

Workshop & Reviews- Unpublished Pieces

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The Workshop: Essays

The Unreliable Narrator

The Workshop #01

Aug 3, 2021

I've been hesitant to start a venture like this because I find a lot of discussion and advice on writing to be false. Which is to say that it doesn't chime with my experience. Now, of course people are wildly different and so their approaches to creativity will have a lot of variances. If you look at great writers' daily routines, they are all highly idiosyncratic, but they are all highly idiosyncratic *in different ways*.

Yet the advice that surrounds the activity seems to be fairly uniform and to fall into lockstep. Perhaps people favour what *sounds* right rather than what is actual true of the advice-givers lived experience, however counter-intuitive and against the orthodoxy it may be.

But there is a still bigger and still more uncomfortable truth. No writer who gives advice about the craft truly knows what they are talking about. Not really. We are all apprentices in a craft where no one ever becomes a master, as Hemingway once put it. And he was right. I suspect everyone, from the novice hobbyist to the Nobel Laureate, navigates each writing session via a mixture of intuition, superstition, luck, boldness, and simple bloody-minded perseverance.

Like any craft, writing is largely a question of heuristics and *feel*, with nearly all theoretical frameworks ultimately being a form of rationalisation and post-hoc intellectualisation.

In many cases people *know*, but they don't know in a way they can explain without in the process missing the essence.

Which is fine, but the problem becomes when those who dole out writing advice (and I have now, perhaps unwisely, entered that fray) adopt an air of certainty, of giving the impression that what they say is incontrovertible fact, the one true way.

It's not. And it cannot be.

So given that, you should take everything that I say in these 'workshop' letters with a grain of salt. Try it out for yourself. These are ideas to play with, things to try out, not holy commandments.

Be like Bruce Lee: Absorb what is useful, discard what is useless and add what is specifically your own.

Now with that (unreliable?) opening monologue out of the way let's talk about the phenomenon of the Unreliable Narrator.

Are Narrators Reliable?

Amazingly, the term 'Unreliable Narrator' was only coined in the early 1960's. This is quite baffling to me as the trope is something that has run through literature for centuries.

You could say that any first-person text has a narrator of questionable credibility, because humans, when speaking or writing for an audience (and a narrator in a novel or film is surely writing or speaking *to someone*), have an inherent desire to rationalise, justify and explain away their own conduct and decisions.

I mean, look at the opening section of this very piece you are reading now. Is all that talk of the limits of being able to objectively teach and discuss storytelling *actually true* or is that simply me pre-emptively explaining away my own future shortcomings as a self-appointed teacher? How reliable am I? How reliable is anyone who narrates, whether real or fictional?

(Don't dwell on that question for too long. You'll either go mad or become a post-modern philosopher.)

Any narrative of any kind, in any tense, is a study in human nature. What is characterisation but the attempt to make a fictional person have as believable a human nature as possible? What's a story but the depiction of facets of human nature played out across time?

And part of human nature is lying. Whether to yourself or to the person you are interacting with.

So the unreliable narrator trope can be a powerful method to depict a three dimensional character and thus give the reader a powerful and meaningful experience.

Adding Two and Two Together

Let the audience add up two plus two. They'll love you forever

Ernst Lubitsch, film director and writer.

You have to assume your audience has a degree of intelligence. For your sanity, I think you have to.

No one likes to be spoon-fed their stories and everyone I believe ultimately becomes bored by a protagonist who is a down-the-line straight-shooter. It becomes boring as, again, it is against what we recognise to be human nature. Everyone has at least some degree of doubt, hesitancy,

delusion, the desire to impress, the desire to be understood or forgiven or affirmed. All of which can be explored through the use of making your protagonist an unreliable narrator.

If the narrator is of questionable credibility, then you now have all manner of shades of grey to paint with, rather than just the black and white of good and bad.

You have to give the audience the chance to add two and two together, as Lubitsch said. You have to give them things to figure out and think about as they read. Ambiguity and intrigue can be great engines for keeping a narrative moving forward.

Further, I believe the resonance of a theme only really hits home and ‘sticks’ in the readers heart if they have had to do a little bit of work to get there.

So, with an unreliable narrator this process of figuring out can come in two forms. One form is when the reader is *behind* the narrator, and they don’t yet know that he is not telling the whole truth. And the second is when the reader is *ahead* of the narrator in that they know- or at least suspect- that he is lying to himself, though he himself doesn’t yet see this. The reader expects that this self-deception will bring the protagonist trouble down the line and so they read on. Which in many ways is the goal. To get the reader to simply keep on reading.

Pragmatically, all dramatic twists in a tale- with the film *The Usual Suspects* being a stark example- are engineered when the narrator is ahead of the audience, but we have been led to believe that he is honest. You lead the audience to believe that the narrator is honest or sane and his version of events are factually accurate and then you dramatically subvert that at the close of the second act or at the close of the third. With *The Usual Suspects*, as the very title implies, the characters are under suspicion and investigation and so the whole narrative hinges on the possibility of them lying. Yet you are led to believe that Verbal Kint is honest, essentially. And such expectations can be played with.

Everything the audience have taken in prior to the second/third act subversion becomes transformed by that revelation and so the audience can suddenly retrospectively see the ‘truth’ of all of the events that the narrator deceived them about. It takes a lot of skill and careful structuring to pull this off but do it well and the audience will want to consume the narrative again and again and again.

Summary and Some Practical Suggestions

When writing in the first person especially, you can play with how *reliable* the narrator is. What does he want the reader to believe? How does he want the reader to see him? And how does he go about doing this- as he tells the story is he charismatic, charming, pleading? Does he insist on his own honesty and neutrality, does he omit information and fudge details, does he try and disarm you by outright telling you he is not to be trusted while giving you a wink or a roguish smile?

These are all choices and playing with such things will make the story richer. Characterisation can come through *how* the story is told and not just the events and actions that occur. Fictional

characters, like real people demonstrate who they are by what they do more than what they say. But that doesn't mean that what they say isn't important. Even if the doing and the saying are in direct opposition, the saying shows either what the character believes about themselves or what they believe about the audience and their level of gullibility.

It all reveals worldview and motive and thus reveals character. And character is at the cornerstone of story. And more so than the unfolding of a plot, believable three-dimension characters are what keep us reading.

Why Write?

The Workshop #02

Aug 10, 2021

Before you get into the practical you have to delve into the principles of the thing. The *how* can only be framed in terms of the *why*. And why you should write, why you should bother, is a foundational question that few would-be writers seem to ask. And those who do ask it rarely delve into that question until a truly satisfactory answer is discovered. Perhaps because there *is* no neat and easy answer. But it's a question that I would argue the writer *must* ask themselves. So let's do just that, and see what answers come to the surface.

The Material Answer

Q: Why write?

A: Because there's money to be made.

We can call this 'The Side Hustle response.' And it is by no means an invalid one. Like Samuel Johnson- himself one of the all-time great writers- once said: 'No man but a blockhead ever wrote except for money.' It's straightforward, this answer, it's honest, and if upon questioning why you are interested in writing the word 'money' springs back from your heart then this unmuddies the waters enormously.

All of the 'rules' for writing are particular ways of achieving an underlying aim. This is why all rules can eventually be broken, because there is more than one way to skin a cat. Knowing that the aim is money thus dictates the rules that you will be playing with. To make money via words means persuasion is needed, clarity. The best prose is the prose that *converts*. An artiste might see 'one weird trick' type headlines as being corny, deceptive, unaesthetic, but if they work, they work. Right?

The writer-for-money experiments with the tried-and-true until they hit upon something that works. And when they find that thing they milk it for all it is worth. The copywriter finds the product, the market, the positioning, and the pitch and then get to work being as prolific as possible. The money-focused fiction writer finds the genre, the audience, the hook, and the formula and then gets to work being as prolific as possible. Artfulness and craft are always a bonus, but if they stand in the way of churning out the material then time spent on such niceties is ultimately time wasted. It's like over-engineering parts of a vehicle. If the catalytic converter lasts for way longer than the rest of the engine then in strictly monetary terms you can argue that

the part is *too* good and that a simpler, less durable and thus quicker and cheaper to manufacture one would make more sense to use.

So, if you're in the writing game for the money alone, then Godspeed. I don't begrudge that. But if that is your motivation then pursue it *more* aggressively. I believe in avoiding the middle in all things. Don't be wish-washy about it. Commit to the cash and study copywriting and marketing intently. Master those crafts.

Commerce can be artful and art can be commercial, but conflating the two when your answer to 'why write' points firmly to one side is how mediocrity seeps in, whether it be in terms of the bottom line or in terms of the power of the undiluted artistic expression.

Now, with all that being said, writers as a rule are not primarily money driven. It seems to be a part of the temperament. It comes with the territory, for whatever reason. It's certainly that way with me. Now I'm not saying that makes me and people like me superior or more ethical. It is quite possibly the opposite. It may well be a sickness, a malignant manifestation of Johnson's blockhead syndrome.

All I know is that I am not the only one thus afflicted.

The Utilitarian Answer

Q: Why write?

A: Because writing brings x, y and z benefits to the writer.

So, let's say you've ruminated on the question of 'why write' and the idea of money has not resonated. You're not opposed to money but that is not the primary motivator, if you are being honest with yourself.

Then why do it?

Well, if you look online or in popular nonfiction books that touch upon the topic, you will usually find variations on what we might call the Utilitarian answer. That is that writing *does something for you*. Which is to say that writing confers some benefit on the writer whether it be cognitively, psychologically, or practically. You should write according to this line of reasoning because it is good for you.

And maybe it is. Journaling is a fantastic aid to memory and a way of seeing and correcting the patterns of behaviour that emerge in your life. A journal is like a free and always on call therapist that you can carry in your pocket. And the act of writing, whether privately or in a public online space, does have a way of clarifying your thinking. I often find that I truly don't know what I think about something until I start to write about it. Thoughts left swirling in the head tend to lead to nothing but more vague and half-formed thoughts but start to put them on the page and they become something tangible and useful and real.

All well and good.

This Utilitarian, or if you like therapeutic, type of writing is the meta-genre that most online written content conforms to. It is designed to be *impressive* rather than *expressive*. Which is to say it is there to create a (pre-determined) impression rather than to be a self-justifying emanation of the soul, which is what much of what we might call capital-A Art is.

Utilitarian writing then has a particular aim in mind- to impress, to please the audience- and so it has particular methods. This style of writing favours clarity, short sentences, comprehensibility, sharability and what we might call stickiness. It uses storytelling as a vehicle to achieve these ends. Sometimes. It can vary in its degree of cynicism, complexity and beauty and thus functions as a middle-ground between the bottom-line driven ‘Money’ writing that we talked about above and the more existential driven writing that we’ll get onto in a minute.

And content like this is fine, if you approach it with your eyes open. I only complain about it because it has now become both the primary form of writing online and confusingly the primary mode in which all writing is itself discussed. And that’s where it becomes a problem. If your answer to why write is to make money or to gain some benefit- whether it be the creation of a network, personal authority, an audience, better ideas, more peace of mind, and so on- Utilitarian content is a fine thing to both create and consume.

But if it’s not, then that stuff will lead you astray. Which is largely why I am both writing this piece today and why I have started this *Workshop* publication. To help rid my fellow ‘existentialist’ writers of some misconceptions they have no doubt picked up from consuming online content about writing and storytelling.

See, the funny part about teaching, as I am rapidly starting to gather, is that before you can facilitate any kind of learning you have to first walk the student through a sometimes quite prolonged process of *unlearning*. And if the general nature of online discourse is anything to go by, I see a lot of people who I view as being like younger versions of myself who have seemingly become completely muddled up as a result of Utilitarian content.

The Existential Answer

Q: Why write?

A: Because I have no choice.

The point I’m trying to make with this piece is that lots of beginners and would-be writers make what you might call a category error. They misidentify the domain of writing they are interested in and get themselves tied in knots. Hence why the question of ‘why write’ must be asked. It identifies the domain and thus tells you where to focus your attention. If you want to make money, studying poetic techniques will most likely yield a poor ROI. If you want to build a large online audience efficiently then you have to ‘add value’ in a way that isn’t too idiosyncratic or weird or new. You have to obey the Rules of Engagement, as it were.

But what if you want neither of these things? What if writing is just something you *have* to do? What if you have actually tried to quit writing before but that for some reason it won't leave you alone? What if rather than to make money or to build a broad audience what you actually crave is to write a literary masterpiece? Well then my fellow poor wretch, that means you have the artistic temperament and are what we might call an existential writer.

You have the calling, or the curse, depending on how you look at it. The short-attention span, mimetic, dopamine-driven current world of noise and chaos and triviality is not particularly amenable to your dreams. And though that probably gets you down, you still can't fully stop writing and just give in. If that's the case, then the only way out- as far as I can tell- is to accept that absurdity and blindly carry on towards mastery of the written word.

Here I stand; I can do no other, as Luther once said.

And if this is the way you feel, then I am here to help, as much as I am able. Seeing as we are all stuck in this same boat, we may as well see if we can't figure out how to master this writing thing together. I mean, what else are we going to do?

On Starting a Commonplace

The Workshop #03

Aug 17, 2021

We'll start at the very beginning. If someone who had never written before approached me and asked 'where do I begin' I would say this: Read voraciously and start a commonplace. This and practicing via some sort of journal habit are the foundation. This is how you go from nothing to something, how you get the wheel in motion for the first time.

The practice of keeping a commonplace is an ancient one, and an obvious one, but today it goes largely neglected. Yet when done diligently, and done over a sufficient length of time, it can be quietly transformative. Allow me to explain...

The goal in the long run is to create a body of work. Outside of a hard drive, this is what a body of work looks like.

What a Commonplace is

A Commonplace or Commonplace Book is a written repository of information. It's an archive of knowledge that the writer has considered to be important or useful enough to write down for future reference. They are individually tailored and curated collections of wisdom, aphorisms, notes, commentary, marginalia, facts, trivia, tidbits, quotations and so forth.

They are the autodidacts friend.

A commonplace is where you store what you learn, it is the raw material from where ideas and insights are synthesised and created. A commonplace is like a condensed library of material that is uniquely tailored to your own interests and obsessions. Because you are the one who has curated it.

Commonplacing as a practice, then, can be useful to anyone who has any activity that they want to improve at and study at depth. Athletes training logs are an example of this. Historically scientists, poets, generals, scholars, and philosophers from Plato on down have used commonplaces to master their chosen fields. It is infinitely variable and personalisable (if that's a word). No two commonplaces will ever be quite the same, in form and content both. This is a huge part of their appeal. For something that, on the face of it, can seem so rigidly systematic, commonplaces have a way of leading you to be an increasingly individual thinker with an individual viewpoint.

This is all well and good. But I suspect that though you may be intrigued about starting this practice, you are still not quite sure about what it is exactly and what it entails. Maybe explaining my own system will make things clearer...

My Commonplace Method

As I have said, there are many ways to approach this. I'm sure each week here I will endlessly repeat phrases such as 'there is a lot of nuance to this' or 'there is more than one way to skin a cat' and so forth. Because there is. People who offer the 'one true path' are more interested in your money than your improvement in your chosen field. Everything is contextual. Boxing is an ostensibly simple sport with a limited number of moves, but you don't train a long, lanky southpaw the same way you would train a compact, aggressive orthodox fighter. Make sense?

So, with that being said, what follows is how *I* approach commonplacing. It works for me and I have discovered the method based on trial and error. It may not work for you. 'Absorb what is useful, discard what is useless and add what is specifically your own' as Bruce Lee used to say.

So with that being said, here is my personal system, in easily digestible step by step format:

1. Read a book
2. While reading, underline interesting passages in pencil and write notes in the margin if the spirit moves you
3. Upon completing the book type up all of the underlined passages and marginalia into a word document called 'Commonplace 2021 (or whatever year it is)'.
4. Set the pages to be numbered and have the first two pages be a contents page where you list the title, author and dates you read the book along with the page number.
5. Periodically print this out double-sided as you add to it and put it into a ring binder labelled with the current year.
6. Regularly skim through these paper notes at random.

That's it. Now I'm sure that seems like tedious hard work. I'm sure that very few of the people who read this will actually follow through with it, especially not for long enough to notice any real difference to their creative work and their learning. I accept this fact. But in having a platform here to talk about the nature of writing, I want to tell you about what is useful and true, not just what is popular and conventional. There's more than one way to skin a cat.

So you have my method now. You probably have questions. I will now try and pre-empt the most obvious ones and I can answer any that I inevitably miss in the comment section.

Questions and Answers

Why go to all of this effort?

Because I said so. But seriously, you can do what you want. For every writer who has used some variation on the commonplace I am sure there are just as many, if not more, who have not. Many great books were written by philandering drunks, so I think there is a limit to how useful mindlessly aping a great writers routine will prove to be. As long as you never stop writing entirely and you keep getting better according to the standards that you set for yourself then you are probably on the right track.

But. I personally think that the practice of keeping a commonplace is worth the effort. For one, knowing that you have to tediously type up/ copy and paste passages from everything you read will make you read better stuff. It will make you more selective. It will break the awful habit of grimly finishing a book that you are not enjoying rather than just tossing it to one side. It will make you read more of what you want to read. And being honest about what you actually like is the first step towards actually developing an aesthetic.

Also, commonplacing is one of those habits that- like all good habits- compounds. It scales. It feels largely pointless until you have spent six months or a year doing it. And then you suddenly realise what a formidable and utterly unique tool you have built for yourself (assuming you follow your whims and don't just take notes from contemporary best-selling non-fiction/ self-help books).

Transformation does not happen all at once. Progress eventually skyrockets after months of nothing. It's just the way it is. That commonplacing conforms to this dynamic should be encouraging. But as I said above, I accept that most won't see it through. This is another thing that's just the way it is.

How will this make me a better writer exactly?

How will diligently reading great novels/plays/poems/literary theory and reviews and collecting all of the passages that move me and intrigue me make me a better writer? Seems self-evident to me.

Besides, by building an archive of great material to skim (a much better way to while away dead time than scrolling a social media timeline by the way) you are constantly interacting with great writing. Reading it, considering it, copying it out. Copywork- where a writer copies out whole paragraphs and passages of great prose- is a tried-and-true method of improving your own prose. It is the writing equivalent of athletes watching tape. You learn through imitation and example.

Commonplacing helps you focus on great prose itself. Everyone begins by being a consumer before they truly become a creator. Commonplacing naturally makes you an engaged, mindful and discriminating consumer of great writing. Which is a fantastic foundation.

Why print it all out?

Well, for me personally I am trying to absolutely minimise my screen time in life just as a general principle. I think nothing good comes of being a screen slave. But more specifically I have found that everything that I read on a screen is not retained in the same way that things that

I read on paper are. The same goes for writing on paper versus typing in a word processor, although this is more time consuming and less practical.

So the compromise is to type for practicalities sake and then print out a hard copy. As well as helping minimise screen time (your commonplace will eventually serve as an internet replacement for the most part), this will give you a sense of progress seeing the physical archive grow. Conversely it will keep you honest and make you more discriminating as obsessive note taking to the detriment of living your life will soon make you feel a little bit like the Kevin Spacey serial killer in *Se7en*. A shelf full of notes but an abnormal way of living.

The preference for analogue might just be my prejudice here. I can cite all sorts of studies regarding retention via physical material versus screen based but I won't waste your time. You can try it out for yourself. For me, the difference is night and day. Files on computers just sit there, trapped behind glass, ignored. I need things to be tangible. And bizarrely I find sorting physical clutter much less of an aggravation than sorting digital clutter.

Do I have to do this forever?

At the risk of sounding like a broken record, everything is nuanced. You don't have to do anything you don't want to do when it comes to writing. Just write, using whatever combination of tips, tactics, self-deceptions, and esoteric nonsense that actually gets the pen moving.

But if you are going to try out commonplacing, I suggest you do it for a good while. A year minimum, maybe a couple. It compounds tremendously, as we discussed above. You can of course read certain things without taking notes, and you can take breaks from the practice. Up to you. This isn't school anymore, no one is grading you. As long as you are learning, improving and enjoying life then carry on with what works.

Me, I commonplaces really diligently for four years and now I am a bit more sporadic. I lean much more towards reading fiction because as well as being more pleasurable, fiction generates a lot less notes. Besides, once you have read and taken notes on 6 self-improvement/motivation/pop-psychology books you have effectively read them all. Another example of how commonplacing compounds. This realisation alone is a huge time-saver in the long term. You will find other such examples as you persevere with the habit. Which may end up meaning that you never feel the need to abandon it entirely.

Why is this 'commonplacing idea' not more widely known/discussed?

No idea, to be honest. Again, the compounding issue/ need for patience probably means that people don't stick with it long enough to see the benefits. Second, as with many actually helpful things such as fasting, walking and getting fresh air, it is hard to make money by promoting them. Maybe the best things in life really *are* free.

If something is hard to make money from, you are unlikely to hear much about it in a Contentland. Which makes such things even more of an advantage, if you choose to look at life through a competitive lens.

I see people talk about note-taking systems, and apps and ‘second brains’ and so forth which are all ostensibly commonplace systems. And good for them. If it works for you, it works. Me, I just dislike apps and screens and systems that require updates and can crash. Pen and paper, pencil and book, printer and ring-binder are my friends.

Maybe that’s just me. But however you do it- analogue, digital, hard drive, cloud- I recommend giving commonplacing a good honest try. You might just find, given enough time, that it ends up transforming the way you think and write.

Feel free to leave any questions and notes about your experience with commonplacing in the comments section below.

Imposter Syndrome In Writers

The Workshop #04

Aug 24, 2021

You're reading this, but who am I to give you advice on writing, or anything else in life? Who am I to pontificate and expound theories about what fiction is and should be? Who am I to explain how the written word works and how you should go about making your own writing better? What credentials do I have? What gives me the right?

These are questions that exist at the back of my mind. Usually as I sit at the desk I can drown them out- a routine of creation is the best killer of doubts regarding your worth- but today I am going to hold them up to the light of day. Because I not only feel like an imposter, I *am* an imposter. And you are too. So let's discuss it and put this so called Imposter Syndrome nonsense to bed once and for all.

I'm not sure how relevant this Magritte painting is as an image, but it feels right and it looks good so here we are.

On Being An Imposter

I told myself when I first conceived of this [Workshop](#) idea that I would focus on the nitty gritty, on the technical side of writing: sentences and paragraphs and story structure and the like. And I *will* tackle such things through the coming months. But I see now why such discussions (especially done with a suitable amount of nuance) are not more prevalent. It's because for the beginner writer these things are not pressing issues. The technical side will of course be lacking in the newbie, but this is fixable through trial and error and practice, through reading and consideration. No, the real problem for the new writer is *psychological*.

They feel like an imposter.

And this is by no means irrational. Because they *are* an imposter. They are- given their current skillset and experience- out of their depth, beyond the limits of their current capabilities. Like the saying has it, they don't even know what they don't know.

Well, I hate to tell you that not only does is this feeling of being an imposter based on an accurate assessment of the situation, but it also never goes away, not completely.

But here's the thing- feeling like an imposter as a writer, feeling like a fraud is *universal*. Which means it doesn't matter. If everyone is an imposter, then no one is an imposter and we are all merely slightly insane together. The problem is only a problem because we think we are on our own with it. But we are not.

It's ironic that writers don't discuss this much. Good fiction and essays and storytelling is the artful discussion of the self and of life in all of its particularity. Only when writing is personal and specific and detailed and heartfelt does it become universal and thus become moving and relatable to the reader. This is the deeper meaning of the phrase 'write what you know'.

And yet the doubt, insecurity and attendant procrastination and perfectionism of the writing process itself are not much acknowledged. They are of course flippantly joked about, but not actually *talked* about. Hence why everyone feels like an imposter, even though everyone else feels like an imposter and it is therefore not a problem. You know?

It's like a lot of other mental health issues. You feel sadder, and alone in your sadness, if you don't realise that everyone feels sad sometimes and that it is just a part of the human condition. Knowing you are not alone diminishes the darkness.

Speculation As To Why This Problem Exists

That is all well and good, and possibly a little reassuring. But the question of course is why do writers feel like imposters? Well the answer is that any attempt to do anything in life can bring about such feelings because you, in choosing this activity, are now on a path to mastery. This is not a normal thing to do as most people just drift through life devoid of ambitions and dreams that run beyond the mere material.

Feeling like an imposter only happens if you are actually trying to do something, to *become* something, and so in this light it can be seen as a signal that you are on the right path. That you are actually doing something.

That is more of a general observation, there. The question is why does Imposter Syndrome affect the writer specifically? Well, I can only guess but I think that Imposter Syndrome and its two cousins perfectionism and procrastination all work in concert because good writing is hard. And I don't just mean hard in the difficulty sense, in the way that scoring a three pointer in basketball is hard. I mean that it is hard on you emotionally.

Writing is an act of revelation, of exposure, of peeling back the layers of the self and showing the world what is there in all of its shaking vulnerability. And who in their right mind wants to do a thing like that? It's only natural that a part of the brain would rebel against doing that. This is why as a means of avoiding doing that you find yourself suddenly organising CDs or frantically vacuuming and sorting files as your deadline looms. This is why writers drink. And this is why writers- regardless of their experience level- think that they are not good enough, that they are phonies, that they are frauds who don't belong and are about to be found out.

The small, fearful part of the mind will contort itself in all different sort of ways and tell you all sorts of different lies in an attempt to keep you away from that blank page. Because the blank page is where you have to face up to yourself and face up to your life.

Writing worth reading is real. And to create real writing often requires real pain. And the mind would often feel the pain of feeling like a fraud than the pain of being vulnerable and exposed.

What To Do About It

In short, nothing. There's no quick hack here. To quote the title of a self help book you have to feel the fear and do it anyway. Feeling like an imposter means you are- by definition- in the arena so to speak, which means that you are on the right track in life. High achievers are most likely to be beset with Imposter Syndrome so they say, so the feeling of this is a bellwether showing you that you are facing in the right direction.

Writing- as much as any other endeavour- is simply a matter of perseverance. Of long term thinking. Of toughing it out. Feeling like an imposter is part of the wider mental apparatus designed to save you face, and keep you from pain. But if listened to it will make you slow down and quit which is the exact wrong strategy in a game of last man standing.

Perseverance is everything here. And the thing that keeps you persevering is having some sense of self worth. Some belief that you are worthy of calling yourself a writer, or having an audience.

The world of words- especially online- is a stale monoculture. Same ideas, same sources, same tone, same platitudes. It needs new voices. It needs your voice. Your voice may be exactly what someone needs to hear. Your voice matters. You belong.

At least this is what I tell myself when the doubt and the apathy and the deadening perfectionism and procrastinating behaviours kick in. And when I remind myself of these facts I feel like less of an imposter. And then I write something.

One True Sentence

The Workshop #05

Aug 31, 2021

Hemingway once famously broke it down like this, he said: ‘All you have to do is write one true sentence. Write the truest sentence that you know.’

This is great advice, but as with all great advice that is of aphorism length, there is a ton of nuance and discussion to be had about this.

And so that’s what I am going to offer today. There will be a little bit of general discussion about the nature of great opening lines and then I’ll break down a few examples to show you this theory in action.

So if you can settle down at the back and pay attention, I’ll begin this weeks class.

It’s pretty much a cliché to use an image of Hemingway in an essay about the craft of writing. But we’re not discussing cliché this week so...

The Nature of Openings

So. On the most prosaic level, the purpose of a sentence, any sentence, is to get you to read the next one. The goal is to move the reader with your writing. And to do that, they have to first make it to the end. And to do *that* you must make sure that the reader remains engaged and follows along. The breadcrumb trail has to be enticing enough to make the reader follow it all the way to the end, the end being where you have stored the pay-off of the meaning, the resolution, and the culmination of all of the themes, ideas, characters and plot movements that are built up via the breadcrumb trail itself.

Are you with me?

But what is it that makes that trail so tempting in the first place? Well, it’s two things: intrigue and trust. The opening lines have to be intriguing (or to use another word- compelling) enough to draw you in and you have to instantly be given a sense that you can trust that the writer knows what they are doing and knows where they are going.

Intrigue and trust.

Now, a mistake a lot of beginners make is that they go too big, too dramatic. But if someone were to try and tell you a story in the street and they began by grabbing you by the lapels and

hurriedly shouting in your face, you wouldn't be intrigued. You'd be repelled. All's you would want to do would be to get away.

Intrigue can be created by an assured whisper and a beckoning finger more than it can by a bellowing carnival barker hawking his sideshow. Different genre's have different conventions of course, but finesse is never the wrong move. Although, it is more difficult, hence the myriad of bad, overzealous openings out there.

Look at some of the all-time great openers: Call me Ishmael..., It was the best of time, it was the worst of times..., Mother died today. Or maybe, yesterday; I can't be sure. They all *invite you in*. There's no harangue and none of the kind of big talk that is often a front to hide against scarcity and lack of confidence. No, instead they read like the equivalent of someone patting the empty chair next to them and saying 'sit down, I've got a story to tell you that you are going to want to hear.'

Which ties in to the idea of trusting the author. In each example- and it's as clear as day- you instantly trust that the author knows their business. They use simple, clear, everyday words (there becomes more scope for more challenging verbiage- within reason- once the trust of the author has become absolutely cemented later on in the story). They clearly have a handle on the rhythm of prose, on style, and in a mere handful of words they can already sketch the nature of the protagonist and what their journey of transformation will have to consist of. Whether it succeeds or fails.

Ishmael is our guide, our eyes, though he may recede into the periphery as the story unfurls. Magically you sense that in only three words. Not 'I am Ishmael'; bold and declarative, not 'Ishmael was the sailor's name'; detached and with an omniscient authorial distance, but 'Call me Ishmael'; warm, friendly, and just a little bit unsure and almost shy. And in only three words. Incredible.

