Hollywood and the State of the Art & Industry Today

Selected Writings by Jake Horsley © 2005

Movies, Big Macs, and the Rule of the Mediocracy

Talking of creative integrity in Hollywood is akin to preaching chastity in a whorehouse. At best, it is bad manners, at worst, suicide. Either way, you are going to upset the punters. The whores, on the other hand (for which read "filmmakers"), might well be open to conversion; but if so, then the whorehouse is clearly not the place to do it. (There are pimps as well as punters to worry about)

First let us define what we mean by "Hollywood."

Any collective of individuals (business or group enterprise) must by definition develop (and serve) an interest of it own. It must, therefore, develop an agenda outside of (eventually overruling) that of the individuals who have formed the group. This is the will (if not intelligence) of the collective. To clarify this point, consider government institutions, religions, even a simple sports club or protest group.

When enough individuals are directed towards a single goal, they cease to function as individuals, and begin to operate as components within the structure and agenda which they have created. Thus, it may be seen how the medical community, for example, "conspires" to keep people sick and therefore dependent on it, even though the number of corrupt physicians deliberately poisoning their patients must (we trust) be relatively few. (Instead, they poison us with paranoia about disease and a slavish dependence on medicine, both of which increase our susceptibility to illness.) Ditto government, which conspires collectively (and in this case individually too) to keep the world in a state of chaos, and thus in need of governing.

There is no special need to posit malevolence in such an agenda (although we can if we like), since it is really the most basic (and base) of all interests that is being served: that of self-preservation. When individuals group together to solve (or at least address) some problem, the purpose of that group thereby becomes dependent on the existence of the very problem it seeks to solve. And so, as it develops autonomy and becomes a groupagenda—and hence develops the will to self-preservation—it begins (quite naturally) to serve a function directly counter to its original aim, namely: the maintenance (and even aggravation) of "the problem." The "solution" (abstract to begin with) gets lost in the shuffle, and is eventually forgotten altogether. Which brings us to Hollywood.

The purpose of Hollywood is (I trust none will argue) to make movies. This goes without saying, just as the purpose of bees is to make honey, McDonald's to make Big Macs, and politicians to wage war. The other purpose of Hollywood, or rather the purpose which is

perhaps less self-evident (though still elementary), is to entertain the public and make money by doing so (though not necessarily in this order).

It might be said that the primary purpose of Hollywood (namely, those individuals who run the studios and make the deals, and, further down the food chain, the ones who make the movies) is to entertain the public, and that movies (once invented) seemed like a good way to do it. This would be credible enough in a Utopian society populated by individuals geared towards making people happy. Since we do not live in such a society (at least, the author doesn't), let us assume that, in actual fact, the primary purpose of Hollywood is, and has always been, to make money.

Entertaining the public with movies was decided upon as a viable way to achieve this. Yet Hollywood is not a factory. Its "products" cannot be mass-produced by machines to be identical, and sold over and over again for as long as people consume them, eat them, wipe their butts with them, or go jogging in them. No. Here is the difference. The purpose of Hollywood is three-pronged, then: to make money by making movies that entertain people (and make them "happy"). Since this three-pronged purpose cannot really be broken down like this, there might eventually occur to the self-sustaining system of Hollywood the following puzzling dilemma: if people need (or at least will pay money for) movies that make them happy, then happy people do not need (or at least won't pay for) movies. In fact, the less happy people are (the more bored and frustrated with their lives), the more they will pay to escape their misery, and flee into the temporary relief of movies.

Just as medicine that makes us sicker keeps the medical industry thriving, movies that insult our intelligence and frustrate our hopes, that leave us despondent and fed up, are, perhaps, better for the movie industry as a whole than movies that make people "happy." After all, there is no (acceptable) alternative to modern medicine or (Hollywood) movies. So people will keep going back for more anyway, in the hope of finding that elusive cure. It is not likely to ever occur to these people that their needs are being deliberately denied in order to be all the better exploited. That is a possibility too ghastly to consider. It verges on paranoia.

Of course Hollywood is not nor was it ever about making art. This is something that hardly needs to be said at all, and it is perhaps merely a show of the author's naiveté and guilelessness to do so. But that Hollywood is not even about making decent entertainment, that it is in fact, and with all the evidence before us, about making worthless dreck and so selling popcorn and securing product placement advertising (which make more money than human admissions ever could), this may, I imagine, give us reason to pause and consider. Because if Hollywood movies no longer even entertain us, then (we may ask) what the hell are they good for?

Pauline Kael once said, "If art isn't entertainment, what is it? Punishment?" If we look at Lars von Trier's *Dogville*, for example, we get art as punishment, but by the end, we have been entertained, too. We are lighter, stronger, for the experience (unlike after most Hollywood movies, which pummel us into submission and drain the life out of us while "entertaining" us). But, like his Dogme exercise, we trust that von Trier only has to do this once to get it out of his system. Movies *can* be entertaining. They can be escapist fantasies and at the same time cathartic, enlightening experiences. They can be art, without the capital 'A' that accuses us of complacency and lack of depth.

To give four movies of recent years as examples: Natural Born Killers, Fight Club, The Matrix, and Phone Booth are all, in their ways, as subversive as Dogville, or any other "indie" film. Yet these movies are almost shamelessly entertaining. The function of these movies is primarily to entertain us, in fact, yet they do so not in spite of their subversive style and content, but through it. There is something that separates these movies from Dogville, however: they are products of the very same system which they are subverting. They are made by men and women (and groups of men and women) who—despite their creative sympathy for the apocalyptic—appear quite comfortable living within and benefiting from the system whose destruction so inspires them. Von Trier (I presume) also shops at supermarkets and uses gasoline, and the difference I am suggesting is one of temperament, of degree, and not absolute. What I am suggesting is that the people behind these movies—Oliver Stone, David Fincher, Brad Pitt, the Wachowskis, Keanu Reeves, Joel Schumacher, et al., men also responsible for movies like Alexander, Panic Room, Troy, Matrix Reloaded, and Batman Forever—are artists only when (and so far as) they are inspired by their material to be so, and only when obliged to be. The rest of the time, they seem to mix comfortably enough (if they will forgive me the phrase) with the other whores and pimps of Hollywood.

