How I accidentally changed the way movies get made

This weekend, tens of millions of people in the United States and tens of millions more around the world, in Columbus, Georgia, in Cardiff, Wales, in Chongqing, China, in Chennai, India will leave their homes, they'll get in their cars or they'll take public transportation or they will carry themselves by foot, and they'll step into a room and sit down next to someone they don't know or maybe someone they do, and the lights will go down and they'll watch a movie.

00:35
They'll watch movies about aliens or robots, or robot aliens or regular people. But they will all be movies about what it means to be human. Millions will feel awe or fear, millions will laugh and millions will cry. And then the lights will come back on, and they'll reemerge into the world they knew several hours prior. And millions of people will look at the world a little bit differently than they did when they went in.

01:06
Like going to temple or a mosque or a church, or any other religious institution, movie-going is, in many ways, a sacred ritual. Repeated week after week after week. I'll be there this weekend, just like I was on most weekends between the years of 1996 and 1990, at the multiplex, near the shopping mall about five miles from my childhood home in Columbus, Georgia. The funny thing is that somewhere between then and now, I accidentally changed part of the conversation about which of those movies get made.

01:40
So, the story actually begins in 2005, in an office high above Sunset Boulevard, where I was a junior executive at Leonardo DiCaprio's production company Appian Way. And for those of you who aren't familiar with how the film industry works, it basically means that I was one of a few people behind the person who produces the movie for the people behind and in front of the camera, whose names you will better recognize than mine. Essentially, you're an assistant movie producer who does the unglamorous work that goes into the creative aspect of producing a movie. You make lists of writers and directors and actors who might be right for movies that you want to will into existence; you meet with many of them and their representatives, hoping to curry favor for some future date. And you read, a lot. You read novels that might become movies, you read comic books that might become movies, you read articles that might become movies, you read scripts that might become movies. And you read scripts from writers that might write the adaptations of the novels, of the comic books, of the articles, and might rewrite the scripts that you're already working on. All this in the hope of finding the next big thing or the next big writer who can deliver something that can make you and your company the next big thing.

02:48
So in 2005, I was a development executive at Leonardo's production company. I got a phone call from the representative of a screenwriter that began pretty much the way all of those conversations did: "I've got Leo's next movie." Now in this movie, that his client had written, Leo would play an oil industry lobbyist whose girlfriend, a local meteorologist, threatens to leave him because his work contributes to global warming. And this is a

situation that's been brought to a head by the fact that there's a hurricane forming in the Atlantic that's threatening to do Maria-like damage from Maine to Myrtle Beach. Leo, very sad about this impending break up, does a little more research about the hurricane and discovers that in its path across the Atlantic, it will pass over a long-dormant, though now active volcano that will spew toxic ash into its eye that will presumably be whipped into some sort of chemical weapon that will destroy the world.

03:39
(Laughter)

03:41
It was at that point that I asked him, "So are you basically pitching me 'Leo versus the toxic superstorm that will destroy humanity?"' And he responded by saying, "Well, when you say it like that, it sounds ridiculous." And I'm embarrassed to admit that I had the guy send me the script, and I read 30 pages before I was sure that it was as bad as I thought it was. Now, "Superstorm" is certainly an extreme example, but it's also not an unusual one. And unfortunately, most scripts aren't as easy to dismiss as that one.

04:11
For example, a comedy about a high school senior, who, when faced with an unplanned pregnancy, makes an unusual decision regarding her unborn child. That's obviously "Juno." Two hundred and thirty million at the worldwide box office, four Oscar nominations, one win. How about a Mumbai teen who grew up in the slums wants to become a contestant on the Indian version of "Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?"? That's an easy one -- "Slumdog Millionaire." Three hundred seventy-seven million worldwide, 10 Oscar nominations and eight wins. A chimpanzee tells his story of living with the legendary pop star Michael Jackson. Anyone?

04:47
(Laughter)

04:48
It's a trick question. But it is a script called "Bubbles," that is going to be directed by Taika Waititi, the director of "Thor: Ragnarok."

04:55
So, a large part of your job as a development executive is to separate the "Superstorms" from the "Slumdog Millionaires," and slightly more generally, the writers who write "Superstorm" from the writers who can write "Slumdog Millionaire." And the easiest way to do this, obviously, is to read all of the scripts, but that's, frankly, impossible. A good rule of thumb is that the Writers Guild of America registers about 50,000 new pieces of material every year, and most of them are screenplays. Of those, a reasonable estimate is about 5,000 of them make it through various filters, agencies, management companies, screenplay compositions and the like, and are read by someone at the production company or major studio level. And they're trying to decide whether they can become one of the 300-and-dropping movies that are released by the major studios or their sub-brands each year.

