

NACS

MAGAZINE.

JULY 2007



You Oughta Be in Pictures

Hollywood confesses why convenience stores
make for good cinema.

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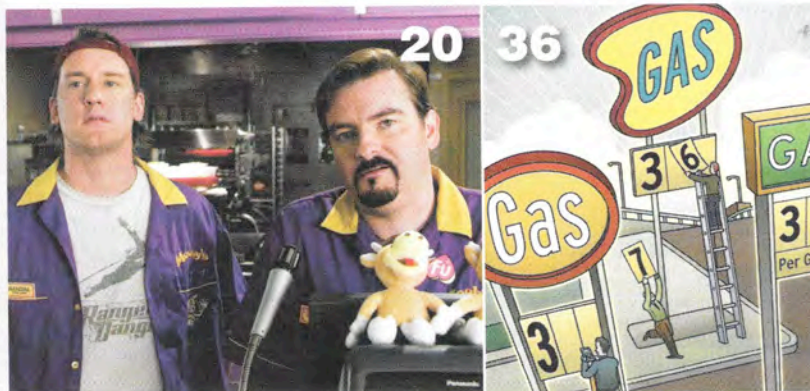
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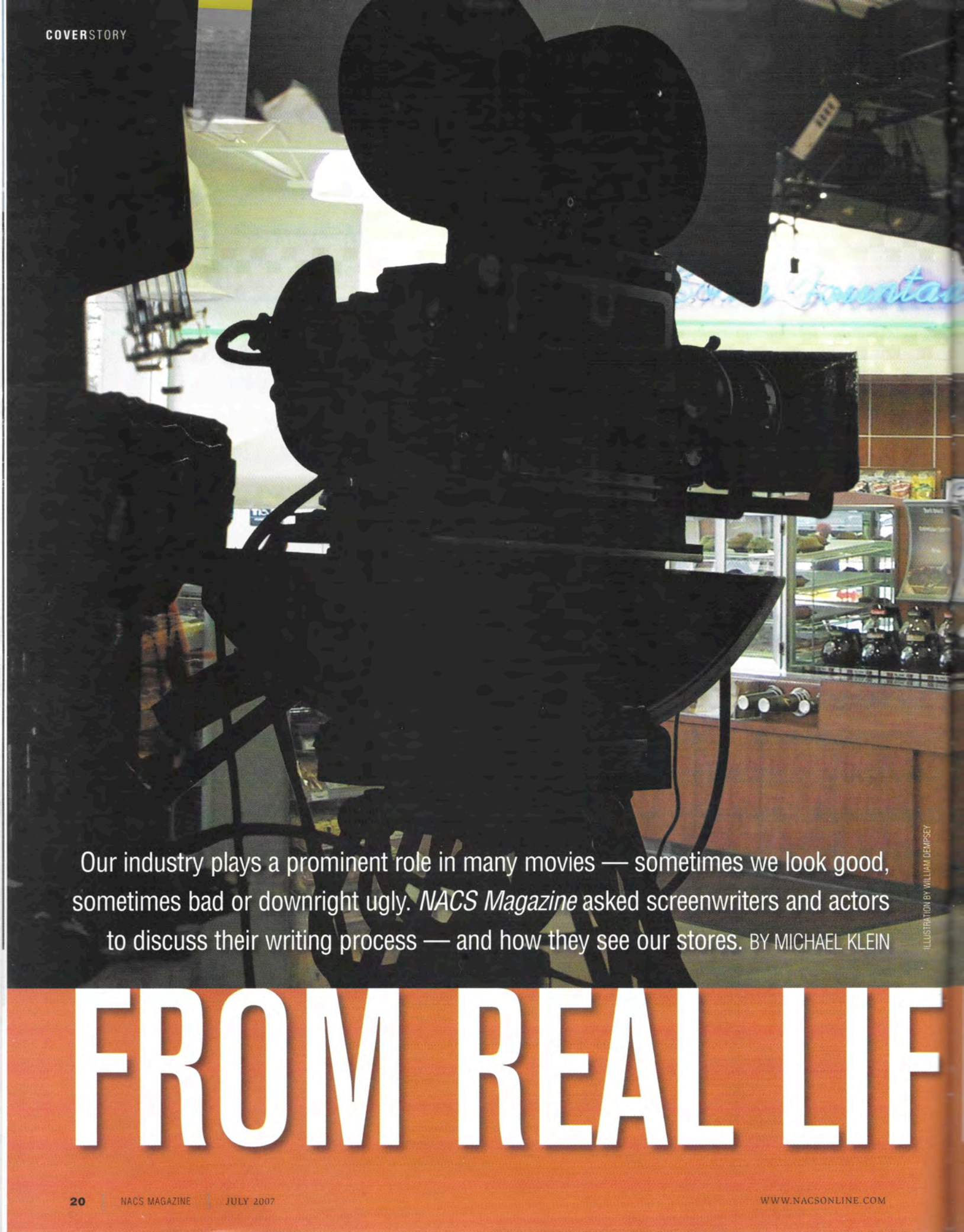
