F O U N D   I N   T I M E   L L C

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SCI-FI/SPECULATIVE FICTION/FANTASY FILMS OVER THE YEARS

Title	Director	Year	US $ (original)
CLASSICS			
The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari	Robert Wiene	1920	
Metropolis	Fritz Lang	1927	
Un Chien Andalou	Luis Bunuel	1929	
Orpheus	Jean Cocteau	1945	
La Belle Et La Bete	Jean Cocteau	1946	
La Jetee	Chris Marker	1962	
Solaris	Andrei Tarkovsky	1972	
The Man Who Fell To Earth	Nicholas Roeg	1976	
Stalker	Andrei Tarkovsky	1979	
Delicatessen	Jean-Pierre Jeunet	1991	$4.3M
Cronos	Guillermo Del Toro	1993	$2.0M
Cube	Vincenzo Netali	1997	$395K
After Life	Hirokazu Koreeda	1998	?
New Rose Hotel	Abel Ferrara	1998	
Pi	Darren Aronofsky	1998	$168K
RECENT			
Donnie Darko	Richard Kelly	2000	$4.0M
Happy Accidents	Brad Anderson	2000	$2.0M
The American Astronaut	Cory McAbee	2001	$2.0M?
Robot Stories	Greg Pak	2003	
Primer	Shane Carruth	2004	$8K?
The Final Cut	Omar Naim	2004	$4.0M
Piano Tuner of Earthquakes	Brothers Quay	2005	$1.5M
Eden Log	Franck Vestiel	2007	
Racing Daylight	Nicole Quinn	2008	~ $200K
Sleep Dealer	Alex Rivera	2008	$2.5M
Cold Souls	Sophie Barthes	2009	~$4M
I'm A Cyborg But That's Okay	Chan-wook Park	2009	?
Ink	Jamin Winans	2009	$250K
Moon	Duncan Jones	2009	$5.0M
Thirst	Chan-wook Park	2009	$5.0M
Timer	Jac Schaeffer	2009	$2.0M?
Beyond The Black Rainbow	Panos Cosmatos	2010	~$1.4M

Title	Director	Year	US $ (original)
Stake Land	Jim Mickle	2010	$650K
Troll Hunter	André Øvredal	2010	$3.4M
Uncle Boonmee …	Apichatpong Weerasethakul	2010	$1.0M
Another Earth	Mike Cahill	2011	$2M
My Life As Abraham Lincoln	Shari Berman	2011	< $200K?
Europa Report	Sebastian Cordero	2012	$4.0M
Robot and Frank	Jake Schreier	2012	$2.5M
The Sound of My Voice	Zal Batmanglij	2012	$200K?
When Time Becomes a Woman	A. I. Alyaseer	2012	$5K?
Channeling	Drew Thomas	2013	< $500K
Found In Time	Arthur Vincie	2013	< $200K
Upstream Color	Shane Carruth	2013	$100K

Estimates from IMDBPro, BoxOfficeMojo, Variety, and personal contacts. Currency conversions using average of yearly currency conversion.

I would also include:

- The webseries *Voyage Trekkers (*shot right here in Phoenix!)

- David Cronenberg's early work (*The Brood, Scanners, Videodrome*)

- A good chunk of David Lynch's work (*Eraserhead, Mulholland Drive*, *Inland Empire*, *Twin Peaks*)

- The shorts by The Quay Brothers (puppet animators)

- The fantasy films of Woody Allen — *Purple Rose of Cairo, Midnight In Paris*

- Francis Ford Coppola's *Youth Without Youth*

Television shows: *Supernatural, Babylon 5, Star Trek: TOS, Firefly.* Babylon 5's budget was $900K per episode, roughly 40% what *Deep Space Nine's* was.

Borderline cases: *Serenity, Gattaca, Looper, In Time, Being John Malkovich, Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind.* These are borderline because, while their budgets were low compared to mainstream sci-fi films, they were still significantly larger than most of the ones on the list above.

WORKING THROUGH THE IMPLICATIONS OF YOUR TECHNOLOGY

I'm using the term "technology" to include whatever sci-fi/sci-"fact"/magical/fantastic device, process, character(s), or locations in your script that make it different from everyday life.