And then look at the Camus opening: Mother died today. Or maybe, yesterday; I can't be sure- a note-perfect depiction of the haze of depressive detachment and alienation. He can't remember the specifics of an absolutely tumultuous and defining event, he is completely unmoored from both himself and the world. And he seems to lack even the energy to care much.

And crucially, as readers all we want to know is *why*, and more to the point, how are these facts of his character going to play out? And so we keep reading.

The psychological truth of these lines (to go back to Hemingway's advice) is palpable. They just feel *right*, they feel *true*. The characters- though we, as of yet, know hardly anything about them- *feel real*. And the feeling of believability makes you willing to invest in the story. Intrigue plus trust lead to investment. This is the vital point. Because once you are invested, once you are hooked, then the author has the means to guide you towards a powerful conclusion and a moving reading experience.

Let's look closer.

Example One: The Assassination Of Jesse James By The Coward Robert Ford- Ron Hansen

This might be my favourite novel. I cite it every chance I get. I could talk about it all day. Stylistically and thematically it is exquisite. The way Hansen can paint pictures with words, the emotional and textural authenticity of his dialogue, his profound gift for poetic description and the way he can take vast mounds of historical research and turn them into environments and people who seemingly live and breathe is extraordinary.

And as evidence of all of that here is how he opens his masterpiece:

He was growing into middle age and was living then in a bungalow on Woodland Avenue. Green weeds split the porch steps, a wasp nest clung to an attic gable, a rope swing looped down from a dying elm tree and the ground below it was scuffed soft as flour. Jesse installed himself in a rocking chair and smoked a cigar down in the evening as his wife wiped her pink hands on a cotton apron and reported happily on their two children...

There is no drama, no action, but you are transported to Jesse's time in an instant. Ursula Le Guin once said that 'first sentences are doors to worlds' and this is a vivid example of that idea in action. The poetry and the imagery make me trust Hansen in an instant. You are in the safe hands of a master here, clearly.

The ground below a rope swing being scuffed as soft as flour is a simple piece of description that in an instant takes me back to my own childhood. And it takes me to Jesse's homestead, to a world before plastic and jet planes and WiFi. I am transported in an instant.

And there is intrigue too. Jesse James is a notorious figure, we know of the man and his deeds and his death before we even turn to the first page of this novel. This simple pastoral domesticity doesn't chime with our knowledge of Jesse's myth. We know the exploits but not the inner nature of the man. And so we read on, because we know that all is not as it seems. We know that things are going to turn tragic and we want to see what tapestry the genius of Hansen will weave as he lays out the inevitable fall of the outlaw.

Example Two: Nightmare Alley by William Lindsay Gresham

Now to an old, departed Americana of a different stripe, the seedy world of carneys and hucksters. Here's how Gresham begins his great novel:

Stan Carlisle stood well back from the entrance to the canvas enclosure, under the blaze of a naked light bulb, and watched the geek.

This geek was a thin man who wore a suit of long underwear dyed chocolate brown. The wig was black and looked like a mop, and the brown greasepaint on the emancipated face was streaked and smeared with the heat and rubbed off around the mouth.

I don't think I need to even point out where the intrigue lies here. It's self evident. What happened to this poor wretch to make him become a freakshow geek? (Not coincidentally, this question drives the thrust of the narrative and the final scene pay-off gives you the answer). How can someone fall so low?

(One side effect of reading this novel is that afterward you will always shudder a little when you come across the word 'geek' in popular culture. Such is the power of great fiction to embed itself in your imagination.)

And the trust for the author is there too. In three sentences it is established. Gresham exhibits a clear and vivid prose style with arresting imagery and great rhythm. He engages the senses. He draws you in to his world. We all need to do likewise if we are to succeed with our literary efforts.

Example Three: The Friends of Eddie Coyle by George V Higgins.

And now we move onto more genre fare, specifically the dark world of crime fiction. Here's how Higgins opens up his legendary debut novel:

Jackie Brown at twenty-six, with no expression on his face, said that he could get some guns. 'I can get your pieces probably by tomorrow night. I can get you, probably, six pieces. Tomorrow night. In a week or so, maybe ten days, I can get you another dozen. I got a guy coming in with at least ten of them but I already talked to another guy about four of them and he's, you know, expecting them. He's got something to do. So, six tomorrow night. Another dozen in a week.

Here's the thing with openings. A great book teaches you how to read it *as you are reading it*. It sets the tone and sets your expectations and shows you the kind of world and themes and milieux you are going to be dealing with. This is why, when you read through books in a bookstore, you almost instantly know when a novel is for you and when it isn't. Like the man once said: 'If you're reading it, it's for you.' When the artistic vision is laid out clearly in strong prose you know straight away if it's your kind of thing or not.

And what we have here of course is a masterclass in gritty style. The book teaches you in an instant that this is going to be a very dialogue-heavy page-turner where we get to be flies on the wall to the authentic dealings and sins of small-time criminals. This is a street-level affair, no mansions and henchmen, just small-timers trying to make scores and avoid their near-inevitable fate of being killed or sent back to the can.

The intrigue of course is- what are the guns Jackie Brown is selling going to be used for? And the trust comes from that masterful dialogue: stylised and flowing but that reads as authentically as if you were sat at the next booth over, eavesdropping.

Higgins clearly knows his craft. And he clearly has a great story to tell. And so we are hooked and his *in media res* beginning is a roaring success.

In Summary

Opening sentences are the portals to the fictional world you are going to create. You need to draw the reader over the threshold by intriguing them with a hook, a question, an incongruity. It doesn't have to be signposted in neon letters (if this is done well it should almost be a subconscious effect- and this applies to all great writing), but you need to suggest the itch that only continuing reading will scratch.

You also need to demonstrate that you are a capable stylist, a canny psychologist and that the reader will be rewarded if they invest their time in reading you. You need to convince them by force of your prose that you know what you are doing.

This a lot to ask from a few short sentences. This is why openings are notoriously tricky and why writers will rework and rework them until they shine. The opening paragraph is, in a sense, the elevator pitch for the rest of the novel. You don't have much time. There's a lot at stake. But, like elevator pitches, you don't want to be too forceful, too needy, too overeager and embarrassingly over-aggressive.

You need to be cool, demonstrate your skills and calmly coax the reader into investing in your story.

Writing as Performance

The Workshop #06

Sep 7, 2021

All arts are performance arts, or they should be. That's my opinion anyway. Even art with the loftiest of aspirations should at least have some element of entertainment to it. Not in a broad or pandering way necessarily- although even Shakespeare has plenty of farce and dirty jokes in it- but it should be enjoyable, surely. If you're not moved or captivated, if you're not moved to laughter or tears or both, then what is the point?

Writers especially, I feel, lose sight of the audience. You write alone and as such you can regress into a lonely ivory tower dwelling abstraction. This is why so many writers write books where the protagonist is either a writer or a professor. Which, for a professional storyteller, seems to show a massive and fundamental lack of imagination.

So the way around this, as far as I can tell, is by simply keeping the audience in mind. And you do this by seeing your sessions at the desk as being a performance.

Let me explain...

Behind this door is a little desk with an anglepoise lamp, a dictionary, a pen and a sheaf of blank paper.

All The Worlds a Stage

All art should be performance as I said. And further from that, I believe that all art should have elements of improvisation. This is what makes it exciting as both consumer and creator. As both audience member and performer.

(Note already how the latter phrasing of this duality implies symbiosis and partnership, whereas the former implies that the creator is a somehow different and superior species than the mere consumer)

Art should be about risk and discovery, both of which are born of improvisation. Risk, because when performing in the moment you can come apart and fail and discovery, because it is only when you are fully present and flowing that you unearth new ideas and new thoughts from either the unconscious or somewhere beyond yourself.

This is a wonderful thing to experience as a creator. It feels like magic, it feels like you are an antennae of sorts, a conduit of the universe, if you will. And the same goes for being an audience member who bears witness to this. Those great transporting hypnotic moments of live music are

often improvised, those authentic bits of movement and gesture and expression that you see on the theatre stage or on the silver screen are usually improvisations. I don't know how but you can simply tell the difference between planned choreography and spontaneous creation.

This is what makes the live experience so magical. This is what grabs you in the moment and makes everything else in your life fade for the duration of the performance. This is what you remember for years afterwards.

But although some of this live atmosphere is a result of a collective gathering, I believe that all art forms can borrow from it, largely by the artist conducting them in such a way that improvisation is cultivated and allowed to happen.

All Plans are Useless, But Planning Is Indispensable

A trap for the beginner writer is to discover some of the mechanics of structure and storytelling and then to entirely fall in love with this almost mathematical aspect of the craft. Now don't get me wrong, such structuring is vitally important and we will get to it in future issues. But all too often I see people learn about act breaks and denouements and foreshadowing and the like and it turns them rigid. Plot movements are marked out on whiteboards and index cards like military operations. Characters- rather than being authentic beings who seemingly live and breathe and think- become mere chess pieces that are positioned across the board to make the plot advance.

Well, I think that in many cases plot is overrated. Something that is overplotted loses all future rereadability. You are carried along the neat tracks of the plot advancement but once you reach the station you never want to repeat the journey. Because there was no scenery, no detours, no surprise. In short, no spontaneity. And this most often happens in thrillers, funnily enough. There are lots of twists and shocks but no actual surprises, I.e nothing that is off the beaten path that the writer is sprinting you along.

There needs to be breathing room. For the writers sanity (working from extensive plotting makes you more of an assembly worker than an artisan) and the audiences ultimate satisfaction to improve.

The key is to have a plan but to hold it loosely. To have a plotted progression of scenes and acts but to not plan the scenes themselves too much. You know that Johnny and Sally are at a restaurant and that they argue and then Sally storms out. That's the scene. As you approach the page that's all you need to know. With that thumbnail sketch in place you can then approach the desk for the day and *perform*. You have abundant scope to improve and surprise yourself. In this environment writing becomes fun again.

This for the record, is how I approach these essays. It's how I approached this very piece. I knew that I wanted to talk about the act of writing being a performance. Because that's how I treat it. Every day is a 3 hour session where I sit and type and see what happens. I try not to look things up. I never crib from other sources. And so it went. I had no conscious idea that I would talk about overplotting killing rereadability, or make a train journey analogy, or talk about Johnny and Sally in the restaurant.

It all just happened. It all just came out. Because I think and daydream throughout the days and I have conversations with people and I read and I watch. This all goes in and percolates. And then with maybe a title, an opening line, an observation I approach the stage that is the blank page each morning and I take a breathe and I begin to perform.

And sometimes I kill and sometimes I bomb. But during that time I flow and I learn and I get better. They say writing makes you a better thinker. Maybe. But sometimes, as with everything else in life, I find that you have to stop thinking and start doing.

The blank page is a stage. Start performing on it every day.

Don't Be Afraid To Use Big Words

The Workshop #07

Sep 14, 2021

To be honest, the main reason I started this Workshop publication was because I was sick to death of seeing wrongheaded writing advice, predominantly on Twitter- the place where nuance goes to die.

Virtually every platitude on the craft rubbed me the wrong way (it's often designed to do so because a hateshare is still a share and polarisation can be used as an engine for growth). So I felt the need to make a soapbox for myself where I could undo all of this bad advice or I could at least rant about it to bemused passersby until the police gently ushered me away.

And so here we are.

Today's misconception that we will try and knock down is the idea that in writing you should use simple, everyday words so that your reader will be better able to understand and enjoy your work.

I say nonsense. Or more specifically I say that there is a bit more to it than that.

You learn something new everyday.

Small Words, Small Ambition

First of all, and this is a question that it pays to keep in the forefront of your mind- what do you want your audience to get out of your writing? What do you imagine they are reading it *for*?

(It's amazing how often this question goes unasked. I suspect because if you seriously ask it of yourself then you may find doubt start to creep in and your self-worth start to ebb. This is all a part of the process of being a writer, I'm afraid. You have to experience the doubt and move beyond it. And the only way to do that is to seriously ask what is the point of what you write and then work on it until you have a satisfactory answer.)

If you are writing merely to convey simple, easily graspable everyday ideas then by all means stick to simple words. Keep your vocabulary small and short.

And there's nothing inherently wrong with this. In fact if you are writing instruction manuals and how-to advice then to be able to communicate in such easy language is a virtue and is to be encouraged.

But I'm guess that's not the case with you, I know it's not the case with me.

You want to write creatively, and to either write fiction that moves and delights or to write essays and non-fiction that are contemplative and have depth and offer actual teachings borne of hard won experience.

You want to write properly, as it were. You want to write well.

Well, I've got to tell you, the truncated monosyllabic vocabulary that the twitter theorists laud simply isn't gonna cut it in this context.

People worry about alienating readers by using fancy words when they should worry about alienating readers by being boring and one dimensional. In any given sentence you want the right word for the job- whether the job be to terrify, seduce, amuse or confront- and sometimes the right word, the *mot juste*, needs to be absolutely gargantuan.

Clarity vs Precision

You've probably seen the famous Gary Provost quote that demonstrates the importance of varying your sentence lengths. Here it is in case you are unfamiliar:

This sentence has five words. Here are five more words.
Five-word sentences are fine. But several together become
monotonous. Listen to what is happening. The writing is
getting boring. The sound of it drones. It's like a stuck record.
The ear demands some variety.

Now listen. I vary the sentence length, and I create music.
Music. The writing sings. It has a pleasant rhythm, a lilt, a
harmony. I use short sentences. And I use sentences of
medium length. And sometimes when I am certain the reader
is rested, I will engage him with a sentence of considerable
length, a sentence that burns with energy and builds with all
the impetus of a crescendo, the roll of the drums, the crash of
the cymbals—sounds that say listen to this, it is important.

So write with a combination of short, medium, and long
sentences. Create a sound that pleases the reader's ear. Don't
just write words. Write music.

-Gary Provost

Well, I believe a similar mechanism is at play with word choices themselves. Writing should be rhythmical and musical and the words should be selected for maximum poetic effect as well as for their powers to precisely describe. Which means you need a decent vocabulary. In fact I would argue that the writing sin of overuse of adverbs comes about as a result of lacking a sufficient depth of vocabulary.

Adverbs are there to modify and add (or diminish) the weight of the sentiment (extremely, slightly) which can be achieved by simply (see what I did there?) knowing alternative words for the phenomena itself. You don't have to refer to something slightly cold if you know the word tepid.

The advice to use only simple words maximises for clarity. Which is one goal, of course. And a useful one if you are a marketer who is writing to sell products. (The observant will not that the online voices who give writing advice are business writers and not creative writers. Their advice is good for copy, not so much for literature).

But if you optimise for clarity you miss out on *precision*. And great creative writing is precise in the way that it captures a mood, a location, a moment in time.

Comedy too is also precise- whether it be an absurdist focus on details and minutia or whether it be someone really drilling down into how people talk or act in certain situations. It's the focus and depth of detail that can build tension and make an unfolding story excruciating whether this be done for either comic or dramatic effect.

Short sentences and short words stultify this dynamic. They mean there are many tools in the toolbox that are left neglected and thus there is a limit on what you can build.

I think the use short words advice is given because it's quick and easy and digestible. Much like what you end up creating if you follow that dictum. You can't go too badly wrong if you stick to it. But there is only so good you can be this way. Me, I want to be good, I want *you* to be good, so I can't prescribe such lazy blanket rules.

Practical Ideas To End On

Right. This isn't school and so I'm not gonna set you homework. I'm just gonna observe that improving vocabulary is never a bad thing. The more quivers in the bow the better, even if many go mostly unused.

Shakespeare was both the greatest writer of all time and had the widest vocabulary, which I do not think is a coincidence.

So learn some new words and practice using them.

The easiest way is when you read a new word simply jot it down and then try it out a few times either in speech, a journal or a piece of writing when it's appropriate.

It's all about finesse and context. The reason why we are told to steer clear of the 'alienating' obscure words is because they can often be distracting. This is the case when they are used injudiciously and with no discernment. And that comes from experience.

You'll probably overdo it in the beginning, we all do. But I'd rather someone err on the side of being pretentious than being boring. Because it shows you are actually trying, that you actually have some ambition with your words. And more importantly that you see your audience as real people rather than infomercial consumers.

Against Writing Apps

The Workshop #08

Sep 20, 2021

Regular readers will know that I'm always banging on about the scourge of 'content'. Of how, in cynical moments, it can feel like all online writing is the same bland and homogeneous mass of vaguely upbeat and instructional listicles. In the same way that YouTubers all seem to talk in the same upward inflected, vocal fry riddled, vaguely condescending voice, so all online writing reads like they have the same prose 'accent', so to speak. It's all short sentences and simple statements written in direct and everyday language. It's easy to read. But it never sticks in the memory. It's easily digestible yet ultimately unsatiating, like a night-time plate of bland and beige carbohydrates. It's junk food for the soul.

Now, I used to blame the preponderance of such work on either the naked cynicism of SEO and metrics chasing 'content creators' or on the atrophying attention spans and winnowing taste of today's audiences, depending on my daily mood.

But I think there might be a third culprit. See I think that well-meaning writers might well be being led astray by software. My hunch is that writing assistant tools, cloud-based writing apps and the like are hobbling writers' development and are stopping them from mastering their craft.

This is a hunch, or if you prefer, a prejudice. And I'm now going to rant about it...

Autotune For Writers

It's probably a profound tactical misstep to begin a diatribe against how apps are making our collective writing ability worse by citing a tweet I wrote. But I'm going to do it anyway. A false consistency being the hobgoblin of little minds and all that.

So yesterday I tweeted (twote? twat?) the following:

thomasjbevan.substack.com @thomasjb3van

**Never used a grammar app None of them Never will "Omg you're missing out"
Maybe You're missing out on the subtle sensual pleasure of writing tediously
verbose and unnecessary convoluted sentences without some computer telling you
that this could be less wordy Keep your apps**

September 19th 2021

23 Retweets 190 Likes

Now first of all I know that should be unnecessarily rather than unnecessary, a charge to which I plead the cowardly defence that I was screwed over by autocorrect. If only there was some way that you could turn it off.

But still, the central point remains. Grammar apps may well make your writing better in the sense of it becomes somewhat more readable, but the trade-off is that it may very well become a lot less pleasurable, to both read and to write.

What machines would call mistakes in writing- programmed as they are to assist you in mere professionalism, clarity and comprehension- may well be the very things that make a piece of writing exciting and intriguing from the reader's standpoint, and perhaps the reader- like yourself in this very instance- may well find themselves almost cocooned in a sentence that is way too long by conventional standards and they wonder 'is the writer going to be able to work his way out of this predicament that he has placed himself in or will he fail miserably and fall flat on his face?'

Such exuberance and risk is exciting for both creator and audience. A little daring and a little cockiness, a little nod and wink to the camera go a long way in a time where prose has degenerated to being a dead-behind-the-eyes means to an end.

I'm of the opinion that all art is performance art and nothing will kill your flow and momentum mid-performance like an algorithm offering 'helpful' critiques on how to make your work in progress more conventional and digestible.

Imagine if an equivalent piece of software existed for music back in the late sixties. Imagine Hendrix in the studio recording a take of *Purple Haze*. Mitch Mitchell counts the band in with four beats on the sticks and then the band begin. As he plays Hendrix looks at an app on his screen.

'Your guitar is a quarter tone out of tune. Consider retuning it to standard concert pitch.'

'This song is using more distortion than is considered standard. Perhaps use a cleaner tone.'

'The E7#9 chord is not commonly used in this style of composition. Consider...'

And so on.

Now nothing said there is actually *false*. And your opinion of Hendrix and the song in question is irrelevant. The point is that each of those 'mistakes' are intentional stylistic choices done to elicit a specific response in the listener. Rigid adherence to a notional app would have stripped the song of everything that makes it what it is, and everything that makes the song a success.

And I wonder if the present-day writing apps aren't doing the same thing to the written word.

Mastery by Mistake

You have to learn the rules before you can break them, as the old saying goes. But how do you learn the rules if the process is automated? How do you learn from your mistakes and failures if mistakes and failures are instantly highlighted and removed with a mouse click?

In talking about performance, stylistic choice and expression I am not saying that anything goes and that you should just be yourself and so forth. Children can spout random sequences of words just as they can smear random splotches of paint. And it is very free and expressive and creative. It can sometimes be very cute and entertaining. But it's meaningless because it is random. It's pure in its intent because there is no intent.

The creativity of adults doesn't work that way.

Great art is not the ignorance of rules but the transcendence of rules. And grammar apps and the like keep you stuck in the world of rules. Sure, they will make a bad writer okay, but they will also make a great writer okay too. This bargain of mediocrity seems to be an increasingly popular one.

Now, I'm not saying I'm a great writer by any means. But I would like to be. And I intend to be. And that involves a true lifelong process of not only learning but also *internalising* all of the conventions of the written word. Sure I could simply correct any underlined instance of the misuse of their/there/they're or I could figure it out myself through repeated failure until I internalise the usage.

Sure I could click from a menu of synonyms every time I make a weak word choice or I could actually make efforts to improve my vocabulary and thus have a wider arsenal of tools to use in ways that allow me to truly express a part of myself.

There are no shortcuts. There's the easy way that leads nowhere and there's the hard way that actually takes you to where you want to go. We understand this with other endeavours, but for some reason with writing there is a tendency to lean on convenience over mastery. I don't know why this is.

All's I know is that anything that robs you of a learning opportunity is inimicable to mastery.

So like I said: keep your apps.

Creation vs Consumption

The Workshop #09

Sep 27, 2021

My routine, when I am struggling for ideas on what topic to cover in an upcoming Workshop essay, is to go online and search for generic writing advice to argue with. It seems to be working out fairly well so far. See, the problem with such advice is that while it may well be well-meaning it is almost always incredibly reductive and simplistic. And when taken at face value can do more harm than good.

A prime example of this is the popular twitter sentiment of ‘creation > consumption’ or ‘create more than you consume’ or words to that effect. It *sounds* good. It *sounds* true. But I believe it can be a trap. Because the reality is not quite as simple as those neat soundbites would have you believe.

Let’s get into it...

Creation is the sculpting. And consumption, along with experience and imagination is what constitutes the clay.

Not All Consumption Is Created Equal

At the root of ‘creation > consumption’ is a linguistic sleight of hand. The dichotomy as presented is a false one because creation and consumption are cyclical- one feeds the other, and conversely the absence of one diminishes the other, but we’ll get to that in a minute.

First of all you have the word ‘consumption’ itself. The associations it carries are those of lazy passive indolence and bored lowest-common-denominator time-wasting. We picture someone sat on a sofa *consuming* snacks, *consuming* pacifying domestic beers, *consuming* sports broadcasts or stultifying tv dramas or endless livestream ‘content’. Nearly anything that is actually *active* would be better than this, we think, let alone the enormously gratifying and even life-affirming activity of creating something with your own hands and brain.

Consumerism is bad, creativity is good- I can’t help but agree with this statement if these are the definitions we are using.

However lumped in with other forms of consumerism is what the serious working creator would label ‘research’ or ‘inspiration-seeking’ or ‘study’. And avoidance of these activities is the trap that the novice falls into.

I have never met a writer- a good one- who was not also a voracious reader. I have never met a filmmaker who wasn't a cinephile first. I have never met a painter who didn't regularly visit galleries or watch art documentaries or thumb through coffee table Taschen books. But surely these are all forms of consumption?

I think you see my point but I'm going to hammer it home anyway.

Everyone is a student of their craft, no matter how experienced they are or how extensive their body of work is. It never ends. And alongside learning from being a practitioner, you also learn through careful study. You learn, in a sense, through *consumption*. Both of these modalities, practicing and studying are of *equal value*, which is a point that these cute 'create more than you consume' tweets miss.

Yes if you had to choose one of those two activities, you could say that creating would be better than consuming. But what you created wouldn't be much good because everyone who has ever created anything has started out by imitating their forebears. We all stand on the shoulders of giants. This is so universal a truism that I strongly suspect that anyone who posts those 'creation is better than consumption' messages without any subsequent explanatory nuance is probably not much of a creator at all. Asides from creating an online brand and maybe some reductive info products that is.

But I digress.

You build upon what came before. When the creative impulse first strikes you it is usually because some great work of art moves you. And so you seek more. And after a time this process leads to you building a taste and an aesthetic which you then refined and explore in your own work. But consumption was the impetus, and consumption is what keeps the fire lit when you encounter the inevitable frustrations and struggles that come with walking the path towards mastery.

Mindful Consumption and Masterful Creation

So the crux of the issue is not to consume less and create more, but to consume *better* and create *consistently*. You have to treat consumption of art (both in your own chosen medium and in other forms of storytelling or expression) as part of the process of your self-directed education.

See the problem of writer's block is a problem of fear quite often, but it is also a problem of a lack of inspiration. In fact, writers block is the wrong metaphor as ideas are not a river that gets dammed but rather they are more like a well that runs dry if you do not regularly refill it with both experiences and new materials. Writer's block, so called, often signals a deficiency of quality consumption.

Rather than being a passive waste of time, sitting down and devouring a great novel or devouring a series of classic films can be one of the best ways to actively generate new ideas.

Not to be too prescriptive but if time were no object and obligations were not much of an issue I would say that spending equal amounts of time each day creating and then consuming great art would be ideal. Three hours of writing in the morning and then three hours of reading in the evening is probably optimum though it is by no means obligatory. Life rarely permits us to be so regimented. But it's something to think about.

If you are putting in the hours creatively but are not making progress, consider balancing it out with more mindful consumption. Conversely if you are ploughing through the Canon and the Sight and Sound greatest films of all time but are not creating consistently then you also have a problem. It's all a question of balance.

I hope that clears up some misconceptions and helps you in improving your creative output. I also hope it helps to explain why I so often bemoan the world of content and the addictive nature of social media feeds. Because they undermine this process. To create art you have to consume art. Not just snippets of content.

A Writing Exercise That is Actually Worth Doing

The Workshop #10

Oct 5, 2021

As a rule I am not generally one for writing exercises. I see them as kind of analogous to warming up or stretching and exercise- they can be useful but devoting more than a small fraction of your time to them can become a displacement activity for the thing itself. More so because, unlike with exercise, you don't really need to warm up in the same way. You can simply sit down at the desk, take a breath, compose yourself, collect together whatever materials you need and get to work.

But all rules have exceptions. I have tried out various writing exercises, prompts and practices over the years and I have found a rare few to be extremely beneficial in improving the way I write. One is the habit of journalling/ keeping a diary and the other is a dialogue-based exercise that I am going to lay out for you today.

I'm not sure that this Vermeer painting is especially germane to our discussion today but I like it so I have decided to use it.

Prelude

Okay, so first of all when considering writing exercises- or anything really- you have to look at the reliability of the source. If some guy whose claim to fame is writing books about how to write gives you an exercise it is more than likely not worth doing. This person is a theorist rather than a practitioner. And you should always follow the practitioners as they actually have some skin in the game. This is just a fact of life.

There is a weird facet of existence whereby bad advice *sounds* right and yet good advice sounds wrong or counterintuitive. So you have to use discernment to avoid this pitfall and looking at the body of work of the source of the advice is one of the better heuristics to do this.

I say all of this as a lead up to telling you that the writing exercise I will show you today comes from David Milch, the man who wrote *Deadwood*, *NYPD Blue* and *Luck* among other great tv shows. He is considered by his peers to be one of the greatest writers of his generation in any medium. He has made his living and reputation from storytelling, not from merely teaching you his theories of how storytelling works. He's a consummate practitioner. And so, if what I have said above is correct, he is worth listening to.

So let's discuss what the man himself considers to be the most beneficial exercise for writers to practice.

The Exercise Itself

This exercise concerns dialogue and is quick and easy to do, it requires a mere 20 minutes per day to perform but it does need consistency and effort. It is simple, but not easy, a crucial distinction.

So here's what you do.

Your task is to with pen and paper write a scene featuring two characters talking. You will not name or describe them. There will be no scene setting or action, just two people talking.

The way you format it is like a play without stage direction, purely dialogue. So for twenty minutes with no forethought or preparation you have the scene play out on the paper. It may look a little something like this:

A: You're late.

B: Yeah, I know, I know, I feel awful about it. Traffic.

A: It can happen. But still.

B: Look, I'm here now aren't I? I mean, if you want to not bother, if you want me to go then I-

A: I didn't say that. What I'm saying is if I didn't know you, if this weren't me here, then you've made a pretty bad first impression right at the offset. People hold a lot of stock in things like that. Basic professionalism.

B: I know, I know. Look, I'm sorry okay. It won't happen again. Message understood. So can we just put it to one side- I get what you're saying, really- and get down to it.

A: Okay. So. The reason why I called you down here today is...

And so on.

Now this little daily practice seems easy enough, but in my experience the benefits you gain from it are numerous and profound. I'll lay them out.

The Benefits of The Exercise

First, and most obviously, if you do this for 30 days your ability to write credible and authentic dialogue will improve massively. And this is one of the cornerstones of good storytelling. You

can tell the reader more about a character with a single line of authentic dialogue than you can with a whole page of descriptive text. It's the essence of show, don't tell.

And you will also be well on the way to building up the habit of daily writing, which of course is vital. The strict format of this exercise (a set time limit, a set number of characters, and a very restrictive set of rules) removes a lot of the choices you have to make before you begin. Do this exercise at a set time each day and you have basically removed *all* of the decisions that can impede you from getting started.

If all art is performance art then this exercise gets you into the habit of a regular daily performance. No thinking, no prep, no procrastination, just showing up and writing something. And the beauty is you don't even know what this will be before you begin. One line leads to the next and the thing almost writes itself, with you being the conduit. Though Milch doesn't say as much (because all of the analysis in this section is mine and not his) what this exercise essentially is flow state training.