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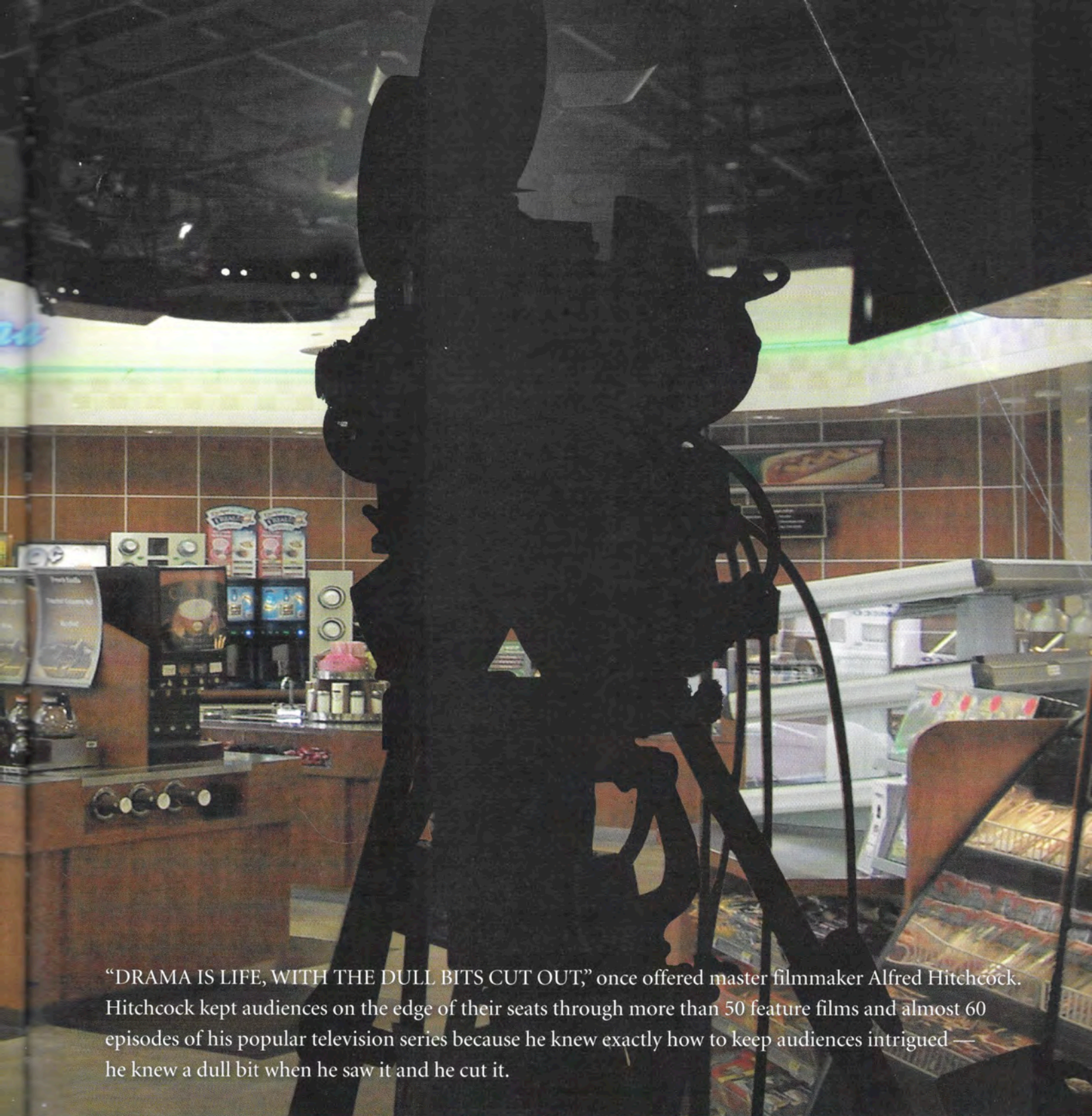
David Leider knows what it takes to hold a captive audience — both at the pump and at Gas Station TV. Interview by NACS Vice Chairman Richard Oneslager, CEO of Balmar Petroleum/First Hand Management LLC