The movies I cite have a special dynamic, an intensity that comes from internal conflict that more "pure" indie films rarely if ever exhibit. They are richly imbued with the doubt, despair, and self-loathing that characterizes the momentarily repentant. Like whores who briefly become evangelists in order to escape the corrupting demands of their chosen lifestyle, they exhibit the joy and fervor of the recently converted. They suggest the conviction and intensity of doubt, of the dilettante-rebel who compensates for his lack of experience or commitment with excess enthusiasm.

It's doubtful, for example, that David Fincher would have taken such glee in trashing consumer culture and Western values as he did with *Fight Club* if he didn't also feel enslaved by them. Or that he could have adopted so anarchic a sensibility so whole-heartedly were it not for the awareness that, at the end of the day, he would be returning to the comforts of a bourgeois lifestyle. These movies (most nakedly and purely with *Phone Booth*, which even has a Dogme feel to it) are the impassioned fantasies of frustrated egos longing to unplug. Made by rich, decadent, probably unprincipled (since Hollywood actively discourages principles) movie fat cats, they are expressions of defiance, of the will and the right to have our cake and eat it—to get fat and complacent off the system while making movies that denounce it as corrupt. They are also (not despite but *because of* this) almost perfect works of art/entertainment.

They do not justify Hollywood, however. The exception proves the rule. They signify the completion of Hollywood's purpose, the end of its rule. For when the system delivers messages that betray its own corruption, then, clearly, the end of that system is at hand.

There is a saying in the (US) legal world—much used, little publicized (for obvious reasons)—that is as follows: "Any prosecutor can convict a guilty man; it takes a great prosecutor to convict an innocent man." Such "game rules" have now replaced more traditional "moral" principles in modern institutions such as Law, Politics, and Hollywood, and the same basic principle might afford us a better understanding of the evidence, when it comes to the world of mass media. For the thrill of the challenge, and a perverse

satisfaction at the rank stupidity of the public, publishers may (for all we know) take special pride in turning the most inexorable books into best sellers. (This is a rationale/motivation that can only come about when love of money has supplanted love of literature, naturally; the same applies in the legal world.) In Hollywood in recent years, the game appears to have reached its apotheosis with works such as *Phantom Menace*, *Godchild*, and the *Matrix* sequels, or indeed any number of summer blockbusters that—no matter how bad—are guaranteed to recoup their costs and garner a tidy (if not substantial) profit for the studios, for all concerned in fact. Everyone, that is, *except* the public.

In Robert Altman's *The Player*, the Faustian producer-executive played by Tim Robbins makes a quip to the effect of: "Now if we can only do away with the writer, we'd really be cooking." Hollywood has yet to succeed in this goal, but it has come close. Nowadays big Hollywood movies are worked on (not only before but even during shooting) by so many different writers-for-hire that the end result is that the movies seem to have been written by no one, or not to have been written at all. The situation is thus: a seemingly inexhaustible stream of worthless movies that make money for studios to make more worthless movies with, and so keep the public hungry for ever-more worthless movies. The medicine that forever promises but never delivers the cure. It is a blueprint for everlasting dominance over the masses, Hollywood supreme, worlds without end. Save for one single factor—Time.

Time means change; time means impatience with and intolerance for no-change. One way or another, change must come to pass. When a system refuses to change, when it establishes itself—finds "stability" from—a refusal to change, then the need for change builds and builds, until a point where it can only come about apocalyptically, i.e., suddenly and catastrophically. A long period of apparent no-change, then, is the ideal lead-in to a short period of transformation.

A system that is corrupt is by definition already dead. Corruption comes not before but *after* death has occurred.

This simple logic can—and must—be applied to the world today: the legal world, the political world, the world of media and entertainment, and the world of Hollywood. Concepts such as Art, Science, Religion, since they are eternal and abstract, cannot be corrupt, nor can they be corrupted. They stand outside any institution or discipline that claims to represent them. The institutions themselves however—those lifeless structures, ideologies, theories or styles—are like shells, crusts that form around the abstract, in order to make us conscious of it. As such, they are by their very nature corrupt; the only question is how corrupt they are. This usually relates to how long they have been around.

Like bodies, the moment such institutions or ideologies are created, they begin to rot. When systems designed to host and transmit abstract principles instead serve to imprison and distort them, it is safe to say that the corruption has reached a critical stage; that it has in fact nullified the original function of the system. It has high-jacked its meanings (those of Art, Science, Religion) to its own ends, ends which are the precise inverse of those it was created to serve. This is only natural, since in order to further itself, the corruption—the system—must overrule and oppose the will of its creator.

This is the point of total revolt, when the cells become the disease and the body becomes death. There is nothing left but for the shell to collapse, to fall away under the pressure of the original principles (those principles which the system—while still a host to them—has strived in vain to repress). This is the inevitable revenge of Art, over any and all institutions that claim (but finally fail) to represent it. Like Hollywood.

Hollywood, Indiewood, and the War Between Art and Commerce

If one looks but closely at the many case histories, a trend may be observable in the trajectory of most independent filmmakers and their prevailing relationship with Hollywood. With very few exceptions (Cassavetes for one, but also John Sayles, John Waters, and Jim Jarmusch), filmmakers who come to notice through their own efforts who, like Kubrick, Coppola, and Scorsese, rely on their wiles and resources to make their first movies—generally wind up making films for the studios in the end. Usually they jump aboard the Hollywood band wagon as soon as a suitably attractive offer comes along, one that is both lucrative and sufficiently non-restrictive. What is notable about filmmakers of this period (the late '60s and early '70s) is that they often did their very best work for the studios. During the transitional period, while they still held on to their anarchic, independent sensibilities and accepted the financial benefits and production perks of the Industry, many filmmakers seemed to enjoy the best of both worlds. Both Coppola and Scorsese, for example (and also Kubrick), actually made their "sell-out" movies before they hit the mainstream, as a means of getting the necessary experience and commercial qualifications. A very different order to that which prevails today, when independent filmmakers squander their gifts before they really understand them, and go from promising debuts to tawdry and faceless Hollywood products in no time at all.

