CHAPTER 2

The Responsibilities, The Relationships, and the Setup

HIERARCHY OF RESPONSIBILITIES

First Responsibilities

An art director’s initial relationship to the production designer is as intense and short-lived as most film project relationships. Anyone who has experienced summer camp as a child understands this dynamic. First encounters on a new film project are driven by the personal need to establish a sense of belonging to a special group, your department, and a political need to define one’s place in the psychological hierarchy of the film. The bond between the prime art department figureheads—the PD and the AD—is forged by these human forces and compels the art director to fulfill first responsibilities.

How does an art director repay the favor of being hired by the PD? The art director begins by acting as a credible emissary for the partnership. By being responsible to the production designer, you are also being responsible to yourself. As codependent as this might sound, it remains as a key factor contributing to the effectiveness of the position. First, the art department budget demands this. The set budget, linked to the visual shopping list of the script, is an outline of how the funds to realize the visual concept will be spent. A good art director defends a PD’s vision by managing the budget with the indispensable help of the construction coordinator by strategizing how the funds are dispersed over the set list (see “The Relationships,” this chapter.) The unit production manager or UPM, the producer, and the head accountant are also an integral part of this process. They are given copies of the set list and budget, and they are constantly kept within the loop of set changes and developments. The ultimate goal here is to preserve the visual concept as much as possible without going over budget or relinquishing the PD’s original ideas in the process.

Second, your production designer also relies on your support as an ally. Most situations will demand this: you are on location in Europe, and you are
presented with conflicting information regarding the exact placement of an exterior, wooded escarpment for shooting a series of important script shots. This specific location had been decided on after a full day’s worth of scouting similar locations several weeks before. Even the location manager’s photos look very much alike; the truth is, no one remembers or is really sure. Essentially, this quickly escalating argument is between the PD and the director. You are in the middle, and it is time for you to speak. What do you do? You do what is expected. You take the side of your designer. And you do this diplomatically with logic. You refer back to your scout notes, you present quick plan sketches you made during the original scouting of the location in question, you recall specific conversation at the time of the decision, and you smile. Politically, you cannot afford to offend anyone. Morally, your duty is to your designer. Bonding through these kinds of experiences on a film crew is legendary. In the process, first responsibilities are fulfilled and lifelong working relationships are assured.

Third, being an effective art director demands that you are always ready. The brief scenario described previously illustrates this. Always carry a sketch pad and a PDA and learn how to scribble or enter data while you are talking. You are always relied upon to have exactly the right information at hand for precision decision-making. Readiness also includes knowing every aspect of the script well, reading every page of script changes and memorizing the most recent, staying close to the events in the production office and on set, and having set expense data always at your fingertips. The PD is doing the same thing, but expects you to close the gaps whenever necessary. This is the only way to market yourselves as the “Dynamic Duo” you truly are.

Christa Munro, art director (Erin Brockovich, Forces of Nature, Hope Floats), and Gae Buckley, art director (The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants, Coyote Ugly, What Women Want), recently shared similar thoughts:

- Christa, what do you require from a production designer to make your relationship work well—is communication the core?
  A dialogue based on trust, a mutual acknowledgement of strengths and weaknesses and things we mutually like/don’t like to do. That way you can really help one another out. It should be kind of fun.

- What quality separates a great art director from a good art director?
  Someone who can create a really strong partnership with the production designer is most effective. Of course, it depends on your designer wanting the same type of relationship.¹

- Gae, what separates a great art director from a good art director?
  I think of a great art director as a clear conduit of information both within the art department and with all other related departments. Ideally, it is someone who possesses an extensive background in art, architecture, design, theater, and film. Aside from talent, skill, and experience, an even-keeled and respectful personality enables you to get people to do their best work for you. It’s extremely important, especially in Hollywood. Regarding the
expression of personality, it’s also necessary to sublimate your personality and taste to some degree to get into the head and vision of the designer. Ultimately, you’re facilitating someone else’s vision. Realistically, I would have to say that a great art director must be able to graciously defer to the designer while still managing the art and craft of the film.²

Second Responsibilities

The art department is home away from home, 12 to 18 hours a day, six days a week, for a duration of anywhere from three to six months a year. The art department place and people become primary family while primary family often take on a secondary, surrogate role to our professional lives. So, responsibility to the art department is another fundamental concern. As formal head of the department, the art director is its leader-protector. As such, exercising the power to hire only the best crewmembers available reinforces core competencies for the art department. The art department coordinator (see “The Setup,” this chapter) is the AD’s inter- and intra-organizational interface and most valuable player. Both of you work diligently to keep the machine well-oiled and running smoothly. On Vanilla Sky (2001), key staff from all departments at the Paramount lot had walkie-talkie cell phones, making up-to-the-second changes and instant interface effortless. Comfortable working conditions, excellent office equipment, and connection to an Intranet server, if the project warrants it, make daily life workable. At times your tenacity will be necessary to convince the UPM to install an art department server to assist the archivist’s task in organizing thousands of digital images for a larger show. Of course, this kind of equipment requires full time IT care, but will benefit everyone on the production. It is only your persuasiveness that will make the difference for the success of your department. Once again, Christa Munro shares her observations:

☐ **How can the art department operate more smoothly?**

My primary thought about that right now is about expanding my staff with an assistant art director and possibly two. Part of that completes the archiving question, and the other part addresses the fact that the “paperless office” isn’t a reality. We generate a much larger paper trail now with our technology than we ever have, and it needs constant attention. Something you said to me a long time ago comes to mind—you were actually describing what an art director really is in six words or less—”a glorified, middle management executive secretary.” The funny thing is we need secretarial backup more now because we need that support just to stay on top of it through the entire show. With that established, I’m more readily available to make changes and also it makes wrap a lot easier.

