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This is an adapted English transcript of Future et médias, a series of French podcasts on major changes and emerging trends in the media and entertainment industry.

I'm Catherine Mathys.

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The leitmotif for Season 2 imposed itself without warning. Productions were shut down, projects postponed indefinitely or cancelled outright, studios left deserted. And like so many others, the screen-based industry went into sudden COVID-19 lockdown.

Yet, a very positive side of the lockdown has been the development of innovative solutions that have allowed us to continue developing, distributing, and promoting content.

In Season 2 of Futur et médias, we're meeting with creators who've proven their resilience in overcoming the unprecedented restrictions brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Today, the post-production paradigm is being inverted as we talk about technical pre-production.

COVID-19 has certainly presented its share of challenges for restarting the filming process, particularly in terms of dramatic content. Do we have to write off scenes that require extras? How can we respect the two-metre social distancing rule when the script calls for intimate scenes between characters? How can we get international talent on set with travel restrictions still in effect?

These are only a few of the hurdles we must get over before we can start shooting again. Not to mention the major issue of budgeting. How can we keep the increased costs of meeting government health directives under control?

Many are worried that drastic changes to scripts will have to be made in order to meet all the new requirements and that this will seriously impinge on our freedom in the way we tell our stories.

Well it just so happens that our guest today has developed a filming process over the years that solves many of the difficulties brought on by the COVID-19 situation. I recently met with Marc Côté, founder and president of REAL by FAKE to discuss technical pre-production. His

I get the impression you've been rethinking the filming process for quite some time, and, without wishing for anything like the current COVID-19 situation, of course, you've somehow already come up with solutions that fit in perfectly with what we're experiencing now. Am I missing something?

05:11

- **MC:** Well, it goes all the way back to my educational and business background. Before I got into film, I worked in engineering, in robotics. I worked for companies like Peugeot and also did some engineering consulting. Then in 1996-97 I was bitten by the cinema bug and have remained seriously bitten ever since.

I noticed that there was little in the way of preparation, pre-production, or design when it came to technical aspects on film sets. And these could be very complex. I'm not talking about Marvel projects here, where the whole project is storyboarded and we know exactly what's going to be shot, but for more basic projects, and, you know, indie productions.

So, during my career in film and then in television, I realized that there was plenty of room for improvement in technical pre-production. Sure, we look for locations, actors getting casted, we do run-throughs, we prepare like we're doing a play, then finally we execute and capture the execution on cameras.

So, filming techniques can also be improved by using the concept of visual effects to its full extent...Actually 'improve' is the word I use but it's more...more like being able to review the filming methods in order to lower costs of the job or even bring the story closer to the writer's or director's vision without limiting ourselves. Without having to do a rewrite because, well, it's not possible, we can't go to Paris, we can't get that actor back on set, it's not possible to get everyone together again in the same place. And there have been occasions recently where these techniques have been applied and we were able, indeed, to meet everyone's expectations

CM: Can you give some examples of shoots where you were able to adapt to particular situations like that?

07:53

MC: Well, let's start with the *Dallas Buyer's Club*, a project where we were working with a tight budget. We also had a limited turnaround time. Not to mention the budgets had been cut by half. We actually wondered if it was even possible to make a film on this scale with what we had left.

After working with the director and then the producers, we decided that the only way to get the job done was by taking a different approach. That meant shooting with a skeleton crew. We'd work in a set-up where we used no lighting, no camera support system. We'd do everything by hand, and where we could, we'd narrow the locations down to a fairly small area.

The idea was that if we're going to make our actor travel, we're going to make him travel in the parking lot next door and then we're going to turn the parking lot environment into a highway, into other places, and then, in terms of driving around, we do it using the *poor man's process*. It's an old trick. But, of course, we put up green screens all around so we can change the environment.

CM: What exactly is the *poor man's process*?

MC: Back in the day, you put a car in a studio and projection screens in the back instead of going out for a drive...that's the poor man's process.

CM: And it showed!

MC: No kidding. In early James Bond films, you could have sequences shot in studio with projection screens and then you'd also get stunt doubles actually driving the car to handle certain scenes. So, it goes back a ways. It's not something that we've only been using since COVID-19.

