

Introduction to the First Edition

Back to the Brats

by Nick James, Editor of *Sight and Sound*

When asked to write an introduction to this, the first volume of the Critical Guides to Contemporary Directors, I began thinking about the world of the North American director today and kept coming back to a rumour I heard recently (circa July 2000). Apparently Harvey Weinstein, the notoriously uncompromising co-head of Miramax, the influential Disney-owned production and distribution company, had flown to the Cinecittà studios in Rome where Martin Scorsese was shooting *The Gangs of New York*, a nineteenth-century crime drama starring Leonardo DiCaprio. Weinstein had gone to stop the budget from ballooning out of control beyond its reported \$90 million. He is said to have walked onto the 1860s New York set barking, “worker, stop working!” at bemused, possibly monolingual, Italian set builders.

Unremarkable, you might think, but what is irresistible about this story is that in one snapshot you have a director from the ‘movie brat’ generation (Scorsese, who made *Mean Streets*, *Taxi Driver*, *Raging Bull*, *GoodFellas* and *Casino*), given a budget way beyond anything he has had before in twenty-five years of film-making (a near-blockbuster \$90 million), working for the most influential movie company of recent years (Miramax), on a film shot far away from Hollywood (Cinecittà), but where English remains the language of money. If we expand a little on each of these elements, one by one, something of the reality of contemporary North American film-making emerges.

Scorsese is, of course, one of the ‘movie brats’, the cinephiles who came out of film school and formed a second wave of maverick film-makers, joining the older film-makers in bringing the independent rock ‘n’ roll spirit of the 1960s and 1970s to a hidebound Hollywood or – if you subscribe to Peter Biskind’s alternative view in his book *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls* – hoping to indulge their monstrous egos with sex and drugs excess. Of the first maverick wave, mostly men born in the 1930s who are now in their late 60s or 70s, only the affable likes of Warren Beatty, Woody Allen and Robert Altman still work regularly, and only Beatty is a force in the industry – unless you count the high-profile acting kudos that comes with being cast by Allen.

Another of them, William Friedkin – married to Paramount chair Sherry Lansing – has attempted comebacks with *Jade* (1995) and *Rules of Engagement* (2000), without ever looking convincingly like the director who made *The Exorcist* (1973). Otherwise, putting aside deceased greats and near greats such as Stanley Kubrick, John Cassavetes, Alan Pakula and Biskind’s hero Hal Ashby, it is a tale of brief glory followed by prematurely arrested careers. Francis Coppola (*The Godfather*, *Apocalypse Now*) mostly executive produces, significantly for his daughter Sofia, whose recent directorial debut *The Virgin Suicides* is a big prestige movie success. Others, such as Peter Bogdanovich, Dennis Hopper or Arthur Penn, are increasingly invisible or retired.

Of the movie brats who came after them in this great experiment and who might be expected still to dominate the industry, Scorsese, Steven Spielberg, Paul Schrader and Brian De Palma have kept working, the latter two only in fits and starts. George Lucas stepped down from directing after completing the Star Wars trilogy and only recently returned with the prequel *Star Wars: Episode 1 - The Phantom Menace*. Terrence Malick did not make a film for twenty years between *Days of Heaven* (1978) and his triumphant comeback *The Thin Red Line* (1998). As Biskind tells it, the careers of most of these mavericks crashed in the 1980s with the coming of corporate Hollywood: the new world of pitch meetings, plot paradigms and executive narcissism so deftly etched in acid by Altman’s comeback movie *The Player* (1992).

It is necessary to sketch some history here because it was in the 1980s that the movie business reconstituted itself out of the ashes of the old studio system. And it was two movie brat directors who were responsible indirectly for conjuring the world of *The Player*. Where many 1970s innovators sought to merge a European sensibility with Hollywood-level success, coming up with such prestige masterpieces as *The Godfather*, *The Last Picture Show* and *Chinatown*, Spielberg and Lucas took a very different approach. With just two movies, *Jaws* (1975) and *Star Wars* (1977), they changed the way the industry works forever. So successful were their attempts to make big versions of 1950s-style B-movies for teenagers that the newly corporatised studios were encouraged to formalise the production and distribution processes to better exploit these kinds of movies,

specifically targeting that teen boy demographic. Event movies, as they would come to be called, soon became the benchmark for studio success. What ensued is well known: the rise of multiplex cinema chains, the re-expansion of the moviegoing audience and a return to the idea of the movie as pure spectacle on a scale not seen since the days of D.W. Griffith and Cecil B. DeMille.