Our industry plays a prominent role in many movies — sometimes we look good, sometimes bad or downright ugly. *NACS Magazine* asked screenwriters and actors to discuss their writing process — and how they see our stores. BY MICHAEL KLEIN

ILLUSTRATION BY WILLIAM DEMPSEY

FROM REAL LIFE



“DRAMA IS LIFE, WITH THE DULL BITS CUT OUT,” once offered master filmmaker Alfred Hitchcock. Hitchcock kept audiences on the edge of their seats through more than 50 feature films and almost 60 episodes of his popular television series because he knew exactly how to keep audiences intrigued — he knew a dull bit when he saw it and he cut it.

E TO REEL LIFE



Clerks, left, Clerks II, middle and right.

“All you need with a setting is a situation where people come in. So a convenience store is probably better than the cockpit of a plane.”

— CHRIS ROCK

To most writers and filmmakers, “dull bits” would probably include things like pumping gasoline and buying snacks, and yet gas stations and convenience stores appear in countless movies and television shows. Even Hitch used one himself at least once. I remember feeling anxious for years every time my parents stopped for gasoline because I was afraid birds were going to attack my father, causing him to drop the nozzle, leading to a fire and explosion. (It happened in Hitchcock’s 1963 movie *The Birds*, in case you hadn’t figured it out.)

So if refueling your car and your body are dull, why do we see it so often in films?

Kevin Smith’s *Clerks* was set almost entirely in (and on) a convenience store. But there’s not a lot of mystery surrounding this choice; Smith had worked in several convenience stores while growing up in New Jersey, including the actual Quick Stop where his movie was filmed. When Smith dropped out of film school after four months to put his tuition to better use — making a film — he looked around for something he could make his film about.

In the documentary, *Snowball Effect: The Story of “Clerks”* Smith explains, “I had read an interview with [independent filmmaker Robert Rodriguez] where he said the best way to go about making your first film is to take stock of

what you have. In this interview he said, ‘I knew I had access to a bus, I knew I had access to a guitar, and I had a turtle. So right away I knew I was putting those things in my movie [*El Mariachi*].’ So I was like, I’ve got access to a convenience store. And I know that world, because that’s all I’d ever really done. So I said I’m going to use the convenience store as a backdrop to a movie about people sitting around and talking.”

And talk they do. For 92 minutes the clerks swear and talk about sex in front of the customers, they ridicule and chase customers away, and one of them even sells cigarettes to a five-year-old. Not model employees. But the film is not actually critical of the convenience industry; it’s more an examination of these young people who work in the store.

“It’s really about those guys,” comedian Chris Rock told *NACS Magazine*. “If [Kevin Smith] had made that movie 20 years earlier those guys would have been working in a bar, you know? It’s just a setting. All you need with a setting pretty much is a revolving door — a situation where people come in. So a convenience store is probably better than the cockpit of a plane...no strangers coming in. Better than if you are on the space shuttle. Two guys on the space shuttle? Nobody’s coming in.”

Rock wrote, directed, and starred in 2003's *Head of State*, which featured a gas station-convenience store. Rock's character, an improbable candidate for president of the United States, meets his love interest, Tamala Jones, while she works at the store. But according to Rock, not a lot of thought went into the choice. "We thought, okay, he's got to meet her somewhere — a place that is always open. [The gas station-convenience store] just seemed like a good spot."

The Blessing of a High-Traffic Location

Many convenience stores are open 24 hours a day and attract a lot of customers, but that can be both a blessing and a curse for the industry's portrayal on film.

On one hand, having a store that is always open provides writers with a high traffic location and the potential for rich characters. "Wherever you have a steady flow of people is a good place, you can always write wacky characters to come in," said Rock.

Television writer and producer Bill Grundfest agrees. "Anyplace you find people, you're going to find drama. Or comedy. Anyplace you find people, you are going to find imperfection and you find the story. There is a lot of human drama that goes on in front of, and inside, and behind the counter of convenience stores. It's where people go when they need...fill in the blank. But the story isn't about the product they need — the story is about the people who need the product, how they get jammed up. Or the clerks — the people who work there. Are they on their way up in life, or are they on their way down in life? Or are they just going to move sideways through life? Where are these people at? And therein lies the tale. I don't think there is any human place that is inherently dull. I'll show you movies or TV shows about the most exciting places in the world that are dull, because they didn't get the human story."

The Curse of a High-Traffic Location

On the other hand, a store open 24 hours a day that handles lots of cash is perceived by many to be a magnet for crime and thus earns frequent negative depictions in film.

In 1987's *Raising Arizona*, Nicholas Cage's character robs his local Short Stop four times in the middle of the night. He's never successful — the first three attempts land him in jail and the final time leads to a hysterically absurd chase with neighborhood dogs, police and a gun-toting, pimply-faced clerk. There's nothing glamorous about the depiction — it probably wouldn't make kids want to go out and copy Cage; and in addition to getting laughs, the sequences advance the plot, define Cage's character and cre-

ate dramatic tension in his relationship with his wife.

