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'Cloverfield' monster movie hoping for monster business

By Martin A. Grove

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"Cloverfield" conversation: This may be the awards season (or what's left of it anyway), but for films opening now the name of the game is boxoffice rewards not awards.

A case in point is Paramount's sci-fi monster thriller "Cloverfield," a Bad Robot production opening Jan. 18 that hopes to do monster business over the four-day Martin Luther King holiday weekend. Directed by Matt Reeves, it was written by Drew Goddard, produced by J.J. Abrams and Bryan Burk and executive produced by Guy Riedel and Sherryl Clark. Starring are Michael Stahl-David, Mike Vogel, Odette Yustman, Lizzy Caplan, Jessica Lucas and T.J. Miller.

"Cloverfield's" boxoffice prospects are enhanced by the fact that its teaser trailer was already playing last summer to audiences seeing DreamWorks and Paramount's blockbuster "Transformers," which became the year's third highest grossing film with \$319.1 million. Having a "Cloverfield" trailer out there so early and playing with a film that went through the boxoffice roof was a combination of smart marketing by DreamWorks, Paramount and the filmmakers plus some incredibly good luck, I discovered in a conversation Friday with Matt Reeves.

Reeves, who made his feature directing debut with the 1996 dark comedy "The Pallbearer," created the hit TV series "Felicity," starring Keri Russell. Abrams, his partner on that project, went on to make his feature directing debut with "Mission: Impossible III" and is now directing Paramount's latest "Star Trek" movie.

"You know, it's funny because when we were making the trailer we weren't sure if it was a smart thing to be doing or a disastrous thing because we were spending a lot of time using up what was our limited prep for the movie and not really sure whether or not it was going to take away from the prep that was needed for the movie," Reeves told me. "But the truth of the matter is it was also the situation we found ourselves in because the script at that point was not ready. Drew was still writing it on the weekends. He was working on 'Lost' at the time so (doing the trailer) was really what we could do. It only turned out (well) in retrospect.

"We knew it would be kind of a big experiment to see how to shoot this (Handycam point of view) style. But I learned a bunch of things shooting that trailer that then came to be used in the actual movie. I don't think I could have made the movie as well if we hadn't made that trailer. So it turned out in retrospect to be the smartest idea, but at the time we didn't even know. Again, it was one of these things where so much on the movie was experimental in terms of the approach. We could have fallen flat on our faces any number of times and that one, in retrospect, turned out to be a very lucky but smart way to go."

"Transformers'" greater than anticipated success was another lucky break. "We hoped that that movie would be a hit," he said, "but we had no idea that it would be that kind of hit and that we would have, as a result, that kind of platform for people to see what we'd done. In a way, that was as responsible as

anything for what happened because we made this trailer that a lot of people got excited, but they never would have even seen it in the same way if it hadn't been on 'Transformers.' So that was really an exciting surprise, as well."

Asked how the project came about, Reeves explained, "J.J. had just finished 'Mission: Impossible III' and they were doing the premiere in Japan. He brought his son, Henry, with him because he wanted to show his son Japan (and) he loved Japan. They went to a toy store one day and when they went in there they both were struck that there were shelves and shelves and shelves of Godzilla toys. Just the idea of seeing all these Godzillas (made them feel) like that was so clearly part of the national identity. It's their national monster. He just started thinking, 'Well, we need to have that.' He was thinking that King Kong is sort of that, but not really. So that was where the seeds of it began."

After that, Reeves continued, Abrams spoke to Drew Goddard, "a writer from 'Lost' who also (has) kind of a cult following of people who watched the 'Buffy the Vampire Slayer' series. They both were very excited about the idea of doing this kind of monster movie. Around the same time there's a movie, 'The Invisible Woman,' that I wrote that I'm directing and producing (next) -- and J.J.'s one of producers -- and we were casting that. J.J. after having finished 'M: I 3' was just setting up a deal to do movies at Paramount and the idea was that not only did he want to write movies and direct movies, but he also was really excited about the idea of producing movies under his Bad Robot label.