Whatever the individual cases, the fact remains that the dividing line between "independent" and "mainstream" is both blurred and constantly fluctuating. It is not like the border between states but more like a twilight zone separating day from night, so-called "independent artist" from "sell-out." As Alexander Payne put it, "I don't think independent implies necessarily the source of the funding, but rather the authorial and personal spirit in which the film is made." There are plenty of "independent" filmmakers whose work is every bit as soulless, derivative, and crassly commercial as the worst Hollywood drek, who clearly made their "independent" movies solely as a means to hock their wares within the Industry and go for the big payola. Likewise, successful and world famous moviemakers continue to work "for" Hollywood—within the Industry and with studio backing, making \$50 or \$100 million movies—while retaining their creative integrity, subversive vision, and stubborn individuality. Perhaps it even nourishes their rebellious spirit and keeps it alive, to work within an environment so manifestly antithetical to them? (Terry Gilliam comes most readily to mind.)

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¹ DGA Magazine, Vol. 27-4, Nov. 2002.

The "war" between art and commerce, already a lazy division to begin with, becomes even more facile when extended to an imaginary "war" between "independent" cinema and Hollywood. Of course there is a war, and that no one can deny. As we have attempted to demonstrate (with our case histories of Welles, Coppola, Peckinpah, et al.), it is a real war with real casualties, complete with assault strategies, intelligence operations, and weapons of destruction (albeit psychological and financial rather than physical destruction). Yet there are no precisely definable sides in this war, unless they be the sides of the collective (represented by Hollywood) and that of the individual, represented by the "auteur" filmmaker. This is also a shifting line of demarcation, however. A collective is made up of individuals, and Hollywood is made up (partially) of auteur filmmakers; in which case, it is an interior battle that is raging. It is the system (Hollywood) against itself, on the one hand (Hollywood's schizoid desire for commercial hits and popular appeal, opposed by its need for artistic credibility and prestige); and on the other hand, it is a conflict within the artists themselves, an inconsistency of the fluctuating goals of "art" and "trash" (commerce). Naturally, Hollywood (and the public) reflects and complements this split within the filmmakers and vice versa: Hollywood's ambivalence—and the public's fickle and unpredictable taste—is an unconscious response to (and a reminder of) the lack of the filmmaker's commitment to his vision.

The mass will always be just a mass (a temporary and arbitrary arrangement of units), and the system will never amount to more than a system (ditto). Likewise, artists are only human beings. However much the system may demonize them and the public deify them, they are subject to inherent whims and weaknesses—doubts, fears, the desire to be admired—every bit as much as they are to the external pressure of circumstances (sickness, adversity, failing marriages, financial ruin, etc, etc). To expect (or even desire) an unbroken chain of masterworks from any filmmaker, as continuing "proof" of his integrity of vision and the independence of his goals, would be unrealistic. A filmmaker is going to have ups and downs just as much (or more so) as an ordinary person does, from day to day. The trouble is that with a filmmaker, an "off-day" may last the duration of a picture, and sometimes more; unlike a painter or novelist, moviemakers can't set fire to their inferior works or stick them in a drawer and work on them later. Even when they *know* they have messed up—either in their original intent or in its realization, or both—they have no choice but to stand behind the work and send it into the world with a smile.

In this regard, the "system" always "wins," because, at the end of the day, no matter what has gone into it, the artist's work winds up as just another product. The means by which it enters into the world (public consciousness) is (save in rare, obsessive cases like Kubrick) out of its creator's hands. An artist—and this includes painters and novelists—has no choice but at some level to "sell out" in order to reach his audience. Audiences are only interested in buying what is for sale, and this includes an artist's "vision"; it is only a question of degree. The "pure" artist who creates "only for himself" would destroy his works, or keep them hidden, or at best allow them to be seen without charge and without taking credit for them. Only so could he be sure that his motives were pure, unleavened by personal desire for profit or gain—including the gain of being admired. And in the life of the artist, the desire for admiration is the most insidious and prevalent motivating force there is, and the system plays on this weakness for all it's worth. What else is celebrity but the

poisoned prize by which artists' psyches are seized by the same system they once lived to defy?

When it comes to film, a generation passes considerably faster than it does with ordinary human beings. Rather than taking twenty years for a new cycle to come about, one "wave" of filmmakers can generate another wave—bearing similar characteristics to the first—within ten to twelve years, sometimes less. Not only this but, as with human procreation, the process seems to be accelerating rapidly. Where once a generation took twenty-five years, teenage mothers have made it more like sixteen; similarly, where once Coppola and Scorsese's "offspring" took some fifteen years to emerge (and where Welles' had taken twice that), Tarantino had already fathered a new wave of imitators within four or five years of *Pulp Fiction*.

It's ironic that, among so-called "indie" filmmakers, the passing on of traits through celluloid DNA—imitation as the sincerest form of flattery—is even more in evidence than it is in mainstream movies. Studios are monolithic entities, and as such they have little time for questions of aesthetics or artistic innovations, much less revolutions. The only kinds of "trend" these entities observe is one that relates to audience tastes. This is why studio movies have remained basically the same, stylistically, since the inception of sound and color. Studios (and their movies) imitate each other, and were it not for the subtle but insidious influence of individual artists working within the system, the medium would barely have evolved at all since Gone with the Wind. It's only when the studio aesthetic merges (and fuses) with a unique creative vision and a work of art becomes a phenomenon unto itself —as in film noir, The Godfather, or recently The Matrix—that "trends" change at any profound level in Hollywood. The rest of the time, it's more like the slow, steady chipping away of a mountain, happening so gradually that the mountain (monolithic Hollywood) regenerates itself before its basic structure can be altered. However radical, subversive or innovative an artist may be, he is almost invariably assimilated by the system he is subverting. The system, like a parasite that constantly adapts itself to its environment in order not to be expelled from it, alters its form repeatedly, according to the new influence.