The same can not necessarily be said of 2006's highly stylized and violent *Crank*. Bad guys have injected Jason Statham's character with a drug that will kill him unless he can keep his heart rate high. (The pitch was probably, "It's *Fantastic Voyage* meets *Speed!*") Statham sets out to find an antidote — or at the very least to kill everyone who has ever wronged him — and make amends with his girlfriend. One of his first stops? A convenience store where he loads up on energy drinks and energy-enhanced snacks.

But Statham's character is a criminal in his own right, so he's not an ideal customer — he pulls the clerk through

On Location

I asked every writer I spoke with about the last time he was in a convenience store and what he bought. The answers probably won't surprise anyone in the industry.

CHRIS ROCK (COMEDIAN, FILMMAKER): "Probably yesterday. I don't think I've gone today. What did I buy? I bought some donuts. Probably a *USA Today*. Gas."

TAKASHI BUFFORD (SCREENWRITER): "The last time I was in a convenience store I purchased coffee and Altoids. And that was probably about a week ago."

BILL GRUNDFEST (TELEVISION WRITER, CEO, HOLLYWOOD CORPORATE MEDIA): "You are implying that I was buying something inherently interesting or untoward. And so I'll tell you exactly what it was. It was at Beverly and La Cienega — and it's big. You want to buy a toaster oven? They got it. You want to buy gum and loose leaf reinforcement? They got it. I didn't realize what I was doing, but I walked up to the counter and I placed a bottle of moderately priced chardonnay, a bottle of Scope mouthwash and a pack of condoms. And the lady behind the cash register just looked at me over her glasses and said, "Well, somebody's got an interesting evening planned tonight." I did not realize that those three items told an entire story to this woman. And I just looked down and I laughed and we had a good laugh about it. And so, yes, without convenience stores, life itself would be impossible."

STEVE PINK (WRITER/DIRECTOR): "I can't remember. I love to go there and not buy anything. I find myself in convenience stores when I don't really need anything. Then it's really fun because you just go — what are my options? Maybe I'll go this week and call you back." (See "Steve Pink's Adventures in Convenience.")



the window, points a gun at him and takes the products without paying. (In the character's defense, he is in a hurry, and the idea is to keep his adrenaline

level up so he can stay alive. Perhaps a more traditional transaction would have been just mundane enough to kill him — remember Hitchcock?)

Steve Pink's Adventures in Convenience

As threatened, Steve Pink did go to a convenience store a few days after we spoke. His report was hilarious:

"I needed something and it was late at night and I didn't want to go to the big grocery store. I thought it was a good test, because I wanted something so weird that there's no... way they're going to have it. So it was a good test. Not only did I not want to go to the big grocery store to get it, the odds in my view that they would have it at a convenience store would either make convenience stores [really great or not great].

"So I wound up going to the 7-Eleven on Sunset Boulevard. And by the way, I'm looking for Quaker Oats Cheddar Rice cakes. Not apple cinnamon. No! I wanted the savory.

I wanted the salty cheddar because I needed them for a lunch for my step-daughter. So I'm walking around and I'm like, there is no [possible] way they have those things. Because they don't even really have bread. And they have tons of chips, and I'm just like, 'There is no way.'

"So I'm going down this aisle, and on the bottom row in the middle of the aisle where there are all these snacks are two packages of Quaker Oats Cheddar Rice Cakes! Now, they

were mini rice cakes, and I had in mind the large size but I didn't care — it didn't make any difference. In fact, it seemed slightly better for lunches. I couldn't believe it.

"So then I bought them and left and then I thought, well, maybe they do have everything. I started to feel like you actually have to choose the thing you want [before you go into the convenience store] so that it magically appears. If I had wanted something while I was there, like as a secondary need, that I didn't really want, but I was testing how far out this thing would take me, I think I would be disappointed. In other words, it has to be a true need to magically appear at the convenience store.

"It was a very positive experience, very successful, so I can only conclude that it is like the magic box in *Lost*, because how on Earth would they have Quaker Oats Cheddar Rice Cakes? And by the way, I had just been at Whole Foods. But Whole Foods is very fancy. They don't have Quaker Oats. They had rice cakes that are really high in fiber and taste like, you know, like a medium walnut pressboard veneer for your kitchen. But they don't have the good Quaker Oats fun-ass rice cakes.

"Maybe I'll go back in two weeks to see if it was a fluke. Are convenience stores like a magic box, or do they actually stock that [stuff]?"



Much of the scene is shown through the four security cameras in the store, which, thanks to sensationalist television shows like *World's Dumbest Criminals*, and even the evening news, make for familiar images to Americans. This kind of real-life footage serves as another reminder that convenience stores may not be the safest place in the world.

