

# Making Movies-in-Minutes

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Paul Duncum  
Professor  
University of Illinois, Champaign Urbana  
E-mail:pduncum@illinois.edu

## Abstract

Believing that youth's unsolicited on-line productions offer models for in-class production and reflection, the author describes the YouTube genre of movies-in-minutes, which contract full-length, professional movies to just a few minutes. The films variously involve life action reenactments, or the use of puppets, Lego, toys, or animation, and usually they eliminate all but what is essential to chronicle a few key scenes of the original. Additionally, they overcome the challenge posed by the use of high technology, multi-million-dollar special effects with inventive low technology, low cost solutions. The author describes his use of this model among his pre-service art teachers with three examples. Each exemplifies students engaging in considerable planning and organization; student learning and reliance on a complex range of visual and technical skills; and the creativity inherent in translating one cultural form into another. While highly motivated by recreating cultural forms with strong emotional resonance, students acquired knowledge that is basic to reflect critically upon, as well as fully appreciate, the dominant cultural forms of our time; namely, realistic style, time-based narrative imagery.

**Key words: Youth, YouTube, Videos, Movies**

## Making Movies-in-Minutes

No, it is not possible to make movies in minutes. Movies-in-minutes refers to the YouTube genre in which many youth, some as young as 7 and 8 years, collaborate to reduce down a full-length commercial movie to no more than a few minutes (Duncum, 2013). Like other art educators, I believe such on-line unsolicited productions by youth offer models for in-class production (e.g., Manifold, 2013; Freedman, et. al., 2013). In particular, making movies-in-minutes involves a range of skills and knowledge relevant to operating with a critical perspective in today's narrative-based popular visual culture. It requires problem solving, relies upon co-operative learning, and is highly motivating. Making such movies is an example of the visual culture orientation in art education, with its extension beyond both traditional and contemporary fine art to embrace popular culture (e.g., Duncum, 2006; Freedman, 2003). The visual culture orientation acknowledges the fact that our students' minds are increasingly formed and informed by digital popular imagery and to be relevant art education must be responsive.

Over the past few years I have introduced an assignment based on the movie-in-minutes genre to my foundations pre-service art teacher students. This paper describes three movies created in a recent class, each of which can be viewed on YouTube.<sup>1</sup>

The hugely successful blockbusters that are typically reworked by youth on YouTube are more than escapist spectacles. The original films invariably engage through the use of such archetypal themes as the hero's journey, fear conquered, goals realized, maturity attained, love achieved, love lost, and so on (Campbell, 2008). They play the traditional role of storytelling, that of inculcating social expectations. As one of the dominant

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<sup>1</sup> *Harriet Potter and the Sorcerers's Stone* (Final Edition). Available from: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fCPDmcqLQi8>  
*Sisterhood of the Traveling Yoga Pants* by Sneha Gaikward. Available from: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZHBSioBtF9o>  
*The Hunger Games: Movie in Minutes* by Regina Hinders Available from: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=njFfzOKvK1g>

forms of cultural production today, movies simultaneously reinforce the behavioral norms of society and offer deep psychological satisfactions. For youth, they play crucial developmental functions. No wonder then that when time-based technology is as widely available as it is today, youth relish reimagining these films in ways that reflect their personal as well as generational dispositions and predispositions.

## Movie-in-Minutes on YouTube

Movies-in-minutes on YouTube are typically achieved by eliminating all but what is needed to chronicle key scenes with only essential characters, and by overcoming the use of high technology multi-million-dollar special effects with low technology, low cost solutions. Sometimes the films involve the capture of imagery or audio from the original film, but more commonly they involve reworking scenes with live actors, and/or animations, puppets, dolls, Lego figures, and soft toys.

Blockbusters like *Jaws* and *Titanic* even now remain favorites. In the 1997, \$200,000,000 epic *Titanic* (Landau, 1997), the climatic sinking sequence involved the use of a full-scale model, several very large-scale models, and extensive computer generated images (CGI). Youth productions posted to YouTube rework this iconic scene in many different ways. They include a paper boat in a sink with the plug taken out so that the paper boat swirls around chaotically, a large Lego boat in a wading pool with an anxious voice over predicting disaster, and a plastic ship on a blue bedcover that is lifted up and down to create the illusion of giant waves.