"So the thing he told me about right away was, 'Gosh, the first movie I really, really want to do, which I'm hoping that they'll let us do, is this giant monster movie.' He was telling me about it and how he thought (it would be great) if it were all sort of Handycam. I thought it was a fantastic idea. I thought it sounded really exciting and never ever ever thought that that would be something I would end up getting involved in or that he would ask me to get involved (in). But what happened was that time passed and we were casting my movie and there was an actress that we cast and she ended up falling out because she got pregnant. It's a more independent movie and you go through this sort of casting dance and as all of that was going on J.J. came back to me one day and said, 'Remember that monster movie I was telling you about?' I said yeah and he goes, 'Well, Paramount just gave it the green light.' I said, 'Oh, that's fantastic!'"

To Reeves' surprise, Abrams had him in mind to direct it: "He and his partner Bryan Burk, who is another friend of mine that I've known forever -- Bryan Burk actually produced my student film in college at USC and we have a long history together. J.J. and I have known each other forever. We met making 8mm films when we were kids. So we've always sort of like shared this creative camaraderie -- came to me and said, 'Look, we know you're going to do 'The Invisible Woman' and you have to get that made and we're really excited about that, but why don't you do this first because we just got the green light?' I was like, 'Well, let me read the script.' And they said, 'Well, there is no script right now. All there is right now is a very, very detailed outline that Drew Goddard has written based on the story that he and J.J. talked about.'

"It was like a 60 page really dense outline, very detailed. Upon reading it, my first reaction was, 'Oh, my God. This is enormous.' It read in terms of scope and size like a Roland Emmerich size movie. It was just enormous. It was clear that there would be a tremendous number of visual effects and all of these things. I said, 'Guys, you know I'm very flattered, but why are you thinking of me? This movie is wall-to-wall visual effects and I have never done visual effects.' And what they both said was, 'The thing is, we feel like there are a lot of obvious choices for a monster movie, but we don't want this just to be a monster movie. We want this kind of realism -- this kind of Handycam aesthetic -- and we know that's the kind of thing that you are really into, which is that you care about character.'"

Reeves was very comfortable with that approach. "They wanted this sort of naturalistic, realistic character-based monster movie," he noted. "And then I got very excited. I said, 'OK, then what you're saying is you want to take some outlandish idea and find a way to do it with naturalism.' And I said, 'OK, I'm in.' So basically that's where the idea started, that's how I got involved. And then J.J. and Drew and I got together and started talking about where we would take the story and where we would take

the characters.

"Drew and I started meeting on weekends because he was still writing on 'Lost.' Basically, we spent the first part of our prep with Drew off on weekends writing the first draft of the script while we were prepping to make this teaser trailer that ended up, much to our surprise, getting so much attention -- I think primarily because it was on 'Transformers' and so many people saw it. And then finally the first draft of the script came in. We prepped that and then we rushed into making it. It just was this crazy, crazy process. I've never been through anything like it. We made the trailer in May (of '07) and we started shooting in June. So it was very, very quickly. The whole movie has been made in less than a year."

Shooting the teaser trailer, he added, turned out to be a very valuable "sort of test experience for making this movie. When I first got involved I was talking to the visual effects people and there was a lot of talk about whether or not we should consider shooting the movie on Steadicam and then adding shake later to make it seem more like it was handheld. I was adamantly against it. I was like, 'Guys, this is going to be watched by people who film their lives every day with these little cameras and there's no way that we could possibly shoot the movie (using) Steadicam and not be completely like laughed at. I mean, any audience that has any experience with this at all is going to feel that it's completely inauthentic.'

"They were like, 'Well, that's going to be a real challenge to shoot a visual effects movie all handheld.' So the teaser trailer actually was a sort of think tank workshop for that. We got into it and figured out a lot of ways that we could tackle the problem. In a way that's how we learned how to make the movie and was also a way that we ended up getting people to first hear about the movie. Part of the whole experience was that we're making this studio monster movie and yet they're letting us cast total unknowns. They're green-lighting this outline. Drew's going to write this great script, but we're also going to do improvisation. We're going to do all these things that make it seem like this kind of independent spirited movie and yet, at the end of the day, it's a monster movie. So it was such an unusual experience."