In the above metaphor, Hollywood is the virus in the "body" of "art." We might better reverse the metaphor, bring it down to a more local scale, and instead posit Hollywood as the body or organism, and individual artists as the viruses that attempt to infiltrate and transform it (by forcing it to mutate). The host, Hollywood, adapts and mutates so rapidly, however, that it is immune to any single virus (artist, or new aesthetic); as a result, the virus is assimilated into the organism, and the filmmaker is swallowed up by Hollywood. This can happen only as a result of the system altering itself in response to the virus, however; so even though the artist has been absorbed into the commercial agenda, he has also

² As independent producer John Pierson put it, "my theory is we're living in a world of ten-year cycles." *Spike, Mike, Slackers and Dykes*, pg. 5.

³ Organisms procreate, generate, and evolve, creating new organisms towards some unknown end, presumably that of perfection. Viruses, on the other hand, replicate themselves endlessly with ever-increasing speed towards a single basic end: that of turning everything into *themselves*. Yet viruses are organisms too, and so far as it requires a host of some sort to live off (an environment to sustain it), every organism is also a kind of virus. So whether virus or organism, and whether the end be of evolution or decay, finally depends on point of view.

triumphed over it, because that agenda has been obliged to mutate in order to assimilate the artist and his vision. The artist then becomes a "sacrifice" to the greater cause, as it were, the higher entity of "Art." What is normally sacrificed is the artist's uniqueness, artistry, and vision. Having forced the system to accommodate that vision, he can no longer define himself or his vision as in any way different or new to the system.

This is why "imitation" (and flattery) is the rule in Hollywood, the surest way to strip any new influence of its originality and therefore its power. This is also why, as a general rule (exceptions duly noted), the more radical or subversive an artist is in the beginning, the more he will eventually be assimilated by the medium he once subverted. This is a necessary self-preservation on the part of Hollywood. The medium—Hollywood movies has no choice but to recognize the influence of a new visionary element in its midst, and the safest means of defusing this potentially disruptive influence is to acknowledge it and, if possible, recruit it, and adopt it as its own. Since such visionary sensibilities depend on their outsider status to thrive (and to define themselves by), when they are accepted and adopted by Hollywood, they are quickly drained of the very qualities that inspired them to make movies in the first place. Hollywood gets its "auteur," and the auteur "gets" Hollywood—wealth, fame, and the apparent freedom to make movies, albeit strictly in the house style. Everybody appears to be winning in this deal; but in fact, everybody loses, and none more so than audiences. Generations—or imitations—are occurring with ever-greater speed and frequency in Hollywood, because there is less and less substance (original ideas) for the viruses to feed off, and they end up devouring themselves. And while generations evolve and improve over time, copies only degenerate. If a virus imitates its host in order to infiltrate it, then, by the same token, the host has also "taken over" the virus. It's only a question of which comes out on top. Despite the gloomy evidence of countless individual cases (Scorsese, Lynch, Spielberg, et al.)—and despite the even more discouraging evidence of current Hollywood products—there can be no doubt that the medium is evolving, albeit in strange, non-linear directions.

On Film Sense

There is a mysterious factor when it comes to making movies, a quality that can't really be measured or defined, nor apparently can it be learned (though it *can* be lost). It is a quality that is as essential to the film director as his own eyes, and like vision, either he has it or he doesn't. Pauline Kael called it "film sense." A filmmaker can be bereft of all other

⁴ Peckinpah had it in spades, to the point that even when his technique, his basic abilities, his sobriety and even his sanity had deserted him, his movies were still possessed of moments of brilliance. Lynch has it and it shows in his very first films, even the shorts. De Palma likewise, and Spielberg (who may not have much else besides), Altman, Scorsese, and Coppola for the first part of his career, after which (somewhere during the making of *Apocalypse Now*) it seemed to abandon him, never to return. In a rare exception, Woody Allen seemed to pick it up as he went along.

skills—of any adeptitude for writing, plotting, honing performance—and still get away with making movies, just so long as he retain his mysterious film sense (witness Stanley Kubrick). On the other hand, if a director is lacking it—as in the case of Paul Schrader—it matters little how accomplished his cast may be, how brilliant the screenplay, or how lavish the production values, his film will sink like a stone in the minds of audiences and leave no traces.⁵

Audiences don't necessarily need to be seduced or tricked into entering the illusion of movies, but they definitely need to be wooed (and lulled) into it. Above all, what audiences need—and what the mysterious film sense enables a director to give them—is a feeling of complete confidence and trust that the movie they are seeing (and the people who made it) will take them on a journey and get them safely to their destination. Without this trust, audiences cannot suspend their disbelief or ignore the artifice of the medium; they cannot succumb to the experience of watching and partaking in the movie. This is probably why Hitchcock is so revered to this day, because—more than any other filmmaker who ever lived—he gave audiences what they wanted and needed: a sense of complete and total confidence in his ability to deliver. Hitchcock finally lost the gift of spell-casting; his film sense deserted him and audiences were lumped with Torn Curtain and Topaz, so consequently he lost his audience. This was presumably due to old age as much as anything, but what are we to make of filmmakers who are blessed with this (apparently unearned) gift of a prodigious film sense, only for it to desert them completely and leave them floundering in a sea of lackluster images and lifeless performances? The history of Hollywood is rife with just such cases. In fact, they are more the rule than the exception. And the reasons, though many and varied, all come down to the same thing: creative burnout.

The Question of Independence and the Sundance Film Festival

"One line making the rounds in Hollywood . . . was that Andy Warhol had just upgraded his comforting prediction that everyone would be a celebrity for fifteen minutes to everyone in America would run a major movie studio for fifteen minutes."