In *Gattaca,* the technology is the ability for parents to "genetically engineer" their children.

In *Thirst*, it's vampirism.

In *Ink*, it's that we have the equivalent of angels and demons that can move between dimensions, and influence our decisions and dreams.

In *My Life As Abraham Lincoln,* it's that the main character's interior state is as real as the "exterior" events in her life, and that everything is happening at once.

In *Channeling*, it's the idea that you can actually earn money through sponsorship of your personal channel (the channel that's broadcast from your special contact lens).

Often the biggest phenomena quickly become invisible. Now when you refer to a phone, you usually mean a *smartphone.* Devices that were considered miraculous a few years ago (tablets) are now commonplace. But their effect is still felt and will affect the rest of the story.

Some things to think about when you're looking at your script:

- Is your technology still a big deal or has it become commonplace?

- How will people interact, if your technology has become commonplace?

- How does your technology change the relationship of people to space? How does it affect existing technology? For example, if you have a teleportation device that works across vast distances, is there any reason for people to use spaceships anymore?

- What are the economics of your technology? Can everyone afford it? How does it affect the economic lives of the people in your script?

- Are you possibly opening up any plot holes? For example, do you have a bunch of telepaths running around not knowing what's going on? Do you have scientists acting like idiots for no reason?

THE BATTLE OF SHOW VS. TELL

In general, it's often better to show than to tell. But this doesn't mean you have to bust your budget. Here are a few budget-conscious examples.

BLADE RUNNER:
In *Blade Runner*, one of the early drafts of the script had Roy Batty executing an elaborate heist to get into Tyrell Corp's headquarters. What they shot was Roy riding up in an elevator, and beating Tyrell at a game of chess. This is a great example of showing — on a budget. It *shows* us how smart Roy Batty is, which is almost more intimidating than watching him beat up a bunch of guards. It also sets up the confrontation between Batty and Tyrell — a battle of wits and the return of "the prodigal son."

SLEEP DEALER:
We "get" the way the workers are hooked into the machines through two very brief scenes. You don't ever actually see the machines that they're remotely piloting, except through their POV.

UPSTREAM COLOR:
There's very little that's explained at all. Instead, you're shown a series of scenes that indicate the drugging/brain-washing process, and then the bonding process that follows between the victims and the pigs. You as an audience member are left to figure it out. However, the individual scenes are not very complicated or expensive. The pieces of the puzzle are put together through clever editing.

CHANNELING:
Drew Thomas created a faux commercial (that also served as the film's trailer) for the EyeCast device that's the big technology in the film. It basically explains how the device works, and what it does for you — lets you broadcast your life from your POV. Drew sent GoPros to friends of his with instructions to "get some footage" — and some of them strapped it to their bike helmets, parachute straps, surfboards, etc. It was an effective way of conveying the idea while staying within their limited budget.

SERENITY:
The film had a very slender effects budget. In the climactic hand-to-hand combat scene between the Operative and Mal, Joss Wheedon wanted to create an extra level of jeopardy by having the fight take place on a narrow service platform above a huge drop. But every time the camera looked down the drop meant more effects work (knocking out the greenscreen and replacing it with CGI background), so they had to pick and choose their shots very carefully.

In one such shot, they knock a crate over the edge, and the audience sees it tumbling down the chasm to the generator. *That* one shot makes it clear that there's no room for error — anyone slips, and someone goes tumbling to their deaths.

FOUND IN TIME:
There's almost no telling in the film per se. The actors convey the feeling of things but not necessarily what's going on. They either don't know what's happening, or what's happening is so mundane that they just don't (or would rather not) talk about it. Since the film unfolds in a nonlinear way, the audience is left to put pieces together. But the things *shown* are not terribly expensive either. Again, the main "effect" is the edit.

TIMER:
Many films introduce the central "technology" of the story through television advertisements, talk shows, etc. This works well when used sparingly (*RoboCop* and *Starship Troopers*). *Timer* starts with a brief montage of ads and news reports promoting the Timer and what it does. There's also a clock featured in many of the key scenes in the film.