After a week or two of this you will be able to sit down and hop straight into a scene instantly. It doesn't matter if the scene is good or not, or if anything much happens, but as you keep practising you will find that you naturally start including conflict, drama, obstacles, tension, irony, and all of those other writing guide conventions *naturally*.

Writing itself will become less intimidating. Your ability to naturally structure scenes will improve, your grasp of the fundamentals will improve. You will learn what your sticking points are and you will thus be able to do whatever research and work is necessary to shore them up. You will similarly learn what your strengths are and what it is that makes up your own style and voice.

With writing I believe that people already intuitively know much more than they think, they just have to simply learn how to get out of their own way.

So you write for 20 minutes each day and then you put the piece away. You don't go back to it or edit it or tweak it. Each day is a new start. You don't think about either what you have written or what you are going to write tomorrow. Each session is a new discreet entity. You learn to keep showing up and creating in the purest sense. You learn focus. You learn to make creative choices in the moment as one characters lines lead naturally to the others response and so on back and forth.

Give it a try. And let me know what you think either in the comments or over at the Social Club.

I hope this proves to be as useful to you as it has been to me.

How To Write 1000 Words In An Hour

The Workshop #11

Oct 12, 2021

In a (thankfully increasingly rare) moment of weakness I found myself scrolling my twitter timeline. I'm glad that I did because between the ads and the hot takes and the political nonsense of the day I found this excellent question from Mr Kjell. He asks:

Kjell Vdv  @Kjellvdv

You've got one hour to write 1,000 words. How do you start?

October 7th 2021

12 Likes

It's something that is worth considering and in the spirit of 'show, don't tell' I thought that rather than hypothesise in the comments I would instead open up Substack, set a timer for one hour and *show* the process of getting down 1000 words of prose in an hour. Now, eyeballing the text I have written so far I would say that I am about 100 or so words in with only 3 minutes down on the clock. I'm not saying this is going to be easy, but it is certainly doable. So let's see what happens and let's see what we learn along the way. Ready?

Creative Work vs School Work

This is the obvious question that doing this little challenge brings up. Why? What benefit does it bring you to simply be able to rapidly ramble for 1000 words?

It's a fair question. And indeed I would say that the main impetus behind me doing this is merely to prove a point. And that point is that if we aren't especially accounting for quality and lucidity then the ability to get down 1000 words in an hour is not particularly impressive. It shouldn't be a noteworthy feat, but it is sufficiently difficult that doing so may well help to break certain mental barriers in the novice writer. I think we get needlessly hung up on word count and the ability to get a given number of words down during any given writing session. Time at the desk should be the variable, not just words on the page.

I think this word count fetishisation is a hangover from school where word counts are enforced and taken into account as part of the marking scheme. We all have memories of padding out essays with verbose quotations just to make the word count inch closer to the requisite total. We all have memories of torturous pre-deadline nights of desperately trying to get something typed

up that at least vaguely meets the criteria of the essay question asked. And so sadly we later bring these memories and this mentality to our creative work. 1000 words *is* a lot if you have to cite sources and stay on topic and write in the style that we are taught will bring us favour with the teacher or the exam board who will be doing the marking.

But none of this applies to creative work, and yet we forget this. When writing an essay for yourself you are free. You can write whatever you want in whatever way you want as long as you are not boring.

(For example, I have now begun this parenthetical aside for no reason. I don't know why I have done it, but an in-the-moment instinct has told me it's the right move. And so here we are. Perhaps it's merely a cynical ploy to eat up the word count as the Pareto clock besides me tells me I am now over twenty minutes into this exercise. But perhaps not. Perhaps it proves my wider point that as long as you write with enough exuberance, verve and skill you can do whatever you feel like on the page. Perhaps it also proves my point that the goal is to build a relationship with the reader whereby they learn to trust your indulgences because you generally get to some sort of point in the end or you at least prove to be an entertaining guide as you meander into the wilderness)

So where was I? Yes- essay writing, like fiction writing affords us far more freedom than we are often willing to acknowledge. We can do what we want as long as we are not boring.

Timelock

Over halfway there in terms of word count and still plenty of time on the clock. There is the creeping realisation that what I have written so far may well be terrible but what is life without risk?

Okay. Every narrative- even an essay- must have something that propels it forward, something that makes the reader want to continue. Generally with essays this consists of the thesis, of the point that the author wishes to prove. I think this is overrated and it smacks of the classroom a little bit. As a reader I am tired of being told mere information in an easily digestible format. I am tired of takeaway lessons and actionable advice. I would rather experience something or at least be made to feel something.

These are harder skills to master and so they are rarer. They certainly take much more craft and care than my hour time limit allows (oh shit twenty-two minutes to go).

Which is where meta-writing comes in. To propel an essay forward you can simply tell the audience what you are doing as you are doing it. I have already told you about the time limit and I periodically let you know how little time is left. The intrigue, then, comes from you wondering if I am going to make it. Whether I succeed or fail largely doesn't matter because if you have made it this far you are along for the ride.

In certain storytelling circles this device is known as timelock. The story of the protagonist (in this case me) is driven forward by the fact that I am running out of time. You have seen this

device in every action movie where the megalomaniacal terrorist has planted a bomb that loudly ticks down to zero while our hero tries to kill enough henchmen so that he can reach it, disarm it, and save the world. It's a tried-and-true method of engaging the reader from the midpoint of the story to the climax.

Well know it is time for me to disarm the bomb. I have a good twelve minutes left on the clock and I am inches away from the 1000 words in an hour limit. Easy. In fact, like the eighties action hero I might now spend the last few concluding paragraphs wisecracking before I cut the red wire and swagger off into the distance while Eric Clapton plays string bending guitar licks on the soundtrack.

So the point of all of this was this- with practice writing becomes less intimidating. With practice you can learn how to draft rapidly, how to come up with the vague semblance of narrative structure on the fly and how to keep the audience engaged enough to stay with you as you explore a topic. It's all practice, same as anything.

'We are all apprentices in a craft where no one becomes a master.' As Hemingway once said. This is true. But you can become more competent just through sheer practice and repetition. And attempting to write a thousand words in an hour is a worthwhile part of the apprenticeship phase, I have learned.

So- snips red wire- maybe give it a try yourself. Timer stops with 45 seconds to go.

What's the worst that can happen?

Lights a cigarette and stands triumphant in a bloodstained undershirt as the credits roll.

9 Reasons Why Listicles Are Terrible (Number 7 Will Not Surprise You)

The Workshop #12

Oct 19, 2021

You've got to think like a killer to catch a killer, that's what all of the grisly TV procedural would have us believe. Maybe. Or it could just be that if you play in dirt you end up dirty.

In either case, in an attempt to further persuade you that virtually everything that labels itself as 'content' is irredeemably bad I am going to debase myself and write a listicle about why listicles are so awful. How clever. I am not looking forward to it but this, gentle reader, is the kind of personal sacrifice that I am willing to make for your edification. You're welcome.

Now on with the damn list.

This is the only Liszt I have any time for.

1- No One Ever Learned Anything Worth Knowing Via a Listicle

This is the primary truth that has inspired today's number-based diatribe. No one- and I mean no one- has ever learned anything that is truly worth learning via either a listicle or its shrunken cousin the twitter thread. Ever. Putting to one side the wider philosophical discussion that you may well only ever learn things from experience or trial and error (or further, perhaps humans don't actually learn anything other than increasingly sophisticated and subtle means of self-deception), listicles are not the means of gaining knowledge. The medium is the message and the only message behind the medium of a list is that neither the reader or the writer are truly serious about discussing meaningful ideas. If they were the listicle would be a real essay or a book or a lecture or something.

2- Listicles Are Affiliate Advertising Disguised as Content

So what is the point of the listicle then? Why do they exist? Simple. They are a writer led medium, they are designed to benefit the writer and not the reader. In the terminology of Commonplace Newsletter #24 on *How to Be Less Stupid listicle* writers are Bandits (to a greater or lesser degree) and so their readership are therefore Helpless. See, the purpose of a listicle is to a high search ranking repository for affiliate links and advertising, whereas the purpose of a twitter thread is to gain followers. Any learning or 'value' is entirely incidentally if not in fact illusory. If you (believe you) learn something, then that is a bonus as far as the writer is concerned. But the real point is to make metrics move and to make money and attention flow. Which mean persuasion, readability and childish levels of 'insight' are the name of the game.

3- No Listicle Ever Achieve Actual Artistic Merit

Great prose needs room to breathe. It takes time to slowly build towards a crescendo and create something that is meaningful for the reader as an experience. The staccato nature of listicles impede this. A surface level skim cannot facilitate depth. Jumping from one point to the next does not allow for either depth or for the reader to be truly swept away in the flow of a writer's prose. It's the reading equivalent of multitasking. And like multitasking, such pieces give the impression of being efficient when really they are more of a waste of time than doing nothing at all.

4- Listicles Force You to Adopt Polarising Opinions

It's not actually true that listicles can never achieve artistic merit. Jason Pargin (formerly known as David Wong) writes good, fun pieces within a list-based format and has done for years. But this nuance doesn't help my case. If I as listicle shiller want to maximise my audience (see #2) then I have to disregard all points that are counter to my argument and my audiences' expectations. In an actual essay you can play with opposing viewpoints and juggle contradictory beliefs. The greatest essayists- particularly Montaigne- are notoriously contradictory. Because this is what it means to be human and in the never-ending process of thinking about your own lives experience. But in Contentland this won't do. You have to be consistent and unchanging in your worldview. This is what branding is.

5- Listicles Force You to Skim, Which Is Ironic as They Are Designed For Engagement

Halfway done, thank God. This point is a simple one- if you make something too easy to read people won't read it, they will skim. If there is a TL; DR why read the main text? And if there is a list of points in large font why do anything else other than just quickly soft through those while ignoring the smaller words that (allegedly) provide further context and clarification? People are busy and content glorifies both busyness and efficiency. So in trying to appease and pander to the reader the list writer actually ends up repelling them. Which would be funny if it weren't so sad.

6- Restrictive Formats Inhibit Creation More Than They Allow It to Flourish

Creativity can come from constraint. Limitations can lead to more daring creativity. Within reason. Sometimes. The reason why such limitations work are because they shake up some of the patterns that you can fall into as a writer. They make you stretch yourself and improvise and perform in different ways to mitigate the downsides of the limitation. But they only work because they are optional and sometimes arbitrary.

For example deciding you were going to write an albums worth of music all in the same key would shake up some of the stale scales and patterns that middling musicians can end up falling back on out of habit. However, deciding you were only going to write in that one key for the rest of your life would be a nightmare that would soon kill all of your passion for music making.

Beyond a certain point creative constraints become a straitjacket. Listicles are a prime example. You see them suck the life out of writers over time. A sad fate.

7- Arbitrarily Numbered Lists Make You Scrape the Barrel To Reach Your Quota

I am bored to tears. I feel like I have already said enough to make my point. I want this to be over with. But in the title I said this list would be nine items long. And so here I am, desperately trying to think of something else to say. And if the writer is bored and going through the motions this is how the end product will read, no matter how many times you edit it and no matter how many positive and powerful words you use. The reader can always tell when you are faking.

8- Listicles Do Not Attract the Kind Of Readers That You Want

I believe that in the end you get the audience you deserve. Not in quantity necessarily but in quality, if you'll permit me to use so judgemental a word. Your work attracts the kind of people who it deserves. The Last Psychiatrist used to say 'If you are reading it, it's for you'. Well that cuts both ways. And who are you going to attract if you put out engagement friendly, easy to read articles and lists? Simple- you're going to end up with people who like breezy and easy to read pieces. You're going to attract casual readers, the kind who might quickly skim your prose on their phone while they are eating a sandwich at work, or worse, while they are sat on the toilet. Is that who you want reading your work, is that the context that you want your work to be consumed within? If it is then that's up to you, but me personally I want to attract intelligent, thoughtful readers who I can actually forge a connection with. Which is why this post is not public. Because fortunately you were attracted to my work by my actual real writing and not this intentionally awful parody of an article.

9- Listicles Are Beneath Us

This is the central crux and the point I'll end on. We are better than this. As both writers and readers we must make efforts to rise above the sad entropy of increasingly inane, lowest common denominator online writing. We need to write for humans and not for algorithms and machines. Writing should be a reflection of our humanity in all its humour, contradiction, complexity and oscillating emotions. These things are what make us human and reducing thoughts and ideas and stories and truths down to little lists of fluff is in some way inhuman. It is beneath us. It is beneath me. And so I must now end my one and only foray into the sordid world of listicle writing. I would not recommend it.

Thank you for indulging me.

On Juggling Multiple Writing Projects

The Workshop #13

Oct 26, 2021

Social Club regular Ivan/John posted the following request a while ago:

Any advice on how to manage working on multiple things would be lovely, e.g. I'm writing a few short stories and essays and many other things (some of those I want to publish weekly). Obviously I want to finish all of them but it's hard to manage this context switching and most of them cannot be finished within one session because "writing is thinking" you know (I'm not talking about scheduling 2 hours here and 2 hours there for different things) I can be thinking of something for the whole week but write nothing about it, or I can finish it in one sitting, but if it's actually taking a lot of time (which i'm ok with) it's hard to make other "regular" things done

Now this is a great topic that is worth pondering. But right off the bat I have to be honest and say 'I don't know'. I don't think there are any easy answers or hacks when it comes to such things, because if there were you would be doing them already. This is the elephant in the room when it comes to anything productivity related. It's rarely a question of tweaks, it's often a question of internal stuff, at least for me.

Now personally I write and publish multiple things each week but I do them sequentially. A review on one day, a Workshop on another, an essay on another. Compartmentalised, nice and easy. The immediacy of the deadlines for each and the fact that people expect them and would give me grief were I to be late is all the motivation I need. It largely takes care of itself at this point.

But each of these different projects are essentially the same they are all 1-2k pieces that I write in a single sitting after a certain amount of thinking-while-walking time. However, fiction is a different beast. It takes multiple sessions and a lot more thinking time. This makes it a far more rewarding experience and the crucible within which you grow. It also makes it a pain in the arse.

Now I have to point out the obvious. I haven't published a short story in ages. I am possibly not the person to give advice. I do not have everything figured out by any means.

But that being said the way to approach things I believe is to buy time by learning how to churn out decent non-fiction quicker. See this piece here for more on this concept.

Doing this will keep the audience and (Lord help us) 'content' aspect of your operation ticking over which will free up for time for fiction. Try to have a set publishing schedule and stick to it so people can depend on it. And then up the ante and start scheduling. So for example, I publish 3 essay type things per week. But if I can write and schedule 4 each week then this means that every 4th week I can have a week off to focus solely on creating a new piece of fiction. This seems to be the way to go.

I think initially with both fiction and non-fiction you have to place somewhat more of an emphasis on quantity. Showing up and putting stuff out there is how you sharpen your skills and build an audience. And then once this is in place (and I myself am in the transitional phase with

all of this myself), then you can publish less frequently but of a higher quality. There will be less total output but more work that only you could have produced. You have now distinguished yourself and largely moved beyond any notions of competition and being in a crowded marketplace.

So in short, get ahead with the non-fiction to create time for the fiction. Schedule a body of work. And then the real creative work can happen.

But in regard to actually juggling projects, personally I believe it should be one thing at a time. Sure you will be bombarded with other ideas for other pieces and stories (ideas beget ideas, the more of them you see through the more you will get. The list of creative projects to work on should grow year on year) but you should merely take notes and then see them through wholeheartedly when their times comes.

It's just one thing after another, one foot in front of the other, day by day by day.

I hope that helps, Ivan, and whoever else from the Social Club might be reading and wondering.

On Taking a Day Off

The Workshop #14

Nov 2, 2021

All work and no play makes Jack a dull writer. As with everything in life you can only get so far via brute force and effort alone. I know the online gurus argue the opposite case, but then they would, wouldn't they?

See brute force effort and 'hustle' and all the rest of it have their place but they also have their limits. This should be a point almost to obvious to state, but such is the degraded nature of online discourse that you can seem like an original thinker if you simply state that which is obvious but inconvenient to the main narrative/business model.

But let's get back to the example at hand.

See Bull-in-a-china-shop style wading in can generate momentum and energy and it can shake you out of a rut and remove the circling holding pattern of fear and neurotic doubt. Just do it, etc. And this is all well and good but it is very much a beginners strategy. Getting you head down and charging forward is how you *start*, it's how you get going. It is very effective, until it isn't.

Charging blindly ahead is fantastic if you are running in the right direction but it can also lead you to charge right off a cliff and like Wile E. Coyote you can be running on clouds for quite a while, oblivious, until eventually they peter out and you suddenly find that you are plummeting.

Beginners' tactics work for beginners which is why it is vital to be able to honestly assess where you are. If you don't write and publish material consistently then you are a beginner and so consistency and efforts are the things you need to work on. Brute force, head down and get the material out there. Quality is largely irrelevant at this stage and every new essay/story/poem/whatever should be better than the last, every performance should lead to new insights and discoveries about your own process and skillset.

But what happens when you plateau when the gains, so to speak, start to diminish? Well, this is where the generic advice of effort abandons you because that is written for beginners only (it makes sense- most people are beginners, so this is the largest demographic from which to extract money and attention from).

When you hit the plateau what you needs is a day off. To trot out another cliché sometimes less is more. See I believe the plateau, the writer's block, the getting stuck is an intentional impediment created by the mind because it knows that you aren't ready yet. It knows that the piece you are working on hasn't been thought through or researched enough. The mind is trying to protect you from yourself. Now you could override this and hustle your way through, but the end result will be mediocre and in having ignored your instincts and intuitions you will have moved one step closer towards being a hack.

If you are experience enough to be able to write consistently but you are not feeling it today then you should probably take the day off. If this won't 'break the chain' and set you back a week then you should step away from the desk. But you will only learn if this will happen or not through experience, through trying. Nothing exists without risk.

People who are insecure in their ability and their process are unwilling to take a step back so that they can leap forward. And thus they end up staying where they are. But progress in art is not linear. Creativity develops in leaps and bounds. What allows the next leap forward is a sudden 'a-ha' moment of inspiration and these only occur when you are at rest, away from the desk.

Art is a question of power rather than force. Rather than forcing it, things should naturally flow out of you. And though flow is an endlessly debated topic with no definitive answers, my experience tells me that flow results from being well rested and also having given myself sufficient time to daydream and ponder upon the topic at hand.

There's nothing that impedes productivity more than worrying about increasing your productivity. You have to let go. And only then will the words flow freely.

Writing About Writing About Writing

The Workshop #15

Nov 9, 2021

There's a line in Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* where the unnamed narrator complains about the Xerox like nature of his world. Everything is a copy of a copy of a copy, he notes. Everything is a blurred, faded, recursive approximation of a largely forgotten original.

The image resonated with me back when I first read the book and then saw the movie that overshadowed it. In fact, the image still resonates in my imagination, perhaps more so. Because a copy of a copy of a copy is the perfect description for what so much online writing actually is. It's a warning and a reminder both. It's an effective admonition because as I write this I feel a slight queasy uneasiness that I myself might well be adding to the endless recursion with these Workshop essays.

See, rather than being *about* something most writing online is merely about writing itself. Rather than being practitioners, many writers on the internet become commentators, take offerers, spectators. For all the talk of creativity being better than consumption, the vast majority of online creatives rather than stepping into the proverbial arena merely broadcast gossip and conjecture from the press box or at best are play-by-play announcers or coaches.

This is what happens when the desire to create an audience is the primary motivator. Instead of writing you write about writing so that other would-be writers can learn from you how to write about writing. It's insidious and it is a fact that goes largely unremarked up because if it did the whole pyramid might crumble into the desert.

And of course, I'm trepidatious to mention it because with these pieces I too am a part of the same dynamic. Commentary- even jaundiced, contrarian outsider commentary- has a way of bolstering the thing in question, whereas the only true way out is to ignore the egregious thing in question and simply go your own way.

So that's the message here as we stand on the precipice of mind-bending paradox and contradiction. Write about things, don't write about writing. It's been done to death and besides writing is something that you mostly learn by doing rather than by studying theory. I truly believe that the skill is largely innate and is forged by reading widely, practising frequently and trying to capture what you see and feel via the voice that you think in when you ponder things to yourself.

All of that is so individual centred that I can't see how you can even write about it that much other than by recounting your own experience of practicing and by trying to disabuse people of wrongheaded absolutist notions that writing-about-writing writers have popularised as part of their own audience building endeavours.

So that's all I'm trying to do is to help people unlearn. The person who reads zero writing advice is better off than the person who reads all of it. That is a pretty controversial statement I know, but I stand by it.

See, I've been thinking about what these pieces are for and what good they can do. I know how easy it is to lay out a stream of right sounding patter and I know how easy it is to dupe people who are a few steps behind you in the path towards mastery. The truth is that there isn't much to know, or there isn't much to know that can be grasp overtly and taught explicitly. It's all intuitive and all learned through trial and error and reverse engineering the writing that truly moves you. Always has been. Everything else is window dressing and time wasting. Everything else is avoidance of the business of confronting the blank page and getting on with it.

This is what I believe and this is what my experience has taught me. But I don't want you to take my word on this or on any other aspect of writing. I'm an unreliable narrator just like the rest. I just try to admit that fact out loud from time to time.

Don't Pander To The Zeitgeist

The Workshop #16

Nov 16, 2021

This one applies more to essay writing and non-fiction, but I think that the principle is pretty universal. Don't pander to the zeitgeist.

I remember, dimly, going on a heavy night out in London many years ago. On the Tube on the way home one of my drinking buddies for the evening kept drunkenly muttering the phrase 'don't pander to the zeitgeist'. It was strange because such words didn't seem like the kind of thing that would be in the guys vocabulary- presumably he picked the turn of phrase up from somewhere along the way- but nonetheless there it was. And it stuck with me. Because above all else it is a truly excellent piece of advice, especially for the budding writer.

To pander to the zeitgeist is to be trapped in the present, it doesn't offer much scope for the imagination and actual true creativity to roam. You become a reactive automaton- the news or social media feeds provide a topic and you simply react to it. You are not only trapped within an echo chamber, but you perpetuate it. Rather than being a prison who digs a tunnel you become a prison who reinforces the jailhouse locks and starts laying an extra layer of brick wall on the perimeter.

(As much as we may moan- justifiably- about algorithmic manipulations, such technology is ultimately only going on the inputs we provide it. There must be at least some element of mea culpa accountability if the individual is to move beyond them.)

So in short, don't do it. When you come to write a piece try and search beyond the obvious. An essayist is not a journalist and if you have your own platform you do not have to write about the same topics and provide a polemic from the same narrow pool of hot takes as everyone else. You can write about whatever you want, if you can do it entertainingly enough. Whatever you want. Absolutely anything. This is what gives you the edge over the journalists and the hot-takers, so why would you lower yourself to play variations on their click bait games?

Why bother to go to the effort of honing your voice if you don't use it to actually say anything?

Reject False Dichotomies

As the wit once said 'There are two kinds of people, those who believe there are two kinds of people and those don't'

There's something to this. I'm definitely in the later camp.

Now in terms of the topic at hand I believe that this aligning yourself with either side of a (false) dichotomy as it is presented by the zeitgeist is how the whole hot take economy is able to perpetuate itself. In fact the definition of nuance as it is currently manifested occurs whenever someone doesn't immediately throw themselves into the clutches of one side of the argument or the other.

See, the way that things work now is that you are presented a simple frame. X is good or x is bad. Which then accelerates into X is the best thing ever or x should be banned. It's still the same

binary. Whereas what someone who is not trapped in this dynamic might say is ‘x is irrelevant’ or ‘x is merely a distraction from y’

Do you see what I mean?

Now no one is perfect, and the zeitgeist has such a pull that on occasion you will want to write about it. To quote Viktor Frankl: ‘Even a genius cannot completely resist his zeitgeist, the spirit of the times.’ Just don’t make a habit of succumbing to it, is what I’m saying, unless you want to become lost in that maddening vortex where everything feels completely unmoored and where everything is urgent yet nothing is actually permanent or meaningful.

To write well you have to have a worldview of your own. You have to have a series of topics, themes and obsessions that are intrinsic to you. For the most part they will be unconscious (this is why great writers are rarely the best analysers or explainers of their own work- it’s all instinct and compulsion). For these things to emerge you have to simply let them out and write about what you feel driven to write about.

To pander to the zeitgeist is to override and to second guess this usually in the misguided effort to try and increase your own popularity by attempting to surf the wave of whatever is trending at the moment. This is the definition of short-term thinking.

Writing is a long-term game and the genius, as Thelonious Monk reminds us, is the one most like himself. And you don’t get to become yourself by writing about the same timely topics as every other sucker.

I’ll give you some proof. Read a great essay something by Montaigne or Dr Johnson or one of the greats. They still resonate today. Why? Because they are not filled with topics a s references that date them and make them incomprehensible to a reader not from the time and place contemporary to the author. They are timeless. That’s what we are aiming for.

Leave the trend chasing to the clickbait journalists. They can keep it.

On Feedback

The Workshop #17

Nov 23, 2021

Feedback is vital. Now this is true for anyone engaging in any kind of creative pursuit, but it is especially true for the writer. The practice of writing with all of its pondering and drafting and editing has a way of making a person very inward and 'living in their head' if they are not careful. It can get so that you completely lose the ability to distinguish the proverbial trees on account of the proverbial forest.

Unless you get good feedback on your work from people whose opinion you trust you will eventually flounder. Feedback is, to my mind, one of the major pluses of having an audience. But it has to be the real deal and come from people who know what they are talking about and are brave enough to say what needs to be said.

Know that when I go on period rants about the corny, do-whatever-it-takes than people employ to build as large an online audience as possible I do so out of love and concern. Because if you have hundreds of thousands of 'followers' I can near guarantee that the quality of feedback your work receives (if you actually still write anything longer than a social media post at that point) will be absolute garbage. Just pure sycophancy. Smoke blowing. Useless. Self-serving indiscriminate praise in the hope that you will retweet their cloying, cringe-inducing words of idolisation. This is the opposite of good, honest, useful feedback.

This is not where you want to be. Now the ego in all of us might think it is, but it is not. This idolisation is the path to downfall, or at least it is something that will seriously throw you off the path of longevity, which is the name of the game for the artist. Slow improvements towards mastery, slow, hard-won growth, year after year after year. This is the name of the game with creativity.

But back to feedback. As I said with the nature of writing it is easy to get too close to the work. To be unable to step back and appraise it with the detachment that is necessary. This is where feedback comes in. See, in an ideal world you will build up an audience that is intelligent, discerning and more importantly highly engaged with your work. In fact, I don't like the word audience- it implies passivity and an immutable one-way relationship- I prefer the term readership. This implies a more back and forth circular relationship and more of an equal footing. Which is how it should be. How it is, even.

So. Assuming you have your intelligent, engaged readership (and numbers are really not that important, it is quality and fit that matter. Another point the online audience-maximisers miss) they will tell you what is what. Freely. If you are worthy of being read (because you are honest, because you are trying, because you show potential, because you are consistently putting work out there) they will offer you genuine insights and point out things about your own subject matter, methods and techniques that you yourself may not have even consciously been aware of. Again, the forest and the trees. This is invaluable.

A real readership will be able to place any given piece in context with your body of work. 'This latest story seems to be a real improvement over your earlier work', 'I'm not sure about this new direction because of x, y and z' and so forth. They are more often than not right, or at least they have a point. In the aggregate, if not individually.

Now I'm not saying that you should bow to the readership and slavishly follow and enact every last suggestion they make. These things will often conflict for one. But, they should definitely be listened to and considered deeply. Artists forget that no matter how rarified and highbrow their art, ultimately it is there to provide an aesthetic experience and, on some level, to *entertain* an audience. You should never sell out your vision and principles, but you also have to remember who this is all for and who it is that keeps the lights on and the fridge stocked. So listen. And consider.

The readership want you to succeed. They want you to improve in your craft for the selfish reason that they then get to enjoy better work. Everyone wins. Writing as with all art is ultimately an intuitive act. Ideas come out of the ether and the best work seemingly creates itself while you are there as an onlooker. At best, guided by instinct, you are an antenna and the work flows through you. You become a 'stenographer for the muse' as Cody Clarke once said.

So on occasion, with your instincts screaming at you, you will ignore all of the thoughtful advice and suggestions of the readership. You will follow the intuition, The muse, just to see where it leads. And you may fail. You have to make your own mistakes sometimes, even if on some level you know that they are mistakes before you even begin.

But when intuition and readership feedback are in sync- that is when you are on to something. Creativity is an almost preverbal thing, you have whims and gut-feelings but nothing that is actually concrete or articulated. Feedback brings this articulation. It puts into words things you have only vaguely suspected, whether good or bad. And that is why it is invaluable. And that is why you must intentionally seek it out and foster it, no matter how much it can sting.

Film Reviews

The Driver (1978)

TJB Review #01

Online, I quite often find myself being drawn into the tedious ‘creation vs consumption’ debate. It’s silly. Many take the stance that creation is superior to consumption and that consumption must therefore be minimised. It is largely a waste of time, they say. Well, that is palpable and obvious nonsense, I say.

Show me a musician and I’ll show you someone who was a music fan first. Show me a film director and I’ll show you someone who is an ardent student of cinema and a voracious moviegoer. Show me a writer and I’ll show you someone who was a reader first. This is an iron law. Usually I like to be ‘on the one hand this, but on the other hand that’ about debates but there will be no quarter given on this one. You have to consume first and consume omnivorously if you are to create anything of worth in the arts.

I mention this as a prelude to this new feature, where I will be reviewing some of what I consume. It will be primarily cinema, as film is the quickest and easiest way to digest an entire narrative in a single sitting. And it’s fun.