☐ **Are you a hands-on art department manager, or do you tend to delegate tasks?**

I’m a delegater. In order to do that well, you have to read the person as well as the situation. Personally, I like to get someone directed and then let them take it and build on it. You see very quickly if they’ll rise to the occasion or
not. You know, some people are lost without some direction—they need clearly defined parameters. Lately, I find myself double-checking my delegating decisions and re-evaluating midstream as required. The fact is, people get tired after four months on a film going full speed, day in and out. The evaluation check allows me to see how everyone’s holding up and where s/he might need to go in order that the project can easily complete itself.

How wired is your art department?
It’s totally wired. On The Ring 2 and Confessions of a Dangerous Mind, we upload stuff to an online server, EStudioNetwork, at https://www.estudionetwork.com/ESN/welcome.jsp. They were very helpful, had good tech support, and it was pretty easy for all of us to learn how to use. On Confessions when we were in so many different locations, combining all of the location photos in the same place with the production info and schedules was a beautiful thing. Although we generally hire great art department coordinators, I can see the need for an archivist in an ideal world. That person would solely handle the images and perhaps also manage clearances but mainly trafficking the images. The documentation aspect of it alone is a huge amount of work. The server issue we’ve already discussed, and the computer rental issues, i.e., jurisdictional conflicts regarding large format printers, are two small tasks I’ve been investigating lately so I can fully address them on my next project.

I suppose your digital camera is always on hand, then?
It has become indispensable. For instance, on a recent project we had to break apart an ambulance and re-create it as a stage set. We could rapidly document every detail required—or, simply use a digital camera phone for a quick shot of the perfect door pull—snap the item, send it, and then leave a message at the office, “When the boss comes in, let him know he’s got some images on email.”

Third Responsibilities
The director is an art director’s other boss, wielding the primary vision for the look of the film. Reading the director correctly is just as important as an AD’s regard for the vision of the production designer. For example, most directors are purely verbal, translating the words of a screenplay, and in most cases, the rewriting of the script. Most likely labeled “an actor’s director,” they entrust the visual responsibility of the script to the design team. Other directors are exceedingly visual, spending a vast amount of time in the art department during the pre-production phase of moviemaking; they speak the same visual language as the art folks creating the imagery. As a result, the visual information plastering the walls of the art department and PD’s office is welcomed and easily digested by visual directors. Concept sketches or ideas scribbled on napkins at mealtime become an overriding form of this shorthand communication. Drafted ground plans, elevations, and details with supporting white models and computer previz presentations easily exist as understandable, workable tools for further debate and
change in the process of nailing the look of the film. We in the art department like this breed of director because they make our lives easier. One favorite champion of the art department is John Gray (*Helter Skelter*, *Martin and Lewis*, *The Seventh Stream*, *The Hunley*). Early in the process, he entered the workspace with a palpable enthusiasm that never diminished and left us with a visual concept. During the prep for *The Day Lincoln Was Shot* (1998), he simply said he was going against the expectations of a sepia-toned vision of the past by shooting the film in blues and gray tonalities as a premonition of the Civil War. Holding fast to that notion throughout, such a salient visual metaphor became our design beacon, inspiring countless choices and clearly answering many questions that would inevitably arise.

Amalgamating the visions of a director and PD is the obvious challenge. Just because the visual concept for a film project arises out of similar conversations does not translate into unanimous agreement. A third-party interpretation on top of those of each of your bosses can easily become a Gordian knot. Care must be taken to maintain a keen sense of neutrality and objectivity, in addition to a well-honed ability for active listening. In
most cases, although your input might be brilliant, your goal is to steadfastly translate and maintain the unity of both visions at all costs. Again, the art director is an enabler of other wishes, points-of-view, and demands—a servant to many masters.

**Fourth Responsibilities**

The final reporting relationship discussed here is with the studio, its representative the UPM, and the film project in general. It tends to be a more straightforward relationship because it is a business relationship; the superimposed layers of creativity and artifice do not as easily compound the business of making art as do previously discussed responsibilities. The UPM and the studio are interested in film as product. As a commodity, a project’s focus is about getting the best quality product for the least amount of money spent. Taking this a step further, it is about economies of scale, a basic concept that states that the average unit cost of a good or service can be reduced by increasing its output rate. Although we are not producing donuts or widgets, this formula works especially well in terms of the ratio of added crew numbers and production of finished sets per week on a heavy film schedule or crisis schedule. On this level, the art director is operating for the company, or studio, on an efficiency level of most operations managers. Avoiding bottlenecks within the art department, as well as how it effectively functions with all other departments, is the goal. Optimizing division of labor and corresponding labor costs directly relates to economies of scale. On a union film, supervising the management of the construction crew, for example, to work efficiently by steering away from working on days off, unless absolutely necessary, i.e., a crisis schedule, would automatically boost production level but keep down inflated labor costs, correctly supporting economies of scale. On a low budget film, achieving economies of scale, especially in terms of increasing output rate, becomes a challenge considering the smaller size of the labor pool and how thinly everyone’s efforts are already stretched. All of this directly relates to the management of the art department budget.