ART DIRECTION ON A NO BUDGET FEATURE FILM

Nothing is worse than staring at an empty white wall, unless that's really what you intended for the audience to look at. Here are a few tips that can help you squeeze the most out of your meager art department budget, while creating some good-looking sets and props. I'll be referencing my own feature, *Found In Time,* as well as films I've worked on as a line producer or production manager. On films that I've worked on, I've written my position in parentheses after the title.

SELECTIVE DUMPSTER DIVING

This is obvious, but you'd be surprised at how many film folks overlook it out of sheer squeamishness. I've rescued TV sets, chairs, sewing machines, books, plastic shelves/junk drawers, file cabinets, and more just by walking around different neighborhoods on garbage pickup nights. There are a few rules of the road, however:

- Commercial trash is best: corporations throw out old PCs, office furniture, cubicle parts, and a ton of other things, for many reasons (bad resource management, sheer laziness, or bankruptcy). So you have a better shot at getting decent things than poking around your neighbors' garbage can.

- Avoid wooden bedframes, mattresses and linens. Bedbugs are everywhere (in New York, anyway), so don't invite them on the set.

- Use gloves. Should be obvious, but even I forget this sometimes, and I've got the splinters and cuts to prove it.

LOCAL THEATER GROUPS

I've rented rehearsal space, employed extras, and rented some props and wardrobe from small theatre companies. They're happy for whatever cash you can give them, and you'll be surprised at the depth of their inventory. Also, the managers know all the local resources for getting stuff cheap (thrift stores, Salvation Army depots, recycling centers, etc.)

USE OLD TECHNOLOGY

If you need a special technological prop, you can usually find something old and dress it up to look new, or find something low tech and add a few things to it to make it look more "next gen." Since the look and feel of technology seems to run in 5 year cycles, anything older than ten years may actually look "cool" again. Look at Windows/Mac icon design and you'll see what I mean.

I needed a "memory camera" for *Found In Time* — a camera that can "see" and take a picture of the last person a psychic came into contact with. It had to look like a camera, but like anything that's out on the market now.

I searched on eBay for older-model digital cameras. I found a Sony Mavica (the kind that took 3.5" floppy discs) — and bought it for next to nothing. Then I scratched off the logo in the front, and spray-painted it matte black, so that it looked relatively new. The bulkiness of it made it look serious and "specialized," and the fact that it still looked like a camera helped the audience get over the "hump" and buy into the concept of a soul camera.

BUILDING WITHIN LOCATIONS

Set construction is just insanely expensive. The soundstage rental is just the beginning — you also need to factor in the power charge, grip/electric gear, construction materials, construction staff (carpenter, grips, stage electric, and construction foreman, set painters, set dressers), paint, set dressing, and so on...

However, if you can find a location that is close to what you want, you can build *within* it. We did this on several films I worked on. On *Windows* (line producer/post supervisor), John Bonafede (production designer) and Ben Wolf (DP) built one wall and the floor of a living room *inside* of a park, so we could look out the "windows" into the park itself. This was a lot cheaper than renting a park-view apartment. We also built an exterior faux-brick wall inside of a large loft space, to make it look like we were dollying in through an exterior window into an office space. The wall was actually built in two pieces, so that it could fly apart and let the camera and dolly in.

On another film, *Exposed* (line producer), the director wanted a specific wall to be set next to the bathroom, so that we could get a particular shot. The production designer and art director (Mary Hendrickson and Derek Wang, respectively) built a temporary wall that extended the hallway a bit.

You obviously have to plan this type of construction out carefully, and explain to the location owner what you're going to do; but it can help you create that "perfect" space without shelling out a ton of money.

PAINT AND STAIN ARE THE GREAT EQUALIZERS

On *The Reawakening* (line producer)*,* the director needed a coffin for a scene involving the funeral of a Native American chief. They're typically built out of specific types of wood, and are expensive and heavy. The production design team (Laura Hyman, production designer, and Susan Evans, art director) worked with a local carpenter and built a coffin out of whatever wood they could scrounge together. Then, using reference photos, they stained it so as to make it look "authentic."