"Look at the facts: Every time you come out of a convenience store you push the door open and you have that height thing. That is a constant reminder that you're in a place that statistically has more criminal activity than any other store," opined Takashi Bufford, writer of 1997's *Booty Call*. "They're also open 24 hours a day... No one robs a bank at 10 o'clock at night. Then you have security footage and then all of the scenes we've seen from *Cops* and other shows where convenience stores are robbed. And there is probably a lot of cash passing through any business open 24 hours a day; so I don't think it is a stereotype to view convenience stores as a hot site for crime because all the elements are there. Then again, we've seen a lot of footage where these clerks are very well armed too... and we did that in *Booty Call* where they are ready for anything."

Booty Call features two heavily armed South Asian clerks who repel a stick-up man, almost destroying their store in the process. However, the film turns the ethnic stereotypes on their collective heads. First of all, the stars of the film, Tommy Davidson and Jamie Foxx, are black, and although one of the clerks is initially suspicious of Foxx — the stars actually pay for their purchases — it is a white drug addict who tries to rob the store at gunpoint.

And secondly, it is not Davidson and Foxx cracking jokes at the clerks' expense, but rather the other way around; the clerks taunt the comedians, making fools of them in two scenes.

"I think we usually see it from the perspective of following our main charac-

ters and their interaction with the clerk, where the clerk is basically an ornamental stereotype. Even though it was a brief scene, we wanted to give the clerks' point of view of what was going on and how they view the various people that come in," said Bufford, who himself worked in retail before succeeding in Hollywood. "I used to work at a drug store when I was in college, and you tend to categorize your customers. You know the minute someone comes in — even if you've never serviced them before — what kind of customer they are going to be, what they're probably going to want to purchase. So we thought it would sort of lift and elevate the scene to give the perspective of the two clerks."

So Successful It Hurts

It is the convenience store's status as an icon of American culture — indispensable and omnipresent — that motivates some depictions, and attracts some ridicule. We don't attack institutions we consider irrelevant. If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, then mockery may be the sincerest form of veneration.

"Convenience in America is sacred, right? Americans love convenience. The idea of convenience is a sacred concept, and so I think it's always fun to poke fun at that," said writer and director Steve Pink.

Pink co-wrote *Grosse Pointe Blank*, a dark comedy starring John Cusack as a professional hitman who returns to his hometown for a high school reunion. Cusack tries to visit the home he grew up in, but it is gone; in its place, an Ultra Mart convenience store. While very unsettling for Cusack's character, it gets big laughs from the audience, in part thanks to Cusack's subtle performance as a violent young man whose world is comically unraveling around him.

Disoriented, Cusack repeatedly asks the slacker clerk, "What are you doing

here?" Then, as he tries to get his psychiatrist on the phone to talk about the experience, Cusack wanders the aisles of what was his childhood home. "You can't go home again, but at least you can shop there," he observes.

Later in the film, Cusack is dumped by his love interest. Depressed, and with no place to go, he goes back to the Ultra Mart, like a carrier pigeon returning someplace safe and familiar. But it isn't safe for long — a rival hitman follows Cusack to the store, a gun battle ensues and the store is literally blown up.

"You take what is sacred and you blow it up, and that's the satire," Pink explained. "You blow up a convention — we literally blew it up. When you blow up a convention, you turn it up and look inside it, and that's how you make fun of something."

Ready for Prime Time

Turning a convention inside out to find something fresh to make us laugh is essential to originality. Making fun of a stereotypical convenience store clerk may appear to be plentiful in pop culture, but considered a cheap shot by many professional writers. "If something was going to get a cheap laugh... it's hackish. We would never send up the Korean grocer because [he is Korean] or the Pakistani guy because [he is Pakistani]. But we would certainly send him up because he was an idiot," explained Bill Grundfest.

Grundfest was nominated for three Emmy Awards for his work as a writer and producer on the Paul Reiser–Helen Hunt sitcom, *Mad About You*. One



Booty Call

"The idea of convenience is a sacred concept, and so I think it's always fun to poke fun at that."

— STEVE PINK



Grosse Pointe Blank

episode Grundfest wrote, “Giblets for Murray,” featured a Korean-run convenience store that, with its well-stocked

shelves, repeatedly saves Thanksgiving for the characters. No robberies, no high prices jokes and no immigrant jokes. The joke was that as hard as the main characters tried to ruin their own Thanksgiving, the friendly convenience store clerk downstairs could save the day. And the depiction came out of real life.