05:41
I've described it before as being a little bit like walking into a members-only bookstore where the entire inventory is just organized haphazardly, and every book has the same, nondescript cover. Your job is to enter that bookstore and not come back until you've found the best and most profitable books there. It's anarchic and gleefully opaque.

06:02
And everyone has their method to address these problems. You know, most rely on the major agencies and they just assume that if there's great talent in the world, they've already found their way to the agencies, regardless of the structural barriers that actually exist to get into the agencies in the first place. Others also constantly compare notes among themselves about what they've read and what's good, and they just hope that their cohort group is the best, most wired and has the best taste in town. And others try to read everything, but that's, again, impossible. If you're reading 500 screenplays in a year, you are reading a lot. And it's still only a small percentage of what's out there.

06:38
Fundamentally, it's triage. And when you're in triage, you tend to default to conventional wisdom about what works and what doesn't. That a comedy about a young woman dealing with reproductive reality can't sell. That the story of an Indian teenager isn't viable in the domestic marketplace or anywhere else in the world outside of India. That the only source of viable movies is a very narrow groups of writers who have already found their way to living and working in Hollywood, who already have the best representation in the business, and are writing a very narrow band of stories.

07:11
And I'm somewhat embarrassed to admit, that that's where I found myself in 2005. Sitting in that office above Sunset Boulevard, staring down that metaphorical anonymized bookstore, and having read nothing but bad scripts for months. And I took this to mean one of two things: either A: I was not very good at my job, which was, ostensibly, finding good scripts, or B: reading bad scripts was the job. In which case, my mother's weekly phone calls, asking me if my law school entrance exam scores were still valid was something I should probably pay more attention to. What I also knew was that I was about to go on vacation for two weeks, and as bad as reading bad scripts is when it is your job, it's even more painful on vacation. So I had to do something.

07:54
So late one night at my office, I made a list of everyone that I had had breakfast, lunch, dinner or drinks with that had jobs similar to mine, and I sent them an anonymous email. And I made a very simple request. Send me a list of up to 10 of your favorite screenplays that meet three criteria. One: you love the screenplay, two: the filmed version of that screenplay will not be in theaters by the end of that calendar year, and three: you found out about the screenplay this year. This was not an appeal for the scripts that would be the next great blockbuster, not an appeal for the scripts that will win the Academy Award, they didn't need to be scripts that their bosses loved or that their studio wanted to make. It was very simply an opportunity for people to speak their minds about what they loved, which, in this world, is increasingly rare.

08:39
Now, almost all of the 75 people I emailed anonymously responded. And then two dozen other people actually emailed to participate to this anonymous email address, but I confirmed that they did in fact have the jobs they claimed to have. And I then compiled the votes into a spreadsheet, ran a pivot table, output it to PowerPoint, and the night before I left for vacation, I slapped a quasi subversive name on it and emailed it back from that anonymous email address to everyone who voted. The Black List. A tribute to those who lost their careers during the anti-communist hysteria of the 1940s and 50s, and a conscious inversion of the notion that black somehow had a negative connotation.

09:16

After arriving in Mexico, I pulled out a chair by the pool, started reading these scripts and found, to my shock and joy, that most of them were actually quite good. Mission accomplished. What I didn't and couldn't have expected was what happened next. About a week into my time on vacation, I stopped by the hotel's business center to check my email. This was a pre-iPhone world, after all. And found that this list that I had created anonymously had been forwarded back to me several dozen times, at my personal email address. Everyone was sharing this list of scripts that everyone had said that they loved, reading them and then loving them themselves. And my first reaction, that I can't actually say here, but will describe it as fear, the idea of surveying people about their scripts was certainly not a novel or a genius one. Surely, there was some unwritten Hollywood rule of omertà that had guided people away from doing that before that I was simply too naive to understand, it being so early in my career. I was sure I was going to get fired, and so I decided that day that A: I would never tell anybody that I had done this, and B: I would never do it again.

10:22
Then, six months later, something even more bizarre happened. I was in my office, on Sunset, and got a phone call from another writer's agent. The call began very similarly to the call about "Superstorm": "I've got Leo's next movie." Now, that's not the interesting part. The interesting part was the way the call ended. Because this agent then told me, and I quote, "Don't tell anybody, but I have it on really good authority this is going to be the number one script on next year's Black List."

