Aping Edwin Porter

By

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FADE IN:

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Three 20-somethings, BEN GARDNER, DENNIS TAYLOR and JIM STARK, sit in a living room, waiting for a friend to arrive.

DENNIS
It’s quiet.

BEN
Too quiet.

JIM
Where’s John? Meeting was supposed to start 10 minutes ago.

DENNIS
Not sure.

Silence for a bit.

JIM
So I watched The Smurfs last night.

BEN
Cartoon Network?

JIM
Huh?

BEN
Did you watch The Smurfs on the Cartoon Network?

JIM
No, I...

DENNIS
Nick at Night? They run ’80s series all the time.

JIM
No, I went to NCG Cinemas. I’m talking the Smurfs movie, live-action adaptation with Neil Patrick Harris.

BEN
Yeah, isn’t the guy from the A-Team in it, too. I saw that on Tuesday.
DENNIS

TV Land?

BEN

Huh?

JIM

(encyclopedia-like)
TV Land, the channel that delivers classic sit-coms, dramas, variety shows and memorable TV programming 24 hours a day.

Ben shoots Jim a glance.

DENNIS

No, the A-Team is on Classic TV Channel, I saw an episode last week. Mr. T is still hilarious. ’I pity the...’

BEN

No, I’m talking on-demand. The A-Team movie version, with Liam Neeson.

DENNIS

I bet it wasn’t as good as The Scarlett Letter.

JIM

(quickly)
Nice transition.

BEN

Never read it.

DENNIS

Read what?

BEN

The Scarlett Letter.

JIM

Frankly, I don’t give a damn.

DENNIS

I haven’t read it either. I’m talking about the movie, with Demi Moore.
BEN
Hollywood has relied on books for movie ideas for years, but when did they start rehashing old TV shows?

JIM
1954. A movie version of the TV series Dragnet was released into theaters.

DENNIS
1954? Okay, so Hollywood has been bankrupt of original ideas for longer than I thought.

JIM
Dragnet’s actually an interesting case study. The original Jack Webb TV series was adapted for film in ’54, which was then revived for television again in the ’60s with Webb and Harry Morgan, which was then remade into another feature film in ’88 with Dan Aykroyd.

BEN (professor-like)
So was Dragnet 1988 a remake of the ’54 movie, or an adaptation of the ’60s series?

DENNIS
Well you know Hollywood’s really got a creative deficiency when they start repackaging old movies.

BEN
So what was the first-ever movie remake?

Dennis and Ben instinctively turn to Jim.

JIM
The first Hollywood remake was of The Great Train Robbery... which also happened to be the first feature motion picture ever made. Edwin S. Porter directed the original in 1903; remake hit the market in 1904.
DENNIS
So the Hollywood dream factory lost steam in 1904? They aped Porter with the first move ever made and never looked back. That is depressing.

BEN
Everybody steals from everybody, that’s Hollywood.

JIM
I do want to see Total Recall though.

DENNIS
What does that have to do with anything? Go down to your local Blockbuster if it’s still open.

JIM
Total Recall 2012, not the 1990 original.

DENNIS
There’s nothing wrong with the Schwarzenegger movie! This is what I’m talking about. There are no totally unique movie ideas out there. Hollywood has become a vast wasteland of remakes, retakes and reruns. I paid 10 bucks to go see the A-Team. If I want episodic television nowadays I don’t go to Nick, I go to the local theater. How about something original?

BEN
I wanted to see a movie last week and saw that Fright Night and Conan the Barbarian were in theaters. Thought I was back in fucking 1986.

JIM
I agree with you about remakes to a point, Dennis, but you can’t include the one movie that begged to be re-imagined: King Kong.
DENNIS
That movie was made three times!

JIM
But it’s a perfect technological arc. Look, the special effects in the first King Kong were cutting edge...for 1933. The Jeff Bridges’ 1978 version was much better, more realistic, but the picture could not have truly lived up to its cinematic potential until 2005, when Peter Jackson used performance capture technology to truly perfect Kong’s motion.

(to Ben)
Don’t you think, Ben?

BEN
I think we need to stop dropping pop cultural references and concentrate on why we’re here.

DENNIS
(not even listening)
Three times, the movie was made three different times. Once is enough.

JIM
You’d be surprised. There are quite a few films that have made the remake trifecta.

DENNIS
A Star is Born.

JIM
Ben Hur.

BEN
Invasion of the Body Snatchers.

DENNIS
Well, I think we’ve successfully illustrated our challenge. This is the first meeting of Parrot Studios...

BEN
Why Parrot Studios?
DENNIS
Why not? We’ve got to think up a
totally original movie idea for our
first production. It’s time for
the rubber to hit the road, to
think outside the box, pick up the
low-hanging fruit and come up with
an original idea that no one has
thought of before.