The UPM demands the fiscal loyalty of each department head by requiring strict adherence to the allocated budget figures. Inevitably, changes on both sides of the equation demand a constant adjustment to the numbers. Sometime during the mid-point of the production phase, the once rigid budget brick more closely resembles an overworked wad of Silly Putty. Again, the ability to roll with the punches acts as a release valve for the pressures of handling someone else’s money.

A last consideration as a major footnote is the art director’s responsibility to the guild and other brother/sister unions also collaborating on a film. All deal memos, contracts, and paperwork must be in order, to satisfy union quotas and requirements. By default, the AD is the union watchdog also responsible to the vigilant union reps waiting like referees at a sporting event to spot a foul. If such a call is made and is in turn ignored by production, the union can, and often does, shut down the film. This happened in
the mid-nineties in New Mexico on the Morgan Creek production, *White Sands*, early on in the pre-production process. When the lead actors of the film stood in solidarity with the rest of us on strike, the slowdown was more quickly resolved than if they had not given their support, and production resumed as if nothing had happened. On non-union films, allegiance to the art department crew tends to be fierce and solidarity more unshakable because of the lack of union support and intervention. Typically, events like this catapult non-union people into the various guilds and film craft unions, thereby bestowing union status. My title changed to union art director during that summer. It was an experience where I also learned invaluable lessons on being a union activist before I had legitimate union membership.

The constant “push-me-pull-you” allegiance to the financial, political, and creative forces playing on the art director is extreme in both union and non-union scenarios. Successfully working in a highly collaborative industry like the movie business reinforces fast thinking, self-confidence, action, creativity, and negotiating large egos. It is not for the thin-skinned or weak-minded. It tests every fiber of a personality, as well as one’s mental acuity and determination. By relentlessly testing one’s social skills as well as inner strengths, art directing presents a range of challenges in the professional film arena bar none.

THE RELATIONSHIPS

Developing relationships in Hollywood translates to cowboy work. From the first moment a tenderfoot steps out of the creaky stagecoach onto the dusty dude ranch dirt, that neophyte is looking for a leg up. Throughout the process of mucking stalls, splitting rails to put up and tear down corrals, learning how to chew tobacco and win spitting contests, tying a proper lariat knot or choking on round-up dust, getting a hand with the hard work and patting other cowpokes on the back, the journey continues from cattle drive to cattle drive. What could be more classically American Western film? Learning the ropes by giving a hand and getting a hand—shorthand for basic film etiquette—is just as critical as understanding the motion capture process. Remember, filmmaking is a collaborative endeavor. One person with a Mac and Final Cut Pro just cannot do it in a vacuum. This next section will explore fundamental relationships and their reciprocal implications.

**Art Department**

Historically, the art department is seen as the imagery hub of film production [see Fig. 2-2]. More than this, it also exists as the central department providing a strategic guide for all crewmembers in their respective departments. As keeper of the visual concept, the art department has creatively inspired and monitored all related activities for decades.

Relationship marketing is transacted in the art department—more specifically, an exchange process of services, support, ideas, options, and
value for energy expended. The buzzword is show business—emphasis on the word “business.” The aim of this creative, relationship marketing is to build long-term, mutually satisfying interactions between players, suppliers, and even vendors outside the film circle, in order to develop and retain lifelong preference and business acumen. Life and work continue beyond any particular film project, so short-sightedness will not do if a productive network of business relations if can exist in the future. Whether one is working on a studio picture or just getting started as an art director on a low budget Indie, promising and delivering high-quality service and product at reasonable prices to your immediate customers, the director, UPM, and producers are your main goals especially in non-union projects. The relationships established with other department heads and vendors on a current project had better be extendable into the next project, or you’re just spinning your wheels. Why not develop proper etiquette and business form from the onset of your career? It’s certainly the best way to give yourself a leg up.

**Interdepartmental PR**

**Head Accountant and Staff**

Before I begin my first day of work on a film, usually on the same day I interview with the UPM to set up my deal memo and corresponding perk package, I make a beeline to the head accountant’s office. This is a vital PR
stop more than anything else. Making friends with the head accountant beforehand positively ensures that payroll will happen effortlessly—that vendor checks might be assured to happen within a 24-hour turnaround and that a healthy communication channel is established. Nurturing this relationship is the key to money flow. Once in the Schiphol International Airport, Amsterdam, I boarded a crowded terminal-to-plane shuttle and freely offered my seat to a weary, raven-haired woman who quietly said, “Thank you” in an unmistakably Midwestern American accent. Our first paragraph of conversation revealed that we were both headed for the same 16-seater jet to Luxembourg City, Luxembourg to begin work on a TV film. She was our head accountant, Dana Bolla (With or Without You, The Naked Man, The Lost Battalion). Being the first of a handful of arrivals to set up our respective departments, we became fast friends, exploring the local restaurants for dinner and creating a unilateral offensive to the many challenges we would encounter during the course of the film. In this case, it is important to mention that having her as a solid ally was a significant plus in getting anything and everything done with the parent studio being 5,318 miles away. On this same film, the UPM and Dana were old war buddies and were determined to deliver the studio’s financial and contractual agenda to the local film company. Befriending the head accountant and UPM extended my own political invincibility and helped ease the demands of my daily tactical tasks.

