

*The Mikeifesto: A Critique on COVID-19-Era Cinema and Why It Needs To Change.*

By Michael Lynn

Remakes! Rehashes! Revamps! The top box office films of 2020 have been predominantly catered to the ontological security of our nostalgic better days before COVID-19! Might I add - this is an outrage! An atrocity! Dare I say - a bastardization of what filmmaking is all about! Need I use a better example of “selling out” original ideas than the puppeteering of films laid to rest in the same vein as the plot of *Weekend at Bernie’s*? Who am I to judge the mainstream as if I were as accredited as Siskel and Ebert? Alas, I am a graduate student with a love of creativity and a passion for creating original works myself. This, however, does not provide me the proper credentials to say that the multi-million dollar companies like Disney, Universal, Warner Bros., 20th Century Studios, Paramount and Columbia Pictures/ Sony are “wrong” in their efforts to entertain modern audiences by reintroducing them to old ideas. On the flip side, I am part of this large audience and I feel that I am entitled to say enough is enough! It is time to create what I deem: “*The Mikeifesto: A Critique on COVID-19-Era Cinema and Why It Needs To Change.*”

Now I know what you may be thinking: “Mike, this is a bit dramatic, don’t you think? I mean, there have been plenty of instances where cinema proved its intended purpose - to entertain audiences as a form of escapism from the perils of the modern age.” Certainly, they did. Statistically speaking, to have millions of dollars spent on watching films in an era where box offices are not open to the general public, your film is doing very well off. Perhaps I’d even play devil’s advocate and even go as far to say that by creating films that appease happy memories,

you are expressing the nostalgic mood that many people reminisce about during COVID-19 limitations. However - this is a cop-out excuse for tainting the image of the original films placed before! Why not just make a “remastered” version of the original films with better colors, remastered audio and include deleted scenes, director’s cuts, storyboard and more?

My general point being that time and time again, we find that some of the highest rating films in the box office of today are names that entice a callback to previously existing ideas and the reputation of their original glory days. *The Call of the Wild* is a prime example of taking a classic story from the early 20th century and repurposing it with uncanny CGI effects in a well-made-play style of predictable quirks that you can anticipate the entirety of the “hero’s journey” plot line as Harrison Ford talks to himself- I mean, the dog of course (the one that you can very much tell is artificially added in). Don’t get me wrong, there is nothing particularly upsetting about combining cartoons with reality at the same time - classics such as *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* have been ambitious and well deserved for their efforts made in a predominantly analog era of filmmaking. Similarly, *Mary Poppins*, *Space Jam*, *Scott Pilgrim Vs The World* and *Pete’s Dragon* are entertaining films to watch - even though not all of these films listed will make it to everyone’s *Top 10 WatchMojo.com’s Best Films of All Time* playlists, they have a distinct, unique and captivating aura that makes them hard to forget. There is a brand. Not everything is predictable, none of these performances drag on for too long and the line between the “cartoon” world and the excitement of the live action work in harmony - it makes *sense* as to why cartoons are acting alongside actors with cartoonishly beautiful and lively personalities.

Speaking of animated films, I would argue that there is great potential for animation as a safer alternative to live action production during the COVID-19 pandemic. The advantage here is that all of the assets needed to create the film - the animation, the storyboard, the editing process,

the voice acting and other elements can be done entirely remotely from one central location, thus being the safest way that I can fathom of creating a feature film in the modern era. The issue, however, is once again not by the idea of “bad” films - but the idea of predictable and mundane stories with relatively cookie-cut characters with similar character arcs and characteristics to one another. This phenomenon can partially be predicted to the art style that resonates within the “DreamWorks Face” style of animation that Universal Pictures has capitalized on from *Despicable Me* and forward. *The Croods: A New Age* is an example of this - there is nothing new about two unlikely factions learning to separate their differences and coexisting in harmony, even if it means cavemen and “modern” people. The flip side to this being *Soul*, released in 2021 - I will elaborate on why this idea works significantly better as a potent message and a film worthy of its praise.

My most controversial point is about to be made in this whole manifesto and truly, it’s not to say that I necessarily dislike this genre of cinema, but I think it’s about that time where we give this a short break to give our independent ideas a place to blossom. I’m looking at you, *Warner Bros.* and *Disney*! More specifically, I am referring to super-hero themed films. I know, I know, “Mike! You can’t say that! The Marvel Cinematic Universe movies are *LITERALLY* my favorite movies of ALL TIME! How could you *SAY THAT???*” Quite easily, to be honest. My favorite part of this is that it allegedly comes to a close when *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 3* releases in 2023. Once again, this is not because I dislike the films - they are a fantastic depiction of the comic books that so many people grew up with or learned to appreciate over time. I very much love to reminisce about the Toby Maguire Spider-Man films. On a whole different topic of superhero films, *The Dark Knight* trilogy is one of my personal favorites and I am mystified by the performances and cinematography in each respective film. However, considering that *Iron*

*Man* (2008) is considered the first film of the series that is still continuing to the day, it truly feels like an eternity of watching films that never seem to end. I have a similar love-hate relationship with the new era of *Disney's* installment to the *Star Wars* saga - and boy, sometimes the relationship emphasizes the "hate" of that statement (especially in Episode 8).

