

THE MIND OF THE MODERN MOVIEMAKER

20
Conversations
with the
New Generation
of Filmmakers

Josh Horowitz

INCLUDING

KEVIN SMITH: *Clerks*,
Chasing Amy

McG: *Charlie's Angels*

CHRIS & PAUL WEITZ:

American Pie, *About a Boy*

DOUG LIMAN: *Swingers*,
The Bourne Identity

MICHEL GONDRY: *Eternal*
Sunshine of the Spotless Mind

TREY PARKER & MATT STONE:

South Park, *Team America*

NEIL LABUTE: *In the Company*
of Men, *Nurse Betty*

BRETT RATNER: *Rush Hour*,
X-Men 3

TODD PHILLIPS: *Old School*

JON FAVREAU: *Made*, *Elf*

PATTY JENKINS: *Monster*



The
MIND
of the
MODERN
MOVIEMAKER

*20 Conversations with the
New Generation of Filmmakers*

Josh Horowitz



A PLUME BOOK

PLUME

Published by Penguin Group

Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, U.S.A. • Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4P 2Y3 (a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.) • Penguin Books Ltd., 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England • Penguin Ireland, 25 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd.) • Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia (a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty. Ltd.) • Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd., 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi – 110 017, India • Penguin Books (NZ), cnr Airborne and Rosedale Roads, Albany, Auckland 1310, New Zealand (a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd.) • Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty.) Ltd., 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd., Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

First published by Plume, a member of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

First Printing, February 2006

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Copyright © Joshua Horowitz, 2006

All rights reserved

 REGISTERED TRADEMARK—MARCA REGISTRADA

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Horowitz, Josh, 1976–

The mind of the modern moviemaker : 20 conversations with the new generation of filmmakers / Josh Horowitz.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-452-28681-6

1. Motion picture producers and directors—United States—Interviews. 2. Motion pictures—Production and direction—United States. 1. Title.

PN1998.2H675 2006

791.4302'33'09973—dc22

2005023782

Printed in the United States of America

Set in Fairfield Light

Designed by Joseph Rutt

Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise), without the prior written permission of both the copyright owner and the above publisher of this book.

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book via the Internet or via any other means without the permission of the publisher is illegal and punishable by law. Please purchase only authorized electronic editions, and do not participate in or encourage electronic piracy of copyrighted materials. Your support of the author's rights is appreciated.

BOOKS ARE AVAILABLE AT QUANTITY DISCOUNTS WHEN USED TO PROMOTE PRODUCTS OR SERVICES. FOR INFORMATION PLEASE WRITE TO PREMIUM MARKETING DIVISION, PENGUIN GROUP (USA) INC., 375 HUDSON STREET, NEW YORK, NEW YORK 10014

A PLUME BOOK

THE MIND OF THE MODERN MOVIEMAKER

JOSH HOROWITZ is a writer and television producer. His television work includes producing for *Charlie Rose* on PBS and talk shows on CNBC and the Fox News Channel. His writings have appeared in numerous magazines and Web sites, including *Entertainment Weekly*, *Interview*, *Moviepoopshoot.com*, and *Us Weekly*. His musings on popular culture can be read on JoshHorowitz.net. He lives in New York City.

For my parents
My mother—whose passion for the arts will
always be an inspiration
My father—who didn't walk out of What About Bob?
Thanks for always indulging me.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are twenty-two filmmakers whose generosity with their time and candor made this effort possible. I've thanked all of them profusely in person, on the phone, and by e-mail. But here it is, one more time, a thanks immortalized in print.

To each of the filmmakers' assorted agents, publicists, managers, and assistants, my thanks for your patience and cooperation. In particular, I'd like to mention Jason Abril, Raffi Adlan, Rowena Arguelles, Chantelle Aspey, Anders Bard, Samantha Bryant, Ed Choi, Joseph Garner, Todd Gold, Tim David Harms, Marc Hofstatter, Jennifer Howell, Melissa Kates, Suzanne Lehfeltdt, Bebe Lerner, Heather Lylis, Phil Raskind, Leslie Rathe, Christine Richardson, Betsy Rudnick, Andy Shapiro, Gale Stanley, and Shannon Treusch.

I was assisted in the transcribing of the interviews by Michael Fontana, Sheena Goldstein, and Priya Sanghvi.

My thanks to everyone at The Creative Culture, most especially Nicole Diamond Austin, for leading me with a sure hand. I am indebted to my editor, Jake Klisivitch, for giving this book a proper home and presentation.

When this book was only a vague idea in my head, several people lent support and advice that propelled me forward. My thanks to Chris Ryall, Keith Gordon, and to the trio of filmmakers who were the very first to agree to be a part of it: John Hamburg, Kevin Smith, and Chris Weitz.

Many friends and colleagues were generous with advice and encouragement for this project throughout. Among them were Lewis

Beale, John Bobey, Alexandra Bresnan, Mark Bryant, Renee Kaplan, Jerome Kramer, the Stuart Krischevsky agency, Cathy Saypol, Liz Topp, Irene Wang, and Cara Weber.

My thanks to Courtney Litz for reading virtually every word of the book in your hands. Her recommendations and support were invaluable.

All the thanks I can possibly muster to my family. To my parents and my brother and sister, I hope it won't surprise you to know that I actually enjoy you all even more than the movies. And I enjoy the movies a whole lot.

I tend to obsess and agonize over most aspects of my life. This project was no different. Sadly for the patient, lovely, and wise Jenny Powers, she had to hear most of the whining. In the many highs and lows of this book, she never failed to be there for me. This book is better for her existence. And so am I.