Some examples are immensely popular. *Movie-in-Minutes Harry Potter* by Nigajoga was uploaded in February 2009, and at the time of writing early in 2014 it had received over 14 million views. The movie is typical of the genre in devising ingenious translations from big budget to virtually no budget film making as well as incorporating a range of diverse influences to create something new. Nigajoga is a Japanese teen who, with the aid of friends, parodies *Harry Potter* by using upper class British accents, puns on *Harry* and *Hurry*, and creating incomprehensible spells while breakdancing.

Like other movie-in-minutes movies, Nigajoga's movie sacrifices a coherent storyline in order to recreate a series of iconic, emotionally charged scenes that make sense only by reference to the original. Again, like the genre as a whole, it also illustrates a collaborative model of creativity (Jenkins, 2006), in which youth, working together to share and swap ideas, modify, extend, and average between existing cultural models (Wilson & Wilson, 1976).

## **Movies-in-Minutes the Classroom**

Inspired by these films, I begin by asking my undergraduate foundation art education students to chose a movie. Then they must identify its primary narrative; decide on which scenes and characters are necessary to tell it; chose a medium such as live actors, toys, and so on; develop a storyboard; and consider how to achieve climatic special effects with whatever they can muster. Through trial and error I have learned it is necessary to insist that students chose movies that primarily involve more than everyday experiences. The bigger the blockbuster, the more inventive they need to be.

### **In Preparation**

As preparation for making these movies I introduce some of the basic, formal elements of still photography, including framing, angles-of-view, lighting, lenses, and depth-of-field. The students view a PowerPoint presentation on each of these elements, and in small groups they take photographs and make their own PowerPoint presentations that illustrate variations of each element.<sup>2</sup>

They photograph a subject with distant framing, loose and tight full frames, three-quarter frames, half frames, head and shoulder frames, close-ups, and extreme close-ups. They shoot with high, neutral, and low angles; with full frontal lighting, and back, side and three-quarter lighting; with telephoto, standard and wide-angle lenses; and with deep and selective depth-of-field. In each case students are expected to explain what these

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<sup>2</sup> See Duncum (2012) for a more complete description of this procedure.

choices allow and exclude, and how these choices position the viewer in relation to the subject viewed. For example, students must explain how a loose full frame provides context but is less dramatic than tight full frame, how a high angle offers the viewer a powerful position, how frontal lighting flattens a subject, how selective focus directs attention, and so on.

I then introduce basic time-based elements including camera movements such as panning, tracking, tilting, and zooming, and the numerous ways to transition that are now available on digital editing programs. Students also consider objective and subjective point-of-view; that is, where the placement of the camera positions the viewer as onlooker and when it acts as the eyes of one of the characters. And, finally, students consider how the meanings of images are anchored by means of music, words, and sound effects. We then study short snippets from Hollywood movies to identify all the elements mentioned above and also to understand how they work together. We watch many times, focusing each time on different elements and different combinations of elements. Initially, I turn off the sound so that students can better concentrate on the purely visual elements, and when I turn the sound back on the importance of anchorage is made abundantly clear.

We then watch a number of movie-in-minute examples posted on YouTube, which we critique in terms of interest, originality, and coherence. Students also use the YouTube criteria - what they liked and disliked - as well as considering the validity of comments on the films already posted on YouTube. (I have found it exceptionally useful for students to critique these amateur efforts since students learn from negative models in a way they cannot by watching only well-crafted professional productions).

## **The Choice of Movies**

The class I describe below broke into three groups of three and four students to produce three separate movies of their own choice. One group chose *The Hunger Games* (Jacobson & Kilik, 2012). Another group chose *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (Heyman, 2001), which, following

many parodies already on YouTube, they retitled *Harriet Potter and the Sorceress's Stone*. The third group chose *Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* (Chase, 2005), which they too retitled, again using models on YouTube, *Sisterhood of the Traveling Yoga Pants*.

The original *Sorcerer's Stone* film is the first in the Harry Potter series. It introduces many of the main characters and situations. The trio of young heroes discover their friendship and prove themselves by doing battle with a series of dark forces. The *Sisterhood* film involves four teen girls who discover that despite their different body types a pair of jeans miraculously fits each of them. The jeans then act to connect them as they spend their first summer vacation apart discovering themselves as individuals. *The Hunger Games* film involves a future utopian society that has replaced war with a game in which youngsters are set loose in a forest to fight to the death, all the time being watched on television by an excited mass audience. Essentially, the film combines real war with a reality TV show.