Given that contemporary Hollywood is crowded with sequels, prequels, reboots and remakes we will mostly be going back in time and assessing examples of what I- in unapologetically elitist fashion- call ‘real cinema’, examples of which almost always have:

- No CGI
- No superheroes
- No sequels, prequels, retcons or reboots
- A sub-2 hours run time
- No frantic cutting and shaky camerawork
- A pleasing (or at least interesting) aesthetics sensibility
- A focus on human stories and human themes

You get the idea. I’m sure we will revise and expand upon this loose definition as we go here. I’m sure we will bend a few of the rules and discover a few of the exceptions too.

Interestingly, we can say that virtually all films released before the turn of the millennium were ‘real’ in the above sense of that word. In fact, you could argue that film was a twentieth century medium and that what we are experiencing today is merely its death rattle.

So given that, today I am going to start this ongoing series off with the discussion of a 20th century film that ticks every last one of the boxes above.

We’re going to talk about Walter Hill’s 1978 masterpiece of minimalist cool ‘*The Driver*.’

Now, just one last piece of housekeeping before we begin. Know that every single film that I ever discuss in these reviews will not be star rated. I don't believe in such nerdy rankings as a rule- the words themselves should convey the writers recommendation.

Further: a film is either worth watching or it isn't, and I'm not going to bother talking about any film that I don't think is worth your while to watch.

Everything I talk about here can be assumed to have an implicit four or five star rating.

And with that being said let's discuss an example of a five star film if ever there was one...

The Driver (1978)

D. Walter Hill

W. Walter Hill

S. Ryan O'Neal, Bruce Dern, Isabelle Adjani

The Detective : A friend of yours told me where to find you in the middle of the day.

The Driver : I don't have any friends

The Detective : That's right. No friends. No steady job. No girlfriend. You live real cheap, you never ask any questions... boy, you got it down real tight. So tight that there's no room for anything else. And that's a real sad song. Only trouble is, eh, sad songs ain't sellin' this year...

Man, I love this film. I've lost count of how many times I've viewed it since I first came across it in my Granddad's VHS collection as a bored pre-teen one fateful Sunday afternoon.

[Granddad was a John Wayne man, a Lee Marvin man- and those visits to my grandparents with their obligatory video watching did, in retrospect, do a great deal to shape both my aesthetics and my world view. Between Mitchum-type noir movies and an obsession with Batman: The Animated Series you can see how I became a curmudgeonly hipster grump (in the 1940's sense). But I digress...]

Simply put, *The Driver* holds up to repeat viewing in the way that few films do. It's a tight-as-a-drum 88 minutes long and simply a perfect piece of minimalist construction and storytelling.

[The script form *The Driver* is quite rightly recommended as essential reading for all novice screenwriters. But it is very hard to come by.]

You can see *The Driver's* influence in more recent films such as *Baby Driver (2017)* and for my money the car chases in *The Driver* are far superior in both pace and excitement to those more acclaimed ones that feature in *Bullitt (1968)*.

Everything in this film just sings, man.

The pacing is perfect, the cinematography has that simultaneously stylised cool meets sleazy patina that marks so many of the great films of the '70's, the dialogue is a masterclass of economy without resorting to mumbled monosyllables, the direction is assured without having to go in for any showy tricks. You just feel like you are in safe hands. You feel like everyone involved knows what they are doing and that they are going to take care of you and ensure that you have a fun moviegoing experience.

And really that's all you can ask for, though very few nowadays (here comes Granddad the bricklayers influence again) have an appreciation for craftsmanship and the kind of competence that doesn't make a big song-and-dance about itself.

And I haven't even spoken about Bruce Dern yet. About the acting in this thing. See in the world of *The Driver*, where no-one has a name, just a role (The Driver, The Player, The Connection, The Kid) Bruce Dern is The Detective. And you'd best believe he is *The Detective*. Dern is out there just chewin' up the scenery and somehow not turning his performance into the kind of eye-roll inducing work that Pacino has been putting in since *Heat* (1995). Tremendous stuff.

I'm trying to restrain myself here because I could talk about this film all day. I'm trying (in all of my work in fact) to practice the central lesson of *The Driver* and to strive to be a prepared, figured-out-all-the-angles professional who simply says the essence of what needs to be said and leaves it at that. Because that's what this film is, it's a perfect statement- concise, considered, cool-calm-and-collected, the kind of style-AND-substance artistic statement that many aspire towards but all too few actually manage to pull off.

A closing thought to prove my points. If you have a free evening at some point watch *The Driver* and follow it up by watching Nicholas Winding Refn's highly touted *Drive* (2011). Now tell me that Hill's film isn't the better picture. That *Drive* isn't a pale derivative that trades in ultraviolet shock rather than an assured slow build of intensity. Tell me that the superior laconic getaway-driving Ryan isn't O'Neal over Gosling and try and tell me- with a straight face- that they still make em like they used to.

Charlie Bubbles (1968)

TJB Review #02

Charlie Bubbles is a film that has largely been forgotten. Yes, it has a Criterion release, but I would be surprised if more than one or two of the people who read this piece will have even heard of the film, let alone seen it. Such is the way of most art, it is created, it is enjoyed by its

audience, it speaks to its time and then it is forgotten and buried somewhere within the mountainous pile called 'culture'

And so we tell ourselves that the process of creation is reward enough. Fortunately, this is actually true. Or if it isn't then my artistic equivalent of Stockholm Syndrome is now in the terminal stages.

But anyway.

Charlie Bubbles has largely been forgotten. And that's a shame because it is a very interesting piece of work. I would have thought that the fact that it is the only film to be directed by the late, great Albert Finney would give it some cult appeal, but sadly I suspect that most would only dimly recollect Finney as being the white bearded, shotgun wielding gamekeeper from that latter-day James Bond film.

Again, the vagaries of the artists lot.

I harp on this point because it is pertinent to discussing *Charlie Bubbles*, a film which was clearly very close to the heart of Mr Finney.

See, our hero- if that's quite the right word- is a writer. He's a successful writer in Swinging Sixties London, a working-class Mancunian lad who has found fame and riches. We see this from the evocative opening shots of the West End. We see Charlie in his champagne-coloured convertible Rolls Royce, we see the smart streets sparsely lined with chrome heavy cars.

We see Charlie in an upscale restaurant- all red walls and fruit basketed finery, the clientele all fitted out in Saville Row tailoring and drawing on Churchills and Toros. The head waiter is moustachioed and obsequious and has sweat dripping down his bald pate as you would imagine.

Charlie's advisors talk escrow, alimony, moving money around off the books, taking up residence abroad to ease the old tax burden. This is Charlie's world now. And he is clearly bored of it and numbed by it.

Cue the bark of a thick Northern working-class accent amid the background of smart restraint. 'I arrived tieless. I was forced to wear this filthy object.' Charlie's old friend. A symbol of how he used to be.

Next comes a head-spin of Swinging Bohemian fun- a Dada-esque food fight (spaghetti in the hair, jug of cream in the breast pocket, a flan to the face like clowns in a circus), a department store costume change into a working man's flat cap and slacks, pinball, bookies, snooker hall, pint after pint after pint, Charlie with endless cigar, his mate with his proletarian Woodbines.

And therein lies the rub you see. Our man Charlie is trapped between two worlds- successful enough to no longer fit in among the many semi-comatose salt-of-the-earth drinkers at the other tables but not well-bred and privately educated as to fit in among the stuffy suits at the red walled fine-dining establishment.

As Charlie's drinking buddy puts it:

Just look at these faces. [referring to the aforementioned salt-of-the-earth pissheads]. Well you won't see those sitting upstairs in yer ivory tower tappin yer typewriter. You get cut off from life that way? What do you do all day?

Our theme in a nutshell.

I'll tell you more about it after I insert the credits here...

Charlie Bubbles (1968)

D. Albert Finney

W. Shelagh Delaney

S. Albert Finney, Colin Blakely, Billie Whitelaw

You see, Charlie is bored. Existentially bored. Because sometimes nothing fails quite like success. There is little consolation to be had when you are caught between two classes, between two worlds. Both become equally alien.

Charlie can modulate his accent depending on his audience but he can't feel at home.

Now, it goes without saying that Finney is tremendous at conveying this with his acting (I suspect that his own poor Salford upbringing and subsequent classical training at RADA provided plenty of fuel and reference points, if not quite Charlie's felt level of apathy) but I was surprised at how good he was at directing.

It's a shame that this is his only work behind the camera, but I admire anyone who can walk away one-and-done having said what they wanted to say.

In *Charlie Bubbles* we see nice bits of inventive filmmaking (particularly the split screen security camera scene which shows how isolating it is to be surrounded by scurrying two-faced household staff), shifts from realism to surrealism and nice Nouveau Vague inspired touches (and I don't mean that as an insult).

Yes, it's all very slow for the fried dopamine receptors of the Google Generation (this is true of 99% of what I will review here and I will not add this disclaimer any more. Take it as a given). Yes it meanders and is not particularly plot heavy. But this just gives it all room to breathe in the way that cinema used to know how to do.

This is a simple story of someone who is depressed and doesn't know they are. Someone who is successful materially but most of the way towards dead emotionally. Not the easiest thing to pull off in a visual rather than literary medium but Finney manages it wonderfully on both sides of the camera.

Now I could be biased here, as a lot of the themes and class-based stuff here resonated with me for personal reasons. Maybe I am overselling an average film. But I don't think so.

There is enough here in terms of visuals, performance and storytelling to keep a cineaste with an intact attention span suitably entertained. But there are no explosions, no ligament snapping acts of revenge-seeking violence, no downed helicopters or spraying automatic pistols or world threatening catastrophes.

I consider this to be a good thing. And maybe you will too. Who knows? Ultimately, it is up to each individual to engage with the world as it is. Which of course is what our man Charlie eventually comes to realise.

Review: Pump Up the Volume (1990)

TJB Review #03

Essentially, you've got two types of films. You've got what I like to call Diminishers and what I like to call Expanders.

Now your Diminisher is the type of film that is all the rage when it comes out and all of your friends tell you you have to make time to go and see it (or stream it on Netflix or whatever it is kids do in this post-cinema world of ours).

These type of films usually have a twist ending and nifty ultraviolence and set-pieces and all the rest of it. And you go and watch em and you have a great old time and you discuss and theorize about them over coffee or a few pints afterwards.

And yet.

And yet as the days and months and years go by you forget about what you've seen, it leaves no impression other than its title, who the lead actor was and possibly the vague ghost of a plot outline.

Inception (2011) is a prime example, I would say- all of that hubbub, all of that buzz and the instant sky-rocketing to the top of the IMDB Top 100 Of All Time list and now ten year on I vaguely remember a dreidel, some On Her Majesties Secret Service-esque skiing and some bendy architecture.

That's about it.

Now in contrast to this, you've got the second type of film.

See, the Expanders are films that you may initially love or you may initially only think that they are okay, but over time they grow on you. They burrow into your subconscious for whatever reason. You can recall scenes and snatches of dialogue years later and you could have a reasonable bash at narrating the story around a campfire if needed.

For me *Pump Up the Volume (1990)* is one of these latter films. Which means I'd better get around to actually talking about it directly...

'We're all worried, we're all in pain. That just comes with having eyes and having ears.'

Pump Up the Volume (1990)

D. Allan Moyle

W. Allan Moyle

S. Christian Slater, Samantha Mathis, Annie Ross

Now, a lot of cult classic movies are Expanders and a lot of Expanders go on to be cult classic movies, shaping the lives (in some small way) of all the weirdos who happened upon them.

And cult classic, coming-of-age, teen-ennui movie fans tend to favour a certain set of ingredients.

Chief among these, if you want to make a cult classic movie, is you need memorable dialogue. Even if you're not making a flat-out comedy per se, you need some catchphrasy dialogue that kids can quote at school and add to their burgeoning lexicon of snark, rejoinders, acerbic wit and seen-it-all-before, old-before-their-time cynicism.

Films, being projected dreams and fantasies, are where teens learn how to slouch, how to dangle a cig from the corner of their mouth and squint against the smoke and how to conform to the adolescent phase of anti-conformity.

You need some real one-liners in your quiver, to reach this demographic. And *Pump Up the Volume* has such quotables in spades.

Here's a small sampling of lines from our protagonist Happy Harry Hard On, played by the young, in-his-prime Christian Slater:

Just look inside yourself and you'll see me waving up at you naked wearing only a cock ring.

Or how about:

I mean, if I knew anything about love, I would be out there making it, instead of sitting in here talking to you guys.

Or the juvenile gem:

Remember my dear, I can smell a lie like a fart in a car.

So far, so authentically teenaged.

And then you have the Ivan Illich/ R.D. Lange-esque:

Feeling screwed up at a screwed-up time in a screwed-up place does not necessarily make you screwed up.

And finally the pure summation of school and the whole teenage existential condition itself:

Being a teenager sucks. But that's the whole point. Surviving is the whole point.

Now some of those lines might be a bit contextual and might not quite sing when taken in written form, but if that last one doesn't resonate with you, then I don't know what to tell ya.

I'm dedicating this unusual song to an unusual person who makes me feel kind of... unusual.

So you've got your great dialogue. That's element number one of making a great coming-of-age teen classic.

Element number two is a great soundtrack. And as the title implies, *Pump Up the Volume* passes with flying colours.

You've got *Wave of Mutilation* by The Pixies, you've got The Cowboy Junkies doing a haunting cover of Robert Johnson's *Me and The Devil Blues*, you've got Bad Brains fronted by Henry Rollins covering the MC5's *Kick Out the Jams*, you've got Ivan Neville's filthy bass line sporting slow jam *Why Can't I Fall in Love*

And as a through-line throughout the whole film, you have Leonard Cohen's *Everybody Knows*. Cohen there at the height of his late 80's shitty Casio keyboard and Marlboro wrecked sub-baritone majesty, growling about the unfairness of life and the lies of romance and how it's poor sucker like us who bear the brunt.

Perfect material then, for the nascent young suburban cynic who is struggling to glimpse a future beyond one of 37 slightly different consumerist variations of adulthood.

And this brings us neatly to the third ingredient. The one that you could argue that all stories need.

That is that you need to *relate* to what you are seeing as the story unfolds.

And shit, you may find this hard to believe dear reader, but I found the idea of this bookish, profane, music obsessed, truth-to-power speaking, bitter, romantic, pining, one minute shy and taciturn, the next spouting theories and observations in his solitary lair, angry, bored and disaffected teen fairly relatable.

But maybe that's just me. I am after all- at an age where I should probably know better- writing this piece into the void of the internet in the hope, much like Hard Harry, that someone out there will feel what I'm saying.

Now, I can't say that this film is perfect. Me, I much prefer the initial Hard Harry being a bedroom shock jock playing cool tunes opening to the parts near the end where Christian Slater and Samantha Mathis ride around in a Jeep and what-not.

But that's a quibble. Since having my own experiences of what a ballache sorting out the third act of a story can be I tend to be a lot more forgiving of such things.

Essentially, I dug this film when I first saw it in my early twenties, I really enjoyed it (with increasing nostalgia for the faded world of pirate radio and physical music) when I rewatched it recently as an early thirties young fogie and it would probably be an absolute all-time favourite had I seen it in that crucial window of being 14-18 years old.

Cynics are disappointed romantics, pessimists are optimists who have been let down. Hope springs eternal. Teen years are damn hard work that if you're lucky you will eventually look back on fondly.

Pump Up the Volume reminds you of all of that.

And it reminds you that fearless honesty and cranked up rock and roll can often be just what your aching heart needs.

Out of the Past (1947)

TJB Review #04

There's nothing new under the sun', as The Good Book tells us.

I always smile when I fall down online rabbit holes in moments of weakness and discover people talking about weed or tailoring or being in shape or the importance of holding a smirking IDGAF* attitude as if these were all brand-new discoveries.

[*IDGAF is short for I Don't Give A F___. Well, I say: 'By their nomenclature you shall know them.' Anyone who knowingly takes on, wholesale, a lexicon created by someone else is ipso facto a dork. Sorry to have to be the one to tell you.]

See, all of these things had already been mastered and perfected to their highest level of expression by around 1947 or so. And largely, if not entirely, thanks to the star of the film we are going to be talking about today.

Now, for those of you who don't know from the title alone I'm talking about Robert motherloving Mitchum here.

Who was that? Well let me tell you. Mitchum aka 'The Man with the Immoral Face' aka 'Trouble Himself*' was the original Hollywood bad boy.

[*These were both genuine nicknames given to Mitchum by the tabloids of the day. Say what you want about those days of scandal sheets and liquid lunches, those old-school newshounds had a way with a snappy turn of phrase]

There were simply no rebel actors before Mitchum.

As the poet Lloyd Robson put it in his book *'Oh Dad!: The Search For Robert Mitchum*

Before Mitchum, there was no 'great American screen anti-hero'... Mitchum did not fit the niche, he created it. You go look at that niche, you go look at Brando and James Dean and all those misfits and anti-heroes and you'll see, you'll see they're just trying to fill a Mitchum shaped crater, unsuccessfully.

Because in a world of phonies on the lookout for fame, Mitchum not only had the whiff of authenticity, he *reeked* of the stuff.

Just look at some snapshots from the man's biography: He grew up poor, he bounced around different schools, he was expelled (for allegedly leaving a turd in a teachers hat). He left home in his mid-teens to go out on his own and ride the rails around Depression-era America. He was arrested on some trumped-up charges and put on a Georgia chain-gang which he escaped under gunfire, nearly losing a leg to swampland-induced gangrene in the process.

I mean, come on.

And so our man, with his outdoors, manual labour built body, with his somnambulist cool and his sleepy-eyed attitude borne from a deep love of vodka, Pall Mall's and the devil's lettuce* somehow found himself in the movies.

[* when Mitchum was a youth riding the rails marijuana was legal and grew wild by the sides of the tracks. It was considered to be 'the poor man's whiskey.' Like I said, nothing new under the sun.]

He started as a bit player on low budget B-picture Westerns (Mitchum: 'I have two acting styles-with and without a horse') and through subtle acting chops and stealing every scene he was in with his underplayed charisma, our don't-give-a-shit hero worked his way up to leading man.

And his greatest ever leading performance, arguably, occurred in the picture we are going to talk about today- that most noiry of all film noirs, 1947's *Out of The Past*.

Let's open the file on this one...

Out of The Past (1947)

D. Jacques Tourneur

W. Daniel Mainwaring

S. Robert Mitchum, Jane Greer, Kirk Douglas

Kathie: *I don't want to die.*

Jeff: *Neither do I, baby, but if I have to, I'm going to die last.*

If you get a group of film nerds together and ask them to codify what it is that makes a film noir they will give you a laundry list of tropes and details.

The list will include: A detective, a criminal, a femme fatale, a woman who is good but bland, a complex, maze-like plot, flashbacks and voice-overs, ultra-heavy drinking and smoking, rapid-fire, witty dialogue, innovative and shadowy lighting, a European emigre director. And on and on and on. Sounds great, doesn't it?

Well, *Out of The Past* ticks every last one of these boxes

Now, I won't talk too much about the plot because I'll probably end up tying myself in knots, and to tell you the truth following the plot isn't that necessary to the enjoyment of this great film, intricate and well put together though it is*.

[*If you read the credits of all these old movies you will notice that they were usually based on novels and that the novelist himself was usually given the job of adapting his own work for the screen. And though a lot of these guys were rummies and pulp-fiction hacks, they were at least goddamn *professional* about it all. So many scripts today are shoddy, written-by-committee nonsense that John Huston and the like wouldn't have even wiped their noses with them, such is the lack of respect that such scripts have for the fundamentals of telling a good, exciting story.]

You just need to know that our man Mitchum plays Jeff Bailey, a seemingly mundane gas station owner in a remote part of Connecticut who has a secret past. And the arrival of a stranger in town forces our man, an ex private-eye, to return to the dark world that he tried to leave behind.

This is the definitive role for Mitchum. The dialogue is worthy of his cynical baritone drawl (voiceover: 'How big a chump can you get to be? I was finding out') and the rest of the cast are fantastic- Jane Greer is pure evil as the femme fatale Kathie ('We can't be all bad.' Jeff: 'Well she comes the closest') and Kirk Douglas nearly succeeds at beating the mighty Mitchum at his own laconic, wise-cracking, underacting game.

If you've never given old black and white, Golden Age Hollywood a go- this is as good a place to start as any.

This film is a perfect introduction to the more textural, languidly paced, grown-up-without-resorting-to-idiotic-profanity-and-violence world of proper old cinema.

When films were as classy as an evening dress and the plots and the scenes drifted along and enveloped you like so much cigarette smoke. Where everyone was trim-waisted without being health-conscious dullards and where moguls made millions without deciding to treat their audiences like contemptible idiots, unable to stomach anything that at least vaguely looks like art.

Here's the main thing that I take away from watching films from the pre-franchise days. See, for me it's strange how when you watch old films, even a noir with all of its cynicism bordering on nihilism, with its bleak shadows and twilight world of gangsters and gumshoes and murder, you leave feeling somehow clean. Purified. As if the sickly sweet, saccharine stink of modernity has been wiped away by something purer.

Or maybe that's just me and my imagination- retreating into a dreamworld as a bulwark against the blandness of outside.

Which of course is what movies are all about, and why they are fun. You get to dream while you're awake.

So. Although, in reality, the past is a place that you can never go back to- nor is it a place that you would probably ever *want* to go back to- I recommend taking 90 minutes to soak in the black-hearted joys of this b-movie masterpiece.

Take the day off work, draw the curtains on the sun outside, point a lamp up at the ceiling and sink into a sofa as that old timey orchestral score blares out. Pour a daytime whiskey, spark a cigarette- enjoying the illicit pleasure of these now frowned upon things. And when work send you an email, or a text message or a voicemail message, when your smartphone buzzes and completely kills the carefully constructed atmosphere, take a leaf from the book of our antihero Jeff Bailey and message back: 'Baby, I don't care.'

Review: Rumble Fish (1983)

TJB Review #05

No, your mother... is not crazy. And neither, contrary to popular belief, is your brother crazy. He's merely miscast in a play. He was born in the wrong era, on the wrong side of the river... With the ability to be able to do anything that he wants to do and... findin' nothin' that he wants to do. I mean nothing.

So says our protagonist Rusty James' father (played by Dennis Hopper) around half an hour or so into Francis Ford Coppola's *Rumble Fish* (1983)

And, boy, did I find that stuff relatable as a moody teenager.

That's because *Rumble Fish* succeeds wonderfully in its aim- Coppola went on the record to say that he was explicitly trying to make 'an art film for teenagers.'

And what a laudable aim that is, to try and introduce the youth to a whole new world of arts and culture.

(Indeed, this is somewhat my own aim with writing these weekly cinema discussions, from my debut piece on *The Driver* onwards. I want to introduce a new audience to all of the cool stuff they may have missed by not digging deep enough into the treasure trove of culture down the decades and centuries. I mean, what's the point of having any online 'influencer' clout, if you don't use that to get people to check out the good stuff?)

It certainly worked for me.

Just off the top of my head, the list of things I got into off the back of watching *Rumble Fish* includes:

- Albert Camus and Existentialism
- German Expressionism and Film Noir
- Young Mickey Rourke
- Young Matt Dillon (criminally underrated in my book)
- Tom Waits
- Nicholas Ray, James Dean type teen-rebel movies
- All black and white films where people laze around and blow smoke rings at the ceiling (the Nouvelle Vague etc.)
- Marlboro Reds (for better or worse)
- Skipping classes to play pool and drink whiskey (for better or worse)

The list goes on.

Now I was probably temperamentally primed to like such things anyway, but when I first saw* *Rumble Fish* I distinctly remember thinking 'Where have you been all of my life?'

[*I suspect I first saw *Rumble Fish* on a sleepless night, probably on Channel 4. A night where the post-midnight hours provided a little respite from boring school and family and the general Brutalist inspired moperly]

So what is it about this film that makes it so good? Well let's dig into it shall we?

Rumble Fish (1983)

D. Francis Ford Coppola

W. S.E. Hinton

S. Matt Dillon, Mickey Rourke, Diane Lane

Time is a funny thing. Time is a very peculiar item. You see when you're young, you're a kid, you got time, you got nothing but time. Throw away a couple of years, a couple of years there... it doesn't matter. You know. The older you get you say, "Jesus, how much I got? I got thirty-five summers left." Think about it. Thirty-five summers.

Cinema is indelibly tied to memory. At least for me.

Nothing evokes a certain time or a certain place better than rewatching the films that I first saw in that moment- whether they were contemporary films seen on the big screen or decades older fare seen on a television re-run, a library DVD or on a laptop screen.

And *Rumble Fish* brings back that adolescent world before the smoking ban and before the (perhaps final) revenge of the (Silicon Valley) nerds. Squinting against the smoke from the Marlboro hanging just-so from the corner of your lip, playing in (retrospectively) awful garage bands that you truly thought were going to 'make it'; those slow-moving summers of writing on [benches](#) and exploring the edgelands of town and getting into wholesome, free range, latchkey mischief.

Deep sigh, wistful stare into middle distance, shake of the head to bring myself back to the present

That's where *Rumble Fish* takes me. But let's try and be objective about this most subjective medium of popular expression...

Rumble Fish is the story of Rusty James (Dillon), an absent-minded, pretty-but-not-too-bright adolescent who lives on the wrong side of the tracks and in the shadow of his legendary big brother The Motorcycle Boy (Rourke)

See, Rusty James longs for the long gone glory days of the gangs, where The Motorcycle Boy made his rep in the time of the 'real rumbles'.

But those days are gone. Drugs now saturate these monochrome, mythical, smoke strewn streets* and the people, like the camera, move in a languid, loping junkie-step, most notably Cassandra- the trackmarked young schoolteacher who still carries a flame for The Motorcycle Boy.

[*Taking German Expressionist aesthetics to its logical conclusion, every single scene in this film utilises a smoke machine somewhere, greatly adding to the late-night, dream-like quality of the film]

You can never go back. This we learn, as we move through the story of the mercurial Motorcycle Boy's return to his home from a trip to California. A telling exchange:

*Rusty James: What do you think California's like? Like all that shit in the movies.
Blondes walkin' around, The Beach Boys, palm trees, the ocean. How was the ocean?*

The Motorcycle Boy: I didn't get to the ocean.

Rusty James: No?

The Motorcycle Boy: California got in the way.

This is their dynamic in a nutshell.

Rusty is simple, literal and wants to taste some of the pleasures that are beyond the grasp of his enclosed, impoverished world. He wants glory and notoriety, all those things that teenage boys crave.

But *The Motorcycle Boy* is beyond that. He is complex, he is existentially weighed down; he has seen too much, he knows too much and though a natural leader ('That cat is a prince, royalty in exile' a guy at the pool hall says) he knows that 'if you're going to lead people, you have to have somewhere to go.'

Resonant themes, these.

But as subtly as the performances play out and as effectively as the film moves along, propelled by the iconic visuals and the drifting Steward Copeland soundtrack, I suspect that you only really feel the weight of said themes once you have moved towards your own middle years, with perhaps only thirty five summers left.

See, when I was a kid watching this, it was all about the swagger of the young actors mixed with that bittersweet note of vulnerability. It was about the visuals and the smoke and the atmosphere and the quotable dialogue.

But great art grows as you grow. And now that, like *The Motorcycle Boy*, I have the weight of years to keep me grounded, I see that it this film is in fact about so much more than surface.

And that is why it is still worth watching, time after time.

Review: Le Samourai (1967)

TJB Review #06

You can tell a lot about a person by what they change their name to.

Anyone who legally changes their names, adopts a stage name, or creates an internet persona is, more often than not, attempting to create a mini-mission statement that they can sign emails and autograph books with.

And so it is with Jean-Pierre Melville, the celebrate director of the '60's masterpiece we are going to talk about today.

See, first off you've got the 'Jean-Pierre' bit- which was the directors actual given first name(s)- which to an Englishman like me evokes Parisian cool, cafe intellectualism, Gitanes and Existentialism and La Resistance and all the rest of it.

As French as French can be, and proudly so. And indeed, this is a quality that shines through in Melville's work.

But it's the second-name that's interesting, the 'Melville' part, the part that Jean-Pierre decided to change from his given surname of 'Grumbach'

Because 'Melville' as a conscious choice is evocative.

'Melville' is, of course, a reference to Hermann Melville, the writer of *Moby Dick*, that all time classic Great American Novel, that epic tale of obsession and ambition that can be seen to be emblematic of the dark side of the American Dream which defines *The New World*.

Make no mistake, Melville was besotted with early-mid twentieth century American art, as all of the great French writers and filmmakers of the time were*.

[*Camus noted his prose style was a conscious blending of Hemingway and Hermann Melville, Sartre was influenced by jazz, the French New Wave (to which Jean Pierre Melville belonged) had a deep love of Bogie, Cagney and studio gangster films etc]

In fact, France and the USA shared a loving cinematic back and forth that enriched both of their respective countries cinematic outputs.

American Noir and gangster films of the '40's influenced a generation of French critics who went on to become great filmmakers in their own right (Godard, Truffaut etc). These French 'New Wave' filmmakers then created works that inspired a new generation of American directors, led by Martin Scorsese and Francis Ford Coppola.

But this artistic back and forth seems to have stopped now. (2009's incredible *Un Prophete*, which holds its own alongside its across-the-Atlantic forebears *The Godfather* and *Goodfellas* is one of the few examples that I can think of.)

But enough history, back to Melville. As edifying as the context of this French-American Connection can be, it's about time we started digging into today's film itself. And that film is Melville's masterwork, 1967's *Le Samourai*.

Let's get to it...