What was unique about the project, he pointed out, is "that it didn't have any of the traditional elements of a studio tentpole movie in that there was nobody in it that anybody would know. And that was by design. The whole idea was, 'Well, it'd be very exciting if we could take this sort of under-the-radar, no stars kind of garage band movie and make a little teaser trailer for it and then because nobody will have heard anything about it to throw that out in theaters and surprise people. We didn't realize the level to which people would react to that surprise. But that certainly seemed to be the response."

Explaining why having a Handycam point of view was so important to making the film work, Reeves said, "The whole idea was that this particular film would be a document that was made of this particular incident, this sort of monster attack on New York City, and that it would be all from one Handycam. So that meant that this was an unedited tape that was made by the people who had the camera. Basically, it meant that we had to create the illusion of no editing so that the only cuts you see are cuts that happen when the camera was turned on or turned off. We needed to find a way to create this kind of naturalistic feeling. In a normal movie you can go out and you shoot, let's say, one of these big action scenes and you design it to be multiple angles -- to get a big wide shot that shows you the big view of the monster and you get the close-ups of the detail of the action of the people hiding where they're hiding or doing whatever they're doing. You might find a way to shoot 20 or 50 shots.

"In this movie because the idea was that there's only one camera we didn't have that luxury. We couldn't suddenly get the wide shot. So it meant that we had to design sequences that were normally done in movies like this in multiple shots, but instead we had to find a way to design it in one shot and find a way to take in all of the important aspects of the action through one continuous take and have any cuts that were there be completely hidden so it would all seem like it was unedited footage. It was a particular challenge for everybody involved. Not just for me because I'd never done visual effects, but actually for the visual effects people themselves because they were used to doing it in this other way

where there are multiple shots and every time you get a different effects angle you have that shot in a kind of contained like maybe five second block, but in this case we had maybe three minute or five minute shots that were going to be designed to go on and on and on and have developing visual effects action in them. So that was really unusual and very exciting for everybody involved because nobody had ever done anything quite like it."

Without giving anything away, here's how Reeves describes "Cloverfield's" story: "Because we wanted it to be found footage we wanted it to feel very authentic and we almost wanted it to feel like this sort of Handycam character story (that) you might even think of as almost like a Cameron Crowe movie for the first 15 or 20 minutes. You're just meeting these characters in this situation (a going away party given by five New Yorkers for a friend) and then all of a sudden the night changes when there is this incident that turns out to be a monster attack. And so really the movie begins with an introduction to these characters who are all friends. One of the characters is going away. He's going to be moving to Japan to take a job there and he's at this sort of crossroads in his life. There's this young woman who he's been in love with for years and who's in love with him, but he's going to let all of that go and he's going to go to Japan because he feels like he needs to find his identity and all of this.

"And basically in the middle of his friends documenting this going away party, which is what this camera's doing -- they're making a tape for him to take away of his going away party so that he can always look back and think of his friends while he's so far away -- and in the middle of this evening as (it's) being documented suddenly there's a monster attack and then, basically, the movie becomes about surviving that evening and moving through 'till sunrise the next day and how they survive over the course of the evening and how insane all of that is. There becomes a kind of imperative for the guy who's been documenting the party to document this because it's something that needs to be seen. If they don't survive, then they want at least some sort of record of what happened."

With monster movies there's always the issue of do you show the monster or not and if you do show the monster how early in the movie do you show it? "Obviously, we all love monster movies," Reeves replied. "I would say that I was very aware of (the fact that) it's not exactly a monster movie in one sense, but it certainly is in another in the way that 'Jaws' so effectively hides showing the shark for a long period of time because of the tremendous amount of suspense that's involved in that and how you build anticipation for something. In a way, there's nothing more terrifying than the dread, the anticipation of seeing something and if you want to make a monster movie you want to make a movie that is filled with dread and terror. The way to do that is not to continually see things, but to keep hinting at getting to see things and then finally pay off those moments."