“My experience with Korean grocers are that there are basically two

kinds. One kind, he’s only got three things and no matter what it is you want, he’s trying to sell you those three things,

and the other is sort of like Batman’s utility belt. Whatever you need, this guy has it! You want a quart of milk? He’s got it. You need transmission fluid? He’s got it. You need birth control? He’s got it. You need Botox? He has that too. Whatever you need, this guy has it! How does he fit all of this stuff in this little store? You can make both of those funny. And in the latter you are making it funny without going to a negative stereotype.”

On the surface *The Simpsons* does go for what some may consider easy laughs — based on stereotypes — but the writers insulate themselves in a number of ways. First, they present every single character and institution as the most extreme stereotype imaginable. And then they find the envelope of the joke and push way past it. The writers go

On the Cutting Room Floor

This feature was fun to research and write, and I hope you had fun reading it. But invariably when you start talking about movies and television shows that fit a certain category, you leave something out. In an effort to stave off the flood of letters to NACS informing me that I missed a movie here or there, let me confess — I know I missed some, maybe even your personal favorite, and for that, I apologize. If it makes you feel any better, here are some other films and shows I looked at, but for one reason or another, they ended up on the cutting room floor.

IT’S A MAD, MAD, MAD, MAD WORLD (1963)

Perhaps the greatest, and certainly the broadest, comedy of all time. Phil Silvers and Jonathan Winters, two of several chasing down a fortune, find themselves at a desert gas station on its grand-opening day. The slapstick fight they get into with each other and the two attendants levels the station.

THE JERK (1979)

Steve Martin as the dim-witted title character gets a job at a gas station. A madman (M. Emmett Walsh) bent on killing him starts shooting at him with a high-powered rifle. All around Martin cans start exploding — both oil cans and soda cans. Leading the jerk to shout a warning to others, “Stay away from the cans! He hates these cans!”



BILL & TED’S EXCELLENT ADVENTURE (1989)

Slackers Ted “Theodore” Logan (Keanu Reeves) and Bill S. Preston, Esquire (Alex Winter) sit outside their local Circle K cramming for an exam. When a clerk heading into the store to start her shift can’t tell them when the Mongols ruled Asia, they decide to head off to another store. Then George Carlin shows up in his time-traveling phone booth, leading Reeves to remark famously, “Bill, strange things are afoot at the Circle K.”

SAY ANYTHING (1989)

Here’s the first time a lovelorn John Cusack wandered around a convenience store on film. He’s pining for his girlfriend (Lone Skye), and when his friends, sitting in the parking lot, give him relationship advice, Cusack asks what is on everybody’s mind: “If you guys know so much about women, how come you’re here at like the Gas ‘n’ Sip on a Saturday night completely alone drinking beers with no women anywhere?”

THELMA & LOUISE (1991)

Louise (Susan Sarandon) robs a convenience store while Thelma (Geena Davis) waits in the car. Up until that point, the women probably could have returned home with not much more than a stern talking to from the police. Now they are on the run.

so far beyond the cheap joke that they come all the way around to clever again.

For example, Apu's Kwik-E-Mart is known for outrageous markups. But \$1.85 for a 29-cent stamp? Or selling \$2.00 worth of gas for \$4.20? Genius.

Show creator Matt Groening must have some affinity for convenience stores; not only is Apu and his Kwik-E-Mart a feature in almost every one of the show's 400 episodes, but convenience stores even turn up a millennia later in Groening's science fiction show set in the year 3000, *Futurama*. At least once, the main characters shop at a futuristic convenience store called 711 where a sign advises that the "Clerk does not know secret to happy marriage."

Another television giant once got in on the act — but again, taking a fresh

approach. In an episode during season eight of *Seinfeld*, the gang finds themselves both in a convenience store and in its back office.

Jerry, embarrassed that a check he accidentally bounced is on display in the store for all to see, tries to convince the owner, Marcelino, to take the check down. Marcelino will — on one condition. Jerry must convince Kramer to have his rooster, Little Jerry Seinfeld, throw an upcoming cock fight — a cock fight that will take place in the back office of the store.

As absurd and convoluted as all this sounds, it is actually funny. The moment that stings the industry is when Jerry buys a pack of gum — for 85 cents — to which Jerry replies in his mock outraged voice, "That is *outrageous!*"

The Thin Line Between Love and Hate

That *Seinfeld* moment could be an homage to 1993's *Falling Down* starring Michael Douglas. At the start of the film, Douglas' character, on the verge of a nervous breakdown and stuck in a sweltering Los Angeles traffic jam without air conditioning, abandons his car and walks off to make a phone call. Without change for a payphone, he ventures into an ironically located convenience store on a burned out, dead-end street. But the clerk won't give him change and is dismissive and rude.

The encounter fans Douglas's already lit fuse and he begins his citywide rampage against what he perceives to be injustice and society's ills — starting with "outrageously" priced items in the convenience store, such as an 85-cent can of soda.

