an independent filmmaker and film instructor at Interlochen Center for the Arts, has been torn between his passion and the limitations of the current health crisis for months. Just before starting his next big project, Einarsen's process was halted by COVID-19, and his team is now going back to the drawing board to see how they can reassess.

"Filmmaking is a business. If you're not doing stuff, you're losing money," said Einarsen. "The capitalism that we have right now doesn't allow for breathing room. The way the market is, people need to sink or swim."

"We're already seeing most of the immediate changes: a lot of DIY/non-guild and non-union workers doing jobs due to necessity. This has the potential to weaken the power of the guilds, especially for below the line workers," said Charlotte Howell, Boston University film professor.

In June, The Screen Actors Guild - American Federation of Television and Radio Artists or SAG-AFTRA, rolled out a new statement which outlines production safety guidelines regarding Coronavirus.

SAG-AFTRA first touts testing as the "cornerstone" of the plan, stating that, in essence, any exposure of the cast and/or crew to the virus would lead to mass quarantining and, as a result, cause "shooting delays," and potential "production shutdowns." They demand that cast and crew be frequently and thoroughly tested before being allowed on set.

The second step implemented involves protection. The key to this aspect: personal protective equipment, or PPE. Masks or subsequent PPE are to be worn at essentially the majority of the time for all crew members as with any public space. The most prominent solution available right now for preventing human to human spreading is wearing a mask.

Thirdly, SAG-AFTRA has laid out “The Zone System.” In a sense, the Zone System is meant to engineer filming spaces as a means of minimizing risk and adhere to social distancing when possible.

Zone A is the most intimate of settings, involving a few actors, without masks, and a handful of most likely masked crew members helping with the immediate filmmaking process.

Zone B is the surrounding areas where PPE is used as well as marked off areas for social distancing precautions.

Zone C is “the outside world.” It represents wherever production is not. Zone A and B are restricted to those who have been tested and cleared within the last 24 hours.

The last major regulations lays out two safety positions on set which oversee that these other regulations are being adhered to: a Health Safety Supervisor and Health Safety Unit Manager.

Einarsen pointed out that there are two levels to film production: the business level and the human level. At the business level, studios are eager to continue filming. However, safety is a matter of humanity. What we are talking about is whether a major business, in the form of a studio, will prioritize their workers’ lives over profit which is a recurring theme in America.

Einarsen also warned about the mentality in entertainment which makes creators believe that there is a constant need for “new material.” Despite the vast amount of movies and TV shows provided in the digital world, streaming services and studios push the notion that there’s always another buck to be made on a new project.

Forbes Magazine reported that in its first quarter of 2020 (ending on April 21), Netflix had almost 15.8 million new subscribers. This was about two times the expected growth—a growth which clearly indicates an ever-growing market, especially in times of chaos, potentially leading to new voices in the industry.

Although there have been major spikes in streaming, Howell believes that potentially, “as the economy as a whole contracts, people are going to have less money to spend on subscriptions to streaming services and the ad-based services are suffering from similar ad-pocalypse (huge cratering of advertising revenue across media), people are going to start cutting services.”

Apart from the actual in person changes to studios, Howell said that “the main effect on production will be the budget slashing in various forms due to budget tightening and the added budget (and time) needed to clean sets and production areas.”

Many, like Einarsen, wonder if the amount of precautions necessary to run a big film studio and budget problems may spark interest in smaller, independent production companies. In addition, the financial damage done to movie theaters in contrast with the boom of streaming services could indicate a new window for independent films to get shown to a bigger audience.

“It seems the pandemic will continue to exacerbate the division in films where the vast middle of budgeted productions has largely disappeared and the majority of films made either have massive or micro-budgets,” said Howell.

Before going into quarantine, Einarsen had put details into place to begin shooting his new film, *The Goodbye Tour*. With the production halted and social norms being thrown into question, Einarsen and his team began assessing how their own company may be playing into the structural faults which many are now seeking to uproot.

In regards to how the team began to rethink their role in the future of the industry, Einarsen said “we want the film industry to be a certain way: more diverse, more sustainable. We are making a film production. Well that seems like the perfect place to start trying to do all of this. If it screws up, then we learn.”

Einarsen’s team is implementing a new system in which there must be an equal number of white and BIPOC in total contributors between the cast and the crew. The hope is that by bringing more voices into the conversation, a more human and universal significance can be brought to the story and to the art form.

Einarsen hopes that smaller studios can exemplify the change they want to see in the industry. The Black Lives Matter movement has made it clear that underrepresented voices in the entertainment industry need to be given equal opportunities to tell their own stories. The impact of film and television media is determined by the collective voices that are crafting it.

Despite Einarsen’s indication that safety costs may make independent studios shy away from shooting during the pandemic, the urge to create films and tell stories, especially those which have previously been stifled, will be ever-present.

“For me, it’s not whether film will survive,” said Einarsen, arguing that art can never be silenced no matter the obstacles. While things may have to shift for the context of the time, Einarsen believes that the desire to create will always overcome those barriers and adapt.

Einarsen feels that now is the time for Hollywood to actually reflect on its shortcomings. Just as recent turmoil has brought many structural failures within our government to the attention of the public, so too have the failures of entertainment been revealed.

As Einarsen pointed out, Hollywood likes to pose as progressive, diverse, and socially conscious, however, it is clear that the stories that are continuing to be produced are completely dominated by white, male voices.

Societal problems from structural racism, to a lack of environmental sustainability, to the favoring of large corporations over the well-being of its individual workers, which have been brought to the surface by the pandemic, are all present within every form of media and their subsequent industries.

In order to capitalize on a moment of change, Hollywood needs to upheave the way films are created not only from a practical perspective but from a moral perspective as well.

“We actually now have some time to pause and reflect,” said Einarsen. “We were just dedicated to making the production. Now we have the opportunity to think of *how* we want to make it.”

Sources:

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