—Jack Mathews, The Battle of Brazil⁶

⁵ Witness also the works of Harold Becker, Bruce Beresford, Jonathan Kaplan, or Michael Apted, accomplished directors with no distinguishing features whose styles all seem interchangeable in their facelessness. No amount of technical ability can cover up a lack of basic vision.

⁶ In the same book, Mathews describes how, "In recent years, with the conglomerization of Hollywood and its accompanying obsession with short-term profits and dividends, the faces of studio chief executives change about as often as those of game-show contestants. It is routine for the incoming administration to review the films committed by the outgoing one and, where possible, to toss off the unwanted projects" (pg. 23). In *Final Cut*, Steven Bach writes, "In one two-week period in the summer of 1984 the top managements of three major motion-picture companies changed personnel completely. Within three years of the *Heaven's Gate* debacle, with only one exception [Arthur Krim's Orion], the management of every major company in the

What exactly is independent cinema? Let's say, for the sake of argument, that an "American independent movie" is a film that has been financed privately, if not by the filmmakers themselves (or his friends or family) then by private individuals (or even companies) not affiliated with any of the (major or minor) film studios. Already we have a slightly fuzzy definition; the only really independent movie would be one made by a wealthy individual who could afford to finance his own folly; one made with digital video for a pittance (a home movie, basically); or—as in rare cases such as El Mariachi—a movie shot so cheaply that the director was able to finance it solo by (for example) renting out his body for medical experimentation. Such cases, though perhaps on the rise, remain rare, and even these films aren't really independent by the time anyone's seen them. They've had to find a distributor, and have been picked up by a studio that splashes out on advertising to make sure that people like you and me hear of the film and get to see it. In the widest definition of the term, an independent film is simply one not funded or in any way influenced by any of the major studios. Tough call, indeed. The chances these days of a true independent film (like Eraserhead or The Texas Chainsaw Massacre) making it to your local multiplex are roughly on a par with those of someone becoming president (or even being in the running) without corporate backing. In a word, zero.⁷

On the other hand, a more general definition of an independent film is one not initiated by a studio but by a filmmaker (not necessarily a director) who *then* gets backing from various different sources—often as not Hollywood studios—who then each own a piece of the movie, even though none of them can lay claim to having actually funded it. This might be a more useful definition of independence—a film that has come about independently rather than as a studio endeavor—were it not for the fact that some of the greatest and most *personal* films ever made—such as *The Godfather* and *The Godfather Part Two*—were in fact *studio* projects.

By the common definition, *Pulp Fiction* and even *The English Patient* and *Shakespeare in Love* (or more recently, *The Passion of the Christ*) are considered "independent movies" in so far as they are financed and distributed by Miramax (or New Market, in the case of *Christ*), which is, or at least used to be, an "independent" studio. But even before it was bought up by Disney, Miramax was already becoming one of the major players in the Industry, so by what criteria is a company independent or not? How small does it have to be to be considered outside Hollywood? Strictly speaking, an independent company is one not owned by a larger corporation, just as an independent filmmaker is one not hired by a studio. But in the current climate and buying frenzy of the 21st century, everything is owned by *something*, or soon will

motion-picture industry had changed. Not one production head in Hollywood today is where he was three and a half years earlier. Such instability preclude continuity and development not only in the industry but in 'the art form of the 20th century' itself, and one might fairly ask how discipline and responsibility can be expected from artists who know that the only continuities in the business are those of their own work and those derived from conglomerates who, for the most part, own Hollywood and are not, as we have seen, afraid to walk away" (pg. 417).

An exception such as *The Blair Witch Project* is duly noted, but *Witch* was perhaps a deceptive phenomenon, since it was a phenomenon precisely *because* it "came out of nowhere" rather than despite it. The rumors that it was a "true" document largely accounted for the public's morbid fascination with the film, and its success was the result of a massive hype campaign (initially independent and Internet-driven, but that Hollywood soon got behind), rather than of any outstanding qualities of the film itself.

be. A small, "independent" company that is bought up by a major one becomes one with it, naturally—regardless of whether or not it keeps its indie label—just as Columbia became one with Coca Cola, then was gobbled up by Sony. Peter Biskind fairly succinctly sums up the current situation in his muckraking *opus magnus* (a loose and tell-all history of Miramax and Sundance), *Down and Dirty Pictures*:

Increasingly it seemed that the small indie companies were being shuffled and reshuffled by the high rollers in the ongoing poker game of international capital for whom they had little intrinsic value and were no more than the jokers in the deck. Universal bought October, sold it to [Barry Diller, head of Paramount], who transformed it into USA Films, which in turn was gobbled up by Vivendi and returned to Universal, where it was merged with Good Machine to become Focus Features. . . . At the beginning of the decade, the indie world was largely reactive; how it looked and felt, its focus and attitudes were determined by what studios did or didn't do. As the decade wore on, the two worlds reached out to each other—the studios starting their indie divisions and the indies responding with their Indiewood films—but it was a dangerous dance, at least for the indies. . . . ⁸

For Spike Lee, "the independent scene used to be all those repertory theatres all across the country. And those are completely wiped out. What is an independent film nowadays? With Miramax owned by Disney and now October being bought by Universal, all the little people are being gobbled up." And of course even as the studios are buying up the independents, major corporations have already swallowed up the studios: Paramount was bought by Gulf & Western, United Artists by Transamerica, Columbia by Sony, Warner Bros. by Time Inc., and so forth. As Robert Altman remarked, "There are really only two companies or three companies. By the time we finish this conversation, there'll be one less,

⁸ Down and Dirty Pictures, pg. 449, 477. As Biskind also points out, "when the studios do acquire or create their own specialty divisions, they're often treated like orphans, starved and neglected." Other "independent" wings of major studios include United Artists Classics (MGM), Sony Classics, Paramount Classics, New Line/Fine Line (Warners), Searchlight (Fox), and Miramax (Disney). Genuine independent companies yet to be conglomerized include IFC Films, Lion's Gate, Newmarket, Strand, and Artisan.