10:52
(Laughter)

10:54
Yeah. Suffice it to say, I was dumbfounded. Here was an agent, using the Black List, this thing that I had made anonymously and decided to never make again, to sell his client to me. To suggest that the script had merit, based solely on the possibility of being included on a list of beloved screenplays. After the call ended, I sat in my office, sort of staring out the window, alternating between shock and general giddiness.

11:19
And then I realized that this thing that I had created had a lot more value than just me finding good screenplays to read over the holidays. And so I did it again the next year -- and the "LA Times" had outed me as the person who had created it -- and the year after that, and the year after that -- I've done it every year since 2005. And the results have been fascinating, because, unapologetic lying aside, this agent was exactly right. This list was evidence, to many people, of a script's value, and that a great script had greater value that, I think, a lot of people had previously anticipated. Very quickly, the writers whose scripts were on that list started getting jobs, those scripts started getting made, and the scripts that got made were often the ones that violated the assumptions about what worked and what didn't. They were scripts like "Juno" and "Little Miss Sunshine" and "The Queen" and "The King's Speech" and "Spotlight." And yes, "Slumdog Millionaire." And even an upcoming movie about Michael Jackson's chimpanzee.

12:17
Now, I think it's really important that I pause here for a second and say that I can't take credit for the success of any of those movies. I didn't write them, I didn't direct them, I didn't produce them, I didn't gaff them, I didn't make food and craft service -- we all know how important that is. The credit for those movies, the credit for that success, goes to the people who made the films. What I did was change the way people looked at them. Accidentally, I

asked if the conventional wisdom was correct. And certainly, there are movies on that list that would have gotten made without the Black List, but there are many that definitely would not have. And at a minimum, we've catalyzed a lot of them into production, and I think that's worth noting.

12:55
There have been about 1,000 screenplays on the Black List since its inception in 2005. About 325 have been produced. They've been nominated for 300 Academy Awards, they've won 50. Four of the last nine Best Pictures have gone to scripts from the Black List, and 10 of the last 20 screenplay Oscars have gone to scripts from the Black List. All told, they've made about 25 billion dollars in worldwide box office, which means that hundreds of millions of people have seen these films when they leave their homes, and sit next to someone they don't know and the lights go down. And that's to say nothing of post-theatrical environments like DVD, streaming and, let's be honest, illegal downloads.

13:35
Five years ago today, October 15, my business partner and I doubled down on this notion that screenwriting talent was not where we expected to find it, and we launched a website that would allow anybody on earth who had written an English-language screenplay to upload their script, have it evaluated, and make it available to thousands of film-industry professionals. And I'm pleased to say, in the five years since its launch, we've largely proved that thesis. Hundreds of writers from across the world have found representation, have had their work optioned or sold. Seven have even seen their films made in the last three years, including the film "Nightingale," the story of a war veteran's psychological decline, in which David Oyelowo's face is the only one on screen for the film's 90-minute duration. It was nominated for a Golden Globe and two Emmy Awards.

14:21
It's also kind of cool that more than a dozen writers who were discovered on the website have ended up on this end-of-year annual list, including two of the last three number one writers. Simply put, the conventional wisdom about screenwriting merit -- where it was and where it could be found, was wrong. And this is notable, because as I mentioned before, in the triage of finding movies to make and making them, there's a lot of relying on conventional wisdom. And that conventional wisdom, maybe, just maybe, might be wrong to even greater consequence.

14:57
Films about black people don't sell overseas. Female-driven action movies don't work, because women will see themselves in men, but men won't see themselves in women. That no one wants to see movies about women over 40. That our onscreen heroes have to conform to a very narrow idea about beauty that we consider conventional. What does that mean when those images are projected 30 feet high and the lights go down, for a kid that looks like me in Columbus, Georgia? Or a Muslim girl in Cardiff, Wales? Or a gay kid in Chennai? What does it mean for how we see ourselves and how we see the world and for how the world sees us?

15:38
We live in very strange times. And I think for the most part, we all live in a state of constant triage. There's just too much information, too much stuff to contend with. And so as a rule, we tend to default to conventional wisdom. And I think it's important that we ask ourselves, constantly, how much of that conventional wisdom is all convention and no wisdom? And at what cost?

16:05
Thank you.