Another movie Reeves said he had in mind while working on "Cloverfield" was "'Alien,' which I thought was a terrifically suspenseful movie. When you did see the alien it was absolutely terrifying, but there were long periods where you were just waiting for when it was going to come out and reveal itself. It was so brilliantly designed and shot, the way that film was put together. So obviously those films were in the back of my head in terms of thinking, 'OK, how can we try and create some suspense?' So I watched those movies. I love John Carpenter's 'The Thing,' which is, I think, a kind of underrated movie. I think it's a very, very frightening movie. But, again, you're not seeing the creature continually. You're getting these kind of long build-ups.

"In our movie I think there's this sense of how we're using what people would consider a kind of 'Blair Witch' aesthetic because it's Handycam. In 'Blair Witch' they used that aesthetic to build suspense, but also to hide the fact that they were never going to actually be able to show you anything because it was such a low-budget movie. But in our movie you absolutely do see so many things including the monster and so it was much more (trying) to find a way to design as much suspense and dread as possible and then to design sequences where you then do see the creature and how that pays off."

Focusing on how he directed the film, Reeves told me, "The aesthetic was to be completely naturalistic and so, obviously, that has to be planned out if you're going to be doing visual effects and yet you need to find a way to allow for spontaneity. There's a company called The Third Floor that is a

previsualization company. I worked with them and we designed the action sequences, the elaborate visual effects sequences, on computer and all of those were sort of moving storyboards that could be used when we were shooting. We brought those to the set. We had the visual effects people from Tippett Studio and from Double Negative, who did our visual effects, on the set with us.

"I wanted to be able to deviate from what was previzzed because I wanted to be able to allow for improvisation and for accidents and things like that. You know, you can't design things so perfectly that then you end up feeling like, 'Oh, well this is something from a movie' as opposed to found footage. There were certain sequences that were designed to be these sort of continuous masters, taking in something in one shot, and if in the beginning of shooting the first part of that shot our actor fell then I'd want to find a way to keep that because it was messy and real."

In terms of working with his actors, Reeves recalled talking to Michael Stahl-David, who plays the character Rob, "who's what you would consider as close to the hero of the film as there is. What we talked about was making a very un-heroic hero, which is somebody who is doing something out of a sense of them having to do it but having no skills in the traditional movie sense of how to do it. So that meant that he would fall down and he would be like anybody in the audience might be. The idea being that (for) anyone watching this film the feeling could be that if you'd been in this situation you might have made this film. If he had to get through a door and he had to kick (it) down, it's not going to be easy. It's going to take a long time (and) it's going to be messy.

"So with the visual effects I wanted to allow for messiness and for accidents and all of that to be used. We planned them out very carefully with previz and then we also allowed them to evolve on the set and did a lot of incorporating of accidents and thoughts that the actors would have right at the moment. It was a very unusual process for everybody involved and it was very exciting because it allowed for spontaneity even though we were doing these very thoroughly pre-planned sequences and that extended into the more traditional scenes as well because, again, I wouldn't be covering them in traditional close-ups and reverses. It meant that I would be shooting sequences between actors and in some cases I'd have the actors actually hold the camera because they'd all be relating to the cameraman as if he was holding the camera. So in those cases I might do 60 takes and we might try improvisations. We might shoot the rehearsal just so we could get a sense of authenticity and naturalness."

After Reeves described dealing with so many challenges, I asked him if looking back there was, perhaps, one that he'd consider the mother of all challenges. "We were moving so quickly and there was such a kind of momentum to sort of move through this movie and it had a kind of chaos to it and I would say the challenge of the process of making the movie was to embrace the chaos because this evening was chaotic for the characters," he observed. "And so in order for it to feel the way that it would feel, I had to allow for there to be a certain level of chaos. So I would say the challenge of the movie was finding a way to modulate between the sort of chaos and the kind of narrative control that you need. It was really about us all taking a kind of creative leap and allowing for there to be experimentation with both the actors and with the cameras and just trying a bunch of different things.