The Event movie was refined and taken to another level of sensation by a new generation of film-makers hired from other countries and other related industries. British director Ridley Scott is typical: his two films *Alien* (1979) and *Blade Runner* (1982) had nearly as much cultural impact as *Jaws* and the *Star Wars* trilogy. Event movies had to be 'high concept', meaning that their essential idea could be put across grippingly in two or three sentences. Requiring larger-than-life, machine-like stars such as Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone, and plenty of special effects, these films were fantastically expensive. The need to put together a package of talent sufficiently impressive to justify gambling huge sums with confidence led to a substantial increase in power for both agents and actors in Hollywood.

Perhaps the key arbiters of the new approach were producers Don Simpson and Jerry Bruckheimer (and one should not forget their mirror image Joel Silver). Simpson (*An Officer and a Gentleman*, *Flashdance*, *Top Gun*, *Beverly Hills Cop*, *Days of Thunder* and *Bad Boys*) in particular was a vulgarian with an instinct for what sells movies to the archetypal teenage boy in Des Moines – more gorgeous scantily clad women, more explosions and more smartass one-liners – and Bruckheimer was the cut control freak, using directors for hire in the old Hollywood manner and kicking them out of the cutting room. Simpson was a crucial influence in shifting script development in Hollywood away from funky auteurism. Using ideas developed by writers steeped in the structure of folk tales, such as Joseph Campbell, Simpson demanded scripts built around an accepted paradigm, a rigid structure of three acts with a chain of action beats arcing upwards towards a big climax and featuring mythical archetypes from typical quest narratives. Campbell's ideas were easily grasped, as were those of screenwriting gurus such as Robert McKee and Syd Field. Smart studio executives soon gained the confidence to do more than question the quality of screenplays. Now they could also dictate their own changes.

One by-product of the movie brat era that survived this bigger-is-better onslaught was a bastardised version of the European concept of the auteur director. It suited the talent-packaging approach of executive Players that there should be an A-list of 'hot' directors – people who could enforce their vision even on a huge, unwieldy blockbuster machine. (Some say that directing such movies involves so many daily logistical decisions that they are often, in effect, 'directed' by the cinematographer – hence the promotion from lighting camera to director of Jan De Bont, who made *Speed* and *Twister*). It is a process that happens almost invisibly for those being assessed. This A- and B-listing meshes well with a similar director-as-star mentality in the music and advertising industries. Another hot corporate concept of the 1980s evidenced by the growth of movie merchandising and encouraged by the burgeoning growth of multi-media conglomerates was 'synergy'. The mutual marketing interests of music and film ensured an increasing supply of new directors who had cut their teeth in the fast-cutting, dutch-tilting, luridly colourful promo video world.

Of the directors who came to prominence through blockbuster Event movies few are US-born. James Cameron (*Terminator 2*, *Titanic*) is Canadian, Paul Verhoeven (*Total Recall*, *Basic Instinct*) and Jan De Bont (*Speed*) Dutch, Ridley and Tony Scott (*Blade Runner*, *Top Gun*) British, Roland Emmerich (*Independence Day*) German, Renny Harlin (*Die Hard 2*) Finnish, and John Woo (*Face/Off*, *Mission: Impossible II*) Hong-Kong Chinese. All of these directors you will find in this volume, although some may feature in companion volumes too; the very fact that the decision cannot be cut and dried points to the increasing globalisation of the movie industry itself. Questions are regularly asked as to whether, if a movie as seemingly North American in subject matter as *The Patriot* (2000), has two Australian lead actors (Mel Gibson and Heath Ledger) and a German director (Roland Emmerich), there is any point in trying to identify anything about it that is specifically national. Or does funding alone denote the national ownership of contemporary films?