**Locations Manager and Staff**

Another early arrival in the pre-production phase is the locations manager. Logistics is what cements your relationship: the locations finally chosen to satisfy the design concept, the schedule of in-and-out movement at a location, access and parking, and strict adherence to what can and cannot be physically done are some of the issues you will face together. Much like the art director, the locations manager is the first to arrive and the last to leave any and all given locations. An emissary for the production itself, the locations manager is the ultimate PR agent for the film company. Together, as external marketing managers, your combined efforts need to be direct and credible to people or companies in the community where you happen to be shooting, in Los Angeles or elsewhere. Although the actual location deals and contracts are the responsibility of the locations manager, an art director’s presence and support is fully expected.

This relationship is unique in terms of interdepartmental PR, but it is more client oriented outside of the film project. In this situation, you are actively working to combine the brand images of the art department, the locations department, and the larger film. On the Warner Bros. film My Fellow Americans (1996), I was the North Carolina art director and Ned Shapiro (Intolerable Cruelty, Identity, Legally Blonde, Bulworth, Apollo 13) was the location manager for the entire film, both in L.A. and Asheville. Our biggest challenges were to convince the Biltmore Estate to allow us to build the south façade of the White House on their pristine grounds for the course of two months; to land a Secourski helicopter in a mountain glen and then
explode it on takeoff, and also, to stage a Gay Pride parade in downtown Asheville. Literally, the first two people to arrive in the on-location production office, Ned and I carefully established solid, trusting community relationships by laying pre-film crew groundwork. Without a well-conceived strategy, our efforts could not have been as persuasive. This combined with the right amounts of goodwill and location rental cash will always get the job done.

**UPM, Production Supervisor, and Production Office Staff**

The bulk of your interdepartmental marketing efforts are exercised with the production office, the other nerve center of film production. All final decisions are made in this office. Your goal as an effective art department manager with the UPM, production supervisor, and production office coordinator is to provide good offensive support. For instance, pretend you are working on a marine movie like *Titanic*. In addition to the normal requirements like building the ship and getting the sets ready, there are special considerations that demand specific attention like building the entire studio: soundstages, office buildings, facilities for art department, construction, props, wardrobe, dressing rooms, etc. At the last minute, production receives its green light for this film in June and is expected to be ready for shooting hero sets in September. Simple issues like arranging the paperwork, regulations, and permit processes, as well as getting the materials and supplies for scenery building, become somewhat challenging in Rosarita Beach, Mexico because of tariff and tactical considerations. Forcing an elephant of expectation through this keyhole of reality within such a narrow window of time demands flawless strategy and coordination. Without proper art department PR, willingness to cooperate, and a great deal of experience and common sense, the odds of success are minimized.

It would not be practical for the art director to get in the way of such a challenging process. Instead, establishing and telegraphing the benefits of cooperation, flexibility, and anticipation to the production office serve the art department in the long run. Staying in front of paperwork, scheduling, and being ready for every obstacle that will arise, positively projects reliability and instills mutual respect. Admittedly, the *Titanic* scenario is exceptional and true. Nevertheless, the same concept applies to an Indie. Budgetary and staff restraints on a low-budget feature can just as seriously undermine the reliability of strategy and scheduling as much as tariff and border restrictions on an international blockbuster. The key to overcoming obstacles like this is to consider a coin: be flexible enough to compromise on one hand, but be uncompromising about letting go of your initial strategy on the other hand. Playing win-win politics in typical issues like this can mean the difference between good managing tactics and lousy PR.

Indie work is most challenging in this way. When I designed *Notes from Underground* (1995), an adaptation of the Fyodor Dostoevsky novel set, for our purposes, in downtown Los Angeles, I was already an art director with a considerable track record. The budgetary restrictions for our small art department were not an obstacle as much as maintaining a steadfast com-
mitment to what I wanted to see on the screen. Director Gary Walkow (*The Trouble with Dick, Beat*) and I discussed our joint effort to maintain realism and faithfulness to the original text. For the kind of control the typical low budget location work doesn’t allow, we opted to design six small sets into 9,000 square feet of the smallest of the Delfino Stages in Sylmar, California. By figuring the costs of retrofitting available flattage and other pre-existing scenery, repainting, and dressing against the costs of location rentals and lack of noise and traffic control, our decision to set up and work in that small soundstage not only benefited the producers but secured my visual control needs. Plus, we came in under budget at $14,600 with benefits far outweighing costs.