While the films are very different from one another and some themes are more pronounced in some films than others, thematically they are remarkable similar. Themes include friendship, self-discovery, mistakes made and mistakes corrected, bonds of loyalty, physical and moral trials, adventures into the unknown, family dysfunction, courage, heartache, and the recognition of the specialness of individual protagonists. *Harry Potter* and *Hunger Games* also involve heroism, demonstrations of high-level skills, and the triumph of good over evil, while *Sisterhood* and *Hunger Games* also include budding romance.

The *Harry Potter* film was released when my early 20s something students were small children, and *Sisterhood* and *Hunger Games* are quintessentially late teen/young adult films. Each film was based on best selling books and in turn each proved not just a "hit" but a box office "phenomenon." In the life of my students the films had been seminal, and when I reviewed the films it was easy to understand their appeal. Each was exceptionally well crafted, with deep emotional resonance, especially, for my students' age group.

## Storyboarding

Since the majority of students had not made a film before, they could not foresee every challenge, but from previous experience I knew it was important for them to make a detailed storyboard to ensure that they did not waste time when filming. Where their drawing abilities failed them, they supplemented their drawing by writing down their intended framing and angles-of-view. For each scene they also indicated their intended camera movements, words spoken, words narrated, and their intended music and sound effects, as well as an estimated length of each shot. To approximate the latter, I had them close their eyes and picture the scene in their mind's eye.

Left to their own devices each group devised different working methods. One group discussed at great length which scenes to include, storyboarding as they went; a second group selected what they wanted to use by watching the original movie; and the third group began watching previous movies-in-minute YouTube versions to consider what they could use, what they thought they could improve, and where they wanted to invent their own solutions. Their discussions were peppered with comments that often began, "What if we tried..." and "Do you think it would work if ..."

Before venturing out to film I checked their storyboards, making suggestions and asking questions to clarify what they were thinking, a necessary step to ensure that they had at least considered the issues they would face. I was intrigued to find who had been assigned which roles; the costumes, makeup, and disguises they intended to use; and the locations they had considered. Among each group a conspiratorial spirit asserted itself in which they were keen to keep some things a surprise. By this time they were anxious to start, and off they went.

## The Filming and Editing Process

Some filming was undertaken with loaned professional equipment; other filming used cell phones. Back in class students edited using either *iMovie* or

*Final Cut Pro* on their laptops. Although each group had carefully storyboarded each scene with particular framing and angles-of-view, and two groups shot their films accordingly, *The Hunger Games* team decided to shoot with different frames and from different angles with the intention of later choosing the best, though when editing they decided to create excitement by using snippets from most of their different frames and angles. My only role at this point was to make occasional suggestions; the students were eager to work, often laughing, co-operating, completely in the moment.

## The Language Learned

At the conclusion of the movie making process each team wrote about their experiences, reflecting upon the decisions they had made, problems encountered, solutions found, happy accidents, and what they thought they had learned. Among the comments student wrote that indicate they had acquired a working knowledge of basic grammar, the following are typical:

“We used a neutral angle-of-view to suggest that the viewer is seated in the train with the characters, drawing them into the conversation, but a low angle to exaggerate Hagrid’s size.”

“We began with a loose full frame of Bridget, then we zoomed into her face, then tilted the camera down to show her pregnant belly, and then down further to show water on the mat from her water’s breaking.”

“When the four girls sit in a circle that symbolizes their never-ending friendship, we chose a 360 degree pan to emphasize their connection to one another.”

“We utilized panning, tracking, and zooming to follow characters and add emphasis, and we found that using handheld shots worked best to create the illusion of constant movement.”

“For most of our film we used a static camera, but for action scenes we used quick panning.”

“When Tibby’s friend faints the camera cuts to her friend’s point-of-view so the viewer sees Tibby’s worried face. When Kostas tells Lena he loves her the camera switches to her point-of-view.”

Each team stressed how they discovered the importance of anchoring.

“Without music our film seemed flat and the transitions between scenes were not very fluid. However, the moment the first song was layered over, the film became dynamic and dramatic.”

“Running up and down the corridor made no sense until we added the dog barking.”

“The creepiness of Voldamort’s voice is essential to the scene.”