Le Samourai (1967)

D. Jean-Pierre Melville

W. Jean-Pierre Melville, Georges Pellegrin

S. Alain Delon, Francois Perier, Nathalie Delon

Gunman: Nothing to say?

Jef Costello: Not with a gun on me.

Gunman: Is that a principle?

Jef Costello: A habit.

Jef Costello is a hitman with the soul of a samurai. For the first ten dialogue free minutes we see him meticulously, silently going about his business, the only words we encounter being a quotation from the fictitious Book of Bushido: 'There is no solitude greater than a samurais, unless perhaps it is that of a tiger in the jungle.'

And so it goes, as our assassin Jef (a career best performance from 'International Playboy'TM Alain Delon) lives out his code to its final conclusion, beholden to no friends, no societal law, and no master. With his trenchcoat and his fedora (see what I mean about the French nods to '40's Bogart films?) Costello drifts through the streets and lounges of Paris, gun in gloved hand, subdued jazz in the background, doomed to his fate from the first frame, like the bird he keeps caged in his bare apartment.

This is a pure cinematic experience, this- stylish, visual storytelling, a little cold, a little detached, a little gritty. None of the extroverted hysterics of the cartoonish ultraviolent killers of later-day Hollywood crime films. No, this is a grown-up film with a grown-up sensibility- cool, calm, collected and calculating.

Such assured minimalist filmmaking as that in *Le Samourai* bring to mind an old saying: 'The worse you argument, the louder you have to shout it*'

[*this feels too clever for me to have come up with, but if I've taken it from somewhere I now have no idea of the origin.]

And Delon doesn't need to shout or argue at all. He carries scenes with his actions and not his words.

See, it has been my observation, in both cinema and in life, that a quiet, business-like demeanour and mastery often go hand in hand. And everything about both *Le Samourai* and Delon's performance exhibits this surgeon-like level of hushed precision. Every shot is painterly in its composition, every set and every room is meticulously laid out, there is not a single thing that is extraneous or off-key or unnecessary.

The film is *flawless*.

To witness such mastery unfold is, in and of itself, captivating. And essential to experience if you have designs towards a life of creativity.

This is what I call a 'mind-eraser' film, my highest form of praise. You almost wish that you could erase the memory of ever having seen it so that you could watch it for the first time again.

And I must say, if you haven't seen *Le Samourai* before, I have a little envy in my heart for you. Because you are really in for something special, my friend.

Review: Heaven Knows, Mr Allison (1957)

TJB Review #07

When I first saw this particular film, or rather half-saw it, I was working a weekend shift in a residential care home.

On the shift in question, I was assigned to one of the all-male houses in which the front room telly was usually set to one of the old-time movies channels hidden down near the bottom of the freeview list, near Babestation and its ilk. One of the better of these channels was called Movies4Men, but it's gone now. Whether it was low viewership or women citing exclusion that finally killed it is something that I can only speculate on.

Anyway. So working there, I was used to conversations with the residents being soundtracked by the *tiing* of Hollywood bullets ricocheting off Monument Valley rockfaces. I was used to the absurdity of walking into the lounge to announce that dinner was ready as Ennio Morricone guitars and whistles formed an ominous accompaniment.

(I'm not gonna lie- there were plenty of times where me and some of the residents quick-drew finger-guns and winced as we clutched at imaginary gut-shot wounds.)

And I was used to seeing snatches of great and unheralded second-string Studio-era classics that time and audiences have sadly neglected. Seeing them, that is until the phone rang or the medication needed popping or the potatoes boiled over or one of several dozen other errands that nagged for attention.

Oftentimes I would jot the title down on a scrap of paper and tuck it into my shirtpocket and tell myself that I would search it out off-shift. And sometimes, if that paper scrap doesn't go through the washing machine, I do. And so here I am writing with a square of paper on the countertop next to me with the words *Heaven Knows, Mr Allison* written on it in my barely decipherable hand.

Heaven Knows, Mr Allison

D. John Huston

W. John Huston, John Lee Mahin

S. Deborah Kerr, Robert Mitchum

First things first- this film is beautiful to look at. It's filmed in DeLuxe Color CinemaScope (whatever that means) and the aquamarine waters of the South Pacific and the yellow and oranges of the tropical fruit shimmer and glow and radiate on the screen. As does the white of Deborah Kerr's habit and the outdoorsy mahogany tan of our man Robert Mitchum. In part you'd be happy to sit there and watch the thing with the volume down to zero, watch it in the same way in which you might let an Attenborough documentary on sea life wash over you on a nothing-to-do Sunday morning.

The story, for what it's worth, goes like this: Mitchum is the titular Mr Allison- a marine who gets washed up on a South Pacific island inhabited only by an Irish nun, Sister Angela, played by Deborah Kerr. They hunt for a sea turtle and forage for fruit, they talk about their pasts and what would've been their future, they hide out from the looming Japanese. Soon Mr Allison has a skinful of plundered sake and pops the question to Sister Angela and Sister Angela rebuffs him as she is already married to Christ. And then things come to a head with the occupying Japanese and some of Allison's fellow Jar Heads.

But as with so much of Old Hollywood the pleasure is not in what happens, but in the process of its unfolding. Old films as made by old hands like John Huston off a gentler, more textural pleasure. They draw you in like a whisper, like a beckoning finger and they envelop you like the daydreams made of light that they are.

From the establishing shots of waves and palm trees and the sea-drenched Mitchum elbow crawling from sheltering rock to sheltering rock you feel in safe hands. Shots are confident and composed but unobtrusive. The dialogue- Allison's grown-up street tough orphan attempting to

talk respectful like vs the upright but humane and subtly humorous speech of the novitiate- rings true and, as with all good dialogue, is able to get across a ton of character insights with grace and economy.

And the acting is phenomenal, in that long-gone, low-key old-pro style. From a time when the Academy Award recognised best acting rather than *most* acting in a motion picture.

I rate Mitchum very highly, as you probably know. I rate John Huston highly too. And as these reviews (or springboards for me to talk about whatever I feel like talking about on any given day) start to mount up I suspect we'll be dipping into their respective bodies of work more.

Even a bad Mitchum flick is enlivened by his charm and presence. Same with Huston. And when they both actually *try*, when they both give a shit about the project in question then it's liable to be very good indeed.

Which is how Heaven Knows... comes across to me.

And call me an old-fashioned sentimentalist but I thought there was something refreshing, something that has been lost about the story of a chaste and unrequited love story where religious conviction represented an understood and impassable threshold rather than a mere temporary impediment to the man inevitably having his way with the token love interest.

Strange how outmoded, ancient even, such an idea feels. Plus the fact that there was zero profanity and only one act of (almost off-screen) violence. And there were only two actors and the whole thing is carried by their acting and by the strength of the writing underneath that.

Like I said- a gentler, more textural pleasure.

Which, to the simultaneously over- and under-stimulated modern imagination, is as refreshing as a belt of strong liquor on a lonely island.

You Only Live Once (1937)

TJB Reviews #08

“You Only Live Once should be seen often.” — François Truffaut

Old Mr Truffaut is not wrong. And yet this film- as with so many others that I talk about in this publication- goes largely unnoticed today.

I should imagine that even if someone were to want to explore the films of the undoubtedly great Fritz Lang they would start with *Metropolis*, *M*, *Dr Mabuse* and other German works well before exploring Lang’s Hollywood output post his fleeing from the rise of the Nazis. Which is understandable- those films listed above are stone cold classics- but it’s kind of a shame too.

Lang never had a true cinematic hit since his escape across the Atlantic, but he did produce a consistent and steady stream of dark, visually stunning, shadowy, rich, ambiguous thrillers and melodramas. His work laid some of the foundation blocks for what became known as Noir, his Expressionistic use of long shadows and unconventional angles forming the visual palette for those postwar paranoiac tales of detectives and femme fatales being haunted by the inevitability of fate.

Among the non-more-American backdrop of a story ostensibly inspired by Bonnie and Clyde, the Old World fatalism and sympathy for the down-at-heel and unlucky as they try to escape the forces of inevitability bleeds through.

Alongside the tension that exists in the narrative there is a further tension that the filmgoer feels as they sense a relentless and by all accounts dictatorial auteur battling not only with his actors and crew, but with the Production Code that demanded that crime must be punished and violence must be merely hinted at or, better yet, unseen.

But art can thrive under any restriction and in any context. And so *You Only Live Once* is a film you should see. At least once, if not often.

Let's watch the opening credits roll, and then I'll tell you more about it...

YOU ONLY LIVE ONCE

D. Fritz Lang

W. Graham Baker, Gene Towne

S. Sylvia Sydney, Henry Fonda, Barton MacLane

From the very opening what strikes you- or what struck me at any rate- is the sound. For a man still remembered primarily for his silent films, the use of sound in *You Only Live Once* is sensational. Lang only made *M*- his first talkie- a mere 6 years earlier and the use of sound itself was still relatively new in cinema. But here Alfred Newman's score soars and adds all the requisite tension and dramatic thrust you could hope for. It establishes mood just as much as the fog and the shadows to come.

We start off light with the ludicrously accented caricature of an Italian grocer telling the radiant and ever-patient legal secretary Joan (Sylvia Sydney) about the neighbourhood policeman who keeps brazenly helps himself to apples from the poor saps cart. But soon enough we learn that the lovely Joan's (even her 1930's hairdo is curled into a kind of halo) has a bad boy boyfriend, a jailbird who is just about to get out of the can after a three year stretch for driving the getaway car for a gang of bank robbers.

People warn her about this 'no good gorilla' Eddie, played with atrophying stoicism by Henry Fonda, a man who ironically bears more than a passing resemblance to stoicism-as-self-help peddler Ryan Holiday.

On life so it is on the screen. As fate, a B&B owner (played, amusingly, by that Wicked Witch of The West lady) and a hard-hearted employer all conspire against our man Eddie he is drawn back to the temptations of his old ways.

In a smoke strewn, ambiguous scene we see another bank robbery which our man may or may not be the wheelman for. At this point in the narrative he's money-desperate and at the end of his

rope having KO'd the owner of the truck company which Joan's boss had secured him a job at. His ambitions of honest employment and domestic bliss with his sweetheart are now down the tubes. The old recidivism kicks in. 'And to think,' he says, to himself, to no one, to God, 'To think, I wanted to go straight.'

Fate conspires. Our man is in jail again. Death row. Now, this isn't where the film ends but this is where our discussion of it will end because the whole jail segment of the film has now indelibly been burned into my memory. It's incredible. All of Lang's Expressionism is brought into play with the framing of Eddie in his cell- the distant window light and the cell bars casting shadows like long fingers, dividing the world into irreconcilable segments of black and white. This is the kind of visual symbolism that registers deeply and almost below the level of consciousness.

If films are dreams then this scene especially, and the ones to follow, capture the elongated and unmoored topography of being trapped in a nightmare. It's stunning work and does the heavy lifting of propelling the plot more than vast swathes of dialogue ever could. In fact, and this is not a surprise given Lang's pedigree, I reckon you could watch the film on mute and be able to follow along perfectly well.

This is the sign of a great and surehanded director. Of someone who you can entrust with your time and attention.

Now, I could go on and on about this film for another thousand words easy. But the film itself- clocking in at a mere 85 minutes- is a lesson in storytelling economy, and I will heed that lesson by signing off.

Sometimes less is more. And sometimes giving the audience slightly less than they expect can be the key to exceeding their expectations.

The Thin Man (1934)

TJB Review #09

One of the symptoms of tipsiness, besides warmth in the cheeks, fuzziness at the edges of peripheral vision and an insatiable desire for health code violating late night street food, is nostalgia. Not nostalgia in the melancholic wishing-the-world-were-different sense, but nostalgia of a more romantic, wistful, let's forget the cares of reality and commit ourselves to a life of wit and conversation and simple immediate pleasures sense.

I mention this because today's film *The Thin Man* is absolutely totemic of that hard-to-reach state of ideal intoxication. In reality boozing- especially once you pass that late youth stage of naivety, exuberance and unblemished internal organs- often becomes a tedious oscillation between sluggishness, boorishness, forgetfulness and staring-into-the-bottom-of-the-glass depression. But fortunately the world of *The Thin Man* has scant little to do with reality, which is what makes it so fun.

Great films are waking dreams, they are make-believe lands you can visit to escape the grey groundedness of the real world. Much like having a skinful on a Friday night. But unlike getting royally hammered, getting intoxicated on cinema won't leave you sick, feverish and trembling come the morning.

So with that disclaimer to the real world perils of the demon rum out of the way, let's talk about Nick and Nora, the two most debonair dipsomaniacs in the history of the silver screen.

The Thin Man (1934)

D. W.S. Van Dyke

W. Dashiell Hammett, Frances Goodrich, Albert Hackett

S. William Powell, Myrna Loy, Maureen O'Sullivan

Now, I haven't read the Hammett novel that this film is based on, but I really don't think that matters. You can just tell that this film- incidentally filmed in a mere sixteen days- is not faithful in the least to whatever source allegedly inspired it. If anything the sozzled post-Prohibition glamour of the real life Dashiell Hammett and his wife Lillian Hellman are clearly more of a touchstone than whatever happens in the novel that MGM brought the rights to.

Because what makes this film is that most mercurial and hard to define thing: chemistry. And William Powell as Nick and Myrna Loy as Nora have it in spades. Every time this pair of soused sophisticates are on screen together it is just sensational- zingers, gestures, affection, embrace, pranks, wit, real tenderness.

I'll cite the same legendary scene that everyone cites because it's too good not to:

Our hero Nick- who I haven't even mentioned yet is a gentleman detective, allegedly retired from the racket- is holding court at the long bar of a swanky establishment at Christmastime. A matre d' and a trio of bowtied bartenders look on as our man deftly handles a martini shaker. 'Always have rhythm in your shaking' he expounds as he pours out his signature cocktail. 'Now a Manhattan you shake to foxtrot, a Bronx to two-step time, but a dry Martini you always shake to Waltz time'. With his pencil moustache and custom cut pinstripe, our man has the dour and taciturn James Bond handily beat in my opinion.

Then a dame appears with some exposition which our man- hood eyed and gently swaying- sort of pays attention to. Something to do with her father being missing. We the audience are much like the tipsy detective- the plot is just something that washes over us, a mere vehicle to further fun and capers. The boredom of plot movement is interrupted by the chaotic entrance of the lovely Nora- all fur coat and tottering bundle of presents being dragged in by the couples' dog Astor. (There's lot of dog reaction shots in this film which I'm sure both the creators of Frasier and Wallace and Gromit copped a few ideas from)

The couple sit at a table and fire off some sparkling repartee. Then the waiter arrives.

Nora: How many drinks have you had?

Nick: This will make six martinis.

Nora: (to the waiter) All right, will you bring me five more martinis, Leo? Line them right up here.

That, friends, is a marriage that is destined to last. Like I said- chemistry.

In a world where virtually all stories about marriage are tales of the ebbing away of love or the sordid regret of infidelity, seeing a couple on screen who both get along, give as good as they get, and seem like their relationship is more than just Platonic coziness is refreshing. As refreshing and bracing as that lethal line-up of dry martinis.

You can see why Powell and Loy ended up co-starring in over a dozen films together, including a whole slew of *Thin Man* sequels. Besides the nothing-new-under-the-sun nature of Hollywood's need to milk any viable franchise dry, it's clear as day that any film with these two in is a worthwhile watch. In fact, it wouldn't surprise me if some of the *Thin Man* sequels seem actually better than this original.

The only problem with *The Thin Man* is that you feel like you could do with even more Nick and Nora. I was utterly ambivalent about the plot (as with all adaptations of alcoholic detective novels in the Golden Age of Hollywood the plot doesn't make too much sense if you put it under sober scrutiny. See also *The Big Sleep*) and some of the peripheral characters. When Nick- in true whodunnit style- gathers the suspects around the dinner table he simply seems amused, as if beyond the fourth wall, he knows that the audience, like himself, simply couldn't care less and are merely there to have a good time.

Because that's what it's all about in *The Thin Man* world. Having a good time. This film- to use a word that has become even more diluted than happy hour cocktails- is utterly, utterly charming. And charm and wit are droughts that you can never drink too deeply of.

Nightmare Alley (1947)

TJB review #10

I told myself that I would pivot away from reviewing film noir for a while. *The Driver*, *Out of the Past*, *Rumble Fish*, *Le Samourai* and *You Only Live Once* are all noirish in their cinematic style and themes. I don't want to be a one-trick pony and besides there is a whole world of largely undiscovered and undiscussed cinematic classics that we could be talking about instead.

However, as soon as I learned that Hollywood are in the process of remaking one of my all-time favourite film noir classics (based on one of my all-time favourite novels) I knew I had to review the original movie pronto.

So that's exactly what I'm gonna do.

Nightmare Alley (1947)

D. Edmund Goulding

W. Jules Furthman, William Lindsay Gresham

S. Tyrone Power, Joan Blondell, Colleen Gray

I'll get this out of the way first. If you had to choose between watching the movie or reading the novel I would opt for the novel in this case. Both are excellent but the novel edges it for me. See, *Nightmare Alley* the movie, being released just after World War Two and during the height of the Hays Production Code days, has a bit of a concocted happy ending as Old Hollywood fans like myself have come to expect. If I were a hack journalist who dealt in star ratings I would say this knocks maybe half a star off the total score. But I'm not, so I won't. With me and with these reviews it's binary- worth watching (therefore I talk about it) versus not worth watching (In which case I keep my yap shut).

So. What we have here is a tale of a man's fated metamorphosis and descent into darkness. What we have here is a cautionary story of vice and greed and manipulation. Intrigued?

We begin with our antihero, the cynical opportunist Stanton Carlisle at the Carnival watching the Barker introduce the Freak Show. Two things strike you immediately. Firstly that- given the nature of the book- the clean-cut Tyrone Power is an odd choice to play the swindler Stan. This role was completely against type and one that Power fought for. It carried the potential to significantly tarnish his image. He used his clout to bring in Edmund Goulding as director (a great choice) and did the full star turn in terms of promoting the picture. Still it lost money for 20th Century Fox, which lends further historical weight to my intermittent cynical inclinations to believe that most people are imbeciles who wouldn't know good art if you beat them over the head with it. But anyway. So Power was a left field choice for the lead but he is perfect for the role of a con man. Capable of Brylcreemed charm on the surface but with an undercurrent of loathing (both for self and world) that you would expect from a professional grifter.

Secondly, what grabs you is the atmosphere of the picture, both in terms of cinematography and set design. In a pre-CGI world, production value for a picture came from the set design mostly and on this one they went as far as to build a fully working carnival on the Fox backlot. This plus all of the real-life Carneys milling around as extras and bit players give it an almost unparalleled authenticity. (Only Tod Browning's infamous *Freaks* can compete with this in terms of truly capturing the seedy world of the carnival on celluloid)

So the film does everything right and still it failed to become a hit in its time. Power is fantastic as I've said- surely his career best performance by a country mile- and everything moves along with that studio system sense of professionalism and craft which I'm sure was largely taken for granted back in the day but now strikes us as almost a novelty. Imagine a time when seemingly every film had effective cinematography, credible dialogue, compassionate run times and sound design that doesn't make you have to reach for the remote every five minutes. (The modern-day phenomenon of mumble-mumble, BANG!! mumble-mumble EXPLOSION! is beyond tiresome at this point).

The problem perhaps is that it was simple too dark for the time. You might see villainous characters in screen but there was still a hint of moustache twirling up to the World War 2 period. Whereas our man Stan is simply a sociopath in much more of a 'modern' sense. This sea change brought about by the collective trauma of the horrors of war is what makes Noir as a genre so fascinating. It's a very psychological art form, steeped in Freudianism, one of those

things- like Marxism I guess- that we nowadays forget had such a huge impact on twentieth century storytelling.

Which brings me to my final point. As much of a rogue Stanton Carlisle is as he rises to fame as a swindling mentalist feeding of the hopes and purses of the gullible, it is Helen Walker as the calculating, double crossing psychiatrist who is perhaps an even more terrifying portrait of the underbelly of the human condition.

Now I could go on, but much like the book, this is one of those films that it is best to experience without knowing too much at the outset. The idea of being reticent about giving away spoilers for a film that is nearly 75 years old is obviously silly, but I don't want to give away too many of the particulars by going into too much detail here.

Just give it a try- use that tried and true Ten Minute Rule whereby if you aren't engaged within ten minutes you simply walk away. Do that and see if this dark, strange, atmospheric slice of funfair mirror Americana doesn't raise your hairs like a glass of wood alcohol that they use to keep the Geek in line.

And if that sentence does make any sense to you, then watch *Nightmare Alley* and it will. Believe me friend, it will.

My Neighbours the Yamadas (1999)

TJB Review #11

Hayao Miyazaki is the figurehead of Studio Ghibli, the star of the show, his neat white beard, apron, thick rimmed glasses and often misanthropic pronouncements are as much a part of the brand as the now iconic Totoro logo. And it is for that reason that I have zero interest in talking about him, as fascinating a figure as he may well be. You see, I'm more interested in *the other guy*.

This interest in Takahata- the other guy- first developed when I watched the Studio Ghibli documentary *The Kingdom of Dreams and Madness*. In it main man Miyazaki is omnipresent, a workaholic in the Japanese tradition, a man who is dedicated to his craft and spends most of his days- despite being well into what we in the west would consider retirement age- sketching and storyboarding his latest animated movie while his much younger team look on in hushed and intimidated reverence. The parallel between Miyazaki and Takahata in this documentary is striking. Though they are both working on their latest animated films they are in many ways the opposite. For one Takahata- older still than Miyazaki and now dead- barely features on screen. He is an offstage presence, talked about but not seen, spreading chaos from a distance. Unlike the steadfast and professional Miyazaki, our man Takahata is an agent of chaos- blowing

deadlines, blowing budgets, constantly creating headaches. He has seemingly never brought a film in on time and for the agreed upon cost. He is the opposite of prolific. But he is revered and indulged. Because when he does eventually deliver he delivers big.

If we wanted to indulge in shallow binaries we could say that Miyazaki is the consummate craftsman whereas Takahata is the genius, in all of the positive and negative connotations of that overused word. He is a pain, he is unreliable, he is unmanageable, he is temperamental and difficult. But. When he does turn in work it is utterly unique and has the true touch of artistry to it. I suspect that even Miyazaki would concede that his older partner is the better artist. So with all of that being said I am today going to talk about one of the lesser known films by the lesser known of the two Studio Ghibli leaders...

My Neighbours the Yamadas (1999)

D. Isao Takahata

W. Isao Takahata, Hisachi Ishii

S. Hayato Isohata, Masako Araki, Naomi Uno

The most tedious part of reviewing films- no matter how good they are- is recounting the plot. To provide some context for the reader you have to talk about what *happens* without either giving away spoilers or dryly summarising what you see on the screen. But mercifully with *The Yamadas* there is no plot, just a series of everyday vignettes about the lives of an ordinary Japanese family in the last years of the twentieth century.

I increasingly find plot to be an overrated aspect of storytelling, as odd as that may sound. Perhaps it's because in the West especially and in Hollywood specifically plot has now become a beat-by-beat formula which renders most stories boring in their sensationalism. Whereas with plot-free works like *The Yamadas* you end up finding its so-called boring nature sensational. Films with a strong plot you will watch once. Films with a plot twist you will watch twice- first naively and then a second time to see how the magic trick unfolds now that you know how it works. But films without plots- films that rely on character and style and atmosphere- you will watch again and again as they create a world you can visit rather than a rollercoaster that you ride to the gift shop by the exit.

Now, don't get me wrong, things do happen in *The Yamadas*, there is an arc to it, but it is not plot-driven. It is character-driven. This is a very important distinction. And thankfully the characters are great- in this typical Japanese family we have the precocious young daughter, the lazy and daydreaming teenage son, the overbearing yet caring mother, the salaryman father who wants both peace and dominion and the headstrong, says-it-like-it-is grandmother.

As these characters clash and laugh and eat and go about their days we are reminded of our own families and our own lives. These are people just like us *because* the narratives of their lives are not driven on by dramatic external events and crises. Drama here comes from forgetting briefcases and missing trains and conflict comes from squabbling over homework and chores and

the fact that mom has cooked the same curry yet again. The driver of the narrative is the largely unseen but felt weight of the passing of time, which of course is the actual driver behind the story of our own lives.

To render the ordinary truthfully is an extraordinary thing. It takes extraordinary skill. The observations have to be acutely observed, the balance of humour, pathos, sentiment, emotion all has to be just so or else you will fall into banality, sentimentality, melodrama (in the pejorative sense) or worse. *The Yamadas* pulls this off triumphantly.

The film is based on a *yonkomo manga* (literally four panel comic strip) of the same name so some viewers may well feel the echo in it of things like *Peanuts* or *Calvin and Hobbes*. The humour is actually humorous (there is one scene where Mom and Dad battle for the remote that would have made even the stone faced countenance of Buster Keaton break out into a wry smile), the heartwarming stuff actually does lift your spirits and the elegiac, passing-of-the-seasons moments make you feel that slight twinge of bittersweet melancholy (this being Japanese there are artful and excellently done references to the haikus of Basho).

To truthfully depict the ordinary is extraordinary. This was the first Ghibli film to be created 100% digitally and the simple, lively figures and the watercolour animation style are ideal for this storyless story. They take a minute or two to get used to- especially if you are more accustomed to the standard hand painted Ghibli style- but they both acknowledge and build upon the *yonkomo manga* source material perfectly.

So, neglected though it may be, I think *My Neighbours the Yamadas* is one of the great unsung films of family life and that it can hold its own alongside the best of Ozu, whose films are in many ways it's forebears. The fact that after rewatching Takahata forgotten gem last night, I began reminiscing on various little pieces of my own family's lore and felt guilt for not having called my mom in a while speaks to the quiet power of this film. I'd best leave you now and go and make that call.

Sea Of Love (1989)

TJB Review #12

It's a question that's been on my mind for a little while now- what was it that turned Al Pacino into 'Al Pacino'? Which is to say, what led to the man who played the softly spoken, subtle, soulful eyed Michael Corleone into the bass-voiced, ranting, scenery-chewing actor of his latter-day work? How do you go from the wordless prelude of the shooting of Sollozzo and McCluskey to screaming, bug-eyes, about how 'she's got a great ass!'

That's what I'm wondering.

Now, you could argue like the faded silent actress in *Sunset Boulevard* that maybe the pictures got small, and you might have a point. You could say that as each increasingly wild Pacino performance garnered increasing praise that the man decided to give the audience what they seemingly wanted. And I do find those later films (and when I say later I mean starting from the early nineties onwards- although it isn't quite as neat as this timeline suggests) entertaining.

But my theory is that it was Al's temporary silver screen retirement that led to the change. See for four years in the mid-eighties, Al packed in the film business and instead chose to tread the boards on Broadway. He'd done this on and off throughout his career prior to this, but this was the first time he's done stage work exclusively. Four years of starring in productions of Mamet and Shakespeare is gonna change you. I think this is where Al learned to truly project and learned to act for the benefit of the nosebleed seats and in doing so he became a little too big for the screen.

That's my theory, but I'm not wedded to it. And to prove (or indeed disprove it) I think it would be wise to sit down and watch Al's 'comeback' picture, 1989's sadly neglected *Sea of Love*. Shall we?

Sea Of Love (1989)

D. Harold Becker

W. Richard Price

S. Al Pacino, Ellen Barkin, John Goodman

I wonder- did my love of noir lead to a noiry young adulthood, or did my noiry young adulthood lead to a love of the literary and cinematic depictions of noir? All's I know for sure is that for some reason my moving to the Big City experience soon descended into a nocturnal bourbon and trenchcoat existence where the mystery to be solved was why I had wilfully chosen to throw away whatever academic potential I might have had. The case remains cold and unsolved in a filing cabinet marked 'the past'.

Anyway. I mention this because I think the best lead would be to say I was groping towards adulthood and for want of a better idea was grasping out at the cliched signifiers of it. Smoky bars, nocturnal wanderings around rain slick Soho streets, jukeboxes and pool tables, days of fitful sleep where shafts of light come in through the cracks in the curtains- the whole Tom Waits bit, as cliched as it gets for a kid from a dying industrial town with literary aspirations.

I'm getting off track here. Now. The fact remains that that lifestyle, cliched as it is, is in fact an adult existence. And one of the first things that enters your mind upon watching *Sea of Love*- a film that very much takes place in this noiry nocturnal world is 'Why don't they make films like this any more? Films for grown up?' Perhaps asking such questions is also part of the maturation process once you get beyond thirty or so.

Why don't they make them like this any more? Tight budget, understated yet effective direction, a sharp script from a great novelist (the ever dependable Richard Price who later wrote for *The Wire*, as well as seeing a number of his novels- most notably *The Wanderers* and *Clockers*- be successfully adapted for the silver screen), fine actors doing fine work. Just story and atmosphere and performances and chemistry- all the cornerstones of the great Old Hollywood gems that we talk about here every week. Cornerstones of the mid-budget masterpieces that seem to have been

swallowed up in a world of Four Quadrant franchise pictures and pre-existing IP milking cash grabs.

So I wonder, having seen this film and loved it, is it actually as great as I believe it to be? Is it merely an okay thing which has gained an outsized place in my estimation simply because it is designed for adult in an increasingly childish world?

I'm gonna say no. I'm gonna stick to my guns. And my argument rests largely on the quality of the performances here, Al Pacino included. Which brings me back to my 'stage work made Al a scenery chewer' hypothesis. *Sea of Love* simply disproves it. Rather than being loud and over the top (although there are moments of course) Al here is all wounded masculinity, empathy and the soulful looks and gestures of someone who just wants to make a human connection in a dark and lonely world. The fact that the never-better Ellen Barkin and the always dependable John Goodman arguably outshine him speaks to the career best greatness of their performances rather than any deficiencies in his. At times you have to remind yourself that you are watching a mainstream big studio cop film from the '80's rather than some forgotten artsy mood piece. And I mean that in the best possible way. It is only the contrivance of the final revelation of who the killer is that brings you back down to earth. But you forgive its silliness, all things being considered.