That's about it, and by managing that way, we were able to restart the project, the production. After just a few days of shooting, we realized that by removing all the little elements that could slow us down, we never had to wait for the camera or the actors again. The pace really picked up for everything and we were able to cover 30 to 35% more material per day. Which is

what we wanted to happen, and soon we were working just nine-to-ten-hour days and were right on schedule.

We were taking more and more pressure off on the shoot. This gave the director and then the actors more opportunity to really work together, explore the script and emotions because we didn't have to worry about the technical aspects and everything else around us. We ended up with a real win-win solution. We've been using that same approach with that same director on all productions since then. I'm talking about Jean-Marc Vallée on *Dallas*, and after that on *Wild*, *Demolition*, *Big Little Lies*, and *Sharp Objects*.

And in exploring these techniques, we took it to the next level. We were creating virtual work environments that were directly dictated by what the shoots required.

CM: Something like the Blue Blues Café you mean?

11:44

MC: Precisely. When we were writing *Blue Blues*, we realized that we had a super moment in time where we had all our favourite actors in one place. Getting them together all in one place was really special. But that meant actually bringing all of them to Monterey, and that meant travelling which was going to really cost. Actors at that level travel with an entourage. They travel by private jet and they go home on weekends. And then everything else that goes along with that.

So, the math was pretty simple. The cost of travelling and getting everyone there at the same time when you needed them versus recreating a similar location in L.A. The locations we did find were perfect, but we'd still have to make a lot of adjustments to them. Changing features and then the cost of fitting them out was expensive as well.

When you add up the cost of the sets, the set-up, the location, the cost of the location plus the travel, we came up with about two and a half times what it would cost to do it in the studio and redo the scenes in a completely visual way, using visual effects.

CM: So, you went ahead? With the same results? Is there any compromise to be made here?

MC: It's not in my nature to accept compromises in the way I work. I insist on creative freedom and in giving them the opportunity to do what they want. And then, later, we'll find solutions either before shooting so we can cover and test or, when it sometimes happens in editing that we realize the need to extend, continue, or go further, we'll do it then.

But in the case of Blue Blues, it was really quite simple. We had a work zone that we used and we told them: "No limitations. You turn at the corner and walk around in the zone, and you take the shots you want." And then after that, we start playing with effects where you look at the horizon, see reflections you want to work with, in fact, what you could manage doing or what you could imagine was going to happen.

So, it's really a question of being creative, but it does take a talent for abstraction, a talent for being able to cut a scene not just into, you know, frame by frame dialogue, but to go further. Cut it out in layers, with foregrounds, backgrounds, sometimes with actors who aren't even together yet, and then we'll put them together.

We did scenes where we had only Reese at the table. We had to shoot the kids later and then we put them together at the end, and it's totally seamless. That's the way the swapping went. Once something was shot, we were able to adjust it in editing and make sure that everything was exactly as it should be.

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CM: Doing things like that in a situation like we have today is really amazing. Because the major problem we're going to experience on set is the proximity, I imagine, between actors and crew members and to each other. So, really, this is coming together at just the right time.

MC: Absolutely. For us, it happened because we were using it more to save shooting costs and to find solutions to even more

difficult problems. We certainly realize that the technique can be applied in the COVID context, which is really a shooting problem, to get the results we want to achieve. And then to move things along, too. What we're saying is, "Listen, we want to have an actor who's in London at the moment to play a role in a scene that's being shot in L.A. Well, now there's a way to do it in parallel, to shoot them separately and put them together so that it's seamless, so that it's impossible to tell that they're not together." That's obviously something worth thinking about.

CM: You were telling me about a London shoot and Reese Witherspoon. I could actually feel the production costs exploding as I listened to you. Does that type of solution apply as much to local shoots as it does to the international ones you've been describing?

MC: You know it's not necessarily just a question of cutting costs. It's a question of rethinking filming paradigms in new ways. Instead of having thirty on the set, there'll be ten instead. So that cuts the crew cost by two-thirds and we can then put a second crew of ten to work on another part of the shoot. So, it really is a question of being able to revise filming paradigms and do more at the same cost, too.