Learning the basic language of the formal grammar of movies is important because it helps focus attention on how movies are constructed and the effect they have on the viewer. In this respect, it is as important as the formal language of line, color, shape and so on. Knowing this language equips students to better appreciate professional film making as well as better positioning them to resist manipulation. The skills and knowledge of traditional media are specific to the media, and so it is with film.

## **Collaborative Creativity**

The student’s movies-in-minutes, however, were more than an exercise in acquiring formal language. They also involved two kinds of creativity: the invention of ingenious solutions and the creativity inherent in translating from one form to another.

First, students had to devise a range of solutions to overcome the modest means with which they were operating. In the original *Harry Potter* film, the Quidditch game is played by flying furiously around in the air by no other means than broomsticks. In the student’s adaptation Harriet and one antagonist simply run towards each other with broomsticks between their legs. The scene in the original film where the three children are entangled by

the tree roots is managed in the student's film by the three protagonists clutching low lying branches, flailing about and crying out; and where in the original they fall through the roots, here they simply jump one by one out of a tree onto the ground. Where the original film employs a giant three-headed CGI dog, the student movie substitutes the sound effect of a dog barking and the heroes own terrified reactions. To recreate the scene in which characters attempt to catch keys the students stood in front of a movie screen on which they projected keys flying, which they combined with a few real keys dangling from string.

The *Sisterhood* team was faced with the problem of devising four distinctly different locations, including in Greece and underwater. I suggested that they could stand in front of images projected with an old overhead projector, but since a green screen was available they were keen to use it. In this way they created an illusion of travel in very different locations.

*The Hunger Games* team avoided the need to substitute big budget special effects with low budget ones by focusing almost entirely on scenes in the forest that did not require special effects. One problem they did need to solve was how to stay faithful to their storyboard, which called for hitting a squirrel with an arrow. Although they managed to film a squirrel appearing from behind a tree, killing it was of course impossible so they created the illusion of a kill with editing and the sound of a speeding arrow.

Secondly, students faced the challenge of re-imagining full-length movies taking place in just a few minutes. Each of the original films had already undergone a process of selection and recreation to condense book length stories to a few hours. They had been already translated from one medium to another, the result of weighing up and deciding from many alternative possibilities. For example, in the *Sisterhood* book two of the main characters have siblings who are omitted in the film, the adventure of one of the girls is markedly different from the book, and instead of taking place over four summers the film takes place over just one (see Brashares, 2003). Making movies-in-minutes involves making further difficult decisions about

what to include and what to exclude. It involves making drastic contractions and still retain some resemblance to the original.

Although each of the original films construct a traditionally coherent narrative, like their YouTube model, none of the student films do. Each of the student films follow the chronology of their original, but consist mostly of a series of separate scenes that are dependent for understanding upon a knowledge of their original. Considering the many the possibilities available to the students, I found what they selected highly instructive; they not only indicate just why these films were chosen in the first place, but also why students showed such enthusiasm in making their own movie versions. In carefully reviewing the movies, it became evident that in each movie the scenes students chose were either essential to help set up the action to follow or were emotionally charged. The delight student took in making their movies appears primarily due to the opportunities it offered to recreate key moments of deep emotional resonance.

## The Motivation of Emotion

Like the original *Harry Potter* film, the student version begins by establishing location, but unlike the original it then almost immediately jumps to the key declaration of Harriet as a wizard. This eliminates most of the build up to the declaration, including all of Harriet's family. Other early scenes are similarly eliminated and instead we move directly to the three protagonists meeting and introducing themselves on the train. In this very succinct way we are introduced to the key characters and their relationships. The original film involves many adventures and many characters, but here we see only a few iconic scenes of trail and triumph. The movie ends with Harriet, having vanquished the chief villain, unconscious, clutching the sorceress's stone in her hand. All the subsequent sequences of the original are jettisoned. Yet with the greatest danger defeated and with the use of highly emotional music, the film ends with its conclusion satisfyingly open. In short, much of the set up scenes and all of the concluding scenes are eliminated, leaving just enough set up to introduce us to the characters followed by a series of

emotionally charged scenes where the courage of the main characters is tested and their friendship is cemented.