**First Assistant Director and Staff**

The influence of a good art director should be felt everywhere at once. Unfortunately, the shooting crew and its activity on a hot set are not an art director’s legitimate domain; the first assistant director, the second assistant director, and the second-second assistant director will continuously remind you of that fact. Regardless, you need to do your job despite any restrictions; acknowledging the domain status of the 1st AD is key to working within those restrictions.

What is the job of an art director on set during shooting? Members of the extended art department: the on-set dresser, the on-set prop person, on-set carpenter, and on-set scenic artist require supervision, especially when key scenes in hero sets are being shot. Daily visits to the set just before call time allow enough time to chat and clarify what is put in front of the camera for a certain shot, or for an art director to provide moral and political support at a specified time. Suppose there is some confusion about whether a foldable, cloth battle map, requested at the last minute, is right for a close-up shot in a pivotal scene scheduled for shooting later in the day. Ideally, a prop’s importance demands attention days before it will actually be used in a scene. Having gotten the information about the hand prop in question at wrap time at the end of the previous day, there is now little time to act. Organizing a brief fact-finding meeting at call time with the 1st AD, director and on-set prop assistant might determine that the map, quickly crafted in the art department from 6:00 PM to 6:00 AM that morning, is too large, too rectangular and needs to be more squarish, looks too new, and must easily fit into the character’s upper coat pocket. That’s a lot of new information to receive, demanding fast work that needs to be done back at the art department, and be ready for shooting in six hours. Because the prop assistant must remain on set, the art director is obliged to make this directorial request his/her prime task until it is completed exactly to specification. Handing the task off to someone else will not insure exactness or speed, but supervising the task yourself will. Necessary calls are made to reschedule other morning and afternoon meetings, and to notify everyone who must be involved in the current emergency. When the task is completed, it is rushed to the set before lunch. Another brief meeting with the 1st AD and director informs you of additional changes to the prop, but more importantly that
the scene has been cut from the day’s shooting schedule and will be added to other insert shots to be gotten later in the schedule that week.

This scenario is typical. Enrolling the power of the 1st AD in any shooting crew or scheduling decision is a smart move. Working respectfully with a first assistant director is like working with an on-set version of yourself. Drew Rosenberg (Helter Skelter, Stealing Harvard, Alex in Wonder), 1st AD for The Hunley, comes to mind as one who exerted her influence consistently and judiciously. Fighting natural disasters, changing weather conditions, and temperamental actors in order to keep production on schedule, she strove to make my challenges with her all win-win experiences within reason, or the dictates of any given situation. Realistically, this could not have happened without my strength as an equal management agent providing alliance, mutual respect, and support.

Previsualization Supervisor and Staff

The advent of 3D animation and how it has affected the design landscape has forced film designers to rethink the process of matching human and animation film elements seamlessly into the visual fabric of filmmaking. A reluctant respect now governs this young relationship between the art department and visual effects folks. It cannot properly function as an adversarial one because our quickly advancing technology is forcing a paradigm shift. The marriage of minds to create a singular vision has arrived and with it, a rethinking of boundaries.

The relationship between the art department and the visual effects department is obliged to merge as hands connected to arms belonging to the same creative body. Fulltime cooperation has already begun to happen out of necessity. The art department has doubled its size by embracing digital subdepartments and creating 3D templates modeled in Form-Z and Rhino by digital set designers for 3D animators in the visual effects department. The process of previsualization before any scenery is built is an ongoing expectation of the director. All digital images are currently catalogued and transmitted to other department computer screens by the art department server and maintained by an archivist. No longer a question of when but to what degree is now the challenge.

In the final analysis, the art director as marketing manager currently has the task to promote the new and improved brand of the digital art department. Within this constantly evolving relationship, the focus has shifted from interdepartmental to intradepartmental, mixed media to merged media. Effectively marrying two peripherally related departments must be accomplished much like the merger of two corporate cultures. The art director at this point must wear yet another hat as “the human relations director” to effectively assist the smooth transition of both worlds.

**ART DEPARTMENT SETUP**

The art director contributes to the physical and political setup of the art department by interviewing and hiring the art department coordinator,
the set designers, model makers, the archivist, previz illustrators, graphic designer, computer graphic artists, set decorator, mechanical effects coordinator, and prop master, as well as overseeing the selection of the respective set dressers, set buyers, on-set decorators, prop makers, mechanical effect makers, carpenters, welders, plasterers, foam sculptors, set painters and scenic artists, aircraft pilots, marine coordinator, and art department PAs.

When I worked on low budget films, I got to do the jobs of 65 percent of all those people and be paid the salary of one. It was certainly worth the effort of all the sleepless weeks as I gathered the firsthand knowledge of my new experiences as a creative in the art department. While navigating the world of Indies or rappeling the canyons of Hollywood, we hire our friends and tap into our carefully constructed networks. Pre-production is a time to carefully create the comfort zone that will enable us to easily outperform ourselves.

Even on the smallest staffed films, the art department tends to be the most densely populated working area of a movie. The physical, creative process of filmmaking requires so much expertise that it would be exhausting even for a single creative genius to effectively handle every aspect of the task. The head positions for the subdepartments described next provide an outline of a larger scope of involvement. The physical setting up of respective department spaces during the first weeks of pre-production can be assigned to an assistant while various department heads drop in on one another and the art director for regular, informally scheduled daily meetings. The art director is the managing director of this intradepartmental event (see Fig. 2-3). Please also see Fig. 2-3 in color between pages 142 and 143.