For me at least films are places you visit, they are moods you can go and inhabit, they are time-bound, pausable and rewindable repositories of vibes. And *Sea of Love* has atmosphere, sexiness, maturity, humanity and Hopper-like nocturnal drifting is spades. It's a place that's worth a visit. Not perfect, but then can a film about such imperfect and damaged but searching characters ever be so. And would we really want it to be?

A Bucket of Blood (1959)

TJB Review #13

If all of the junk food and signage in the supermarket is anything to go by then I guess we must be getting pretty close to Halloween. It can be hard to differentiate the changing seasons by weather sometimes, but the shops will always let you know.

See, we don't have saints days and feast days any more, instead we have diarised occasions to buy different sorts of tat and gadgetry that we don't need along with seasonally themed boxes of poor quality chocolate.

So in short, as I'm sure you've guessed, I don't much care for Halloween. It feels more like a celebration of American Cultural Imperialism than a remembrance of the dead or whatever it is purportedly supposed to actually be about. I don't remember Halloween being much of a thing even a couple of decades ago but of course the nature of the present is to make you forget about

the past, even your own past. Simply possessing a sharp memory, let alone a long one, will eventually make you an enemy of The Powers That Be.

But that is neither here nor there. The point is, is that I am ambivalent about Halloween yet I'm savvy (or mercenary) enough to know that reviewing a couple of horror films over the next couple of Thursday newsletters is the sensible move. It's fortunate then, that when you look beyond the cliches of slasher films, especially of the more recent sort, you realise that horror as a genre has an awful lot of flexibility and things to offer. Rather than being merely a rollercoaster ride of jump-scares, violence and spooky music cues horror can be a great vehicle for satire. *Dawn of The Dead (1968)* instantly springs to mind as a biting (sorry) critique of mindless consumerism where the zombies stand in for the dead inside but still animate mall-goers.

So in a similar vein we are going to today consider Roger Corman's excellent beatnik satire/horror/comedy gem *A Bucket Of Blood*. You dig?

A Bucket of Blood (1959)

D. Roger Corman

W. Charles B. Griffiths

S. Dick Miller, Barboura Morris, Antony Carbone

Even recounting bits of the plot here is probably going to make me giggle or at least half-smile. In a world of big budget, must-appeal-to-everyone moviemaking it is always a delight to look back on old films, especially B movies, and simply delight in some of the madcap ideas that the filmmakers of yesteryear not only dreamed up but actually made happen.

So what we have here- in a nutshell- is the story of a would-be artist busboy at a beatnik cafe called Walter Paisley. Walter is a loser who wants nothing more than to be in with the cool kids and as such is played in a wonderful Jack Lemmon meets bad James Dean impersonator way by the excellent character actor Dick Miller. He makes you cringe as he bumbles and fumbles around and you start to root for the poor weirdo until it turns out that he is in fact a deranged psychokiller.

It goes like this. Walter wants to be a beatnik artist like the other hipsters at the Yellow Door cafe (even though it seems like a good percentage are in fact ostentatiously dressed undercover cops). But even compared to the Orson Welles like godawful performance poetry of the scenester Brock, our man Walter has zero artistic talent. Or unearned confidence and bluster, which seems to be a substitute for artistic ability both now and in the beatnik era of *A Bucket Of Blood*. That is until he happens upon a novel method of sculpture. See, after accidentally stabbing his landlady's cat (it's funny, not disturbing, trust me) Walter decided to hide the evidence by covering the cat in the sculptor's clay that he has no talent at shaping in any other way.

The ensuing art piece 'Dead Cat' soon becomes a sensation down at the Yellow Door and the lowly Walter is elevated- Cinderella-like- to being the hippest cat in the joint. However after accidentally dropping the Dead Cat piece, the cafe manager Leonard (who incidentally looks quite a lot like the lumbering cop brother from the endlessly repeated sitcom *Everybody Loves Raymond*) discovers the murderous origins of Walters new found artistry.

And you can imagine the man's horror when Walter- now drunk on fame and acceptance- begins to create sculptures of humans. First of a man with a split skull (one of the undercover cops who tried to bust Walter after a would-be groupie gave him some dope, as you do.) and then of a nude woman (a haughty model who looked down her nose at the creepy busboy turned cravat-wearing artiste).

I could go on and on with the details but I won't spoil it for you.

Anyway. Being a Roger Corman picture (this is the first of three collaborations with the screenwriter Griffith, one of the other two being the cult classic *The Little Shop of Horrors* (1960) which is a good indicator of what *A Bucket of Blood* is like tonally) this film is short and done on the cheap. It lasts just over an hour and was shot in 5 days on a \$50k budget using old leftover sets from something called *Diary of a High School Bride*. All of those cliches about creativity being born of limitations are in full effect here. The film whizzes by, the performances are great especially from old Dick Miller, the jokes hit and the actual horror elements are as unsettling as they should be.

So basically this is a satire of hipsters meets Cinderella story meets a precursor to *Taxi Driver* that features folk music, cringe inducing bad poetry, a hip jazzy saxophone score and some excellent bits of comedy business that somehow manages to work on all of those different levels at once. It's a lot of fun and has half the run time of whatever ponderous and portentous horror flick is currently showing at the cinema. What else do I need to say?

Simply put this is Corman's best work and besides being a fun film it is also a sharp little allegory about the mimetic, hype-driven nature of the art world and the vying-for-position hipsters who inhabit it.

You should watch it, Daddy-o. Or you can simply remain a square...

The Invisible Man (1933)

TJB Review #14

The goal of this weekly film review operation- as I am sure you have sussed out by now- is to unearth and shine a light on old(er) and forgotten films that are actually *enjoyable* to watch. We live in a polarised world where everything is either one star or five stars, even though everything that is actually fun to watch lives somewhere between those two poles. So yes, *Vertigo* and *Citizen Kane* are masterpieces, but how often do you have the urge to sit down and *watch* them?

Three and a half to four star films are where it's at, in this writer's humble opinion. People have commitments, obligations, families, hobbies- in short, *lives*- and though good cinema is an ingredient of a well-lived life, who wants to slog through a grim two and a half hour 'masterpiece' that is lauded by the consensus of critics? Not everything in life has to be a self-improvement homework assignment. You are allowed to be entertained by your entertainment.

Which is exactly what this week's film offers. At just over an hour and ten minutes long, *The Invisible Man*, much like last week's *A Bucket of Blood*, is a sardonic and wonderfully nasty black comedy disguised as a horror film.

Let's get into it.

The Invisible Man (1933)

D. James Whale

W. H.G. Wells, R.C. Sherriff

S. Claude Rains, Gloria Stuart, William Harrigan

Invisibility is possibly the least popular superpower. Ask people at a party what superpower they would have if they could choose and most will opt for flight, teleportation, time travel- which perhaps speaks to people's innate desire for escapism or is perhaps simply a reaction to one too many nightmarish delay-and-security-check situations at the airport. Invisibility is rarely opted for though, which itself may say something about our narcissistic, status-driven society. Most people want to be *more* visible- this is the driver behind most online activity which is where most general activity now takes place.

But I digress.

Invisibility is underrated both as a superpower and as a thing to explore in narrative. Because what invisibility does is it removes you from moral accountability. You can do things and get away with them, you can steal and not be caught, you can spy on people, eavesdrop, enter places where you don't belong. There's much more to it than simple being able to hide or be a pervy voyeur. This is rich thematic territory here.

Now of course H.G. Wells' 1897 novel *The Invisible Man* is the definitive exploration of this invisibility-as-removal-of-moral-accountability theme and this 1933 film version is the definitive adaptation of that novel for the big screen.

All of the ingredients are there. Firstly, at the helm you have director James Whale who two years earlier directed the iconic and never-beaten Boris Karloff led *Frankenstein*, still the best cinematic adaptation of Mary Shelley's story. So Mr Whale clearly knew how to bring stories of egotistical scientists/madmen who are driven to transcend and violate the natural order for their own selfish glory to life (And man does that theme still resonate today). Whale has a great control of atmosphere and is able to imbue even largely unpeopled shots (because our villain is invisible) with the needed hints of fear and doubt and suspense.

Which is not to say that this is a grim picture, largely because of ingredient number two- the sensational Claude Rains in the lead role. Rains is clearly having a great time here and Whale to his credit doesn't feel the need to reign him in. When he is on screen he is utterly commanding in his megalomania and when he is off-screen (as of course he often must be) he is just as much of

a menace in the demented and villainous voice-over. He is half moustache-twirling Victorian villain and half Iago, actively taking delight in his own evil plotting and more than happy to let the audience in on the scheme. This is far more delightful than the drab contemporary villains with their tedious explanatory backstories.

A few more ingredients- surprisingly good in-camera special effects for 1933 (apart from one slightly ropey cigarette lighting scene all of the invisibility effects *work*), a great cast of very able support players, some fun knockabout almost Keystone Kops like tomfoolery, and a whole host of memorable 'Cor blimey Guvnor' type extras in the English pub where Rains as on-the-run wrapped in bandages scientist first enters the picture.

Now that's a lot to be dealing with. That's a whole mess of different moving parts that a lesser director than Whale could easily have turned into a jarring and incoherent melange. But instead it all synchs together beautifully. That plus the sheer flyness, the sheer *drip* of some of the invisible man's outfits- the hat, the leather gloves, the dressing gown thing with the bold houndtooth pocket and matching cord- make this film a grin-inducing joy. You are allowed to be entertained by your entertainment.

And throughout the tight 71 minute run time of *The Invisible Man* that's exactly what you are going to be.

The Secret of My Success (1987)

TJB Review #15

I find as of late that my viewing choices are becoming, shall we say, less refined. I skim the menu of Netflix and see nothing but grimdark dramas and cynical comedies and nothing that is ever more than say 18 months old. It all seems like hard work. I just want a little levity, a little bit of fun, a few laughs maybe, a charismatic lead, some nice visuals, some charm. You know, entertainment.

The problem with most contemporary tv and cinema is that it is often objectively good- or at least technically competent- but it is not *fun*. This probably deserves an essay of its own as I have not yet been able to parse the reasoning for this joyless wave of televisual production- is it cynicism, ideological programming, the fear of censorship leading to writers erring on the side of dull and earnest seriousness? Is it algorithmic manipulation, or a mimetic need to be seen as being sophisticated that drowns out simple good time entertainment?

But anyway, when you begin to notice the lack of *entertainment* in our entertainment you, if you are like me, feel the urge to retreat towards older fare from a simpler time. If contemporary tv and cinema is good but not fun then after a while you crave something that is fun even if it is not necessarily objectively good. Which is where today's film- an ultra mainstream Michael J Fox vehicle from the late '80's- comes in. Because if nothing else this film knows what its purpose is and it knows what its prospective audience wants from it. And that is to simply provide a good time at the movies.

The Secret of My Success (1987)

D. Herbert Ross

W. Jim Cash, Jack Epps Jr., AJ Carothers

S. Michael J. Fox, Helen Slater, Richard Jordan

Okay, so there are two things I want to talk about here- cinematography and how passing time as a lens skewers our perceptions- but first I'll do the obligatory whistlestop tour of the plot for this one. See Michael J Fox is Brantley Foster, a young man from Kansas with dreams of success. So he moves to the Big Apple and tries to make a go of it among the bright lights of the big city. He lives in an overpriced Manhattan hovel, he hunts for work, he (amusingly) witnesses an absurd liquor store shoot out while on a reassuring payphone call to his mom back in the Sunflower State. Out of money and at his wits end, our man manages to wangle a job in a monolithic swanky downtown office run by a distant relative.

Foster starts in the mailroom and like in all aspirational corporate tales he uses that as a springboard to executive success by moonlighting as one of the 'suits'. Or course there are lots of scenes where young Mr Fox is caught in the act of changing from his mailboy casuals into his red suspended suit and back again. There are tons of montages, big hair, saxophones noodling away in the background and a soundtrack of groups that sound like sub-Huey Lewis and The News tribute acts. The producers of ... *Success* had snagged Michael J Fox and with dollar signs in their eyes and recent memories of *Back to The Future* mania in their minds they did what most people would do in their position. They milked the situation for all it was worth.

Now everything I have listed above sounds cliché and it is. But rather than making you cringe it has the warming and pacifying effect of old and familiar comfort food. It scratches an itch that you may not even realise you had. And a lot of that relaxing-in-a-warm-bath quality is down to the cinematography- the first of the two actual points I wanted to get into today.

See, I watched *The Secret of My Success* on a whim a few evenings ago. Completely cold viewing, I knew nothing about it whatsoever. But as I watched I found myself muttering 'that's a nice shot' several times, to the point where I was soon pausing and rewinding with some regularity. The composition was beautiful, the aesthetics, far better than what it needed to be to make the film work and to move the plot along. Who was the director of photography on this?

And so I looked it up and it turned out it was a man by the name of Carlo DiPalma. DiPalma has won the Silver Ribbon for cinematography four times in his long career behind the lens and is remembered mainly for his work with Michaelangelo Antonioni making some of the most aesthetic cinema in the history of the medium. And here he was shooting a Michael J Fox led romcom. And he certainly wasn't phoning it in either. Throughout this film there are cool and difficult to pull off reflected mirror shots as well as gorgeous skylines and evocative interiors with their filing cabinets, walnut desks, chunky landline phones and green on black computer monitors. 'The most vaporwave film' of all time as I heard one nostalgia-addled kid describe it. The visuals alone make this film worth the price of admission.

And this leads us to my second point, which is more of a question than a statement. I wonder, as I talk about these old films every week, if they actually have much objective merit as stories or if the pleasure of them merely comes from the fact that they capture lost ages and times that we are all rapidly forgetting? Was something like *The Secret of My Success* seen as being good or evocative or worthwhile at the time or do I only see the good in it now because I want to?

When we look back in 20 or 30 years will the big mainstream cinematic releases of this pandemic time be able to similarly evoke a faded zeitgeist of quaint tech and everyone-was-doing-it-at-the-time fashion choices? Or- and this is a bleak thought- have we reached a cultural equivalent of Fukuyama's *The End of History* wherein everything is merely a remix of old twentieth century modes, genres and themes and so nothing truly fresh can exist?

I don't know.

But for all of its neat and fudged plot machinations, *The Secret of My Success* does have an intoxicating energy to it, a spark. It is flawed and you could pick it apart to death if you had a mind to. But it has charm and likability which are words that I suspect reviewers of contemporary films don't have to dust off to often. So perhaps something has been lost in our century and watching energetic old films reminds you on some limbic level of just what that was.

Or perhaps I'm overthinking all of this. And perhaps that is also a symptom of these times for which silly old films provide a welcome if only temporary reprieve.

The Libertine (2004)

TJB Review #16

The man, low lit by a flickering candleflame in his frilled shirt and Restoration wig takes a swig from his wine goblet and stares down us, the audience, directly.

‘You will not like me.’ He says ‘You will not like me now and you will like me a good deal less as we go on.’

Rewatching this film for the first time in many years this opening monologue struck me just as forcefully now as it did back then. It’s remarkably effective. Now, convention says that you must present themes visually, that you must show and not tell but I immensely enjoyed the audacity of the rakish, arrogant, aristocratic and doomed protagonist John Wilmot plainly addressing us and saying his piece. His flaws are myriad but he is aware of them, you see, and to a degree he has accepted them. He is a drunk, a sinner, a whoremonger (‘I put it around a bit’) and given 17th

century medicine, the early grave therefore surely beckons. So be it, he seems to say, with a sneering curl of the lip and a flash of his dark eyes.

You see, through not just the words of his prologue (‘no protestations of modesty, you were not expecting that I hope’) but through the comportment, the gesture, the inflection we learn far more than scene after scene of backstory could ever tell us. We are reminded of what great acting and great writing are all about. And like a Greek tragedy we know from the outset how this will all pan out. Yet we must continue with our viewing. We must see it for ourselves.

The Libertine (2004)

D. Laurence Dunmore

W. Stephen Jeffreys

S. Johnny Depp, Samantha Morton, John Malkovich

Based on little more than blind and perhaps fanciful prejudice I had always supposed that *Pirates of The Caribbean* had been the film that had ultimately killed Johnny Depp’s Hollywood career. You know, the old idea that nothing fails quite like success. Playing the silly Keith Richards-esque Captain Jack in a series of silly cashgrab films had knocked the wind out of Depp’s sails, so to speak, and that this plus increasingly reckless spending had led Depp double down on the cartoony aspect of his characterisation choices. This is what I had supposed.

But *The Libertine* largely spoils this neat theory. Because *The Libertine* was released shortly after the first *Pirates* film and it features what is without a doubt Depp’s career best performance. And further Depp’s portrayal of John Wilmot the Second Earl of Rochester is not un-Captain Jack Sparrow like. It’s simply that the tenor, genre and intent are all very different. The debauchery of Jack Sparrow is supposed to be fun, amusing, non-threatening and harmless, whereas that of Wilmot is the opposite. We see the psychic, physical and spiritual damage that life as a dark bacchanal leads to.

By the time of his death at the age of thirty-three Rochester was a shambling wreck, shuffling around on sticks, regularly soiling himself and wearing a metal nose to replace the one that had been eaten away by the ravages of syphilis. The alcohol, infidelity and scandal never seemed to make the man happier, even temporarily, but having made his bed the man seemed determined to lie in it and to see his self-annihilating path through to completion.

And this is the startling part of the story. There is no sympathy sought, there is no rise before the fall, it is all just ordained and foretold and no less fascinating for the inevitability of that trajectory. If you have had your fill of contemporary paint-by-numbers storytelling then this alone will strike you as refreshing.

It is clear then that the script is a playwright’s adaptation of his own play and that we are playing by the classic rules of stage tragedy than by the rote story arcs of Hollywood. And the supporting cast- from Samantha Morton’s as the actress who falls under the spell of Wilmot the near genius

poet and satirist to John Malkovich as the amused King Charless II- all give the level of performances that such material demands.

This is a dark, grimy, debauched, slow film. The 'hero' as we have said is genuinely truly unlikeable. Perhaps this is why it has largely been forgotten and outshone by the cartoonier and far inferior offerings of the Depp oeuvre. Perhaps this is why Depp himself, disappointed, has never taken on a role as meaty nor given a performance as committed and mesmerising since. Perhaps the fault is not his but ours as collectively we are (judging by box office receipts) not willing to watch movies that fall out of our narrow comfort zones.

I don't know. But what I do know is that even though I didn't like the Earl of Rochester, I nonetheless couldn't take my eyes off him.

Battling Butler (1926)

TJB Review #17

I'll just come out and say it: Buster Keaton is better than Charlie Chaplin. It's not even debatable in my mind. While Chaplin was a talented Vaudevillian he was still stuck in the Victorian stage era of melodrama and pathos, while Keaton was a cinematic innovator both in front of and behind the camera. (It's also interesting to note that even though his career was on the downswing, Keaton seems to be the only one of the silent movie stars who was both excited and artistically stimulated by the advent of sound in cinema)

Chaplin was content to simply plonk the camera in the front row and record the show, whereas Keaton clearly had a far superior feel for transition, composition and actually using the camera and direction itself as a means to deliver the gag as opposed to just via acting alone. Though that being said I would argue that Keaton was also the better actor as his stoic, impassive, unsmiling, deadpan style was the opposite of the brash and impulsive offstage man that the biographers tell

us about. Whereas Chaplin always seemed to play variations on himself, and as such had the egoic need for us to sympathise and root for his Little Tramp even if this was to the detriment of the comedy. Keaton just did what was funniest and most entertaining in the moment again and again.

And of course, Keaton was also the superior acrobat and physical performer, both in terms of slapstick pratfalls and awe-inspiring stunts. Aspects of his films resemble not so much filmed Vaudeville as they do live action Looney Toons cartoons and it is a miracle in retrospect that he didn't kill himself on set (though he did years later learn that one stunted had in fact broken his neck).

So given all of this (deserved) praise we should sit down and watch one of Keaton's classics. Convention states that you should watch either *The General* (his most famous film) or *Sherlock Jr* (which I would argue is his masterpiece) but instead we're going to talk about his 1926 boxing picture *Battling Butler*. Ready?

Battling Butler (1926)

D. Buster Keaton

W. Al Boasberg, Lex Neal

S. Buster Keaton, Snitz Edwards, Sally O'Neil

People often go into this film expecting a B rate, second string Keaton film, but fortunately they are soon disabused of this notion. From the off this film comes across as a well put together, meticulously crafted and not-cheap studio feature. In the silent era there was such a voracious demand for cinema that producers and directors would hastily shoot and cut any old thing on the fly, because money was there to be made, hand over fist. Quality control in a sense slowed you down and ate into profits.

But this here is a quality picture, expertly crafted.

Now for the plot. Our man Keaton plays Alfred Butler, a meek and filthy rich young man who is sent on a camping trip with his devoted manservant by his father. Dad wants his weak son to rough it out in the wilderness so he can toughen up. While failing to do this (his servant attentively does everything for him up to and including ashing his cigarette) Butler meets a lovely mountain girl. He tries and fails to charm her as she- and more to the point her brothers-want nothing to do with such a soft and spoiled young man. So the manservant (played by the excellent Snitz Edwards) noticing that our hero shares his name with the current lightweight champ Alfred 'Battling' Butler lets the brother know that our man is *that* Alfred Butler. And so our hero must now keep up the charade.

So there it is. From that brief précis alone you will probably gather that *Battling Butler* doesn't boast the absolute heights of stunt work and visual invention that Keaton's reputation is founded

on. But it's funny and it's charming and it has a bladder friendly run time which from my 2021 vantage point are all huge plusses and not to be discounted.

The act one camping scenes (which predates this abominable modern music festival practice of 'glamping' by a good eighty years) where the would-be suitors eat a silver service meal on an outdoor table that is slowly sinking into the mud was brilliantly done. The exercise related pratfalls and mishaps as our man tries to play the part of boxer-in-training work well, as does the surprisingly hair raising (and surely genuinely real dangerous) car chase work in the second act.

But the thing that really stands out to me now, just as it did on my first viewing, is the boxing work in the finale where Alfred Butler the fop ends up squaring off against Alfred Butler the lightweight champeen. It's brutal. This is to my mind the only time we ever see Keaton play angry on screen and he is absolutely furious. 1920's Hollywood did not seem to be safety conscious in the least and in this wide shot, largely uncut bout you see both Keaton and Francis McDonald as 'Battling' Butler take a few quite nasty looking body shots and chin taps. In fact so realistic is this locker room bout that Scorsese has gone on record to say that *Battling Butler* was one of the primary visual touchstones for his fight choreography on *Raging Bull*. To me, that is high praise and it speaks to Keaton's physical commitment to what he did.

Way back in the first edition of these reviews I said that what I call 'real cinema' must not (as a general heuristic) contain any CGI. And *Battling Butler* amply demonstrates what I'm talking about. From the visual gags to the car chases to the boxing, without effects and post-production everything must be done for real. And the eye can discern this difference and is engrossed by the real thing. Spectacle to be spectacular must be within the realm of possibility. Otherwise it has a paradoxically pacifying effect. This is why CGI superhero films put me to sleep. And it's why things like old silent knockabout comedies keep me on the edge of my seat. Because what is happening on screen really happened. And that somehow makes you feel a little more alive.

Night And The City (1950)

TJB Review #18

Time to set your TVs to 4:3 ratio because once again we are about to sit down and enjoy another black and white studio system noir classic. But this one has a twist. See even though we have American leads and an American director, this particular drama is set in nocturnal post-war London and boasts a supporting cast of stalwart British players.

But make no mistake, this is noir through and through. We begin with moody establishing shots of The Big Smoke at night, with the players' names in luminescent font such as those that might entice tipsy bumpkins to go and catch a West End show. We begin with bold, melodramatic orchestral music, with the neon of Piccadilly, with voice over. 'Night and the city. The night is tonight, the city is London.'

And then the orchestra kick into frenzy and we see our man in wide shot, being chased by some trilby'd goon, running for his life. So far, so noir. As with many of the greats of the genre the theme, fuelled by post war trauma and paranoia, is that of fate closing in no matter how much you try to outrun or outwit it. And our roguish, swindling protagonist Harry Fabian (played to bug-eyed, sweating, oozy perfection by anti-hero specialist Richard Widmark) sure does a lot of running in this one. He never stays still: fast-talking, fast-thinking, spreading a new layer of b.s. to cover over his just-exposed lies. Always in motion, always darting from one scheme to the next or away from the latest in a long line of hoods and marks who have come to collect on the money they loaned him.

It's exhausting. And that's the point.

'What are you running from now?' His long-suffering, selfless girl Mary (played by Gene Tierney) ask once he seeks refuge from the trilby's goon in her flat. 'Running me?' He says after she catches him rifling through her purse for quick money to pay the hoodlum off. 'You know me better than that.'

She does know him, she does know that his whirlwind of double talk and hustles is just that, but she can't do a great deal to stop him. And she's fond of the rascal in spite of herself. Again, the inevitability of fate, a theme as old as Oedipus.

This theme has fallen out of vogue, though you could argue that it is as relevant and applicable as ever. The modern viewer favours twists and jump scares and the (in the moment) unexpected rather than a suspenseful resolution that could really be no other way. I don't know why this is. Perhaps shocking uncertainty is preferable to grim inevitability to people who are divorced from the cathartic and perspective-giving power of tragic narratives? I don't know. But tragedy and fate is what we are dealing with here as the first reel makes abundantly clear.

You have been warned.

Night And the City (1950)

D. Jules Dassin

W. Jo Eisinger, Gerald Kirsch, Austin Dempster, William E Watts

S. Richard Widmark, Gene Tierney, Googie Withers

Harry clears the debt with the help of Mary's turtlenecked neighbour, a man hapless enough to screw up boiling spaghetti but astute enough to observe that Harry is 'an artist without an art' which is a profound and deeply sad truth. You wouldn't wish it on anyone.

So temporarily off the hook and not needing to look over his shoulder, the compulsive Harry launches himself headlong into his next get-rich-quick hustle. While running a con at a pro wrestling match, Harry overhears the Greco-Roman champion and wrestling purist Gregorious complaining about the tasteless spectacle. Using this Harry worms his way into the cauliflower

ered, still dangerous looking old Greeks affections and is soon on the way to promoting a Greco bout between Gregorious prodigy Nikolas and ‘The Strangler’ a pro-wrestling star who is promoted by Kristo, a racketeer who both controls the wrestling market in London and is also Gregorious’ son.

Have you got all of that?

Not that it matters to much, as the plot unfolds in a much more compelling way cinematically than it does while written down in summary. (Running down the plot is my least favourite part of reviewing. In both fiction and film I think that plot is an overvalued commodity. If the vibe, for lack of a better word, and technical craftsmanship are all up to par then what happens is kind of incidental in a way. The likes of Aki Kaurismaki understand this concept.)

As you can imagine Harry had to call in favours and get into debt with shady people to fund this enterprise, namely with the Sidney Greenstrees meets Alfred Hitchcock esque nightclub owner Nosserus and his scheming wife Helen.

It all goes wrong. A drunken Stranger, having been goaded by Fabian as part of his play to secure the bout, accidentally kills Gregorious after the two get into a protracted and at times brutally realistic fist fight slash grappling match. Kristo puts a bounty on faders head and so every hoodlum in all of London Town hunt down our man.

‘You’re sharp, Mr Fabian.’ Kristo say. ‘You’ve done a very sharp thing. Sharp enough to cut your throat.’

And so our man runs again. Runs as he always has done. Runs until he is exhausted and desolate and with no place left to go. He suggests that Mary turns him over to Kristo and collects the thousand-pound bounty, the only scheme he has ever cooked up that actually seems guaranteed to work. Mary acts like Mary, honest and principled. And so Harry acts like Harry, reckless and headlong.

It ends how you expect, how it must, but you are no less shocked for it. And as the ornate words ‘The End’ fade onto the screen you reflect upon what Mary said:

Oh Harry, you could’ve been anything, anything. You had brain, ambition, you worked harder than any ten men. But at the wrong things, always the wrong things.’

An artist without and art. Effort and ability without integrity, direction, vision beyond the next quick score.

Through tragedy we learn, and we search ourselves and we vow to be a little less like Harry. Or at least I hope we do.

Sharky's Machine (1981)

TJB Review #19

At the time the promotional material for this film leaned heavily on comparisons to its more well-known predecessor. 'Dirty Harry goes to Atlanta' they yelled out, about as subtle as a, well, as a .44 magnum pointed directly at your face. And there is some element of truth to this. Our man Sharky *is* a tough big city cop fuelled by righteous anger and a personal moral code. He does not, in fact, take shit from anybody and he will also happily slap some punks around as part of his investigation.

But for all of these similarities you could also reel of a similarly long list of differences. The comparison then, while valid, is a moneyman's comparison. Positioning one picture next to a prior surprise smash hit in the hopes that the audience will connect the dots and thus unconnect some bills from their wallets. It's a ploy as old as prostitution, the so-called oldest profession

which forms the backdrop to today's picture and is the catalyst for some of that righteous anger from our man Sharky, played by director Burt Reynolds while sporting an impossibly dark roman haircut and well-trimmed moustache combination.

Now I know that prior sentence screams 'vanity project' (when the credits tell me the leading man is also the director, I brace myself and lower my expectations accordingly). But let's give Burt the benefit of the doubt and give this picture a run through.