"I can remember, in particular, there was a scene near the end of the movie where something was supposed to happen and the camera was supposed to be intimately involved in an action sequence where something happens that's quite violent. The director of photography (Michael Bonvillain) is an old friend of mine and we worked together on 'Felicity.' We kept trying to figure out what the shot was and we kept setting it and at a certain point it was funny because we'd been through this whole experience all the way through and here we are at the end of the experience and you would figure that we had learned already. And the crew was watching us (and wondering), 'What are these two people doing?' But really what we were doing is we were trying to find the thing that felt authentic. It finally ended up (being), 'Oh, we have to throw the camera, that's what has to happen. There's no shot for this. The shot has to be that we have to find a way to get the camera involved the way it would be if the person that was involved in this action was holding the camera. So it means we have to toss the camera.' And we did that. We looked at that after shooting multiple different versions of the scene and

that was the one."

What they tried to do in making the film, he noted, "was to find the way to let go of your preconceived notions of how you had to shoot a scene. At the end of the day, the movie's a giant monster movie and you want to modulate those things. We were making sort of determined choices about the way to build something dramatically, but then trying to find the way to make that shot seem haphazard and natural and not planned.

"A lot of the action in the movie was about figuring out how to get the camera there a beat too late (and) how to get the people who were pulling focus to miss focus 'cause it's supposed to feel like auto-focus and then come back. This was all completely new for everyone involved. A focus puller would get fired for such a thing and I would be telling him, 'No, no you've got to throw the focus back there and then come back, you're too sharp, you're too dead on' because they're all experts and they're great. Part of the fun was letting go of all of that."

Filmmaker flashbacks: From Aug. 9, 1990's column: "As summer winds down, Hollywood is busy gearing up for the holiday season. Pathe Entertainment and MGM/UA, for instance, are already actively marketing their mid-December release 'The Russia House.'

"Based on John Le Carre's best seller, 'Russia' was directed by Fred Schepisi, who produced it with Paul Maslansky, and stars Sean Connery, Michelle Pfeiffer and Roy Scheider.

"Last weekend saw Pathe, MGM/UA and Bantam Books, which just published two million paperback copies of the novel, kick off a campaign that includes a two-minute trailer playing on 2,000-plus screens, a poster showing Connery and Pfeiffer's eyes and a TV spot that ran on nearly two dozen leading entertainment programs on broadcast and cable TV urging people to read the book this summer and see the film this Christmas.

"After my eye was caught by a terrific press kit that arrived with a videocassette of the commercial and trailer plus copies of the book and poster, I focused on 'Russia' in conversations with Alan Ladd Jr., chairman of Pathe Entertainment and Greg Morrison, Pathe's marketing president.

"Pathe became involved in the project in early March 1989, Ladd told me, when superagent Sam Cohn, who represents Le Carre and Schepisi, sent the book to the company. 'Tom Stoppard then did a screenplay. We went to Connery and he said yes and then to Pfeiffer, who said yes, and all of a sudden it got made,' recalls Ladd, making everything sound terribly easy.

"'I wish it were that easy,' he replies with a knowing laugh that says it's never easy. 'Actually, this was put together quite quickly. It was such a big production. They shot in Russia for six weeks and then the U.K. and Lisbon and Canada.' Only eight to 10 weeks elapsed from when Stoppard's screenplay was approved to the start of production.

"What was its budget? '\$22 million,' Ladd replies. 'I must say that Maslansky and Schepisi did a great job producing the film and holding the cost down. And the Russian cooperation was terrific. It took longer to shoot there, but by the same token they just let them go anyplace they wanted to go...'

"Leading up to (the film's) premieres will be the marketing campaign that began last weekend. It seeks to create awareness of the film, in part by prompting people to read the book. 'It used to be a very standard campaign strategy before massive television buys when the industry was younger,' Morrison told me. 'The read the book/see the movie strategy certainly in the '50s and into the '60s was a major campaign tool ... That practice has dissipated as the reading habits of America and, in fact, the world have changed. Television, obviously, has been trading in that area and very successfully."


Update: "The Russia House" opened Dec. 22, 1990 to \$4.4 million at 717 theaters (\$6,186 per theater) and wound up grossing just under \$23 million domestically, making it the year's 54th biggest film.

Martin Grove hosts movie coverage on the broadband television channel www.UpdateHollywood.com.

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