**Art Department Coordinator**

An art department coordinator is a logistical angel in situations that can financially support this position. They are represented by Local 871, Script Supervisors, Continuity & Allied Production Specialists Guild. This is shorthand for an efficiency expert who helps establish the tone of the department through common sense organizational skills and friendly coercion.

First duties include the mutual planning of the physical space, defined by a section of an office suite in any of the Hollywood studios, or the dispersal of trailers-on-wheels or warehouse space at base camp on location. Given the limits of the existing space, the art department takes physical form. Art director and production designer ideally occupy adjoining rooms or share an office with a door and a bulletproof window. The bullpen is supervised by the coordinator and contains various production assistants, PAs. It is the nerve center of the department containing the color printer, preferably Canon, capable of $11 \times 17$ size option, 50–200 percent magnification, and job memory. Accept no less. Before settling in with furniture, DSL connectivity on top of a normal phone extension, and routing system is mandatory. (This is particularly important for the archivist’s basic needs.)
Believe it or not, lighting requirements can also enhance creative performance. A quick purchase of a dozen clip-on lamps that can be directed to a wall or the ceiling easily combat the flicker of ubiquitous fluorescent lighting, visually competing with PC screens. Indirect, subdued lighting psychologically establishes a calmer, more inviting environment.

Beyond providing the physical comforts for the art department crew, functional and political skills are also necessary. A coordinator should be computer literate and comfortable with the Microsoft office suite and Adobe products to ensure the quick creation of word processing or image-making tasks. I suggest the Microsoft platform because it is the standard of business software. No doubt many of the folks in the art department will be creating Mac files to be shared with people outside the art department. In that case, it is necessary to be well versed in negotiating both platforms.
In addition to basic organizational ability, a coordinator’s most hirable skill is the ability to research. Even a contemporary film will require Web research for specific visual information and also mining hard-to-find data. When I was working in Luxembourg as my own coordinator, reliable Web connectivity provided most of the visual data on WWI research for France, Belgium, and the surrounding area despite the fact that the data was extracted from the University of Kansas historical archives. Once within the www.ukans.edu site, I simply typed in search words for specific images I needed, and the server’s search engine did the rest. Without it, even the small library of reference books we amassed before leaving for Europe would not have given us the depth and range of visual and text data the project required.

Archivist

Archiving is a new concept borne out of technological necessity. The paradigm shift from traditional to digital filmmaking combined with the ubiquitous use of laptops in the workplace has reinforced our daily reliance on computers. In fact, the movie business is populated with first adopters with regard to new technology gadgets. We, in the art department, learned that the collecting and cataloguing of imagery was a specific skill necessitating a full-time position in order to satisfy the needs of the digital art department. So the digital station of the archivist was born.

Created as a practical job to handle the load of thousands of images created and shared in the art department, the need quickly arose in other related departments on larger, well-funded films—now every size film can use the skills of an archivist. This digital station, available to all departments, needs a computer server, to be maintained either by the archivist or a designated IT person, either physically in the same room or via an online service. A highly skilled PA would normally be employed as an assistant to the archivist and savvy computer techie for the art department. If a server is a budgetary impossibility, then a DSL line or greater would be an acceptable option—only a high-speed, designated line could handle the upload/download volumes and size of documents relayed during the course of a busy day. It’s much more cost effective to email images than physically messenger them. In most cases, an archivist’s box rental might include a top-of-the-line oversize scanner and inkjet color printer in addition to the typical list of required gear: laptop and inkjet printer. If not, the production should consider these technical purchases for communal use in the art department. This team member needs to have impeccable imaging and technical skills, as the art coordinator needs similar troubleshooting familiarity with the copy machine and fax machine. Without an archivist, the speed of visual exchange is extremely hampered.

Alex McDowell, production designer of Minority Report, understands the computer and how to take advantage of it in a modern art department. He did an incredible setup for the production, one I’d only seen at that level in his art departments. He had a server set up for the show that everyone could access with his/her own drop box on the server and there was a fulltime archivist/IT person to maintain the system. Our PA, Sam Page, now a digital set designer, had those incredible skills. We were encouraged to use the server to archive, share key images, drop and pick up files from one another, and collaborate on designs within the department. It was also great for passing jokes and mp3 files. Another fabulous aspect of the server was watching the progress of the construction as it unfolded through digital set photographs. Other departments were tying into the server with databases, making everyone’s process with the art department a lot smoother. Basically, Alex was imitating a modern architectural office by setting up an infrastructure that allowed all involved to share access to top-of-the-line color laser printers, plotters, and of course, file sharing. The server helped the flow of information in the department a great deal.

“How do you casually give someone a file if you’re not using the server?” Sneakernet. (Big laugh.) Burning a CD and walking it to the next person, or by using email, Instant Messaging, or a USB thumb drive, especially if there is no local server available.