The *Sisterhood* movie-in-minutes version begins with the mothers of the four girls in a gym exercising much like the original, but unlike the original, one of the mother's waters break, which introduces a carnivalesque touch that is typical of youth parodies. We are then shown a short textual passage to bring us into the present where the girls are now in their late teens. Like the original, they are shown cheerfully walking arm in arm along a sidewalk and into a clothing store where they each try on the pants. In the original the scene in the store takes some time but here it is contracted with the girls emerging one after the other from a booth, each surprised that the jeans fit. Up to this point all the scenes are concerned with setting up the situation; the girls have been best fiends forever and are now mysteriously linked by means of the jeans. The original film then explores the four girls individual adventures by shifting back and forth between them many times, but here only one or two scenes are shown per girl, and where their adventures are developed over time here they are rendered almost immediately. For example, in the original a whole series of scenes are devoted to one of the girl's response to her father remarrying. She is initially confused and only expresses anger much later. Here, she expresses confusion and anger as an initial reaction, which appears as psychologically valid as the original treatment. Similar to the original, the movie ends with the girls reunited and swearing life-long friendship. Thus, while radically contracted, the structure of the student movie follows the original, with the four girls together, separated, and then reunited. By focusing on their emotional challenges as well as abiding friendship, the emotional tone of the original is also retained.

The student version of *Hunger Games* begins with a panning shot that locates the heroine in the forest hunting wildlife and thereby establishing her expertise in the trail that follows. We then see her comforting her younger sister, and to save her sister she volunteers for the game. Her subsequent actions are thereby shown to be self-sacrificing. We then see her and her romantic interest preparing for their ordeal. Having this established the main

characters and their situation, what follows are a series of scenes of action, sacrifice and tragedy, and finally a challenge to the autocratic rule in which the two protagonists risk everything. Most of the bizarre characters who watch the hunt on television are never shown, but the student version manages to recreate the central drama by focusing on the hunt itself.

In each of the student cut-down versions scenes either set-up the primary situation or recreate key moments of emotional connection in which danger is faced and overcome, people die, friendship is established and tested, and romance initiated. Scenes demonstrate self-sacrifice, courage, and loving relationships.

## Conclusion

The movie-in-minutes YouTube genre has proven a means to combine both perennial and emerging realities and bring them into the classroom. As mentioned in the introduction, the visual culture orientation of art education is concerned with popular culture as much as it is with either traditional or new fine art, and today it is time-based narrative media on digital platforms that are our dominant cultural form. And it is no wonder that youth are recycling these forms with the technology that is now so readily available. Youth have proven able to take to digital technologies like fish to water, and today all they need is a cell phone and a laptop to collapse their consumption of popular media into their own production. Equally, youth culture has always been involved in exploring the meaning of courage, friendship, loyalty, and the mastery of skills, and many films are made with this demographic squarely in mind. Now, with the aid of new technologies, some youth are eager to rework these themes according to their own sensibilities, to offer loving homilies, and filtered through their often transgressive and resistant culture, to make parodies that are not only often hilarious but inventive.

However, not all unsolicited youth productions on YouTube are especially noteworthy. Many are talentless and inane, and they lack even the most rudimentary skills of filming, editing, and the layering of an auditory track. Similarly, art teachers, and my pre-service teachers, largely lack the

skills and knowledge to assist them. This is why it has become important for me to teach these skills and this knowledge, and the movie-in-minutes genre is particularly useful for this because it offers particular challenges. While there are many YouTube genre, subgenre and hybrid genre created by youth, most are rather simple in structure; some are little more than talking heads straight to camera. Making movie-in-minutes involves, for example, structuring and sequencing, considering where to place the camera to best show action, when to show and when to tell, when to use pictures and when words, how to establish mood with music and sound effects, and how long a scene should take to maintain interest. In making these movies students gain a glimpse into the complexity of professional movie making. They acquire a basic language with which to analyze movies and how to articulate expectations when they come to teach.

In the case of my own students, they employed a technology with which they were familiar as users but gained confidence as producers, and thereby become a repository of insider knowledge. Now they can better look at movies and consider why certain decisions were made and by extension be more aware of how those decisions were meant to effect them. And while students were motivated by the problem solving challenges inherent in the activity, it was I believe the emotional resonance of the activity that truly excited them. As the *Hunger Games* team wrote,

On completing our film we had a new perspective on the professionalism needed to make films. This project took many hours of work and effort yet our film is less than five minutes long. Since Hollywood films are much longer, they must take months or even years to make. The skills involved in using camera angles, lighting, audio, special effects and acting in professional films became much more apparent after this project. And as students, how often do we get to work on something we really love? Overall, it was challenging and a revelation. Considering all we learned, it was highly educational, and it will be fun to do with future students.

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