Why then, you may be wondering, do I insist on disliking superhero films and their spinoff additions? With the exception of *WandaVision*, which I will discuss in greater detail later on, I wish that these films would be less of an escape from reality and rather be a voice that is more relatable and thought provoking in our time of need. I am getting a bit ahead of myself, but this is the idea of "expressionism" as an art form - wherein the creator expresses their emotions, rather than their impressions of the external world. In other words, the artist relies on their emotions and how they perceive the world, rather than the realism of how it actually is. One could say that the horrors of a Tim Burton film gather this artistic style - or how David Lynch's living nightmares captivate this philosophy in some of the most potent ways to date. However, to show expressionism, in my opinion, you do not necessarily have to go to the extent of creating a gut-wrenching nightmare like these filmmakers per se. Sometimes, these ideas can be as simple as sharing your opinion through metaphors and allegories.

Instead of remakes - albeit, significantly worse remakes - of films that have already been made, such as *Dolittle* and *Mulan*, original concepts such as *Onward* (animated) or *The King of Staten Island* (live action) really stick to your mind and are not forgotten as easily. I would argue that some of the most stunning pieces are works made by independent filmmakers or those made with a clear and distinct strike of art style, storytelling and acting. Although *Parasite* was released towards the end of 2019, this film stands out as an incredible piece by capturing a story in South Korea with a full cast of South Korean actors. By exploring storytelling beyond the

United States, you are welcoming fruitful ideas and creative genius into the hearts of countless people. Thinking outside the box of what is already here is critical. Even if a film is done properly, such as *The Invisible Man*, I can't help but think of Claude Rains as a Universal Studios icon and the lasting impression he's had as a Hollywood classic. Films like *John Henry*, however, are a great example as to how the source material can turn into something so wrong. The case and point being - if it already exists, it is hard for people not to compare the legacy of your piece to the original, wherein the source material will outlive the remake's legacy.

Right then, back to the expressionism thing. One could say that this is the kairos to film disaster films, right? Not films that are box office flops - but films about an apocalypse, films about existentialism, films about loving one's self and one's family and films about questioning the daily confusion that surrounds a never ending *Groundhog Day* lifestyle - or as mainstream media refers to it, "Zoom fatigue." Films like *Tenet*, *Soul*, *The King of Staten Island* and *WandaVision* are great examples of these themes. To speedrun these ideas, *Tenet* includes concepts of "time control" (one could say an allegory of how time is such a blanket statement as each day is relatively similar to the next) and the impending doom of the modern world, *Soul* is a film about life itself, rather than a film about death (although there are themes of mortality here) and finding your life's purpose - reinstating that is okay to not be "the best" or to have high achievements and/or desires, *The King of Staten Island* revolves around several themes - including addiction, grief, finding one's self, mortality and other related coming-of-age themes and finally, *WandaVision* grabs the themes of a dream-like sitcom reality and breaks the illusion of the day-to-day illusion of bliss. These are powerful ideas and they resonate with audiences so well as they can relate to the themes being talked about - the characters are relatable and their

progressions feel real. More than anything, albeit, the world itself needs comfort and closure - a friend to rely on in the world of the silver screen brought to the black mirrors of our home.

As for aspiring filmmakers - first off, you are not an *aspiring* filmmaker. You are only an aspiring filmmaker if you hope to become a filmmaker one day. I have advice for people like you and for those that have a message to be shared - a beautiful imagination with a breathtaking story that has never been done before. A message for those with a concept that reflects how you're thinking, perhaps - maybe an idea that reminds you of a friend or a memory you had at one time. For those trying to have their voices heard and their ideas recognized, these simple truths are for you:

**1. A good film does not have to be a “good film.”**

I have seen countless films that are not necessarily “good,” but live rent free in my mind as strikes of comedic genius, fascinating ideas or wonderfully choreographed animation. The reason they live in my head rent free, however, is because they took a risk. Films in this category can genuinely make you smile if you let them - some of these concepts are just so whacky that you can't help but laugh at the absurdity of how dead serious a ridiculous idea is. I need not say more than *The Bee Movie* or *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* Once again, these films are not the best, but they are so memorable by their quotes, their styles and devotion towards the pacing, premise and commitment to bring their stories to life.

