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Following The Money: What Does It Cost to Make A Film?

By Rhys Clarke - November 19, 2025



Photo by John Guccione, Pexels

James Gunn's *Superman* cost \$225 million to make. To the inexperienced eye, this might seem like quite a lot of money, but this is little more than chump change in the world of modern filmmaking.

The uninspiring first chapter of Disney's semi-improvised Star Wars trilogy, *The Force Awakens* (2015), was given a budget of \$447 million. Even *Jack and Jill*, Adam Sandler's 2011 critically-panned, Razzie-raking comic masterpiece, somehow required just under \$80 million to cobble together. One does wonder, where on earth did all this money go? What could all those millions possibly have been spent on? The make-up department? I doubt it.

What makes all these squandered millions all the more depressing is the fact that they're just not needed. Some of the most groundbreaking films of all time were created on budgets so meager that it would be gross exaggeration to call them 'shoestring.' Consider *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), arguably one of the greatest examples of found footage horror, which was shot on an original budget of \$60,000. Even taking into account the extra post-production and marketing costs, the final budget still did not even exceed \$1 million. Yet, nearly thirty years on, this cheap independent experiment remains one of the most famous horror films ever created. This goes to show what can be achieved with a combination of hard work, ambition and passion. True art doesn't need to be drowned in a sea of cash; it rises to prominence on its own merits.



The Blair Witch Project (1999) © Haxan Films

That isn't to say that the art of filmmaking is an easy one, or one that often pays out. I don't doubt that there are probably thousands, maybe even tens of thousands of *Blair Witch* projects being produced all over the country; all over the world, even. The vast majority of them won't even have the dignity of fading into obscurity; most of them will be simply ignored. It will be no small miracle if these hypothetical filmmakers even reach the distribution stage.

So it seems that a swollen, ponderous budget is not necessarily required to produce high-quality cinema. Of course, that doesn't mean that any producer with even a shred of sanity would turn down the offer of a generous budget. Money is not everything, but it's not nothing, either. Indeed, an undervalued (forgive the pun) part of filmmaking requires a team that is capable of handling a reasonable budget sensibly; every penny must be put to good use. To do this properly, those involved with the grubby business of financing a film must find a happy medium between the absurd and superfluous budgets of films like *The Force Awakens*, and the measly bit of cash that is typically allotted to independent filmmakers. If they're lucky. Speaking as someone who has dabbled in the world of filmmaking, primarily as a writer and actor, I can attest to the fact that it is not a career for the faint-hearted. Money is not a necessity when it comes to making films, but goodness me, does it help.

I have never had the misfortune (or the patience) to be anything close to a starving artist, but I can recall many instances where I have been an exhausted and uncomfortable artist, wolfing down a meagre snack, enjoying a few minutes of recuperation somewhere between the tenth and eleventh take of a ten-second scene of me crawling through a batch of tic-infested stinging nettles, whilst the director and his henchman bicker and bloviate over the best angle to film a five-second establishing shot of a nearby rock. In that moment, I can remember thanking myself for spending five quid on a meal deal to bring with me. In that moment, that meal deal, that fiver, meant more to me than the entire budget of *On Stranger Tides*.

So, the point of this article isn't to entirely dismiss the importance of money when it comes to producing a film; more to highlight the unintentional consequences of drowning a movie in a budget that is too vast to be of any good use. Money, by which I mean, the absurd fortunes that seem to be heaped upon the majority of modern blockbusters, is not really the largest hurdle to overcome when one decides to make a film. When it comes to the underappreciated art of amateur filmmaking, I can tell you from experience that the three biggest challenges are as follows: transportation, timing, and location.

Unless you plan on making a completely restricted chamber piece, you're going to have to find accessible locations. This is something that eats up a lot of time and money. Even a minute-long conversation between two friends in a pub is a scene that can only be scraped together after many weeks of phoning and emailing and visiting numerous pubs; negotiating the costs of hiring the space for however long you need it for; wrangling together enough extras to fill the room, just so you can squeeze a couple of silhouettes into the background of this sixty-second interaction. That's assuming that you're filming a scene indoors. If you're shooting a film that primarily takes place outside, then you need to spend even more time on this. And if you're not fortunate enough to reside in a manor house surrounded by acres of perfectly maintained private land, it becomes even harder.

Several years ago, I worked on a short film that involved shooting at various locations across the Sussex Downs. This was a wonderful project to work on, even if it did involve me having to spend five days wearing a thick, brown jacket in the middle of a 30 degree heatwave, but when I learned about the sacrifices that were made by the director and the producers, I decided not to voice my complaints. In the weeks preceding the shooting dates, the director and one of the producers spent 24 hours hiking and camping across the South Downs in order to scout out locations. Perhaps not starving, but certainly suffering artists, just for the sake of finding a few scenic fields. Those brave souls didn't even have the luxury of a shoestring budget; just two sleeping bags, a camera, and a rucksack full of sandwiches. I think that they must not have been as puritanical as I if they had been offered the same budget as *Jack and Jill*.

Jack and Jill (2011) © Happy Madison Productions

Then there's transport. I once collaborated on another short film, set on the outskirts of Lochgilphead. As you can imagine, the cost of transporting several actors—not to mention a wide assortment of microphones, cameras, clothes and make-up—from the south-east of England to the north-west of Scotland was no easy feat, and it was certainly no cheap achievement, either. To make matters worse, the entire team was reliant on a single driver. This meant that several dirty, sweaty and cantankerous actors had to squeeze themselves into a small car for large chunks of the days, with about five-hundred pounds of filming equipment (and a few sandwiches, we must not forget the importance of the meal deal) spread across our squashed laps, whizzed to a multitude of midge-infested locations.

Then there is the true enemy of the amateur filmmaker: time. A halfway decent director can bluff and bungle their way through a non-existent budget, but there is nothing they can do to halt or delay the dreaded rotation of this little blue ball. There are few things more demoralising, more soul-crushing, than finding yourself in a constant battle against the clock. In the summer of 2024, I set myself the challenge to shoot a fifteen-minute short film in a single day. I had to catch a

train to Scotland the next day to work on yet another film that would occupy me for the next three weeks, so failure wasn't really an option: I had to shoot as much of the film as humanly possible, or die trying. We had the perfect location, a talented team, and the schedule planned down to the last second. As long as nothing went wrong, we would finish by about 5. Of course, as is always the case when you're on set, things went wrong, one after the other, in a daisy-chain of disasters.

We completed the film three hours later than we had originally planned. I can still feel my stomach turning into burning knots when I remember how we had to race against the dwindling sunlight, the fear that gnawed away, right until the final take, that we would not finish in time. It was one of the most stressful days of my life—and also one of the most exciting. But at the end of the day (quite literally), we achieved what we set out to do. We made a film.

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