⁹ Roger Corman echoes these sentiments. "Probably the biggest change I've seen has been the evergrowing dominance over theatrical exhibition by the major studios. When I started in the late 1950s, every film I made—no matter how low the budget—got a theatrical release. Today, less than 20% of our films get a theatrical release. The major studios have dominated the theatrical market. It started out about 10 or 15 years ago and has rapidly increased over the last five years to the point where we are dependent primarily on home video, pay TV, and syndicated TV for our income." Roger Corman interview by Andrew J. Rausch *Images*, #9, December 2000.

¹⁰ Edward Epstein describes in *The Big Picture* how the "Big Seven" studios—M.G.M, RKO, Paramount, Columbia, Fox, Universal and Warner Bros.— have now been replaced by the "Big Six": Time Warner, Viacom, Fox, Sony, NBC Universal and Disney, which are what Epstein calls "global entertainment companies . . . that collude and cooperate at different levels to dominate filmed entertainment." Movies actually account for only a tiny percentage of the total revenue of these corporations, but, as Epstein sees it, they are "their principal source of prestige and satisfaction in Hollywood."

probably."¹¹ Eventually there will only be one great corporation, with its own government, and its own movies (propaganda). Or perhaps this has already come to pass?

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"Contrary to the popular belief that being publicized is an asset, in reality it is a handicap, both personally and professionally. Professionally you are plummeted into being a celebrity before you've made your bones as an artist. Personally undressing your life for the world to see is the quickest way to mayhem, unhappiness, and ending up as an 8-x-10 glossy. Conversely, it is mystery that sustains your career and affords you some peace of mind."

-Robert Evans, The Kid Stays in the Picture

"Independent" means a million different things and hence nothing at all. In the end, there's really no way (in life or in movies) to be independent of everything. Still, the fact remains that, in the '80s and '90s, more and more films began appearing as if from nowhere, coming from so far left of field that they were off the field altogether, films which the industry only acknowledged when it had no choice but to do so. Although these films were not necessarily of a higher quality or even integrity than the Hollywood product, they were at least unfamiliar and challenging, even if only because we didn't know what to make them. They were refreshing like home-cooking is refreshing (even when less than perfect) after endless pizza deliveries. When a medium fails to change, it stagnates, and pretty soon it starts to rot; and only dead things rot. By the mid-'80s, most Hollywood movies were rotting up on the screen, making so much noise that no one noticed they were staring at corpses. The films turned the audience into zombies, too. The new, independent films may not have been inherently more artistic than Hollywood movies but at least they were alive. They were coming out of an arena which was open to new ideas, out of everywhere and nowhere, springing up like weeds in a garden, offering the occasional new strain of flower. Obviously, the only thing to do apart from keep on weeding (and to keep an eye out for those flowers), was to maintain an open garden.

Once upon a time, independent movies were dependent on repertory cinemas and art houses to be seen. Making a movie without studio backing was one thing, getting it to audiences another. In the '60s and '70s, before the days of video recorders and cable TV, there existed large numbers of privately owned theaters that showed old movies and had film seasons of specific directors, actors, genres, or "themes." These theaters, which showed whatever films they liked, attracted audiences of film buffs, as opposed to average moviegoers; as well as screening old classics and cult favorites, however, repertory theaters had the option of picking up *new* films that hadn't found a distributor, films made not by any studio but by independent filmmakers. As a result, filmmakers could get their work seen—without needing a studio to fund it or a distributor to buy it—through the benevolent intervention of a repertory theater owner (or two). Word of mouth could then help stir interest in the film, and the director could, if he was lucky, secure a wider distribution deal and thence a significantly larger audience.

¹¹ Lee and Altman quoted in *Premiere* magazine, October 1997.

Independent films, then, depended on the existence of independent theaters to show them, and as these began to disappear—with the arrival of home entertainment and the encroaching monopoly of multiplexes—the possibilities for independent filmmakers rapidly diminished. This left only one recourse for filmmakers to get their films seen: festivals. Initially, film festivals were an opportunity for a given city to showcase new movies and hand out prizes to the people who made them. They attracted audiences made up of critics, filmmakers, and film buffs, with a smattering of regular film goers. If an independent film won a prize or received positive notices from critics, or if it sparked enough enthusiastic word of mouth, its chances of being noticed and picked up by one of the major studios were greatly increased. At the very least, the film and its makers would become known and talked about, and have a much better chance of making it to Hollywood (or at least getting their calls answered). But that was about as far as it went.

Originally, film festivals were primarily for audiences and critics, and only secondarily for filmmakers and the industry at large. All that changed with the arrival of the Sundance Film Festival. Sundance was largely actor (and occasional director) Robert Redford's vision, and its initial success was to a great extent thanks to the golden-haired movie star (who renamed the festival after his character in *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid.*)¹² Redford's intention was to support independent filmmakers and provide an alternate venue for their movies; naturally he also had a desire to make money and gain a reputation as the benefactor of indie film, but his vision seems to have been both genuine and inspired. By all accounts, however, Sundance quickly acquired a momentum of its own, and within a few years had grown into something far beyond the star's expectations or intentions (and beyond his input or control). What it became was a kind of forum for filmmakers to audition for Hollywood, an open auction for studios to snap up the latest hot picture and sign up its director while he or she was still green (and cheap).