We're now in the process of carrying out an exercise on two Quebec projects so we can successfully relaunch them by September, and we've made some startling conclusions. Not only can it be done, but we can even save money while doing it. It really shows how important the exercise is, of doing the pre-production work. To be more precise in planning scenes, to be able to line things up and then understand how much leeway you really have.

A good example is the positioning of the camera. It's essential to understand how the camera moves. To have the knowledge of how it's going to happen. You can't be improvising here. You need to know because the camera angle will define what we're going to see in the background, what's going to be there... How the actors are going to interconnect, how they're going to be positioned. And when you make those decisions and you know where the camera's going and where the actors are positioned, you can easily do whatever cutting you need later in layers.

CM: What you're proposing here seems to make a great deal of sense to me. Especially in the context of the current situation, of course, but really no matter what the situation is. You can't argue with less travel for the crews, for eliminating the need for huge sets that are only to be torn down afterwards, all part of a simplified production process you get by putting more emphasis on pre-production. What I want to know is why everyone isn't doing this already? It's an incredible economic and ecological solution to so many of our problems.

19:14

MC: I would say that we are fortunate in Montreal to have an ecosystem that is nonetheless exceptional. We've got some extremely creative people. It's something Quebecers and Montrealers have a lot of and why Montreal is a major hub for video games, for post-production, and for visual effects. In our milieu we regularly rub shoulders with people in video games, where it's par for the course to create entire photorealistic environments from scratch. That's something that's happening right now.

What we see in the video games kids are playing today or that people are currently playing are products that were made three years ago. It's nothing at all like what's happening now...I was doing a review on *Unity 5*, the new version of Epic's *Unity*. It's totally spectacular. They've solved tons of technological and technical problems to really speed things up while reducing the cost of creating environments. Visually, it's just amazing. I can't say enough about it...Lighting can be done in the most complex way. We can use natural lighting. Objects that are going to be created can be reused. If I create a house or a tree or any object, for example, I can multiply it, I can modify it. I can create an entire city like this without the problem, like you say, of having to dispose of it later. On the other hand, you do have to understand the limitations.

We need to have people around us who are able to get the production moving and who are available to help in that respect. And that's a paradigm we became aware of in the film business, most of the credits for visual effects are listed after the catering and after everyone else in the closing credits. We're not considered by many as being high up in the industry food chain yet and that's really a mindset, and as a result many people don't know that they do have a real choice. The more

that's part of what they experience, the more they have to... rethink their way of working and getting people who have that vision, that way of working into their circle.

We worked with Apple on *The Morning Show* and we got in with a group at the very centre of the shoot that had a different perception, and that was a change. Seeing that Apple has a technical background, I guess they applied their technical way thinking a bit more. The creative was done entirely in New York, but the shoot took place entirely in L.A. So, we were able to reproduce scenes that happened on the sidewalks of New York, but we shot those environments entirely in Los Angeles, on sidewalks there or in the studio.

The reason why we did it this way is that the cost of shooting in New York, with the teamsters, with their heavy structure and bringing actors in was again a question of cost. It was more expensive. Making it real was more expensive than making it virtual.

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CM: I really like this idea of porosity or at least positive contamination between the various facets of the audiovisual industry. That video games may have a role to play in the relaunch of TV and film production sounds really exciting to me. Is that it? Is it more a matter of turning to solutions that are outside the scope of what we depended on until now? Do you believe that networking among various facets of the industry is the key?

MC: Well, I am a real believer in collaboration. I believe in keeping an open mind. In order to create you need to be able to collaborate to find new ideas, to find new ways of working. When something like COVID comes along, you have no choice, it forces you to find new ways. In my opinion, it's essential. Those working in video games have already given so much to the entertainment industry.

We even went so far as to talk to people in the event business. The people who create events for *Maroon 5*, for bands on tour. They're the ones out of business. There's no work for them at

the moment because you're not allowed to get crowds together. So how can we integrate them into the solution? How can we get talent like that to help us build things that would have seemed impossible yesterday? To that end, we've had discussions with them about building portable virtual sets. Instead of bringing people to the studios, we're going to bring studios to the people.

And this is another paradigm shift. It's something we never would have thought about before. Getting actors safely in and out of their homes. We kind of laughed thinking about the tunnels in *E.T.* They'll follow the big plastic tubes into the studio, do their scene, then return the way they came without any risk of infection.