Digital Artists

It’s no longer enough for an art director to solely be an arbiter of good taste. Lack of digital skills or at least a surface understanding of basic digital concepts will disqualify potential art directors from the running, especially on an animated flick. An intermediate skill set helps determine what is technically feasible with a specific software, and enables easy expression of ideas between an AD and the digital staff. In most cases, every new digital feature starting pre-production signifies an improvement in this new art form. Consequently, this filmmaking challenge requires the advanced skills of your computer artists as either digital set designers, using Adobe Photoshop to tweak 2D and 3D imagery for keyframe shots, or enhancing images modeled in Rhinoceros and AutoCAD for digital drafting of scenery. From the perspective of digital artist and set designer, Luke Freeborn (Lemony Snicket’s A Series of Unfortunate Events, Terminal, Chronicles of Riddick, Van Helsing), “Now, getting ideas out quickly is very important because you have much less time to do more work. As a tool, the computer only assists the workload. It will not magically make a bad designer a good designer, but it could make a bad designer a faster designer.”

On the TNT movie-of-the-week, The Hunley, the Civil War submarine of the same name was drafted by our set designers in Charleston, South Carolina and transferred to the visual effects group, Station X Studios, in Santa Monica, California. They animated its submersion and underwater travel. Our draftsmen’s skills combined with the animation skills of the
visual effects department created 3–5 second sequences of uncompromising reality. Ability to speak the language of Lightwave or VectorWorks made my presence more credible to the digital artists.

**Set Designers**

Digital or traditional patience is a virtue, especially in set designers. Draftsmen constantly redraw whatever they have already drawn. With the assistance of the archivist, every Rhino and CAD document fragment, or drafted scrap of tracing paper, or napkin scribble can be scanned and saved to help ensure that erasures and revisions can happen a lot easier. Draftsmen who are manually and digitally adept are very desirable—this double indemnity insures performance whether the power is on or off (see Chapter 3: The Design Process, for additional information).

**Set Decorator**

The set decorator is the most valuable player in the art department. The production designer and art director create the structure for a film by defining its concept parameters. The set decorator provides context, subtext, and texture. In a recent Film Society tribute to Bob Boyle (It Came From Outer Space, Saboteur, Cape Fear, The Shootist, The Birds), a Universal Studios design legend at 94, he clearly defines the camera as a stand-in for the audience in terms of point of view. Taking this concept he learned from Alfred Hitchcock a step further, he suggested that subtext, “the underlying personality of a dramatic character as implied by a script or text and interpreted by an actor in performance” 

7 can be implied in scenic terms and interpreted by the set decorator. Bob Boyle also reminded us that, “Visual narrative supports the storytelling. A jail cell can telegraph volumes of information; it can be blatant or whisper in subtle undertones. Without this vital information present to visually guide us, the most well articulated design spaces remain as impressive but empty icons. Cloudia Rebar (Vanilla Sky, Without Limits, Mr. Wrong) sees set decorating like skydiving, “Working in film is like jumping out of an airplane twelve hours a day—striving to get it right and constantly realizing you’ve just pulled off another miracle is exhilarating. Being on that edge and riding that adrenaline rush keeps my attention sharp, keeps me going.”

**Greensman**

A set decorator’s domain extends beyond the interior confines of built scenery onstage to the great outdoors. A greensman and crew exist as an extension of the set-dressing department. The scope of a film determines just how involved an art director is in the process of greens dressing, especially if the location is a sensitive one in terms of contract stipulations. Otherwise, the set decorator will supervise the detailing of landscaped
exterior sets according to the specifications of the script and the production designer or the director. The greensman is available to the set decorator and art director as an expert botanist and landscape architect.

Prop Master

This is the realm of cinematic detail both literally and figuratively. In general, the broad strokes of the set decorator are distilled into minutiae in this position. Specifically, whatever an actor touches as a hand prop in the blocking of a scene becomes the focus of a prop master. An ancient coin or a cell phone can be fabricated or real, and is either found on the prop man’s truck or procured by the prop man. If it’s a hero prop, it must be run by the scrutiny of the art director before it is used in an ECU or extreme closeup shot. Mediating the efforts of the prop man and the final decision-making process of the director illustrates how the art director controls the visual concept of the film down to the design of a matchbook.

Construction Coordinator

Before the stateroom of the Titanic is painted and dressed, the literal framework of that set contained within the larger boat must have a solid, shootable structure. Every construction coordinator is a practical expert in answering questions of physical and structural problem solving. For example, is it more efficient to build a three-story shooting platform out of steel tubing or standard wood construction? Given the material, what is the maximum weight, including the camera, the platform will support? Translating that figure into people, what crew size can easily be supported? Can the same platform be built in modules so it can be reused for other scenes and be durable enough to transport and reassemble? Despite the fact that construction reference guides like “Architectural Graphics Standards” or Sequoia Publisher’s “Pocket Ref” can help an art director determine the answers to those questions, it’s always best to compare notes before making these decisions.

As an operations manager, the head carpenter’s domain includes his immediate staff of foremen and gang bosses, and then scores of laborers and painters as support crew. A labor force this size requires close daily scrutiny of man-hours worked and materials used. These budget items are the direct responsibility of the construction coordinator, although the art director is ultimately responsible for potential budget increases and modifications.