As James Schamus (co-president of Focus Features) put it,

The psychology of the American independent has supplanted the auteur psychology. There's no question to me that Sundance, as a culture, has dangerously infantilized auteurism, because the reigning assumption is that by the time you're seventeen or eighteen years old, you're pretty much an auteur if you're going to be an auteur, and if you're not, you're not. If you'd put that on someone like Coppola, I don't think he'd ever have been Coppola. What could that guy have said at the age of twenty? Your first independent film has gotta be *your* film, *your* voice. So now the pressure is really

¹² In fact, Sundance "was around long before Redford seized the reins. Way back in 1978 the Utah Film Commission brought you the awkwardly titled The Utah/United States Film Festival. It was held in Salt Lake City, the heart of Mormon country, as a way to lure tourists. . . . In the early years it centered around retrospective presentations and seminars . . . Robert Redford founded The Sundance Institute in 1981 to actively engage aspiring filmmakers, with the festival becoming a forum for that newly unearthed talent. . . . By 1991 the shebang had been officially renamed The Sundance Film Festival and developed a reputation for championing indie titles to box office success." Stella Papamichael, "A Brief History of Sundance," http://www.bbc.co.uk/films/sundance/history_of_sundance.shtml

on from the time you're out of your diapers to be an artist. It's become a grim kind of joke. 13

Sundance became competitive in a way that film festivals were not supposed to be. Getting your film shown there no longer meant reaching an audience, it meant going on auction; if you were lucky, it meant a bona fide Hollywood deal. The indication of all this was two-fold. One, that the dearth of fresh new movies and bright new filmmakers in Hollywood was great enough to cause studios to leave their usual hunting ground and venture into a field previously considered beneath them—that of film festivals. Two, that the hunger and ambition of young filmmakers to cut a deal and "sell out" to big studios was now not only acceptable, but the norm, and was a given from the outset. All of this quite inevitable corruption of intents notwithstanding, the fact remains that, in the early days especially, Sundance was an enormous boost to the independent scene, and more than any other single factor, it helped build a bridge between independent filmmakers and the general public. To this day it continues to provide a creative environment for filmmakers to learn their craft and develop their ideas in. The Sundance Laboratory, for example, attracts established filmmakers (such as Keith Gordon) to give instruction to fledgling ones still-forming, and it has helped more than a few filmmakers get their movie shaped, completed, and distributed (two recent examples being Lisa Cholodenko's Laurel Canyon and Jordan Roberts' Around the Bend).

However mixed the Sundance blessing has proved to be for individual filmmakers, the specific cases of directors who in part owe their careers to that first big break at the festival is certainly impressive, and includes Michael Moore's Roger & Me, Richard Linklater's Slacker, Todd Haynes' Poison, Tarantino's Reservoir Dogs, Alexandre Rockwell's In the Soup, Robert Rodriguez's El Mariachi, Bryan Singer's Public Access, David O. Russell's Spanking The Monkey, Kevin Smith's Clerks, Larry and Andy Wachowski's Bound, Todd Solondz's Welcome to the Dollhouse, Alexander Payne's Citizen Ruth, Neil LaBute's In the Company of Men, Darren Aronofsky's Pi, Henry Bean's The Believer, Todd Field's In the Bedroom, and Shari Springer Berman and Robert Pulcini's American Splendor.

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By the late '80s and early '90s, studios were betraying a near frenzy to discover new filmmakers and back them, like race horses, in the hope of backing a winner and raking in both dollars and kudos. In consequence, most of the time—since there are always more losers than winners—filmmakers were disappearing almost as rapidly as they surfaced. Studios wanted to back a winner and, in their arrogance, they believed they could make a winner, too, that their belief and their dollars (and the public's susceptibility to advertising) was enough. In most cases, it wasn't. A filmmaker is not a horse, and his success and growth as an artist depend on more than good breeding, a healthy diet and a good jockey to ride him. There are psychological factors, factors which studios are not only oblivious of but outright hostile to; any budding filmmaker who is suddenly hailed as a genius—thrust without warning

¹³ Down and Dirty Pictures, pg. 474. In the same work, Peter Biskind writes: "'Independents' had once been an umbrella term for filmmakers and companies outside the studio system that made all sorts of films, from art to porn. Sundance built a firewall between art films and the rest, appropriated the term 'independents' for itself, and dismissed the others as junk" (pg. 76).

from total anonymity to wealth and fame, Hollywood-style—is likely to have problems adapting. He is still the same person he was a week ago, after all, before being plucked out of the herd and anointed as the new Messiah. Unless he is temperamentally equipped (like Tarantino) to enjoy endless attention, flattery, adoration, and a ceaseless stream of superlatives coming at him 24/7, he will probably lose the thread altogether. In desperation, he will be happy to go along with whatever the studio suggests and give them what they want, just so long as the gods of chance continue to favor him. Either that or, like Steve Soderbergh (when he followed *sex*, *lies*, *and videotape* with *Kafka*), he will react against the temptations and pull in exactly the opposite direction, consciously (or not) shooting himself in the foot to get *out* of the running, back on safe (and sane) ground.

Consumer culture is about products being manufactured in order to be sold and consumed—as many and as rapidly as possible. The only criteria of success in such a culture is numbers: it is quantity, not quality, that counts. If a product is consumed, it is good; if not, it is bad and will be discontinued. In the '80s and '90s, not only movies but filmmakers themselves began to behave as they were treated, like products. The faster they could be "manufactured" (discovered, backed, and put to work), the better; and if most of them turned out to be faulty products, that was no big deal, they could be discontinued with equal speed and indifference, and there were plenty more where they came from. On such a factory line, the individual artist was likely to wind up feeling like meat in a grinder or grain in a mill: if he survived the process at all, it was in a vastly diminished form.

There were rare cases, however, of filmmakers who neither succumbed to the process nor tried futilely to resist it, but instead embraced the grueling experience of corporate movie production as a necessary initiation—albeit into a dark, satanic realm. Instead of being ground to dust, they allowed themselves to be refined into smarter, stronger, more enlightened filmmakers. These rare exceptions only proved the rule, true; but they also proved it could be broken.

