INTRODUCTION

The director is the key creative person in making a film. Directors have been likened to the captain of a ship and a conductor of an orchestra. They are sometimes called the auteur or author of a film. The director has also been described as 'an interested observer' or the film's first audience. The director has the artistic and creative responsibility and authority for the success of the film. Once generally unknown to the public, directors such as James Cameron and Steven Spielberg are household names.

What is the role of the director? Simply put the director directs the shooting of the film.

Films start with scripts, and this is where the director starts. The director interprets the script, and then ideally enhances the story through a vision and use of the film medium. This not only includes the use of the camera, but of sound, production design, editing and performances.

The director requires a broad and general understanding of many other film crafts, such as: script writing, cinematography, acting, and editing. Many directors in fact, start as writers, editors, or cinematographers. Others start by directing.

They usually begin with inexpensive short films and documentaries, and evolve to directors of commercials, television and features. There is no formal path to becoming a director. Because the attraction and interest in directing is so magnetic many aspiring directors manage to make it. They do however seem to require a higher commitment, resolve and tenacity. They also seem to require a greater degree of talent and luck. The reward is to be the person in control of the film, and the recognition that the film is yours.
TASKS

The director is active in all phases of production and is responsible for all creative phases of the film project. As each craft person performs a specialized creative function, such as production design, wardrobe, cinematography, lighting, and so on, it is the director who molds and shapes this work into a unified, cohesive role. The job of director is unique, and each may bring a different creative approach to the work.

PRE-PRODUCTION

THE SCRIPT

Like a writer, a good director is a story teller. The director uses a far greater range of tools than words. A drama director must understand the elements of a story: structure, conflict, progression, drama. A good script will have a central theme, or controlling idea. Some directors also work with a central theme, and let this theme guide all of the creative decisions to be made. A successful collaboration between writer and director would begin with a shared understanding of the theme.

It is important for a director to choose or work with material for which they have empathy and interest. A director who doesn't like or understand comedy will more than likely fail if they try to direct one. A director has to like and understand the material.

The director may make notes and suggestions on the script for revisions. These could be made for many reasons. For example the director may see a way to visually communicate an idea and consider some dialogue unnecessary, or the director may suggest a simpler way of executing a scene based on practical considerations. The director may also see areas in the story that need clarity or are repetitive and may be edited out or replaced. The director may work with the writer and producer on final revisions of the script.
THE SHOOTING SCRIPT

On set, the director is responsible for the placement and movement of the camera, and the duration of the particular shot.

The primary source for the shooting script is the screenplay or story. The shooting script can also be influenced by the ideas of the cinematographer, the production designer, the choice of locations, and the movement of the actors.

Some directors work with very precise shooting plans, and others use them as a point of departure, or a director may combine approaches depending on the particular scene. A dramatic confrontation between two people in a backyard allows flexibility, a scene requiring compositing images or special effects may require precision.

The director may also use storyboards or picture representations for shots. They may be crude (or refined) drawings done by the director or they may be executed by a storyboard artist.

THE VISUAL LANGUAGE

The idea of cinema as a language began in the era of silent films. But film is not truly a language. There is no direct one to one correlation between a shot and a meaning. However, like music, the visual medium, is a medium of communication, particularly in the realm of emotion. The way something is shown can suggest or manipulate a response (on the subconscious level) as much as what is shown. Style or form influences content.

If film is seen as a language, it is a contextual one. The meaning of a shot changes or alters according to the context. The context would be composed of content, related images and sounds, the way they are juxtaposed, and a variety of other elements.
Nonetheless the director's role is to provide the visual treatment of the story. To do so effectively requires an understanding of space, time, angles, perspective, point of view, composition, movement, and lenses; as well as editing and sound.

Many shots, as do many films simply require a practical or a common sense approach. If it is important to see the expression on a face at a given time, the camera has to be close enough for the audience to see it.

LOCATIONS

A good director views a location as a place where people actually engage in activities, and not simply as a backdrop. A kitchen should appear as a place where someone cooks and works or lives. The sense of realism or reality of a location is true for fantasy or science fiction genres. Film fiction requires the 'suspension of disbelief' and the more real the details the more convincing the story, no matter how 'far fetched.'

There are also many practical reasons for selecting locations. These would be proximity and availability. The story again, is the primary source of the location requirements. The director may select locations with the input of the production designer, producer, cinematographer, or others. The location may be modified by the art department, and sound requirements would also be a criteria.