**2. Good camera does not mean a good film - just grab what you can and try your best!**

Easier said than done, of course. In my opinion, good composition and a great lineup of actors with a fantastic story combined with a decent camera beats a mediocre story captured on an 8k camera with 120 FPS, ridiculous saturation mounted onto a crane featuring cup holders,

autobalance, auto-focus with a shotgun microphone attached any day of the week. You don't have to have a five thousand dollar budget to do alright. Depending on what you're going for, sometimes less is more. The analog horror of *The Blair Witch Project* or *Paranormal Activity* goes to show you that you don't need to be fancy, you just have to be creative. Creative liberties and distribution aside, remember that the 2003 film *Tarnation* functioned on a budget of \$218.32. This film earned a box office profit of 1.2 MILLION dollars.

### **3. Do your thing! Start producing after you read this manifesto!**

Don't think too hard about it, the first thing you should do is to start thinking of ideas. What's on your mind? What things fascinate you? What is your passion? What are some of your favorite memories - or better off, least favorite? These are some anecdotes to help inspire the creative mind into a blossoming new idea that may very well get recognized for something fresh in the YouTube algorithm or film festival venue. What is important to remember is that you need to produce your idea and get it out into the world. There is only one of "you" and you have original ideas that nobody else can replicate. Do your thing! People will love it!

### **4. It's okay if your film doesn't win first place.**

It hurts. It really does. I very much had a film denied from a film festival a couple of years back because of a technical error wherein my abstract never submitted to the judges and boy did my film not make it in. Long story short, I showed my film to other venues and even ended up submitting my film to the same film festival I was denied from the next year - AND WON! I mean, I only "won" because I was the only person who submitted a film and the festival was cancelled due to COVID-19 - BUT I WON! To be fair though, I felt happier showing my work to other venues wherein the celebration was in the creation of the piece, rather than the competition of who's film is "better." This leads me to my next point,

### **5. Your film doesn't have to be "better" than anyone else's film!**

Like I said, a good film doesn't have to be a "good" film - not everyone is going to fully understand your idea. No matter if your film is avant-garde or an easy-to-follow well-made-play plot, not everybody is going to understand what you're getting at and that's okay. The importance is that you're able to showcase your film in your resume, you'll be able to make more films after you've learned what worked and what didn't while working on your set and you feel a sense of confidence that you *did* produce a film!

### **6. The producer / director is always right - there is a vision to be maintained**

Unless you start to see a recurring trend that everyone you pitch your film idea to has not a clue of what you're talking about or needs further clarification, stick to your guns. Never let your actors or technical helpers talk you into changing your vision - it's your story! What do they know? Unless you start to see plot holes that are unintentionally ambiguous or a strike of brilliance happens on set, it's best for you - the director / producer - to stick to what's right in your heart, even if other people may question your idea. Sometimes it's those risky scenes that can make your film stand out or cause a powerful response from the audience - potentially leading to a powerful moment in your scene.

### **7. Be original - be yourself!**

We can't help but think about our favorite directors when we produce something original. Sometimes, you'll even find that famous directors are inspired by other directors. Friedrich Plumpe (F. W. Murnau) had influenced Alfred Hitchcock, who influenced David Lynch (among so many others), who influenced Tarantino and Stanley Kubric, who influenced Christopher



Nolan and Wes Anderson - and so on. We learn from the best and aspire to be the best ourselves, one might say. It is important to note, however, that we should not become the thing that we aspire to be. With each iteration away from the source material, the further you extend into a totally unique art form. Do not rely on the tropes of your favorite director(s), but rather, work in new traditions of your own. Think of things you like and aesthetics that appeal to you - potentially work these into your productions. Perhaps it's a time era, musical genres, art styles, aesthetics, personality traits, physical attributes or something completely different that resonates with you. Stick to these - your life experiences will help guide you through this process.

All in all, we need not another live action remake - nor a repurposed idea from long ago that will inevitably be outshone by its predecessor. Instead, I recommend that the avid moviegoer finds a new short film that resonates with them and shares it with friends and family to give it the critical acclaim it deserves. For us filmmakers, there is work to be done and the advice previously given is but a fraction of the advice that I can recommend giving. This should not be used as a complete set of ideas, but rather as a starting point for figuring out what works best for you. You may develop your own tropes that carry throughout your own personal cinematic universe or even a new style never before seen. If your name ends up on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, however, don't forget about me, will you? Break legs and best of luck to your film endeavors, dear colleague. Always remember to inspire, rather than aspire. More specifically, don't be that aspiring filmmaker, be the filmmaker that inspires others to follow your example and truly be yourself.