REALITY BITES (1994) The story of four college graduates looking for meaning in their lives. Lelaina (Winona Ryder) is given a gas credit card as a graduation present from her father, who tells her he will pay the bills for the first year. Like any industrious Gen Xer, Lelaina takes her friends shopping at the local gas station-convenience store, where they sometimes dance, and generally have fun. The characters are usually seen eating food that likely came from the store. And when Lelaina loses her job, she cleverly schemes to buy gas for strangers with her card, taking their cash ("Same low price, cash or credit!"). In one day she makes what it took her a week to make at her real job and she is able to pay her phone bill.

RUMBLE IN THE BRONX (1995) What do you get when you mix Jackie Chan, his uncle's neighborhood market, a motorcycle gang bent on killing Chan, international jewel thieves chasing Chan and a hovercraft? A movie kind of about a convenience store where Jackie Chan beats people up, throws soda cans at them and the store is ultimately destroyed.

HAROLD & KUMAR GO TO WHITE CASTLE (2004) Stoners Harold (John Cho) and Kumar (Kal Penn) are on an all-night mission to find a White Castle in suburban New Jersey and get lost. They stop at an all-night gas station and convenience store. Inside they find their "extreme tormentors" are terrorizing the clerk. Kumar stands up for the man, antagonizing the punks — but that's the least of their problems — Neil Patrick Harris (as himself) is outside stealing their car.

SHAUN OF THE DEAD (2004) Shaun's (Simon Pegg) trips to his local convenience store have become so rote he barely realizes he's in and out of the store. The second time in the film he goes, he doesn't even notice all the slow-moving, brain-eating zombies wandering around.

GAS (2004) Perpetually feuding brothers must learn how to get along and run their late father's gas station/mini mart in this predictable tale set in downtown Los Angeles. To save the business, friends suggest a gas sale, which Damon Powell (Flex Alexander) rejects, saying "Now we only make 14 cents on a gallon of gas. Tops." Still, a local radio station and wholesaler provide donations to make profits one dollar a gallon with the brothers needing to sell 100,000 gallons in a month (possible) at their two-pump operation (good luck!).

CLERKS II (2006) When a fire destroys the Quick Stop in the opening scene, the clerks must find other jobs. They do for fast food service what they did for the Quick Stop, but in the end they realize their dream, pooling their money to buy and reopen the Quick Stop. Now they are no longer just workers who don't care about the customers — they are the *owners* who don't care about the customers.



There are plenty of other movies about the industry. Go to www.imdb.com and search industry keywords to find more. Share your reviews with us at jlennard@nacsonline.com.

When Douglas begins smashing up the convenience store, you get a sickening feeling in your stomach as Douglas slips into madness, past a point of no return that is going to spell disaster for him and anyone unfortunate enough to cross his path that day. But at the same time you have this feeling that the clerk kind of deserved what he got. If he had had any compassion at all, if he had just given Douglas change for the payphone, none of this would have happened. Of course, that would make for a pretty boring movie — Hitchcock, again.

It's this dual emotion about convenience stores that fuels some creative choices.

"We have this love for the convenience store because everybody goes to them, but we have a hate for the convenience

store because we are suspect sometimes with [its] quality, and it's too expensive, and we feel like we are being exploited for our own convenience. So we have this hate for it," explained Pink, who, remember, blew up the convenience store in his film, *Grosse Pointe Blank*. "There is a satisfying wish fulfillment aspect to blowing up a convenience store and that is why it makes us laugh; because we know the convenience store is an integral part of American life, [but] for once you have gotten over on the great convenience store that lords over you. You get some revenge for one moment — but then knowing that the convenience store will live on. It's not like you've blown up all convenience stores. There will always be convenience stores."

Mystical Places

Pink by no means has anything against convenience stores. Even the store he blew up, which wasn't a real store at all, but rather a set on the Warner Ranch, was blown up primarily as a plot device to move his protagonist past his own point of no return.

Perhaps it is just too good a comic observation to pass up, but Pink shares Grundfest's sense of wonderment with the sometimes mystical stock convenience stores maintain.

"There is something toy store-like, kid-in-a-candy-store-like fun, about a convenience store. You can get a crazy frosty drink. Grocery stores aren't fun — you go to a grocery store and you seriously shop for the actual needs of

Our Turn

Movies often take a critical look at our industry, so we're returning the favor by taking a critical look at them. We asked Sonja Hubbard, CEO of E-Z Mart Stores Inc. (Texarkana, Texas), and Richard Oneslager, president of Balmar Petroleum/First Hand Management LLC (Denver, Colorado) for their opinions on some select movies. They rated the movies based on quality, industry portrayal or some combination of the two.