The director may work with a video of the location or location stills, and may also record walk throughs of stand ins for moving shots. A particular location may suggest different staging possibilities or alterations in the shooting script.
THE CREW

The director usually has choice or veto power as to the key crew that will work on the set and other personnel for the film. The key relationship on set is between the director and the Director of Photography. The director may be part of the hiring, or consulted as to the key crew on the production. Another important relationship on the set with the director is with the first assistant director. The director also has an important relationship with other key creative people, such as the editor, production designer, and composer.

CAST

Unless there are stars involved, or the director or producer have a particular performer in mind, casting is usually done through the audition process. Having the right actor in the part is half the battle in obtaining a good performance. Casting may be intuitive, but there are methods that may serve the director well.

The least important qualities to look for in actors are the physical ones. By trying to cast in a narrow physical range the production limits itself. The key question to ask is not can this actor play the role of the father, but what effect will it have on the film if this actor is the father.

The director may have a clear idea of what they want, not only in terms of the look of the actor, but how they will deliver the lines. However creative film making is discovery, and casting presents an opportunity to discover new interpretations and new ways to see characters.

Rather than telling the actor how to do the role, casting should be a look at how the actor chooses to do the role. Many will interpret the script in the most obvious way, but some will bring something new, or some other quality into play. This may be something or someone the director can use.

It is important also, for the director to understand acting, and the differences between stage and film acting. In order for the director to obtain the performances the story needs, they have to know how to work with the actors. This begins in casting.
AUDITIONS

The director should not expect the actors to memorize the lines, move, or signify (use gestures) in the audition. The tendency for an actor will be to try to hard and give too much. The director has to be aware of this. If the director is looking for anything, it is naturalism: how convincing is the person in the role; the inner qualities or emotional qualities the actor can call upon that align with the qualities of the character in the story.

The usual process for the larger parts in a production is to have ‘call backs’ for the potential candidates, when more time can be allocated, more scenes covered, and the performed can be videotaped for later reference. Once the production has been cast, the director may schedule rehearsals.

REHEARSALS

Stage acting and film acting are different. Non Actors, such as children, can be quite convincing in film, but to place an ‘untrained’ actor on a stage is would likely be a disaster.

The film actor plays to the other actors, not to the audience, camera, or director. The film actor has to act in bits and pieces, deal with the technology of sound, camera, lighting, and effects, maintain continuity of gestures and dialogue, and use in a subtle fashion body language, expressions, movement and gestures.

The film actor has to bring forward emotions and feelings in short spans and with sudden shifts. The film actor has to remain ‘natural’ and also be able to alter the ‘level’ of performance according to the perspective of the camera. The director assists the actors not only in their delivery and interpretation of the character, but also helps them stay focused and relaxed. Most directors learn that less is more. If you tell an actor to speak a little louder, they will increase the volume more than necessary. Actors want to ‘do something’ yet that ‘something’ may be very little in reality to have great effect in the film. The actor in film should be ‘being’ rather than ‘signifying.’
Directors also learn to give direction in positive ways. Rather than tell an actor they are being to angry, they could suggest the actor have the character try to ‘hide the anger.’ Physical movement and giving the actors something tangible to do will often assist the actor in their work, rather than having the actor simply try to ‘emote.’

Rehearsals for film should accommodate the differences in film and theater. The idea of the rehearsal isn’t to achieve performance, but to know that the performance is there. The actual achievement of the performance should take place on set.

The director also can identify problem actors, problems the actors may have, and problems in the script. Rather than rehearse one scene over and over, the director should rehearse several scenes, and keep the actors fresh. The director can also have the actors engaged in relaxation and improvisation exercises, and use the opportunity for the actors to get to know each other.

The director shouldn’t be concerned with blocking in rehearsals, but let the actors move as they want. On set, blocking and marks usually become much more precise to accommodate the camera, although some directors make a point of giving the actors as much freedom of movement as possible, and then accommodate them.

It is also useful to rehearse on location. The set becomes familiar and comfortable, rather than a last minute surprise.

If it isn’t possible for location rehearsals, the actors can view tape or pictures of the location, or visit the set sites.

Rehearsals are also an opportunity to play, try things, and ask questions. In most film situations there is not enough time during the shoot to rehearse, so the performances have to be there, or obtained quickly.
OTHER PREP TASKS

The director is also involved in the shooting schedule. The schedule is made because of many practical requirements, such as the availability of talent and location proximity, but the creative and aesthetic needs of the production as expressed by the director are also a factor. The director is not only responsible for the creative whole of the film, they are responsible to create the film on the allocated budget, so directors learn to balance aesthetic and practical considerations in many areas, including the schedule.

The director also approves production design elements, props, set dressings, costumes and the look of make up or hair, picture vehicles, the number and type of extras, and numerous other details that will be part of the production.