The Event movie has taken US cinema across the globe in an unprecedented fashion, both in its Big Loud Action incarnation (*Mission: Impossible II*) and its more recent Natural Disaster sister form (*The Perfect Storm*) but no Event movie has yet made any claims on social realism, on reflecting North American life as it is lived. For that we usually turn elsewhere. If there is an authentic North American cinema today we expect to find it in the much-praised US indie sector. At present there is a strong whiff of misanthropy about non-mainstream movie tastes. Directors such as Todd Solondz (*Welcome to the Dolls House*, *Happiness*) and Neil LaBute (*Your Friends and Neighbours*, *Nurse Betty*) seem to want to vilify ordinary people for their gormless behaviour and

they find a weird echo in the mainstream 'idiot' comedy of directors like the Farrelly brothers (*There's Something About Mary*). In contrast, hot young directors such as Paul Thomas Anderson and Kevin Smith offer a more forgiving view of humanity. And perhaps most heartening is the level of formal experimentation we have seen in Anderson's *Magnolia*, Kimberly Peirce's *Boys Don't Cry*, Harmony Korine's *Julien Donkey-boy*, Spike Jonze's *Being John Malkovich* and Mike Figgis' *Timecode*. It is almost as if the aesthetics of the movie brat era were being reborn.

The 1960s and 1970s was a uniquely cinephile era during which it was felt to be essential for a young person of intelligence to have an in-depth knowledge of cinema. During the boom post-*Easy Rider* years, a complex supportive structure of repertory cinemas and specialist cinemas built up across the USA and Canada, that was happy to play gay films, classic films, subtitled films and even avant-garde films. The early independent film-makers of the 1980s relied on that circuit to reach the public's attention. Film-makers such as John Sayles and Jim Jarmusch plotted very careful financial routes to survival outside of the mainstream, taking care to earn enough with one film to make another, and ensuring where possible that they would retain ownership of the print.

The typical mode of the 1980s US indie film might be loosely characterised as disjointed, instinctual or magic realist narrative structures married to a cool, downbeat visual style. It was (and is still) a rich field. While Jarmusch (*Stranger Than Paradise*, *Mystery Train*) explored the farce of miscommunication in a milieu of leftover landscapes and hip sainthood, Sayles (*Eight Men Out*, *City of Hope*) made serious issue-based dramas. David Lynch (*Blue Velvet*, *Wild at Heart*) became the prince of surreal weirdness, the Coen brothers (*Blood Simple*, *Miller's Crossing*) were cinephile black comedians, Hal Hartley (*The Unbelievable Truth*, *Trust*) got student angst around lust and literature down pat and Spike Lee (*She's Gotta Have It*, *Do the Right Thing*) used every aesthetic strategy he could to bring an African-American perspective to bear on race issues. These are somewhat sketchy summaries of the often subtle and complex approaches of these indie directors, but they give a flavour of the 1980s scene, an alternative that built its own institutions, only to see them absorbed by the greater industry.

Take the Sundance Film Festival. Ever since Steven Soderbergh won the Cannes Palme d'Or in 1989 with his low-budget indie film *sex, lies and videotape*, a Sundance audience hit which went on to make a lot of money, the festival has changed its character from a place where independent cinema is celebrated for its own sake to a kind of auction block for Hollywood. So many directors have now been plucked from obscurity into mainstream action after just one success there that the films submitted to Sundance are nearly all of a 'calling card' nature. And just as Hollywood has taken a step streetside to talent hunt, so has the independent sector transformed itself into a marketing- and multiplex-friendly operation.

Two names best epitomise this process: Quentin Tarantino and Miramax. Tarantino's success with the complex jewelry-store heist movie *Reservoir Dogs* was a transitional moment in independent film. Most of the directors already mentioned under the indie rubric were middle aged and well established and a new generation of filmgoers were impatient to discard the auteur icons of their parents and older siblings. With its glee for violence, its chopped-up structure borrowed from Kubrick and its brilliant pop-culture referencing, *Reservoir Dogs* somehow made Tarantino into an instant household name. Tarantino's success was cemented by his second film *Pulp Fiction* and by two others made from his scripts, Tony Scott's *True Romance* and Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers*. These quartet of films seemed to redefine the possibilities of independent cinema in a way that also suited the plans of Bob and Harvey Weinstein at Miramax.