Raising Arizona

Sonja: It does focus on the more negative aspect of our 24/7 presence but does so in a way that even I can't help but laugh. Of all the movies reviewed, this is my favorite. It is a brainless, insane portrayal of life taken to the extreme. The main characters experience love, passion, desires and dreams for the perfect family... but all in bizarre hyperdrive.

RATING:

Richard: A darn funny movie, but it's hard to find an upside here as the store is a repeated victim of an armed robbery — wait, it's not armed robbery if there are no bullets in the gun. Sadly, the only person armed is the clerk. I guess the small glimmer of hope in this is that every time Nicholas Cage's character held up a store he was caught and locked up. A recidivist and a repeat offender.

RATING:

Head of State

Sonja: A predictable and cute movie. My favorite part was that the character with the most ethics, insight and all-around human quality was the convenience store clerk. She remained real throughout the movie and a good support to the lead character.

RATING:

Richard: It's nice that Chris Rock's love interest and one of the most honest characters in the movie was a clerk at the neighborhood convenience store. The store also serves as the touch point where all the characters in the neighborhood (good and bad) pass at some point. The most interesting thing is that in a political movie (comedy) it's a good reminder that when it comes to grassroots politics, a convenience store is an anchor in every community. We have at least one, and probably hundreds, of stores in every congressional district in the United States. We should be showing that clout more — say "It ain't right!"

RATING:

your family. But convenience stores have all the fun stuff you want. It's not like the rush of going to a convenience store is like the rush of finding your favorite powdered dishwasher detergent. You go to the convenience store to get your booze or your cigarettes or fun food or magazines."

Pink is not alone in seeing convenience stores as a kind of bricks-and-mortar version of comfort food. "People imagine, whether it is true or not, that everything they desire can be had and found at a convenience store. The whole idea of a convenience store was that somehow they've magically reduced everything you'd ever want into a small space called a convenience store. Which is kind of the most awesome thing in

the world. It seems like such a uniquely American store."

Pink echoed what many of the writers felt about convenience stores — that the constant influx of new customers keeps it interesting from a storyteller's perspective, and as long as it makes for an interesting story, somebody is going to tell it. Clearly a thinking man's comedy writer and director, he gets philosophical when he starts to think about what all these people are doing at convenience stores.

"Maybe the reason you think there is always going to be kind of an outrageous cast of characters [at the convenience store] is because if there is one thing everyone loves it is convenience. So you can see David Geffen and someone on crack. They both go to the same 7-Eleven. That's weird.

All classes and races, the lowest of lows in society and the highest of highs in society go to convenience stores because it's *convenient*. When they want to go and get their Diet Cherry Coke, or whatever. Everyone has this primal need to get this little thing that they want to make them feel better and they get it at the 7-Eleven. No matter who you are, no matter how rich — you've seen Bentleys in the parking lot of 7-Eleven and you've seen Pintos with the bumpers that have been wire hangered on to the car. So there is no class or race — it is this pit stop where everyone can go and get this little thing that makes them feel better" ○

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Grosse Pointe Blank

Sonja: The convenience store, while a major stage for the piece, could be anything. It could easily be a mall, grocery store or beauty shop. Our industry was chosen because of our presence and integral involvement in everyday life. That is nice, well, until they destroy the store!

RATING: 

Richard: What is it about movie directors and their desire to destroy our stores? Sadly, I think it is a reflection on the tough times and budget cutbacks in Hollywood. I mean, let's face it, cooler doors and bottled product looks great when shot up. And shelves and store gondolas make a great maze to navigate, dive and hide during a shootout. But do that to a 60,000-square-foot grocery store? Too expensive, the studio execs say. Can't you shoot up something smaller, like a convenience store?

RATING: 

Clerks

Sonja: While sometimes the actions of the characters don't portray the behavior we would want in ourselves or our staff, they do focus on the diversity of the human race and the vast interactions between them. As in *Raising Arizona*, there is a focus on the extremeness of human actions. This maintains viewer interest by depicting, to

extreme, the micro-moments of interaction that occur constantly in convenience stores. Most of us in this industry could write a book from all our stories.

RATING: 

Richard: There's a lot to be proud of in this movie. Ignore selling cigarettes to a five-year-old and stuff I can't even mention. First, the lead cashier (Dante) accepts the request to work the morning shift even after closing the night before (dedication). Next, when the locks are jammed on the store's roll-up security shades, he uses shoe polish to make a "we're really open sign" (ingenuity). The store didn't receive its morning delivery of newspapers so he buys them all from the machine next door — and all for only a quarter (margin booster). The sign on the cash register reads, "If you plan to shoplift please let us know" (proactive shrink reduction). And in the end, when Dante and his friend get in an argument and destroy the store, he stays late to clean it up (personal responsibility).

RATING: 