It is also important to mention that the detailing work of the lead scenic artist, who operates under the aegis of the construction coordinator, conveys subtext for the visual narrative of set dressing. The literal application of paint color, wallpaper, texture, aging, and surface sealing complete whatever “local reality” is necessary to properly finish the look of the set. Contrary to what one might guess, this is the responsibility of the on-set
scenic artist and not the set decorator regarding the fabrication of mechanical and handwritten signage, for example, used ultimately as on-set dressing. Working with the shooting crew, this specialist’s scenic skills provide on-set solutions for on-the-spot signage, scenery touch-up, and aging of vehicles.

**Mechanical Special Effects**

There is a significant amount of overlap between this subdepartment and construction. Generally, the fabrication of any special piece of mechanical scenery used in a scene is the responsibility of the mechanical effects coordinator. The rotating, interior module of a Mars shuttle for the Disney comedy, *Rocketman* (1997), is a perfect example of this shared responsibility because there was a safety factor involved in the flawless operation of the gimbaled, revolving set. The welded steel construction of this human-size hamster wheel was finished by the carpenters and scenic artists to match the rest of the space shuttle interior set. On the same project, Jeff Jarvis, the mechanical effects coordinator (*Cast Away, Always, Firestarter, Poltergeist*), also supervised the design and functioning of a full-scale centrifuge with a locked-off camera mount, allowing the director to shoot the effects of g-force at variable speeds. Live action sequences like these support script requirements for most action films and utilize the expertise of such specialty artists [see Chapter 7: Mechanical Effects: A Practical Guide].

**Stunts**

Traditionally connected to the mechanical effects department, stuntmen straddle both the **below-the-line** section of the film crew and the directing department, as physical effects consultants and second unit assistant directors. Although not necessarily connected to the art department, their active participation in the mechanical effects department requires close scrutiny of how a certain stunt will impact the look of a film and consequently will need to be art directed.

This sub-subdepartment is an exceptional case, requiring the attention given to hero hand props, for instance. In most cases, the lead stuntman will most likely request **breakaway** scenery (shatterable plate glass) or breakaway props (shatterable bottles, glasses, etc.) for action scenes and fight scenes from the art department. An art director’s only significant responsibility here is to insure that whatever is requested by the stunt coordinator makes its way to the set for shooting.

**Visual Effects and Previsualization**

This subject has been briefly addressed earlier in this chapter (“The Relationships”). Victor Martinez, a digital set designer and concept modeler for *The Cat in the Hat* (2003), shares some additional observations.
Alex McDowell, production designer, typically includes the previz department within the art department. He doesn’t use previz as a conceptual design tool as much as a device for dealing with more pragmatic issues. A previz environment will tell him if a camera will be able to fit into a small set, or whether we might consider shrinking the size of a set or enlarging it, depending on the needs of shot. This aspect of our new technology encourages directors particularly to make those decisions confidently way ahead of time. A PD like Alex can more easily help inform his director and then inform me, someone who is involved in more conceptual set designing, of my direction. As the boundaries between the art and previz departments get more blurred, our definitions become less clearly defined. On *The Cat in the Hat*, I routinely exported previz digital models of the sets I was working on, so that they could be used as models in their proprietary 3D modeling environments (see Chapter 5: CGI and Digital Filmmaking).

**Transportation**

Picture vehicles, or hero cars, are shot in just about every film and this sub-department provides them. In addition to its appropriate historical period, a vehicle might need to be found in triplicate or quadruplicate for work in mechanical effects scenes or simply be dusted down with *Movie Dirt* by the on-set scenic artist to suggest aging and passage of time. Inevitably, “Transpo” deals with every department because it is responsible for parking caravans of talent trailers, five-ton trucks, production trailers, and crew vehicles on all off-studio location sites. This department is directly related to the locations department.

At this point, it should be abundantly clear that the influence of an art director’s supervision and management skills extends consistently into many creative areas. Lists and schedules help keep us organized, consistent decision-making skills help keep us focused on the designer and director’s visual concept, and hiring the best talent available ensures the best quality of the art department product. One department, not yet described in this chapter, is the locations department, which shares a unique relationship with the art department. It qualifies for being included in the next chapter because of the extensive role it plays in assisting to establish all locations outside of the controlled studio soundstage environment.

**ENDNOTES**

1. Christa Munro interview, 9/11/04, Flintridge, CA.
2. Gae Buckley interview, 9/11/0, Studio City, CA.
4. “There are four principal reasons why this operates: construction costs are reduced, costs of purchased materials are also cut, fixed costs are spread over many units, and process advantages are found by avoiding bottlenecks as much as possible.” Krajewski, L. [1999]. *Operations Management: Strategy and Analysis*. New York: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 5th edition, page 304.
Figure 1-3A  Production still from *The Cheat*, designed by Wilfred Buckland.

Figure 1-3B  An example of a “Lasky Lighting” effect for the same scene, designed by Wilfred Buckland.
Figure 1-5  The Motion Picture Art Director: Responsibilities, functions, and accomplishments. Courtesy of ADG—Local 800 IATSE.