JIM
(aside to Ben)
An original idea that no one has
thought up before?

BEN
(whispered to Jim)
We’re doomed.

DENNIS
We also need clever
dialogue. Dialogue sucks nowadays.

BEN
Yeah, after awhile everyone’s
conversation sounds...hauntingly
familiar.

The doorbell rings.

DENNIS
It’s open.

JOHN opens the door and peers in.

JOHN
Here’s Johnny!

DENNIS
Where’ve you been?

JOHN
(he steps in, stands there)
I was unavoidably detained.

DENNIS
Sit down, son. You’re making me
nervous. So gentlemen, we’ve
created the production company, now
we need a movie idea. Who wants to
go first?

John sits on the couch.
JOHN
I got one. This guy, he lives in Oklahoma...

DENNIS
Oklahoma? Only two things come from Oklahoma.

JOHN
Yeah, well picture the plains of Oklahoma. This guy’s home life ain’t so great, he’s lonely, living with his aunt, no place to go. Then one day he runs away and is caught up in this hurricane with Class 5 gale force winds...

BEN
This a love story?

JOHN
No.

BEN
Sometimes there seems like times that men ain’t got no need for women.

JOHN
May I continue, please?

BEN
May the force be with you.

JOHN
So he gets caught up in these hurricane force winds, see, and is swept away to this whole new land. The place is incredible, nothing like Earth. He meets these three strange and wonderful people and they quickly become friends.

Jim and Ben share glances. Haven’t they seen this movie before?

JOHN
One of the friends, I call him the corn cob man, jumps around like a string bean. Another guy is a silver robot, and then there’s this talking bear.
BEN
Oh my.

DENNIS
John.

JOHN
What?

DENNIS
It sounds like the fucking Wizard of Oz. It’s the Wizard of Oz.

JOHN
I admit there are some similarities...

DENNIS
What were we just talking about? We need something fresh. It can’t be that difficult to come up with an original movie idea.

JOHN
But my movie...it’s the stuff that dreams are made of.

DENNIS
Not if you’re going to Bogart someone else’s idea. Check this out: A romantic comedy. We can make bank on this. There’s this guy and girl who work together, okay? At first they can’t stand each other, but you see there’s obviously some sparks, and they start to get closer. But then there is this innocent misunderstanding, and the girl thinks the guy has found someone else, but it’s not what she thinks, and after a series of comical near-misses, they finally clear things up in the end and realize they’ve loved each other all along. Huh? Huh?

JIM
Great story. Compelling and rich.
JOHN
Hasn’t that been done before?

BEN
Yeah, starring Jennifer Aniston. Eleven times.

JOHN
Eleven? Not ten?

BEN
No, all the way up to 11.
(to everyone)
Okay, here’s my idea. Maybe too out of the box, but how about making a movie about making a movie. A movie within a movie, hmmm? We could address the challenges and pitfalls of the process of making a movie INSIDE of an actual film.

DENNIS
Yes, and from a child’s prospective!

JIM
That would have absolutely no appeal outside of film festivals.

DENNIS
Okay, Jim. Let’s hear your brilliant idea.

JIM
A tech thriller. This unmanned drone helo goes berserk in a small Midwestern town. Shoots up everything in sight. Townsfolk don’t know what to do. In the end, though, the helicopter is stopped by a squadron of Blue Angels, who happen to be at a nearby air show. Whatta think?

BEN
(beat)
You had me at helo.

DENNIS
Come on, that’s shit. I...
JIM
Wait a minute, wait a minute, you aint heard nothing yet!

DENNIS
I think you’re done.

JIM
I find your lack of faith disturbing.

BEN
The greater hurdle is the funding. We should spare no expense. Where we going to get the money?

JOHN
Our parents.

Hitchcock high-angle camera shot.

JOHN
A boy’s best friend is his mother.

DENNIS
True, there is no place like home.

JIM
Dennis, phone home. See if we could borrow a few grand.

DENNIS
Right.

JIM
How about outside investors? I have always depended on the kindness of strangers.

BEN
Come on, guys. What we have here is a failure to communicate. With today’s digital technology, you can make a movie on a dime nowadays.

DENNIS
Yeah, we don’t want the film to look like a Hollywood blockbuster anyway. We want a truly...organic film.
BEN
Yes, organic.

JOHN
Speaking of organic, is anybody hungry?
   ("no’s" from group)
I could use some lunch.

DENNIS
Help yourself.

JOHN
I’ll be back.

John heads over to the kitchen, opens a cabinet, and looks at a vast array of foodstuffs.

JOHN
(to himself)
As God is my witness, I’ll never go hungry again.
   (to the guys)
Hey, can I heat up this soup?

DENNIS
Go for it.

John inspects a can of soup, then looks at the other cans.

JOHN
Hey, I think these cans are defective.

DENNIS
(shouting from living room)
You’re defective!