That's where we are now. We can do that today. A series made by Disney... Obviously we're talking about productions like *The Mandalorian* where Favreau had a totally virtual studio made using LED walls, walls of LED lights. There are ways you can also make smaller units and then use them in portable studios or install them in conventional studios. You can also interconnect them so that two teams, in two different places, can use the same light sequence, the same environment, so you'll be able later on to connect the actors.

And the more we use technologies like these, the more affordable they get, until they get extremely affordable and become the new standards. Once you've created 3D environments, environments in video games, you can reuse them again, and again, and again. There are sites like TurboSquid where you can buy assets, built stuff, online. Planes, homes, bikes. All kinds of objects you can buy for \$10, \$15. There are people working at home who do modelling that they sell on their websites. And it's only getting better. So, we can actually build up virtual environments today just like we would in building real ones but by using virtual objects instead.

CM: Do you think that the current situation is an inflection point for the audiovisual industry? Do you see it as a clear before-and-after moment where you could say everything changed after that and we no longer did things the way we used to? Have we reached that turning point?

27:48

MC: I see two elements that for me are pretty key. The first key element is all the streaming companies, the Netflixes and Amazons of this world. These companies have a real advantage. I was looking at the numbers and they've doubled their sales month over month compared to last year. These are the guys who are going to take over the industry now. They're the ones who are going to buy the movie theatres. They're the ones who'll transform our ecosystem so that they'll be able to continue putting content in the pipeline. So, you have to understand what we need to do to be streamed and then to be shown on conventional channels. Producing for movie theatres is no longer an option. We're talking home theatres, series for consumption at home. It's a completely different consumption paradigm.

So that's one thing. Then it's a question of what are these companies or products going to ask for? The way we've been shooting must change. There's no denying that. We're going to have to come up with some new options. I think we'll be accelerating the integration of gaming technologies into what we do. And I think if that happens, it'll also be the catalyst for integrating interactivity. So, we'll ultimately be given control over how we watch series or films, things we used to watch passively from the director's point of view.

CM: No kidding.

MC: Because the technology is going to be a lot less restrictive in two years or three years, if all this accelerates well. We'll be able to shoot multiples scenes at the same time and then go even further, faster. In my opinion, this will be part and parcel of the exploration capabilities the technologies will offer.

And that will make doing classic shoots, shooting crowds of thousands, extras, all the crew you need just for a day's shooting, more and more difficult. So, we're going to have to figure out how to get there. Using game technologies, using techniques I mentioned earlier, small portable studios to go, search for a game, an actor's role you want to be cameoed or in an different environment.

I don't have a solution, yet, to be able to do scenes in a big...let's say, train station like in *The Bourne Identity*, where we're running flat out and getting shot at from all over the place. But there is a way to edit out those sequences and then make something that's functional, where human contact, the way it happens between people, is going to be achievable.

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CM: So, you're optimistic about what's next?

MC: I, for one, am extremely optimistic. My default life setting has always been set at optimistic. My inner voice, my understanding of the technologies, of what is currently available in our toolbox, tells me we'll be able to find solutions and deliver the goods this winter. There's obviously going to be some delay in all this. Change takes a while, but I think the acceleration, putting the pedal to the metal, has already started. COVID has made it a necessity, and necessity is, after all, the mother of invention.

CM: Thank you Marc Côté. That was just the pep talk we all needed. A very inspiring message. We are in a situation where everyone is looking for solutions, and the ones that worked so well for you in the past, and the ideas you've discussed for the future are galvanizing to say the least. Just listening to you make us want to get back to work even more quickly. Thanks for making time for this.

MC: Heh, the pleasure was all mine!

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And that's about it for this episode of Futur et médias, a podcast series presented by the Canada Media Fund.

Many thanks to our guest Marc Côté, founder and president of REAL by FAKE.

For production notes, videos that illustrate the concept of invisible visual effects, and a transcript of the episode, please visit the CMF Trends website.

Finally, if you've enjoyed this episode, please take a moment to rate the series on Apple Podcasts.

I'm Catherine Mathys. See you again soon.