Sharky's Machine (1981)

D. Burt Reynolds

W. William Diehl, Gerald Di Pego

S. Burt Reynolds, Rachel Ward, Henry Silva

The opening is certainly strong enough. The Atlanta cityscape via helicopter shots, sax and keys letting us know when this film was released if the 35mm patina of the shots and Burts upturned collar weren't clues enough. Burt on an undercover job, bearded and walking the railroad tracks to meet the connect with a bowling bag full of folding money. He lights a smoke with a zippo as the words 'starring Burt Reynolds' pop onto the screen, a bit of cinematic cool that I can't begrudge Reynolds as director for including.

So the exchange happens, it goes south, a footchase and shoot-out ensues where the dopeman villain explodes a cars entire engine with a single shot from his hand cannon. He takes a pregnant hostage on a bus. Sharky shoots the scum dead but the bad guy gets of a round which takes out a civilian. And so in spite of saving the hostage and saving the day, Sharky gets shitcanned to the vice squad for his scenes.

It's a great opening, pure action, no nonsense visual storytelling. But then things start to change. We get to see the crowded hellhole of the basement vice office, like a slum from a 1920's sepia photograph, crammed with bodies and movement and junk and decay. The cops on the squad are all wrinkled brows and wrinkled suite and tired irritability. You can almost smell the coffee breath and the stale tobacco through the screen. They fire off some great one-liners, some stinging repartee which adds to that scuzzy authenticity. And then like I say, things start to change.

The pace of the film slows right down. Sharky and his new machine (machine being the slang for a squad or an outfit) start a surveillance case on some \$1000 a time call-girls and the film takes on that hypnotic rhythm of surveillance itself. It's all binoculars and cameras on tripods and telescopes. Silver recording equipment with solid, heavy, clunking buttons.

There is some good surveillance small talk as Sharky's buddy talks about the one time he ever visited a prostitute in Japan and how he naturally has to pay in Yen. ('You can pile it up and sleep on it... I still can't work out if I paid a buck thirty or thirteen hundred dollars'). It's all undershirts and tables of empty beer bottles and backlit shots of Burt and his cigarette smoke as a

reel to reel oscillates endlessly in the background. Though Burt is a competent and assured director this all makes me want to see the same material handled by Brian De Palma, say. It evokes Coppola's *The Conversation* and De Palma's *Blow Out* which was released just six months prior. And to Mr Reynolds credit this picture is only a step below those two classics. But still.

Now the languid surveillance stuff is probably too 'boring' for the atrophied attention of the Netflix generation. But me, I like all of that stuff. I am quite happy to watch an assassin, a detective on a stakeout, a soldier on a night post, simply be in silence *doing* things. Though not flashy, I feel that this kind of thing is something that cinema is uniquely suited for. You could call it a more prosaic and genre inflected version of Tarkovsky's idea of 'sculpting in time.' (Am I the only person to invoke Tarkovsky while reviewing an early eighties Burt Reynolds film?)

But anyway. After a brutal midpoint we start to pick up pace again as we move towards the denouement and the inevitable bloody finale. This is genre cinema, as we get into the third act you pretty much know how this is going to go. (You may not have seen the finger stuff coming, or the two all-in-black Asian henchmen who are pretty handy with a set of nunchucks). What matters in such films is not what happens, but how it happens. And here we have a great leather-gloved villain played by cult favourite Henry Silva (who had a great end-of-career turn in Jarmusch's *Ghost Dog*) and an excellent sidekick part played by wide receiver turned Blaxploitation mainstay Bernie Casey. In fact Casey's character of the black, college educated, tough and street yet also a practitioner of zen hinted at a spin off film that could have been phenomenal in the right hands.

But I'm getting off track again. Point is, is that this was a solid film, with solid performances, some great one liners and bits of mise-en-scene, a wonderfully deranged villain and some odd off-the-time music choices that provided some unintentional humour. This is a good time and it's worth a shot. If you're feeling lucky, punk.

The Hired Hand (1971)

TJB Review #20

A slow running river with the midday sun shining so brightly on it that the whole thing looks like flowing gold. A male figure chest deep in the water, slapping the surface, fooling around. And the soundtrack to the slow motion, lens flare scene- gentle plucking and the slow saw of fiddles all artsy and transcendent yet rooted in the 19th century old west, the same as everything else in this opening scene. So this is a Western no doubt, but this is not the John Wayne west. This horse opera ripples with LCD and the beauty and inevitability of nature rather than being run through with bourbon and unambiguous heroism like the pictures of the cowboys and Indians studio heyday.

But this is no revisionist druggy trend-chasing pastiche of the Hippy era. Ironically the studio may well have wanted that hoping to cash in on the changing-of-the-guard box office bonanza that was the recent *Easy Rider* which starred the lead and director of today's film in his debut behind the camera. What they got instead was a quiet, somber, meditative, ethereal, often

gorgeous character piece about the passage of time. You have to admire our man Peter Fonda for having the guts to seize the hype that this breakthrough had generated and using it to deliver something that has all of the hallmarks and aspirations of true cinematic art.

The Hired Hand (1971)

D. Peter Fonda

W. Alan Sharp

S. Peter Fonda, Warren Oates, Verna Bloom

Westerns, like all established and time-tested genres have the ability to contain multitudes of stories. There is scope and freedom enough within the cliches, confines and expectations for a talented storyteller to do what they want. Freedom comes from restriction, as they say. Within the lexicon of tropes and conventions a narrative can be crafted that speaks to the time in which it was written. This is why generation after generation of filmmakers come back to the prairies and the plains, to the saloons and the campfires, to the gunfights and the water-troughs and the jangling spurs. Because within them is everything, or at least there can be.

So while ostensibly we are dealing with horseback drifters what we are really dealing with is something like the hangover of the sentiments of *Easy Rider*. The freewheeling, freedom seeking rebels are now older, disillusioned and dirty and tired of the endless road. Having had their fill of the footloose life all they ache for is shelter, a little domesticity, a bed. Through the 19th century rural landscapes and the laconic and reserved talk you sense something of the post-Altamont generations numbed bafflement. Life is real, time is passing, what have I done with my life?

In the monologue of the female lead Hannah, you even get a slight flavour of what you might call the regret of sexual liberation, but I'm getting ahead of myself.

See the plot, and the fact that it is so scant strikes me as a relief rather than a misstep on the part of the filmmakers here, is that Harry (Fonda) and Arch (the ever-dependable Warren Oates), sick of the road and saddened by the dubious whorehouse shooting of their young compatriot Dan decide to head back to the homestead that Harry left behind years before. There he is reunited with his estranged wife Hannah and his young daughter. Having told the child that her father was dead and not wanting to distress her Hannah takes Harry and Arch in only if they will live and work as hired hands.

And so they keep up the pretence as we see them working and eating and quietly talking in their straw beds before lights out, all shot with elegiac splendour by the ever-wonderful Vilmos Zsigmond (who also shot McCabe and Mrs Miller in the same year, which I believe would make a perfect revisionist Western companion should you be in the mood for a double bill). And while all of this slowly and calmly unfolds we see more and more of the characters, of their longings and regrets of their essential goodness. As the older and long-lonely Hannah speaks of her infidelities with other hired hands we understand why just as we sense her regret at both her actions and at her husband's perpetual roaming that lead her there.

‘He’ll go,’ she says to Arch, not willing to allow herself to enjoy the reunion with her former husband as she will not be hurt and fooled again, ‘It’s just a matter of time.’

‘Well most things are ma’am,’ says Arch the simple and charming salt-of-the-earth man with more than a little of the true philosopher about him, ‘one way of another.’

Eventually as reunion on domesticity slowly rekindle for Harry, Arch decides to finally leave for California. After seven years on the road together Harry says with false easiness ‘If you’re ever back this way...’ and Arch in an instant gives an equally easy and breezy ‘Sure.’ It’s all there in the acting and the inflections. The stoicism, the repression that comes with male friendships, the need to always save face and hide true feelings. All of it is there.

And then well after an hour into this brief ninety-minute film the action happens, the denouement. There’s no need for me to talk about it beyond saying that it happens. And to also say that saving plot, violence, action, threat, stakes and all of those conventions of actions films (whether sans Stetson or avec Stetson) is a bold strategy that works wonderfully. Story pace is now so beat-for-beat that any variation in tempo is like a ladle of water to a thirsty prisoner.

This film got middling notices and was a box office bomb on release. If it were released now I dread to think how badly it would flop, given that demand for grown-up, intelligent, beautiful and textural cinema has atrophied away to virtually nothing. Which is our great loss. But you can always watch films like the *Hired Hand* and realise that the elegiac sweep of time is the same for all of us and it always has been.

Go (1999)

TJB Review #21

When asked what is your favourite film that takes place over Christmas, I doubt one in 10,000 would cite the late nineties rave-scene inspired romp *Go*. Which shows that straw-polling the public is a waste of time. Now, this film features neither glad tidings, seasonal joy nor another humdrum riff of *A Christmas Carol*, but it is undoubtedly a fun 90 minute joyride. It’s a good time no matter what season you happen to watch it. But I feel like the film does not quite gets its due. So I’m gonna correct that.

It can be hard to puzzle out why a film that has all of the hallmarks of being a success (whether cult or otherwise) doesn’t quite break out in the way it deserves to. The critics enjoyed this one, and people who liked it *really* liked it, but the box office receipts were elusive. Again, this is a commentary on the general public.

Primarily I blame what you might call the 1999 effect. See, that was a banner year for worthwhile mainstream cinema (*The Matrix*, *Fight Club*, *The Green Mile*, *The Sixth Sense*, *Toy Story 2*, *Man on The Moon*, *The Talented Mr Ripley*, *10 Things I Hate About You*, *Election* and

on and on and on). It's easy to see how a modestly budget project like *Go*, without megawatt star power or a hotshot director at the helm could get lost in that glut.

Show business revolves around luck and timing, much more than most would be willing to admit or even countenance. But a good film is a good film and I'm here to spotlight and praise them, whether they got their contemporary due or not.

Go (1999)

D. Doug Liman

W. John August

S. Sarah Polley, Katie Holmes, Jay Mohr

I think another reason for the initial relative failure of *Go* is the unfavourable comparisons to *Pulp Fiction* that it drew upon release. Unfavourable and unfair. Lazy even. Yes *Go* has a triptych structure, hopping back and forth in time, and yes there are some pop culture references in some of the witty dialogue (*The Breakfast Club*, the mixed bag that is the comic strip section of the daily newspaper and so forth) but that's about it. To call it a rip of Tarantino is silly, because it's not as if old QT hasn't been known to borrow a shot, a reference, or a story idea or 500 from his encyclopaedic knowledge of cinematic history.

I didn't even want to mention the (dubious) Tarantino connection/comparison but I thought it better to quickly tackle it at the outset.

Now with that being said let's get to the heart of the matter.

What I like about this film, and what strikes the viewer within five seconds is the energy of this picture. The familiar, trusty, staid Columbia Pictures logo melts and morphs into a rave scene complete with a remix of Nancy Sinatra's *Boots* and we are off to the races.

This film doesn't mess about. Within minutes we have the characters, the stakes and the situation all laid out, crystal clear and with plenty of wit. Rather than *Pulp Fiction* this is in fact the lighter, dancier parts of *Trainspotting* crossed with Linklater's *Dazed and Confused*. These kids are reckless and broke and live in the moment (which I found relatable) and they are surviving through the hell that is a holiday retail gig (which I found *very* relatable) by partying and burning the candle at both ends. This could be a nightmare in the wrong hands but fortunately the ensemble cast are all uniformly excellent as is the high energy direction from the solid Doug Liman.

Though tonally a little different he is using the same playbook that he used to great success in the prior film *Swingers*, namely take a witty and well-crafted script, cast a bunch of great young actors and shoot it all with confidence, energy and boldness. Sounds easy, but it's not.

Now, I'm not even gonna really touch the plot on this one. There are a lot of moving parts, a lot of secondary characters, a lot of things happening. But it all moves effortlessly along and it is all concluded in a little over an hour and a half. You've got Ronna (the excellent Sarah Polly) trying to hustle enough cash to keep herself from being evicted and trying to circumvent the evolutionary food chain of drug dealing as she does so. You've got a young original pre-Hollywood teeth Timothy Olyphant as Todd Gaines who is said drug dealer. You've got Ronna's druggy friend Manny double dropping ecstasy and having genuinely hilarious hallucinations about supermarket Macarena dancing and Todd Gaines' telepathic cat.

You've also got one substory of four friends going to Vegas and another about two gay actors turned undercover narcs trying to get out from under their hilariously creepy handler. You've got flammable menage a trois', dodgy buffet food and a surprisingly riveting, credible and amusing car chase (an unspoken truth is that outside of a few canonical classics most cinematic car chases are actually pretty boring).

You've got a great monologue from a jaded strip club owner about how in the past you got to the top by being better than the guy ahead of you but now today the way it works is that people are so incompetent that they guy in front can't do his job and so he falls on his ass and so you then become the guy at the top.

Like I said, lots going on all expertly juggled and tremendously executed. I enjoy Go every time I see it. The laughs always hit, the pace always excites. And though it stylistically very much dates itself to the late 90's (there is no score in this film, it is all licensed music, all contemporaneous dance and rock. Imagine how bad that would be if someone did that with similarly mainstream 2021 music.) I would stand it up against all of the films of 1999, which is a bold statement.

But as we've said boldness, confidence and competent execution will take you a long way when it comes to cinema.

Holiday Affair (1949)

TJB Review #22

It's that time of year again. Now as much as I like to confound, challenge and stir my audience I recognise that sometimes the correct move, the decent move, is to give the people what they want. And so today, of course, I am going to review a Christmas film. And not in that cute modern way of talking about a film for adults that just so happens to have a late December setting and the ironic juxtaposition of tinsel, baubles and stylised violence (you can call this Shane Black magic and yes I do believe that it has its place and its merits). No, we're going to tackle a certified Christmas classic, a heart warmer for all the family, a 1940's classic of romance, good cheer and yuletide joy. And it has nothing to do with either Jimmy Stewart, Frank Capra or indeed old Bing.

You see there is another slice of Christmas magic from that era that for some reason has never quite gained the recognition that it deserves. I don't know why, I guess that's just the way things go sometimes. But this film for whatever reason unites all of my film buff and writer friends in being among their very favourites, Christmas or otherwise. The cult around it is fairly small but it is fiercely loyal. And I consider myself to be one of its chief apologists and proselytisers. So let me see if I can't convince you...

Holiday Affair (1949)

D. Don Hartman

W. Isobel Lennart, John D. Weaver

S. Robert Mitchum, Janet Leigh, Wendell Corey

One thing I love in movies (and in all storytelling really) is a metaphor or motif that is skilfully used as a through line. Maybe this is a quirk of mine but it satisfies that same pattern recognition, structure seeking part of my brain that is also tickled by the neat resolution of a musical passage or the solving of a puzzle. And one of the most memorable examples in cinema for me is the toy train in *Holiday Affair*. Trains are rich with symbolism and meaning- they conjure up the idea of new starts, of escape, of adventure, of possibility. Perhaps this is why young Timmy so badly wants one for Christmas and why the free-spirited Steve Mason (played by Robert Mitchum) seems to take some pleasure in working in the toy section of a department store.

But Timmy's dreams of a toy train Christmas are soon dashed when the present he discovers must be returned as his single mother Connie (Janet Leigh) only temporarily purchased it as part of her Comparison Shopper gig. And worse still her returning it and Mason not turning her in to the department store higher ups gets him fired. Now given Mitchum's looks and his filmography of cowboys, hoods and private dicks with scores to settle one could be expected for the film to turn dark as old Trouble Himself plots to take revenge on this dame. But no dice. This is a warm and gentle film and Mitchum showing the range that he still doesn't quite get enough credit for is more than equal to the task.

Mitchum's Steve is a free spirit as we said, but he is also kind, generous, and wise to both the psychology of others and the world around him. Without being a guru he is one of the most enlightened cinematic characters that I can think of off the top of my head, certainly in a romantic comedy. He has Connie figured out all right, and he gives it to her straight, not in a spiteful or mean way but he tells her what she needs to hear. Earlier she told her milk teeth loosing son Timmy that if he wishes for things he can get he'll be happy, but if he wishes real big all he'll get is real big disappointment. This is not Steve's mindset at all. In spite of the war and his down-on-his-luck situation he still has hope and optimism. He believes in dreams.

So the presence of Connie's nice guy fiance and lawyer Carl doesn't deter him (and as an aside it is to the credit of the film that Carl is not made a villain or a sap out of narrative convenience. He is a decent man. The lovely Connie simply has two viable suitors, as can happen in life if not in romantic comedies).

The story moves along with train set debacles, noisy neckties, lunch in central park with the seals, an amusing day in court and a Christmas day dinner than ends with Steve forthrightly proposing to Connie in front of Carl, Timmy and the in-laws. I won't spoil the ending but it isn't exactly a Verbal Kint style revelation. Romantic comedies are after all at their most pleasing and effective when they stay fairly faithful to the train tracks of genre conventions.

Now all of this I have laid out could be so much pap in the wrong hands and it is true that this picture was produced in part as a means of rehabilitating the image of Mitchum following his controversial arrest and brief jail stay after he was caught in possession of marijuana. But this is skilfully done and manages to be sweet without making your teeth hurt and heartwarming without making you dyspeptic. There is more depth here than meets the eye. There is a gentle sadness in some of the writing and this is clearly crafted by people who actually know something of life and being short on cash and walking the tightropes between hope and realism and adventure and security.

And crucially for such a picture little Timmy was endearing without being cloying and smart without being smarmily precocious and knowing in a way that kids can often be when written by adults. In short everything works. The run time zooms by, the laughs hit home, the moving parts pull the heartstrings, all of the characters have satisfying arcs (as hinted at above a version of this film written with a modern sensibility would butcher the character of Carl among many other things) and without hammering the train metaphor into the ground it all chugs along nicely.

Towards the end, in his moment of realisation Carl tells us that ‘anything can change a life that’s ready to be changed.’ And who knows, on a cold Christmas evening with good food and good drink and good company maybe this little 90 minute gem will hit you in the right mood and in its own small way do just that.

The Great Escape (1963)

TJB Review #23

If you live in the UK you will know why I have chosen to review this film now. See, for decades, certainly for as long as I can remember, *The Great Escape* has been an absolute fixture of the Christmas time TV schedule. I don’t need to consult this years bumper double edition of the *Radio Times* to know that it will have been screened on at least one of the channels at least once over this yuletide period. It is practically a law at this point. The people demand it.

And with good reason. Because like *Shawshank* this is one of those films that as soon as you catch it while channel-hopping you find yourself committed to seeing the rest of it through. It draws you in like few other films can. Though I had only seen *The Great Escape* in its entirety maybe three times before this recent reappraisal for this review, I have seen fragments of it many, many times. McQueen in the cooler with his baseball and glove, Ives going wire-happy, Danny revealing his claustrophobia, Blythe the forger trying to fool Bartlett with this pin trick. On and on, iconic scene after iconic scene.

So even though, hundreds if not thousands of people will have trodden this same path and reviewed this masterpiece of action and adventure, I feel compelled to enter the fray and say my piece, even though I wonder what else is left to be said about it. Still, one must pull ones shoulders back and mark bravely on, eh? That’s the moral of all of this is it not?

The Great Escape (1963)

D. John Sturges

W. James Clavell, Paul Brickhill, W.R. Burnett

S. Steve McQueen, James Garner, Richard Attenborough

First things first, this might be John Sturges' best film. And that is saying something. If you peruse his filmography you will see the likes of *The Magnificent Seven*, *Bad Day at Black Rock*, *Gun Fight at the OK Corral*, *Ice Station Zebra* and scores of other obscurer pictures with vivid posters, hyperbolic taglines and the promise of a rollicking good time at the movies. Sturges knows what he is doing, clearly, and more to the point he knows what he is *about*. Action, heroism, wit, suspense, mounting tension, all of those components of honest good-time escapism. Which is not to say that he skimps on darkness, consequence and fear because you can have no shining light without looming shadow.

And though other great Sturges films followed in the wake of this *The Great Escape* feels like the culmination of all of the trademarks and themes that Sturges built his craft around. See, primarily Sturges was devoted to the idea of economy in visual storytelling and this is an absolute masterclass in that vital and increasingly under-utilised skill. So even though *The Great Escape* clocks in at a hefty two hours and forty-five minutes (which should by rights rule it out as being a subject for these weekly reviews) the run time flies by. There is zero fat, zero filler, every line and every scene matter and pay off. Watching this (sometimes from between my fingers as the tension ratchets up) I could not see one thing that could be modified or improved upon. And surely this is the definition of five-star filmmaking.

From the opening seconds we know the score and we know the stakes- It is the allied officers sworn duty to escape from the newly built POW supercamp they find themselves in and it is the Nazi's duty to stop them. The first bungling 'blitz' escapes (i.e. grab an opportunity and run rather than premeditate and tunnel out) show that the Nazi's are no fools. And so our crew of heroes are soon identified as to their roles and skillsets- forger, scrounger, stooges, trap team, tunnel kings etc- and their characters are established. Again, pure economy, with sometimes mere seconds of screentime you know what a character is about and (on some preconscious level) what their arch will be.

It's masterfully done. Sturges is overt in his subtlety and subtle in his overt manoeuvrings, you don't miss anything, you are never confused yet you never feel as if you are being patronised, talked down to or beaten over the head with clunky exposition. ('Let the audience add together two and two', director and writer Ernst Lubitsch once said 'and they will love you forever.') I wish more latter-day screenwriters and directors would study *The Great Escape* and it is no accident that the only contemporary filmmaker who regularly cites *The Great Escape* as a favourite and formative influence is Tarantino who is arguably one of the best, or at least one of the most interesting, people working in Hollywood today.

But I'm getting of track. As well as the faultless direction we have the equally faultless writing. The economy of the latter enables the economy of the former. And what's more it is the writing that has allowed the film to be timeless. Though this is early sixties cinema you would not know it other than from the vivid technicolour and the ensemble of stars from that time period- Garner, Coburn, Attenborough, Pleasance and of course Steve McQueen at the absolute pinnacle of his powers. But listen to the speech, look at the sets and clothes and vehicles and you will notice that everything is authentic. Not one thing dates it to the end of the Camelot era as opposed to the 1940's drudger and camaraderie of Stalag Luft III. This is another thing I wish contemporary screenwriters would take on board, rather than lazily using anachronistic present-day argot and speech patterns in what purport to be period pictures.

But let's not sully this slice of perfection with talk of present-day deficiencies. Let's just enjoy it for what it is and for what it will forever be. And that is the perfect mixture of war film, prison film, ensemble film, action film and more. You've got great lines, iconic scene after iconic scene and not to mention the absolutely iconic score and theme song from Elmer Bernstein. As soon as you hear that music play, you know where you are and you know the enthralling time you are in for. It is as inviting and enjoyable as your favourite chair after a hearty Christmas meal with family and drink and good talk.

And like those other great things in life it is something that you can always look forward to enjoying again and again and again.

Treasure Of the Sierra Madre (1948)

TJB Review #24

It's a cliché to point out how ludicrous most decisions at the Academy Awards are; how unjust, short-sighted, politics driven or even just out and out misguided. But sometimes the Oscar goes to the deserving candidate. Take the 1949 awards as an example. At this ceremony John Huston won gongs for best director and best screenplay and his father won best supporting actor in the same film- the first time father and son had ever been simultaneously awarded for work on the same picture. So it is safe to say, my friends, that today's film- *The Treasure Of The Sierra Madre*- is an absolute classic. One of the best films of its time and one of the best films of all time. One you can catch on TV on a slow afternoon and suddenly find yourself drawn into again and again and again.

Further, the enduring legacy of *Treasure...* can be felt all over subsequent cinematic tales of greed, adventure, hardship and survival. Spielberg has gone on the record to say that Bogart's character Frank C. Dobbs was one of the major touchstones for a certain Indiana Jones, and director Paul Thomas Anderson screened *Treasure* constantly while in the process of writing and filming his excellent tale of avarice and madness *There Will Be Blood*.

So we are talking about a masterpiece with a capital M here. Which means I should probably get on with it then.

Treasure Of the Sierra Madre (1948)

D. John Huston

W. John Huston

S. Humphrey Bogart, Walter Huston, Tim Holt

We begin with Bogart as a down on his luck bum Fred C. Dobbs- all stubble-faced and with a frayed brim hat- scrounging for coins in the Mexican port town of Tampico. (This incidentally, was the first Hollywood film to be shot on location outside of the US and the spiralling-out-of-control budget soon reflected that fact). He soon meets another one of life's downtrodden, a younger guy called Bob Curtin (played by B movie western mainstay Tim Holt). The duo mooch around and get swindled by a conniving labour contractor who they eventually catch up to and rough up in a tequila joint.

Avenged but still broke the two use the last of their money to buy a nights stay at a roach and scorpion infested joint where they meet up with the white-bearded and hardy old prospector Howard (Walter Huston). This guy has been around. He knows all there is to know about panning and pickaxes and sluices and claims. He also knows about 'what gold does to a man's soul'. He has seen how a bag full of gold leads to paranoia and betrayal, and men turning murderous. Finding the gold is one thing. Finding it and bringing it back to civilisation without either killing or getting killed by a partner is quite another.

Howard has been around. He has seen a thing or two. And it is testament to Walter Hustons grizzled and amused performance and the depth of research that went into his son's screenplay that we believe all of this. The elder Huston seems not so much like an actor playing a prospector than a prospector who is taking a break from sifting dirt to do a little bit of play acting in a motion picture.

So the trio set out into the wild, far from the rail tracks and settlements and other places that have either been mined already or that may have fellow gold diggers knocking around. This is where the heart of the picture takes place. The trio find gold and with it comes that change in souls that old Howard knows only too well. Soon they are measuring out the day's proceeds with spoon and scales (which brings to mind the addictive, precious, drug like quality of the gold) and dividing it three ways. They hide their respective loot and grow more wary and weary- the shifty-eyes Dobbs especially.

The slow-burn of paranoia, suspicion and mistrust is particularly compelling on the part of Dobbs, which to my mind is one of Bogarts greatest performances. Hats off to Bogie for parlaying his stardom into doing such an unflattering and un-star-like role as this, decades before such grungy realism became a way of currying favour with the award panels. With his grown-out hair and beard and ragged clothes and wild eyes this is not exactly the vanity role of a matinee idol. But then with his scarred lip and rough features and cigarette voice Bogie was never exactly your traditional leading man. What he was though was charismatic, or more specifically he was able to bring a hint of charm and thus likability to some ostensibly very unlikable characters (Sam Spade is often thuggish, Casablanca's Rick is a cynic verging on a nihilist in the first few reels of that picture). A little part of you pulls for the Bogie character, often in spite of yourself.

The story progresses and the camp is discovered by a Texan called Cody. The paranoia mounts, things escalate and soon bandits and natives become involved as well. The moral quandary develops between the trio, Howard representing experience verging on shrug-shouldered fatalism, Dobbsy representing greed, ambition and paranoia, with young Curtin being forced to choose between those two conditions.

Dobbs' hair trigger temper, frayed nerves and ability to harbour grudges lead to an outcome that you see coming but that you are nonetheless surprised and enthralled by (this being entertained by inevitability is the hallmark of good screenwriting. Another Oscar well deserved).

Now, this film especially for its time is long (2 hours and 6 minutes by my watch) but it never loses you and everything that happens serves either the story or the character. There is no fat to trim and the pacing helps serve that mounting paranoia and sense of impending disaster and betrayal. Which is not to say that this film doesn't contain fun and wit and moments of goodheartedness. And, as a sidenote, any violence that is stronger than a right cross occurs off-screen. Having watched many old films of late is a practice which I believe contemporary filmmakers should reinvestigate. If nothing else it is effective cinema. Less is most often more.

So anyway. Treasure tells us many things about human beings when they are untrammelled by civilising influences, about the often fatalistic, cosmic joke nature of wealth and unchecked ambition. And how 'the worse ain't so bad when it finally happens.' And, like all great films it both stays with you afterwards and is something that you can happily revisit again and again.

A Prophet (2009)

TJB Review #25

One of the enduring appeals of what they call ‘world cinema’ for me is that they offer a far greater scope for you as viewer to suspend your disbelief. Simply put it is easier to become absorbed in a picture if you are not blinded by the sheer wattage of the lead actor’s celebrity status. If every time you pass the newspaper rack in a shop or catch a glimpse of a chat show while channel-hopping or get drawn into a clickbait article while logging out of your email you see the same celebrities venerated grin and shopworn anecdotes it becomes much harder to give credence to the idea that they are really a beat-cop a fireman or a working stiff when you see them there on the silver screen.

But ‘world cinema’ doesn’t have this problem if you are from the English-speaking parts of the globe.

And that goes double for today’s film. Because what we have here is the breakthrough film of actor Tahar Rahim, who plays Malik, a young man who enters both the film and the audience’s awareness as a complete blank slate. We know nothing about him, about his past, his experience. Even his nationality is up for debate- is he French, Algerian, Portuguese, what?

As we see in the opening minutes the newly imprisoned Malik is destitute, bruised, grubby, illiterate, alone. He can barely sign his own name on the legal aid paperwork. The strip search shows his scars. He has no family, no friends, no religion. No one and nothing.

From these beyond humble beginnings at the absolute nadir of the social heap Malik's journey begins. As does one of the all-time great gangster films, up there with any of the heralded and prestigious Hollywood counterparts you might care to name.

A Prophet (2009)

D. Jacques Audiard

W. Jacques Audiard, Abdel Raouf Dafri, Lauranne Bourrachot, Marco Cherqui

S. Tahar Rahim, Niels Arestrup, Adel Bencherif

'The idea is to leave here a little smarter'

~Reyeb

It's called *A Prophet* but it could just as easily be called *An Education*. Because that's what we have here, the story of a man gaining an education in all aspects of life- from literacy and numeracy to work and crime and murder. From being naive and at the bottom of the prison hierarchy Malik finds his niche and finds his way in the confined and code-bound world of the unnamed prison he finds himself in.