John shrugs, opens the soup and puts it in the microwave.

BEN
(aside to Dennis)
When are we going to get done? I’ve got to stop by at the marina at 3. Roy’s fixing up our sailboat. We want to take it across Lake Michigan this summer.

DENNIS
What kind is it?
BEN
16-foot Sloop.

DENNIS
You’re going to need a bigger boat.

John takes the soup out of the microwave and spills some.

JOHN
Son of a nutcracker! Spilled some.

DENNIS
(shouting)
Gosh! Clean it up.

John wipes it clean, then takes the soup and steps into the entryway.

JOHN
This house is clean.

DENNIS
Thank you, have a seat.

John sits, starts eating his soup with some crackers.

JOHN
So what are we going to call our little movie?

BEN
We don’t have a plot yet, how can we name it?

JOHN
The plot will come, but the first word in the title has got to end in "ing."

BEN
What are you talking about?

JIM
The gerund.

BEN
What?

JIM
Words ending in "ing" are gerunds. Using a gerund in the first word of a movie title gives it a certain intellectual flair.
DENNIS
Or, it can be used as a crutch when people don’t have the creativity to think of anything else.

JOHN
Saving Private Ryan.

An impromptu competition to name gerund movies ensues.

DENNIS
Searching for Bobby Fischer.

BEN
Being John Malkovich.

JIM
Kissing Jessica Stein.

JOHN
Feeling Minnesota.

DENNIS
Raising Arizona.

BEN
Leaving Las Vegas.

JIM
Romancing the Stone.

DENNIS
Okay, enough. You’d hope we’d be a little more creative with our movie title.

JOHN
Yeah, whatever. Let’s just shoot this fucker.

Dennis notices John spilling crumbs on the floor.

DENNIS
Hey numskull, you’re getting crackers all over the place.

JOHN
Sorry, Dennis.

John uses his hand to catch the crumbs on his shirt as he sweeps them with his other hand.
DENNIS
Sweep the leg, Johnny, sweep the leg.

John sweeps the crumbs off his leg and into his hand.

JOHN
This place is a mess anyway. What a dump.

BEN
And it’s a fine mess you’ve gotten us into, Dennis.

DENNIS
Me? You talkin’ to me?

BEN
Chill-lax. You’re too funny.

DENNIS
I’m funny how? Funny like a clown, I amuse you? I make you laugh.

JIM
(to Dennis)
Why so serious? Lighten up, Francis.

DENNIS
Francis, why are you calling me Francis?

JIM
I don’t know. I guess it’s better than Shirley.

DENNIS
(to Jim)
You despise me, don’t you?

JIM
If I gave you any thought I probably would.

BEN
Guys, relax.

DENNIS
No. I’m mad as hell and I’m not going to take it anymore.
JIM
What are you talking about?

JOHN
Can I have some more soup, please?

DENNIS
No soup for you. Here's a cracker.

JOHN
Thank you sir, may I have another.

DENNIS
No.

Dennis eats the cracker, says "hmmm."

JIM
I'll have what he's having.

DENNIS
No more crackers.

BEN
We about ready to call it a meeting. I've got to hit the marina.

JIM
I've got another idea, but I don't know if it's worth anything.

DENNIS
(serious)
Let's hear it.

JIM
Alright. We know the economy has devastated the city of Detroit, right? But do you know there are 43 square miles of open space in the city right now. It's got more abandoned buildings than any other place in the world, and has become a mecca for urban explorers -- people who sneak into old buildings. They have an entire subculture. My movie idea centers around a group of local suburban high school kids who are urban explorers. One night one of the mothers catches them going out, gets pissed, and says "Why do you
JIM
want to go traipsing about Detroit for anyway." They don't care, they go out anyway, and are robbed. Everything is stolen, their video equipment, wallets, money, car, cell phones. Four guys are stuck in the middle of Detroit, at night, with nothing. In this age we live in, they find themselves with no means of communication. The movie would take place over the course of that one night, with their sole mission of trying to get to an old phone booth 5 miles away to call for help. A five-mile journey through the desolate brick forest, the abandoned buildings, relics of the past. All while being chased by the people who robbed them and other assorted characters who have a score to settle. The film would deal with the broader issues of what's happened to our country, to the auto industry, our society and economy. I'd call the movie "About Detroit." Whatta think?

The boys are silent, sounds like a decent idea, but...

BOYS
Nah!!

They look at the time of their smartphones, start to leave.

JIM
Yeah, we could probably never get the permits.

DENNIS
Way too many scene locations to scout out.

BEN
Yup, a little ambitious Jim. But let's not get discouraged. There's got to be an original movie out there somewhere.

Dennis sees them off.
DENNIS
Yeah. After all, tomorrow is another day.

Ben, Jim and John walk away as the sun begins to set over the horizon.

FADE OUT