On *Moronicles* (line producer), a reality pilot, production designer Tim LaLumia had to build a safe that would look heavy enough to crush someone. He built it out of various grades of wood, dowels, and 2x4s, heavily sanded it, painted it with primer and metallic grey, and then detailed with different shades of rust-colored paint. This took a huge amount of work — about a full week — but it was relatively inexpensive (it cost roughly $300 in parts) and far more practical than trying to wheel around an actual safe.

A safe made from wood and a LOT of hard work, in various stages of development. Moronicles *directed by Rick Mowat. Production Designer Tim Lalumia.*

For *Found In Time*, I needed to create a tapestry. Hiring a painter to do it would have been less time consuming, but I wanted something very specific and didn't have the kind of money to pay the person properly. So I bought a bolt of cloth from a person selling textiles on craigslist (and picked up a bunch of other props from her as well), then went to Build-It Green, a construction supply recycling center in Astoria, Queens (they're a fabulous resource, by the way). They have an extensive selection of used paints. I picked up a shopping cart full of them, plus some spare buckets and brushes.

I took my old beaten-up card table and used it as a painting surface. Then working in three-foot increments, I painted about fourteen feet of cloth. You can see the results below.

Note that it's good if you have some construction and/or painting skills to use these techniques, but even if you don't these should get you thinking about how to make your props and set dressing for cheap. Even just painting a wall a different shade than white will help boost your production value.

CARDBOARD

On *The Reawakening,* Laura and Susan needed to create a headstone for the dead chief (see above). They built one out of heavy oaktag, painted and stippled to look like stone.

Cardboard, card stock, and thick paper can take the place of more expensive plastic or metal, given the right treatment and painting. On *Found In Time* I needed to create an employee ID card. I scanned in some old IDs I had, used them to create a new one in Photoshop, then printed out to a color inkjet onto cardstock. This cardstock copy I cut out then slipped into an ID badge holder. It looks enough like plastic to convince everyone.

SOUND EFFECTS

Half (or more) of an audience's reaction to a raygun being fired comes from the sound. Likewise, having an otherwise inert prop tick or emit a loud humming sound while it "powers up" will clue the audience in on what's going on. You can change the perceived texture or density of an object through clever foley work.

If you're creating a starship bridge or cavernous space or busy intersection, changing the ambiance can help punch up your film. Now, you can't stretch this too far (the sound does have to support the visuals somewhat), but you can cost-effectively alter the "production design" of the film through post sound. (*Seven* is a great example of this).

On *Found In Time*, this meant tweaking the voices of the psychiatrists while they were wearing masks, to introduce an electronic "twinge," as though they're speaking through microphones. The sound designer, Quentin Chiappetta, also added a lot of echos and offscreen machine sounds to our "mine" set, to indicate that it's a larger, scary space. Quentin also added some electronic cicada/bird sounds to a few scenes set in an otherworldly field, so as to heighten — in a subtle way — the fact that we weren't in an ordinary environment.

DO THE MINIMUM

If you look closely at the excellent *BattleStar Galactica* reboot series, you'll see that the chairs used on the bridge of the *Galactica* are ordinary office chairs. *Scrubs*, particularly during the first two or three seasons, only had a few extras on set — they were just redressed and recirculated so you didn't catch on. They also reused sets constantly — one patient room or corridor is pretty much the same as any other. On *Helena From the Wedding* (production manager), the audience never sees three out of the four bedrooms in the log cabin. The director, Joe Infantolino, decided not to show them, at least in part because we'd then have to clear them out and dress them (we were using them for holding, equipment staging, crafty, and hair/makeup). In *Serenity*, the armada of Federation ships in the big battle scene at the end were created using only a dozen CGI models. Zoic Effects simply reused the models in multiple layers.

What are the sets/props/elements you can get away without showing altogether, or only need to hint at, or can redress and so double up on in your story?

FAKERY AND FOCUS

Audiences are usually more forgiving than you'd think. Most won't be able to tell the difference between real gold and a rock coated in gold paint. In the end, your sets only have to look as real as is necessary to fool the audience, and serve the story.