The Weinstein brothers learnt much of their trade initially from Steve Woolley and Nik Powell of the British company Palace Pictures. Woolley and Powell had gone a long way by buying and distributing undervalued video titles such as *Diva* and *The Evil Dead* from a range of genres. What the Weinsteins did was to hone the process of marketing niche films while upping their production values so that they could play in the multiplexes. This meant that films that once would have only played independent circuits, such as costume dramas and noir thrillers, could now viably play in multi-screen cinemas. (The Miramax approach also tended to be one in which films would be recut to the Weinstein's own conception.) This has tended to create a greater marketing divide between such typical 'Miramax movies' as, say *Pulp Fiction* or *The English Patient*, and low-budget independents. It has also put Miramax-sponsored directors like Tarantino up into the same mid-budget bracket as Michael Mann, Oliver Stone and Kathryn Bigelow – auteurs whose epic scale always forced them to work with the mainstream. It is little wonder then that US independent directors who want to retain control now look for funding outside of the USA.

These then are the parameters of contemporary North America cinema. There are now really only two layers of commercially plausible releases in the USA and (to a perhaps lesser extent)

Canada, and they are stratified pretty much by their budget. Or, to put it more simply, nearly everything that is not a blockbuster, a teen comedy, a kid's animation or a women's picture is a Miramax-type movie. And the modern North American film-maker doesn't even have to plow one furrow or the other. It would have seemed impossible a few years ago for an up-and-coming duo like the Wachowski brothers to make the sharp, dark and sexy B-movie style thriller *Bound* one year, and the big-budget special-effects movie *The Matrix* the next. You could not imagine John Dahl (*The Last Seduction*), for instance, making that leap. But then who would have thought that Gus Van Sant would be capable of such a quintessential 'Miramax movie' as *Good Will Hunting*?

The hot young directors of the future, though, will not be able to rely even on these verities. Today, you can still take your first movie to Sundance and be sure that someone at the studios will have caught it and, if enough people are excited, offers beyond your wildest calculation may beckon. But what about tomorrow? Never has William Goldman's industry maxim "nobody knows anything" been truer. The movies, more than any other culture industry, now labour under the Chinese curse of interesting times. US and Canadian cinema is one of the most creatively fertile cinemas in the world but there is no clear picture yet of how a digital future in which moving image piracy may be rampant, and in which the internet provides the calling card shop window for all future directors, will work. What is significant is that although there are hundreds of directors working in North America today, they stem from, and work within, a still limited number of modes and models. It is thus a timely opportunity to consider the shifting parameters of the contemporary North American film industry, and illuminate the variety of currently-working film-makers, as brought together in this eclectic collection of auteurs, movie brats, studio hacks and independent artists. It may very well be that, as cheaper movie-making technology enables more people to be included in directories such as this, the cinema will become richer and stranger. I hope so, but I also believe that something like the collective movie experience as we know it will remain.

When I think of the determined struggle that the supreme cinephile director Martin Scorsese has put up to keep on working with the full resources of Orson Welles' "best train set a boy could ever have" at the highest level of quality, I have nothing but admiration. I hope *The Gangs of New York* matches *Taxi Driver*, *Raging Bull* and *GoodFellas* as an unimpeachable chunk of North American cinema at its best. There is something well rounded in the possibility of an original movie brat perhaps reaching the summit of artistic and commercial success at the very moment when a new generation of directors is beginning to make formal experiments in narrative, structure and shots not unlike those made by Scorsese's peers back in the 1970s. The past year has brought us *American Beauty*, *Boys Don't Cry*, *Being John Malkovich*, *Magnolia*, *The Insider*, *The Wonder Boys* and *Nurse Betty*, all of whose directors need not be ashamed in that company.