

# Interview with Scott Frank

## Carsey-Wolf Center at UC Santa Barbara

13-16 minutes

---

In May 2010, Scott Frank, Screenwriter and Director, sat down with MIP for an interview. In the excerpts below, Frank discusses some of the implications changing distribution strategies have on his work as a screenwriter and director, the new distribution windows created by new technologies, and the way distribution strategies are driving productions toward bigger and bigger spectacle.

A graduate of UCSB, Scott Frank is an Oscar-nominated screenwriter who has written movies for filmmakers such as Steven Spielberg, Sidney Pollack, Steven Soderbergh, Barry Sonnenfeld, Jodie Foster and Kenneth Brannagh. His scripts include *Out of Sight* (1998), *Minority Report* (2002), *The Interpreter* (2005) and *Get Shorty* (1996). In 2007, Frank made his directorial debut with *The Lookout*, starring Joseph Gordon-Levitt, Jeff Daniels, Matthew Goode, and Isla Fisher.

### Changing Production Priorities

Wednesday, May 26, 2010

**MIP: From your perspective as a creative professional, how do you experience the effects of changes in distribution?**

**FRANK:** The answer really has two parts. Part one is that the changes in distribution reflect dramatic changes in technology, rapid changes in delivery systems, and, as audiences are adapting, radical shifts in the ways they are consuming media. In the last ten years I've been overwhelmed by the degree to which technology has evolved. I can't keep up and sometimes I just cry "uncle" because there is so much of it.

But technological change is only half of the conversation about distribution. The bigger thing that *isn't* talked about is that distribution has become the driving creative force in determining what gets produced. These two points are obviously connected, but the biggest factor determining whether a movie gets green-lit is whether or not the studios can sell it. In the last ten to fifteen years the studios' marketing and distribution departments have had an increasingly louder voice with regard to what gets made, how many movies get made, and how much is spent on what gets made.

One topic of concern is the decline -- or adjustment, shall we say -- in the DVD Home Video market. It used to be that there was a formula you could count on when you were green-lighting a movie. Sitting in the negotiation room was the studio's head of creative, and the head of distribution and marketing, and then there was the DVD guy. The DVD guy knew that if he had a certain actor, say Brad Pitt, in a certain type of movie, the gross would be X number of dollars. It was a given, and the studios could count on that money all the time. That was money you

didn't really have to share. The amount you had to pay to talent in terms of residuals was basically negligible. It was less than the amount you paid per package on the DVD. It was pure profit. You knew that you could make that money.

Those formulas no longer apply. Now, movies with a certain actor or a certain genre can't deliver guaranteed DVD revenues. There are very few guarantees. The home video market or the DVD market isn't the investment it used to be. Profits now come from a combination of DVD and foreign and a bit of the domestic box-office.

The studios aren't making fewer films; they're making fewer kinds of films. For example, it is very hard today to get a straight-up drama made, because the audience isn't there and the numbers aren't there. Even though I'm a creative person, if I were running a studio I would have to agree -- I don't think I could sell a certain kind of film today. It would be very, very difficult because of the changing nature of the delivery systems.

This, by the way, is a discussion about studio movies, because independent movies have a whole other formula, based mainly on foreign sales. Financing in the independent space has always required a combination of things. It used to be mainly for production, but now independent filmmakers are also looking for equity financing to pay for the marketing, promotion, and advertising of their movies.

In terms of marketing, studios are now looking at how to add value to the movie experience. 3D is a good example. With 3D, studios are not only adding value, they're charging for it. In the

past it was the theater owners who would do something incremental, like setting up the Arclight theaters, which offer a better experience -- better seats, better food, and supposedly people who will shut-up during the movie, and so on. The studios never saw any of that money, but now they're testing their own version of the concept. They've jacked up the prices for 3D films and, until budgets increased for films like *Shrek 4*, *Clash of the Titans* and *Alice in Wonderland*, the studios were making a huge chunk of their profits from the increased price of tickets for 3D.

As a writer I know that unless I want to work on a big-budget, 3D, event film, the opportunities have shrunk, which brings me to the script-doctoring business I'm in. If I want to do something from scratch, I'm now forced to finance my own development, rather than go to the studio, tell them I want to develop a movie, give them my pitch, and ask them to pay me to write the script. So I choose to do rewrites because I see the uphill push to make the kinds of movies I want to make. Instead of developing my own scripts, I rewrite the kinds of movies I know they want to make. I rewrite them because the opportunities to do what I want to do are few and far between.

Look at what is happening across the board with quality directors -- Sam Mendes wins an Oscar for *American Beauty*, then directs *Road to Perdition* and *Revolutionary Road*. The next film he was going to make, before they shut it down, was a James Bond film. Brad Bird, arguably one of the finest animation directors we have, directed *The Incredibles* and *Ratatouille* and then spent the last two years

working on his dream live-action project, a film for Warner Bros. called *1906*. He was having trouble, for whatever reason, and now he is directing *Mission Impossible 4*. Matthew Vaughn does *Kick-Ass* and now he is directing yet another *X-Men* film. Maybe these are passion projects; maybe. I'm not passing judgment on any of these, but these are arguably three auteurs with incredible vision. They are avoiding the uphill movie and jumping on the downhill movie, the movie that is already being made, and locating their artistic self somewhere in that movie. That is what they are trying to do.

The marketing and distribution adjustments are having a big impact on the kinds of movies we are going to see. People vote with their pocketbooks and they have voted against a certain kind of movie, at least at the movie theater. They may have been renting it, and may continue to rent it down the road. They may watch it on TV or pay cable, but they are not going to go to the theater. And that has had a huge effect on the creative professions.