And it's as real a depiction of prison as I have ever seen on screen. You can almost smell the roll-ups and the instant coffee and the prisoners leisurewear, and there is the faint but ever-present sound of a tennis-ball striking a wall or the sound of laps being run or the murmur and shout of conversations in a plethora of different accents and dialects- Arabic, French, Corsican.

Director Jaques Audiard casts scores of extras for their real-life jail-time experience above all else and the background is always peopled by characters who look right, walk right and carry themselves right. It's hard to distinguish exactly or put into words but prison seems to leave a mark that cannot quite be rubbed away. And all of these secondary players have that mark.

Now to the plot, or at least the catalyst for it. The prison has two factions Corsican and Muslim. A new prisoner, A Muslim called Reyeb, is temporarily transferred to the jail awaiting trial. He was a witness to a Corsican crime on the outside and is to testify in less than two weeks. Word from the higher-ups gets to Luciani the boss of the jailhouse Corsican mafia crew that this snitch needs to be killed. Quickly. Luciani is shrewd enough to know that this should be done by an outsider. Enter Malik, who coincidentally is housed in the neighbouring cell to Reyeb and has started to strike up the beginnings of a friendship with the witness.

The Corsicans summon Malik in the yard. Kill him or we kill you is the upshot. We'll help you, we'll protect you in spite of the fact that you are North African and not Corsican, but kill him.

What follows is some of the best cinema you will ever see. Tahar Rahim fully conveys the nauseating panic of the quandary he has found himself in. He is taught how to conceal a razor blade in his mouth. An education. We see the pain and frustration that learning this gruesome

skill brings. And we see the act itself- conveyed with a brutal but not needlessly lurid realism as we might expect if present day Hollywood were to tackle the same subject matter. Without it being stated directly it is clear as day that Malik is forever scarred and forever changed by the murder that he has to commit to save his own hide.

With blood on his hands Malik has now earned his stripes and a tiny, tiny modicum of respect from the Corsicans. He is in the crew as errand boy. He slowly, slowly builds up his power and experience using his ability to understand both Arabic and Corsican dialects to gain a unique overview of how the jailhouse structure as a whole works and where the opportunities are. An education.

Now this film is long and on paper a two and a half hour subtitled prison drama might appear to be a tough sell. But *A Prophet* moves with the propulsive and meticulous precision of the equally long and equally excellent prison movie *The Great Escape*. Although *A Prophet* is considerably darker of course. The viewer's interest is maintained in this film via two mechanisms (other than excellent writing, acting, sound design, cinematography and all of those other aspects of filmmaking craft).

Firstly- and this is an accurate part of the actual prison system in which it is set- Malik gets day release as his time in prison with (as far as the system knows) good behaviour accrues. The film is not tied down to one location. It can breathe. We see the contrast between the claustrophobic world of jail and the world beyond the walls. We see the contrast of Malik learning to navigate his way through both. And secondly rather than a cliched rise and fall tale this is the story of ascent alone. In interview director Jacques Audiard said that he became bored with Scarface once Tony Montana acquired all of his power. It is the getting that is the fascinating part, narratively speaking, not the having. *A Prophet* makes a very convincing argument for this notion.

The film crackles with energy and is riveting and visceral all of which is augmented by the shaky, fly-on-the-wall camerawork and the masterful performances from both Rahim and the ever-dependable Niels Arestrup as the white haired but deadly Luciani. Audiard had already made a number of very, very good films in his career up to this point including his previous release, the excellent *The Beat That My Heart Skipped*, but *A Prophet* feels like both a refinement of everything that came before and a culmination of the director's career and craft. It's a high watermark this, and one that any filmmaker or storyteller of any stripe would be happy to come anywhere near to approaching.

Invest 150 minutes if your time and see what I mean.

Dead Man's Shoes (2004)

TJB Review #26

We like to think that we are civilised people, removed from our baser urges and inclinations by rationality, decency and self-control. But as soon as someone cuts out in front of us as we are driving, or someone disrespects us or belittles us the blood boils and the red mist descends and for a split second we succumb to murderous fantasies of what we would like to do to the one who has just wronged us.

The fact we do not admit such primal instincts publicly does not make this any less true.

Well, director Shane Meadows does admit to this impulse and further he makes it his theme in this gripping, bristling, at times genuinely disturbing revenge film. The plot- deceptively simple as it is- reads like standard action thriller fare, but this is anything but.

Yes, there is clearly a debt owed to those seventies revenge thrillers starring Charles Bronson or directed by Sam Peckinpah, just as there is clearly a debt to the grizzlier and more relentless end of the Clint Eastwood Western oeuvre, but more than that this film reminds me of the gritty cinema of Alan Clarke. The Clarke who made the Borstal drama *Scum* starring a young Ray Winston and the Skinhead film *Made in Britain* starring a young Tim Roth, two films whose violence and vitriol are made all the more vivid for their acute and pitch perfect sense of place and social realism. These are lessons that Meadows has clearly learned well.

And though Meadows has subsequently mined this same vein of small-town gangs and bullies and the actual realities of violence and retribution in his later and more well-known film *This Is England* (the title again feeling like a nod to Clarke), it is in this earlier work that he gives them their most powerful, direct, haunting and vivid expression.

Dead Man's Shoes (2004)

D. Shane Meadows

W. Paddy Considine, Shane Meadows

S. Paddy Considine, Gary Stretch, Toby Kebbell

‘God will forgive them and allow them into heaven. I can’t live with that.’

So says Richard, an ex-Squaddie now out of the army and back in his anonymous semi-rural Midlands hometown. He is accompanied by his younger, sweet natured learning-disabled brother Anthony. And the ‘them’ that he seeks to exact bloody retribution on is the gang of small-time dealers and ne’re-do-wells who abused and tormented and took advantage of poor Anthony in his big brothers’ absence.

We learn of the brother’s closeness (just as we later learn drip-by-drip the nature of Anthony’s abuse at the hands of the gang) via grainy home video and sepia toned flashbacks. The home video of Christmas day present unwrapping and Christenings and family get togethers with domestic beer and sausage rolls and cheese-and-pineapples on sticks was hugely evocative (I usually find such devices lazy and poorly done), largely because this is set, approximately, in my part of the world and it all feels very, very accurate.

But like I said, Richard as that opening voice over makes clear, is out for retribution of the Old Testament variety. And with his army issue duffel bag, his close-cropped hair and his military training we know he is serious on going about getting it. His Travis Bickle style army jacket, incidentally is another nice visual nod to another seventies revenge film and another character who Richard resembles in both his intensity and focus on fulfilling his self-defined mission.

And on the subject of Bickle actor/screenwriter Paddy Considine puts in a vintage De Niro level performance as the revenge seeking Richard. You believe him. His restrained ferocity, his wide-eyed single mindedness, his complete absence of fear. Though not a hulking physical presence Considine makes Richard a genuinely intimidating presence, even when he is not wearing a gasmask and boiler-suit and terrorising various members of the gang while they sleep or try to get high in peace.

Yet, as I said, this is no standard revenge film. There is a lot of subtlety in between the bouts of overt (and realistic) violence. The sense of place is immaculate- the plastic trikes and swing-sets in the overgrown front gardens of the houses on the estate, the garage doors orange with rust, the dingy working mens clubs and flats where the dealers do their small-time bits of business. This could be virtually any small town in England north of Birmingham.

And the character of the tormented, simple-minded Anthony is excellent too. The temptation would be to play this much larger, more overt, but the beauty is that Anthony is just a little bit slower than the rest, just a little bit less savvy and this plus his good heart are what make him a victim. And as happens in real life, the simple Anthony is adapted as a kind of mascot for the

gang, they ply him with drugs and show him occasional kindnesses such that Anthony would probably think that the gang are his mates. He doesn't realise that the laughter is at his expense until it is too late.

This is all beautifully done and speaks to good direction and having a great grasp on human psychology, the nature of bullying, that small town council estate mentality, and as we said, the unremitting nature of vengeance once those wheels are put into motion.

Things are further helped along by some excellent editing and the interweaving of the aforementioned sepia flashbacks to slowly reveal the full horror of the situation. Plus the music is excellent, from Bill Callahan/Smog in the opening scenes to a masterful use of Arvo Part's *De Profundis* as we reach the denouement.

This is, simply put, one of the best British films of the past twenty years. Small budget, small scale, but with huge thematic ambition and to my mind perfect execution. I just wished they would make more of them like this.

Ariel (1988)

TJB Review #27

The director- looking like he has perhaps had one too many- enters the dusty dilapidated factory set from stage right. He bows before an easel mounted photograph of another director, a better director (he knows it and we know it) and he respectfully mutters 'Ozu-san' in deference before taking a seat. He leans forward in his chair, a little awkward, and fumbles for his cigarettes while he begins to talk to the photograph.

'My name is Aki Kaurismäki from Finland. I've made 11 lousy films and it's all your fault.'

Within these two sentences, within this little staged tableau that I saw on some DVD extra or some ultra-late night movie review show (who knows how many years ago) is the essence of the film we will be looking at today and of the man who made it. First of all, of course, the film is not lousy- far from it- but in that dejected, disaffected, deadpan figure lies the heart of both its humour and its style. This is underdog filmmaking- self-consciously so- this is film about down-and-outs and drunks and deadbeats. But like our director in his little Ozu tribute scene it is self-consciously so and thus it is very, very fun.

Our director is not being insincere when he says Ozu is better than him (because, after all, who in the history of cinema is really better than Ozu?), but this sad-sack admission of the fact, coupled with the absurdist declaration that Kaurismäki says he will continue making films just to prove that Ozu is better once and for all, makes the whole situation not only amusing but also quite romantic if not bordering on heroic. There is a strange and persistent streak of optimism in this Finnish cynicism. And it is no more evident than in 1988's *Ariel*, a film that I would argue is still Kaurismäki's finest to date.

Ariel (1988)

D. Aki Kaurismäki

W. Aki Kaurismäki

S. Turo Pajala, Susanna Haavisto, Matti Pellonpää

'It's all the same story. People try to survive in the world they are born.'

~Aki Kaurismäki.

One thing about the great Japanese director Ozu and about Japanese art in general, is the idea the mastery comes through repetition. In and of itself, novelty is not a particularly interesting or revered quality, nor is what you might call breadth. You find a theme, a topic, a lane and you refine it and refine it through iteration after iteration until you master it completely. Ozu famously compared himself to a tofu maker, saying 'I can make fried tofu, boiled tofu, stuffed tofu. Cutlets and other fancy stuff, that's for other directors.'

He knew his limitations (he imposed them on himself in fact) and through this he was able to gain complete control over his own chosen idiom and subject matter. And, as it was with the master, so it is with his Finnish student.

From the very beginning of his career Kaurismäki consciously selected both his subject matter (simple stories of downtrodden underdogs who stoically work through their situation), and his short and considered vocabulary of cinematic techniques (a still camera, lingering medium distance shots, deadpan non-acting, all very Ozu inspired). Added to this was his own sensibility of Americana infused aesthetics- rock and roll, Cadillacs, pompadours, endless cigarettes and looking off into the existential middle distance, all of which combine to give his films their unique and unabashed sense of cool. His downtrodden heroes may be broke, prematurely aged, trapped in a post-industrial proletariat purgatory, but that doesn't mean they can't endure all of that with style.

And Ariel is the apotheosis of all of these themes, tropes and concerns. In the first scene our hero, a miner called Taisto, gets laid off from the pit along with his father and everyone else. In despair over his own redundancy his father shoots himself. (This opening scene is played for morbid laughs and somehow works). So Taisto inherits his old mans' incongruous Cadillac and heads off to the big city lights of Helsinki to try and find work. In quick succession Taisto is beaten, robbed, made homeless, meets the love of his life in single mother Irmela, is falsely imprisoned and then after escaping commits some actual crimes with the help of his cellmate played by the wonderful Matti Pellonpää.

That's a lot of plot for a 75 minute film where seemingly not a lot happens. Which is all part of both Kaurismäki's craft and his charm. If you hadn't intuited it by now Kaurismäki is a nostalgist rather than a technologist, the past being a comfortable refuge from the bland digital future, a theme which is expressed via a unique blend of romantic escapism and gritty social realism. This is unabashedly melodramatic, sentimental and knows that it is cinema as opposed to 'real'. And if you combine all of these things together what you end up with is a unique cinematic language that is clearly and immediately Kaurismäki-esque. A single long lingering

shot, a single line of deadpan dialogue or a gag as great as the convertible Cadillac one and you know where you are and who is behind the camera.

Kaurismäki has created a whole world of his own, a fantasy Finland both better and worse than the real thing (or so I imagine) and it is instantly recognisable. It is something that you can visit time and again, in film after film after film, all the same, yet all subtly different.

I think Ozu would be proud.

The Honeydripper (2007)

TJB Review #28

I'm a mediocre musician but I know enough about music to not only be able to hear when someone can play but be able to *see* it too. Which can often make watching films about the worlds of music and performance such a disappointment. The leads in many cases can act but they can rarely really *play*. They have clearly had a whistlestop preparation period, a few months of coaching and drilling in the instrument so yes, they can move their hands in the right chord shapes and mimic the movements of a musician, but you can tell that they aren't really playing or they aren't really singing. Mastery takes a lifetime and even the simulation of mastery takes far longer than what production schedules will allow.

So given this, the sheer number of biopics and music world dramas I have watched where this weakness has pulled me out of the onscreen action is significant. The lip-synching, the fake instrument playing, the music added in post-production is as distracting as canned sitcom laughter. It's an aesthetic crime in my eyes. A relatively minor one, granted, but one which is especially irritating to me for some reason.

In fact I would argue that directors would be better off casting professional musicians and trying to coax and school them into competent acting than casting professional actors and trying to coax and school them into pretending to be competent musicians. Besides, musicians- especially singers- are *performers*. There is an acting component to getting across to the audience that what you are singing about is something you really *mean* and believe, whether you actually do or not. The leap into being a decent enough actor, then, should be imminently achievable.

And the main evidence I would cite as demonstrating the truth of this position and the wisdom of using musicians in films about music is today's picture, the John Sayles juke-joint drama *The Honeydripper*.

As you would expect from someone as keen-eyed and empathetic as Sayles, all the musicians here- from a young Gary Clarke Jr to a ghostly Keb' Mo' and a regal and dignified Dr Mabel

John- are *real* musicians. And it's their performances draw you into this Jim Crow, Cotton State world. They do the heavy lifting of pages and pages of expository dialogue. An old pro like Sayles knows about the use of authentic detail as a storytelling device just as he knows that when done right, showing people simply being people can be as compelling as any high budget mainstream spectacle. And what is more real than someone playing a bluesy guitar while the weekend revellers whoop and dance?

The Honeydripper (2007)

D. John Sayles

W. John Sayles

S. Danny Glover, Lisa Gay Hamilton, Charles S. Dutton

There's not much dancing going on in 'Pine Top' Purvis' joint The Honeydripper. It's dead. There's 'no crowd at all, just a bunch of stiffs who want to drink themselves to sleep without the music waking them up.'

Across the way the noisy rival bar Touissants is booming. They have a jukebox which draws in the young crowd and mobs of GI's from the local army base.

This is the crux of the drama- Pine Top's place is on the verge of going under, he's behind in paying 'the ice man, the chicken man, the liquor man'. The electric has been cut off and the jerry rigged source that his friend/barman Maceo is illegally syphoning is temperamental at best and a death waiting to happen at worst.

Plus add to the fact that this is Alabama in 1950 and so The Honeydripper and the whole wider town is beset by Jim Crow laws and is ruled over by a bigoted sheriff (played by Stacey Keach in a role which could easily tip over into pantomime villiany under less subtle writing and direction).

The deck is stacked against the mysterious, piano playing old Pine Top, a fact which makes the ageing but still tough Danny Glover the perfect casting choice. He brings all of that world-weariness which has been one of his calling cards since at least the Lethal Weapon days. Glover does a great line in restrained anger which amplifies the legend that the piano man Pine Top once murdered a man over a woman in his younger days when he was a musician on the road.

So Pine Top has a past but not much of a future. His only shot is to draw in the wages of the cotton pickers once the soon to be finished season ends. He needs an attraction, something that the young folks will be drawn to.

And wouldn't you know it, a young mysterious drifting electric guitar player has just hopped off a box car in this ironically named town of Harmony (Guitar player: 'name like that sounds like a good place for a musician. Station Master: 'Only night I've ever been in jail was a town called Liberty.')

This might all sound fairly standard stuff, but that's not the point I'm trying to make. The point is that the film itself is like one of the Blues songs that it is inspired by, and often quotes- it has a set structure, and rules and conventions and changes. But within that there is scope for all kinds of innovation and flare. The film which is edited by Sayles (as well as written and directed) takes its time, and as I said before, it is happy to simply show people being people. There is room to breathe and to linger over a joke or a song or a conversation. All of this adds up to creating a sense of place and a mood of the moment that is painstakingly accurate without being dull or worthy or distracting from the story.

The Honeydripper transports you to a time and a place but tells you a story that is timeless. Which is exactly what the blues is all about.

This Year's Love (1999)

TJB Review #29

It's Valentine's Day on Monday, which means that I am duty-bound (or at least feel compelled) to review a romantic comedy this week. But therein lies the problem. Most romantic comedies- especially more latter-day ones- fail at both parts of that remit. Miserably.

The majority are both painfully unfunny and also cynically unromantic at heart. It seems like at some point rudeness, disgust and cringe-inducing awkwardness become the only three shades of humour that screenwriters permit themselves to wield, and I personally don't think that overblown, materialist saccharine gestures in the third act constitute 'romance', nor do they make up for the two prior acts worth of jaded careerist nihilism where the leads contrive to ignore the solution to all of their problems that have been right in front of them the whole time.

Sigh.

Perhaps I don't generally care for romantic comedies post the Screwball peak of Cary Grant and Katherine Hepburn et al, because I actually *am* a romantic. There are many classic romantic comedies of that era, but they continue to be correctly revered and thus well-known enough to not require championing here.

But fortunately among the pile of late twentieth/early twenty first century romantic comedy dross there is a gem. A gem which sadly is now so obscure- even within its native Britain- that I would be surprised if anyone reading this has even heard of it let alone seen it. And being the champion of the underdog and the forgotten that I am, I will now talk about it with the affection and at the length that I feel it deserves. Like I said, I am a romantic.

This Year's Love (1999)

D. David Kane

W. David Kane

S. Kathy Burke, Jennifer Ehle, Ian Hart

So what we have here is the story of the misadventures of six thirty-somethings in late '90s tail-end-of-the-Britpop-and-rave-era Camden Town, North London. You've got tattoo artist Danny and his bride Hannah whose marriage doesn't survive the opening scene reception; you've got grungy lothario painter Cameron; backing singer/airport cleaner/ 'fat bird' Marey; comic book selling, clingy introvert Liam, and finally the slumming posh girl in dreadlocks single mother Sophie.

Each act of the picture is a new year in their lives (hence the title) and sees the three couples reconfigure as their relationships sour/fizzle out/implode. This partner swapping conceit gives plenty of scope for both comedy and drama and feels far more organic than a lot of film and TV contrivances that are used to keep us involved in the changing stories of six separate characters. It also belies the stage writing origins of writer David Kane here in his big screen debut as both writer and director.

Even though the run time is a lean one hour and forty-eight minutes all six of the main characters are fully realised and three dimensional. All are dropouts of the standard careerist route, all have baggage and damage and foibles and redeeming qualities, and all are excellently portrayed by the ensemble cast. Without resorting to the grey doldrums of Mike Leigh/ kitchen sink drama type improvisational realism, all of these characters and the Camden Lock settings feel incredibly *real*. The film vividly captures how I recall the place to be when I mooched around there as a student some 5 years after *This Year's Love* was released. The contemporary 'Cool Britannia' soundtrack also helps with this (although as purely *music* it is a mixed bag given that this was time of David Gray and The Stereophonics as well as Garbage and Mercury Rev).

Packing so much into such a relatively short time frame means the film zips along and the tonal shifts from comedic fun (the speed-fuelled Danny ranting down the phone at someone who he mistakenly thinks is after his woman, Marey's regrettable tattoo, the many pints thrown at the rakish and unwashed Cameron) to actual hard hitting, consequence-laden drama can jar a little. But it works, and the actors are up to the task (as an aside, I should mention that the drunk acting- whether played for laughs or pathos- is uniformly excellent. I've always considered this to be one of the highest forms of acting, and it is one thing that romantic comedy leads are often just awful at).

It all adds up to a pretty honest look at relationships and the passage of time while trying to scrape by and stay sane in the big city. The fact that *This Year's Love* has disappeared almost without a trace, whilst the infinitely shitter and cheesier *Notting Hill* was a box office smash the same year is something that I try not to dwell on too much.

You can critique and sneer at the successful but awful until the cows come home, or you can simply champion and promote works that undeservingly underperform and deserve a wider audience. Which is what I always try to do.

Don't get me wrong, this film is not a flawless masterpiece. But what romance is?

Light Sleeper (1992)

TJB Review #30

The first and most obvious point to make about *Light Sleeper*- one that needs to be made to then move on from- is the commonalities and connections that it shares with *Taxi Driver*. Paul Schrader wrote the screenplay for Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* a good decade and a half before he wrote and directed *Light Sleeper*, arguably his finest picture as an auteur, but the two films share the same impulses, the same obsessions, the same vision.

Taxi Driver is the tale of a nocturnal drifter, a ghostly character who watches and lingers at the edges of society. He is in a sense passive with things just happening to him. Happening around him. This existential loner, this character of 'God's Lonely Man' (as *Taxi Driver's* Travis Bickle labels himself) is at the forefront of Schrader's cinematic oeuvre, such a man, such an existence, is Schrader's perennial obsession.

Some artists brim with ideas and novelties, while others must plough the same row again and again trying to dig up the roots of a thing. Schrader is the latter, and what helps him immeasurably here is the passage of time and the changing of our orientation to life as we age.

The portrayal of God's Lonely Man as a twenty-something written by a twenty-something is a different proposition to the same archetype as a thirty-something, a forty-something, a fifty-something. Indeed in his loose trilogy Schrader has tackled each of these developmental decades via the stories of: a hostile and paranoid New York City cab driver in his twenties (*Taxi Driver*), a decadent, narcissistic Los Angeles gigolo in his thirties (*American Gigolo*), and, as is the case here, as an anxious, uncertain New York City drug dealer who has hit forty.

Time has taken the edge off the anger of God's Lonely Man but the longing to find some sort of place in the world, to turn the ghostliness of existence into some sort of solidity is still there,

perhaps now even more so. But all three variations (I'm not quite sure that each iteration can be called an *evolution* as such) have these marginal occupations that in a way make them non-people. Whether it be a big city taxi driver, a gigolo or a drug dealer, you decide in the moment that you need the service that they offer but the second the transaction is complete, and the destination (actual or metaphorical) is reached they disappear both in reality and from your recollection.

And seeing from the vantage point of such a figure, of one who is detached, who is almost a floating soul, who is in-the-world-but-not-of-the-world is the cornerstone of Schrader's unique cinematic vision...

Light Sleeper (1992)

D. Paul Schrader

W. Paul Schrader

S. Willem Dafoe, Susan Sarandon, Dana Delany

Now, the above makes *Light Sleeper* sound like an intellectual exercise, but this is far from the case. Yes you could endlessly analyse this work in terms of Schrader's harsh Calvinist childhood (this director of two dozen films wasn't even able to *see a film* until he was seventeen and that was only achieved by sneaking out of the house) and the consequent obsession with ideas such as providence, redemption, predetermination and so forth.

So Schrader must be the only Hollywood filmmaker of his generation to be working without *any* childhood memories of seeing movies that would later influence his work. This more cerebral approach leads to is a palpable, hypnotic *feel* to what you see on screen. So much more than simply stimulating the brain, this approach to film means that *Light Sleeper* is able to stimulate *the spirit* with its nocturnal atmosphere and languid stylisation. You inhale it.

Every single scene features our upscale drug dealer protagonist John LeTour (tour as in someone on a tour, or someone who is a tourist in his world, but also tour as in *tueur* the French for 'killer') which would be a tough task for a lesser actor than the haunted, soulful looking Willem Defoe. He is perfectly cast with the cheekbones, pallor and sinewy build of someone who was a coke user before he graduated to becoming a sharp dressed dealer who no longer uses.

Defoe is able to somehow bring that detached ghostly passivity without ever being boring or aloof. Without the drama and accelerants of action scenes, fistfights, car chases, explosions, and the like we as audience are induced to pay attention and to *see* the film rather than just passively *look* at it. And so this permanently 3am world- it seems like even when it is day, it's somehow night- strikes us with the intended note of melancholy.

It feels very physically real this world- from the purple bathed and glamorous, yet utterly joyless upscale night clubs to the various apartments where LeTour delivers the product. Some apartments are booklined and palatial while others are showing signs that the user's habit is

taking over- mounds of litter, gaps where the now-pawned stereo or appliances might have sat, mirrors and bottles and crumpled cigarette packets crowding on the coffee table. But no place conveys the same emptiness as LeTours pad- the frameless mattress by the stereo and cluster of empty wine bottles and the desk where he writes out his searching journal entries that give us a voice-over glimpse into his heart. I could go on and on, but this wouldn't do justice to the feel of this atmospheric, ominous vision of New York after dark.

Special mention should go to Edward Lachman's neo-noir infused cinematography and Michael Been's score (his band The Call also provide the ballads that mark the chapters of the film and clue us in to the unravelling themes) as well as the uniformly excellent supporting cast, especially the matriarch-like head of the operation played by Susan Sarandon.

This is a beautiful and compelling film made by one of the few auteurs left around. It is an endlessly rewatchable 95 minutes as it is not marred by the kind of lapel clutching plot that passes for storytelling in this attention deficit age. It is stylish and stylised yet has a true heart and something to say beneath the cool textures and interiors and music. Light Sleeper is the definition of the kind of film I personally dig and if a few of you watch it on the strength of these words then I will be happy. I will have done my job.

Fat City (1972)

TJB Review #31

The novelist Harry Crews had a saying that has stuck with me:

‘Survival is triumph enough.’

Now I’m not quite sure if that is true but it’s compelling, nonetheless. Something to really think about. Survival is what we are built for, of course, what we claw to achieve year after year, but is it enough in and of itself? It is necessary, but is it *sufficient*?

True or not that statement framed as a question is at the very least an outstanding theme for a story, especially a boxing picture like today’s film. See, in the boxing genre the drama so often entails our pugilist protagonist merely trying to hold on until the end of the round, to survive a little longer against the odds. This is inherently compelling if the audience can first be made to care about the boxer in the ring, *as a person*. Which is why the fighter in question is so often an underdog, a palooka, an over-the-hill-brawler making one last run at glory and redemption.

And that is certainly what is going on in John Huston’s *Fat City*, a film which in a fairer world would be held up alongside the likes of *Raging Bull* and the original *Rocky* films (which I would argue that this film is superior to).

So what makes this largely forgotten film a contender? Let’s break it down and look at the tale of the tape...

Fat City (1972)

D. John Huston

W. Leonard Gardner

S. Stacy Keach, Jeff Bridges, Susan Tyrell

Tully is over the hill. He's 30 but looks near a decade older with his balding head and his face worn old by cuts and welts sustained in the ring (as well as being a phenomenal stage actor at this time, Keach was a perfect casting choice here because his repaired cleft lip reads as an authentic scar from fighting). He lives in a dilapidated room in Stockton, California, which we see in all of its hipflask sized whiskey bottle and rumpled clothes starkness in the opening. Kris Kristofferson appropriately sings 'I hope I make it through the night' as we cut between this and shots of the streets of Stockton, which seems as weathered, run down, and desperately fighting for dignity as our man Tully is.

Tully still trains a little and in the empty 'Y' he meets a teen called Ernie Munger. The kid (played by a young Jeff Bridges) is in shape, has a good reach, and has a few moves when sparring. Tully then sends him over to his old manager Ruben who duly starts booking the young prospect in amateur fights, driven at least in part by the dollar signs he sees from having a white prospect in his stable. One telling scene has Ruben giving Ernie the nickname 'Irish' Ernie Munger. 'But I'm not Irish.' 'Don't worry about it, this way the audience'll know you're white.'

And so the two men's paths diverge- the older guy on the way (further) down and the younger guy (temporarily) on the way up.

Now I could go on about the plot in great detail but as is so often the case with the films I review here, the plot is not the point. The texture is, the acting, the dialogue, the- forgive me for using this word- the *vibe* of the piece.

And this is certainly the case here. The film unwinds slowly and the scenes are all given time to breathe, with Tully picking up Oma (played by Susan Tyrell and being one of the most authentic portrayals of a certain kind of female drunk in cinematic history) being a standout among many great scenes. The actors are allowed to act and so we get to know them much more than we have every right to expect to from a film that has a lean sub 100 minutes run time.

It all adds up to a quietly devastating and deeply authentic feeling piece, which laid a blueprint which one might argue *Rocky* later took and commercialised in the first film of that franchise which debuted four years after *Fat City*. But there are no montages here and there is no motivational music but it is clear that Huston cares for his underdog characters and the source material deeply. There is a throughline here from Huston's earlier masterpieces such as *The Maltese Falcon* and *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* where, in failing to get what they want the characters end up getting what they need.

And as a viewer I felt the same way. I didn't get the flashy, heart-pumping finale of a standard fighting film, but I got something better. I got consolation (you'll see why I chose that particular

word when you watch the film). I got something real. Escapism at the movies is one thing, but immersion is quite another.