Mammon or Muse: The Plight of the Writer in Hollywood

By temperament, writers tend to be introspective, and the nature of writing (and that of books in general) is of looking inward, of philosophical thought and reflection, in a word: the quest for meaning. Filmmakers on the other hand tend to be expansive personalities, and the nature of movies is likewise extroverted, outward-looking, drawn towards action, adventure, melodrama, and superficiality. In a word, the quest for sensation. Audiences for movies (especially American movies) are not generally made up of literary people, or rather, the prevailing mood of audiences (even when made up of critics) is not so much a reflective, intellectual mood as a wide-eyed, "surprise me" mood. It is this slightly infantile, sensation-seeking tendency—a mix of anticipation and wonder—that Hollywood works so hard to keep alive in audiences, and to provoke (if not satisfy) with its endless motion picture products. Since movies are naturally disposed towards impressing and delighting us (where books are more geared towards stimulating thought and reflection), it is natural for the majority of

filmmakers to be likewise inclined, and for the show person to be given at least as much respect, freedom, and encouragement as the artist.¹⁴

When the director-showman takes prominence over the artist-writer, a filmmaker will be that much more in harmony with the prevailing order (hierarchy) in Hollywood, and consequently that much more likely to be a commercial success. Inseparably linked to this is the increased possibility that the filmmaker will lose his way as an artist and fall into the Hollywood Trap—a process commonly known as "selling out." On the other hand, the more the introspective, writer side of a filmmaker dominates, the closer the filmmaker is to his inspiration and creativity, and the less likely he is to be sidetracked by the allure and temptations of "show business"; in consequence, his films (being equally introspective and reflective) are correspondingly less likely to be successful.

It may seem redundant to say that the more a filmmaker compromises his creativity, the more likely he is to be successful in Hollywood. But perhaps both these possibilities are really complementary side-effects of a filmmaker's overall preference for sensation-based material, as opposed to material based on content. Movies that are "mindless" (that can still be great but are never going to be philosophic works) come that much closer to what audiences want from a movie: forgetfulness, visceral involvement devoid of any relation to their own lives. Filmmakers that enjoy "mindlessness" (images, sound, and motion for its own sweet sake) are plainly going to advance in the Hollywood climate; but they are also likely to burn out that much quicker, when it comes to their own inspiration, purpose, and integrity as artists.

Examples of this are legion and we will get to them presently. Examples of filmmakers unable to make "mindless" movies even when they try, those who are compelled to make films primarily as a means to explore personal, philosophical questions, are, of course, extremely few, and rarely if ever are they successful in Hollywood. But such filmmakers tend to remain true to their inspiration and more or less immune to the insidious influences of commercial opportunism. Perhaps this is partially because they have fewer temptations to resist—it's easy not to sell out when no one is offering—but it may also be that such artists owe their allegiance to their Muse, and are more interested in pursuing new ideas—and in the process of creation itself—than the rewards of financial (or critical) success. This in a nutshell is the difference between an artist and someone who, however gifted and inspired they may be as a filmmaker, is essentially and at heart, no more than a simple entertainer. ¹⁵

It may not be a coincidence that the two greatest pioneers of American film—Welles and Coppola—shared a common regard for the writer as the single essential creative force in movies. Neither is it a coincidence that, of all the key contributors to the cinematic process, it is the writer which the Hollywood system as presently maintained values *least*. Since audiences have shown time and time again their preference for shallow spectacles

¹⁴ The potential dichotomy of the two roles—or poles—can be seen at play in the work of writer-directors: what the writer composes, the director often dismisses.

¹⁵ The world's most successful and revered filmmaker, Alfred Hitchcock, was the epitome of the artist-as-showman, and made no bones about it. "I don't care about content at all. The film can be about anything you like, so long as I'm making the audience react in a certain way to whatever I put on the screen. . . . That's what I mean by pure film. The way you put it together to create an emotion. . . . I'm a professional. I don't put my personal feelings into pictures. I don't indulge myself—I don't make pictures to please me. I make them to please audiences." Alfred Hitchcock Interviews, pg. 70, 79, 113

like Independence Day, Titanic, and Spiderman 2 (and even shallow religious spectacles like The Passion of the Christ); and since none of these films possess anything resembling an imaginative story or intelligent dialogue—are in fact shockingly stupid sub-literary creations—it is assumed by the people who run studios that good writing is not only inessential to a film's success, but may even be detrimental to it. Yet it's doubtful if there is a single great film that didn't start out as at least a decent script; and while a mediocre director can make a good film out of a great script, the most talented filmmaker in the world will be at pains to make the proverbial silk purse out of a sow's ear.

Hollywood's policy on writing and writers is self-justifying and to some extent self-fulfilling. The less the writer is valued in Hollywood—the less "perks" (be they the perks of respect, freedom, or a decent paycheck) he is offered—the less writers are going to be attracted to work there, or even inclined to write screenplays at all. They know that however good their work is, chances are it will be destroyed by studio re-writes. Since only mediocre and unoriginal scriptwriters end up in Hollywood, Hollywood can feel justified in thinking that scriptwriters are basically mediocre creatures—not really artists at all—and that any script written by one person can certainly be "improved" by the input of ten more (often not even real writers but studio executives convinced that a screenwriting program is all they need).

Such a policy denies the basic fact that the writer and his script is the primary creative element needed before a movie can even begin to approach final form through the various contributions of producers, director, technicians and actors, all of whom—logic would insist are in service to the script/story/idea that brought them together in the first place. In Hollywood before the script—before even the idea—there is the "concept" (be it ever so high). A director, producer, actor, or even studio executive might hit upon a concept that he or she is confident would a) make a great movie and b) make lots of money for everyone involved. At which point, the actor/producer/director/executive then hires a writer to turn his or her concept into an idea, a treatment-story, and finally a script. The process proceeds in much the same way—one imagines—that an interior designer fills out an apartment according to the precise instructions and taste of the home owner. Such a process reduces the writer to another craftsperson, basically interchangeable with a hundred other writercraftspeople; and like the lighting cameraman, assistant director, or key grip, he is basically a second-class citizen. By this approach, movies are freed from any dangerous proximity to works of art, or from being mistaken for the results of creative inspiration springing from the dangerous minds of individual artists. Instead, they come about via the commercial calculations of studio executives, lawyers, and other business types, who have now earned the right to consider themselves "creative people," too.