## **Financing and Creativity**

Wednesday, May 26, 2010

**MIP: How, specifically, are these changes affecting financing?**

**FRANK:** Let's focus on independent movies. In the independent realm you can still get certain kinds of movies produced, particularly if they have a genre hook to them. Films for adult audiences can be made, but only if they are thrillers, cop films,

or have action elements. The magic number these days seems to be around \$25 million or less for a *Michael Clayton*-type independent. Everyone who invested in *Michael Clayton* got paid. Today, lots of companies are working with this model. MRC and Lionsgate, for example, are both keeping budgets down. Summit, a foreign sales company, made *The Beaver*. They partnered with Participant and a group out of Abu Dhabi -- Imagination, I think -- to get some extra equity and cover the predicted short foreign sales. Apparently Mel Gibson and Jodie Foster weren't going to cut it overseas. Those three companies were partnering on an \$18 million movie. Eighteen million. We are not talking about an \$80 million movie. In the independent world, even with much lower levels of risk, you still have people scrambling to find money.

The money is there, though, because there are lots of guys with cash and a surprisingly large number of equity people. Ryan Kavanaugh is a good example; his company, Relativity, is the biggest of them of all right now. Summit, another big company, made money hand-over-fist on *Twilight*. MRC, which has *The Adjustment Bureau* coming out, along with some other projects, is also plugged into the independent financing model. Graham King, who won a Best Picture Oscar for *The Departed*, has placed independent pictures at a couple of studios. His company paid \$100 million to fund *The Tourist*, with Angelina Jolie and Johnny Depp. Yet even with that star-power, it still took Graham King to get that movie made.

Today, money is available for some things but not for others. Take *Moneyball*, for example. Columbia Pictures didn't want to

roll the dice on Steven Soderbergh's version because they didn't think it was commercial enough, so they brought the budget down and rewrote the script. A few years ago they probably would have let Soderbergh make his film. Instead, they brought on a new producer and are going forward with a different director--Bennett Miller the director of *Capote*. Aaron Sorkin rewrote the script, and off they go.

Brad Pitt is still in *Moneyball*, but Steven's version is not going to be made. The risks are so high now, whether it's an \$18 million or a \$150 million movie, and the net result is that everyone is looking for the same movie; no one is looking for the outlier. Even so, outliers do become hits. Alcon came along with *The Blind Side*, which made money. They produced the movie, kept their costs down, distributed it through a deal they had with Warner Bros. and have done rather well, I would say. But no one else wanted to make that movie. Fox wanted them to turn it into a father-and-son story, rather than a mother-and-son story, and wanted more football.

When studios do take risks, like Universal does, it can cost them. Universal had a long list of films, like *State of Play* and *Duplicity* that, on paper, looked as if they would excite adult filmgoers. Movies like these have to be good to get adult audiences to attend, and I don't think those movies hit their targets. But at least Universal was betting on them. Now their big hope for next year is a movie based on the board game *Battleship*. They're putting a lot of effort into it because they don't feel they have a big summer movie, like a *Spider-Man* or a *Batman*.

As for Sony, it's going back to the well and making another *Spider-Man*. Today, the catchword is prequel or reinvention. Sony is reinventing *Spider-Man* – they'll cast a younger lead and go back to his high school years. Sony makes no bones about the fact that they have no money for development right now. Warner Bros. will certainly make another *Batman* (though Warner Bros. still makes darker films like Ben Affleck's *The Town*, a lower budget crime drama that looks terrific). Paramount is producing their third *Transformers* film. Someone is developing a *Barbie* movie somewhere; someone else has the rights to the Ouija board game; and for a while Ridley Scott was going to develop *Monopoly* into a movie. The common denominator here is fear, and it's easy for me to say this because my butt isn't on the line -- I'm not running a studio: Whenever you make a decision out of fear, the odds are that it will turn out badly. I screwed up my own career once by making decision out of fear. I learned my lesson.

That no one is looking for the outlier is a result of what studios think they can sell and how they look at movies today, which is very different from the way they viewed them in the past. It used to be that if a writer wanted to make a movie about Jake LaMotta, he would go and make a movie about Jake LaMotta and then the studio would have to figure out how to sell that movie. Sometimes that was a headache; Paramount had to figure out how to sell *Ordinary People* and *an Officer and a Gentleman* – both movies that wouldn't be made today. Marketing wasn't the major factor in the decision to make those



movies. Obviously, if a movie was going to be controversial, marketing mattered more, but overall quality was of greater concern.

A friend of mine who has been nominated twice for Academy Awards and has written and directed some great movies, tried to convince me to write *The Jungle Cruise* with him, a movie based on the ride at Disneyland. He is an amazing screenwriter who has enjoyed a twenty-five year career. We have to adapt, he told me. We are like Jews in Germany in the 1930s, and if we don't do something there is going to be a knock at the door (it's a bit much for a metaphor, but he's a writer; he's allowed). I had a few sleepless nights after that. He was serious and deeply concerned; and there is a strong case to be made that the business is changing and if we don't change with it...I'm fifty and have lots of close friends who are screenwriters, who have been doing well at a very high level. They are all trying to locate themselves in the industry -- trying to figure out where they fit into the movie business of the future. If we are really honest about it, the movies we want to make today generally aren't being made for the cinema; they are being made on television. The things we would once have written as movies are now being realized as TV series. The kinds of dramas that we really respect are almost all happening on cable.

[Read the complete transcript of our conversation with Scott Frank in \*Distribution Revolution: Conversations about the Digital Future of Film and Television\*.](#)