INTRODUCTION

I have always found it remarkable that the experience of watching a film in a theater, unlike so many other experiences in life, has never really changed for me. Though I'll never again be ten, the rush of different emotions going to a movie elicits remains astoundingly constant. When the lights dim, I am back where I have been a thousand times before. I could be about to watch one of the most dismal wastes of celluloid in history, but for those first few moments, I'm watching *Citizen Kane*. It has me in its grasp, and whether it lets go of me is, in the end, up to the director. I walk into that theater with the expectation of greatness, that there may be at least one moment of brilliance. It's what director Luke Greenfield calls "the chill." It's those moments where, as he told me, "your hair stands up on your arms, and you feel like you can fucking fly."

I wanted to do this book because I love how films can both excite and disappoint me, how they somehow can make me feel a little bit more alive, even if I've spent the last two hours sitting by myself in a dark room. There are clearly distinct and powerful voices emerging in film today, and it is time for attention to be paid. Was it such a different feeling for an audience member walking out of 2004's *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* as it was for the patron leaving 1954's *On the Waterfront*? *Eternal Sunshine* tapped into something as honest and real and true as Marlon Brando did when he picked up Eva Marie Saint's glove a half century before. While *Eternal Sunshine* was clearly an astonishing creation of originality, other films discussed in this book more clearly echo the past. They are, in their own way, no less

original. Each generation puts its unique stamp on genres, whether it's Joe Carnahan's call back to *The French Connection* in *Narc* or Todd Phillips's counterculture comedy *Old School*, a film which owes an obvious debt to *Animal House*. The fact that they stand up so well to (and often surpass) their inspirations is a testament to the craft of these modern moviemakers.

Countless books have been written about the seminal filmmakers of the 1970s, a period worthy of examination even if, as Paul Weitz said to me, we often conveniently remove from our memories the sub-par work that came out of that era alongside the classics. But the book I always wanted to read about my heroes of the 1970s was the one written then. As fascinating as it is today to hear someone like Spielberg or Scorsese or Coppola or DePalma reflect on the past, what were they thinking at the time and in the moment? They are fully formed filmmakers now, resolute in their methods and ideologies but surely it must have been fascinating to hear from them as they were learning, while they were experiencing the early ebb and flow of a career. That is what this book is all about.

There is astounding work being done today and great filmmakers are emerging every year. I wanted to capture the young talents of today before we know how it all pans out, before their Oscar acceptance speeches or their \$100 million flop. The filmmakers in this book are still developing. For many, their best work is yet to come, and that is what is perhaps most exciting about them.

Hindsight is 20/20. We ask how and when and why brilliant directors of the past lost their way. How could the talents behind such films as *The Godfather*, *The Last Picture Show*, and *The Exorcist* be the same artists responsible for *Jack*, *The Cat's Meow*, and *Jade*? Several of the filmmakers I spoke with worry about similar fates. Most agreed it was simply a matter of keeping in touch with the world around them. David Gordon Green said, "I think there's a point in your life as an artist when you're aggressively reacting to the world around you—and who you know or what you know and who you hear—and there's a point when you're not listening anymore and you're just Woody Allen." This sentiment was echoed by filmmakers

as different from Green as McG and Brett Ratner. Can today's filmmakers avoid the mistakes of the previous generation and remain in the moment?

Whether a filmmaker can maintain any degree of individuality in today's system was another topic very much on the minds of many filmmakers. Debates raged over the importance of final cut—that ability to have the final say over the cut of your film—and test screenings. Directors like Todd Phillips told me that “Testing a movie in general is crucial. I always find it amazing when directors—outside of Steven Spielberg—just say, ‘Here’s the movie; take it or leave it.’ I just find it astounding, because ultimately you really don’t know what you have until you put it up there.” As for final cut, Brett Ratner asked rhetorically, “Why do I need final cut? Final cut is for artistes quote unquote, directors whose movies don’t make a lot of money.” On the other side of the fence was a filmmaker like Karyn Kusama, who in the midst of editing her first big studio film told me she’d likely never do another film of that kind without final cut. “I’ve realized I’m a strong-minded director with a very clear sense of what I want to do, and I just want to be left alone to do it,” she said.

As I talked to the filmmakers, I repeatedly asked myself, “What defines them? What qualities does such a diverse group share?” You first have to look at the time that has produced them. This is the first group of filmmakers to make films in the wake of Quentin Tarantino. Make no mistake, the long shadow of the famed former video-store clerk hangs over many whose stories are told here. As Joe Carnahan says, “Tarantino moved over the entire independent film scene like the fucking Hindenburg.”

Like Tarantino, these men and women grew up with super eight cameras, cable television, and VCRs. For the first time we have a generation of moviemakers who did not need to leave their homes to study the greats of the past. In fact, this may be the first filmmaking generation whose greatest influence wasn’t the world around them so much as the world they saw in their living room on TV. David Gordon Green recalls the opening of the second Blockbuster video store in the nation just blocks away from him in Texas. “I remember a sign

when they were first opening it saying 10,000 VIDEOS and I thought, whoa that's going to be trouble." Video literally changed these budding filmmakers' lives. If the filmmakers of the 1970s had Vietnam and the civil rights movement shaping their ethos, today's movie-maker is more likely to be shaped by the society reflected to him in pop entertainment. It's no surprise that perhaps the most dominant filmmaker in the young lives of these filmmakers was Steven Spielberg, the man who seemed to control Hollywood in the 1980s.

This is a group that has lived through the rise and commodification of the independent film. Is such a seeming oxymoron possible? It would appear so when the term "indie" needs be redefined every year or two to the point where we now cast a cynical eye on the new independent feature released on 500 screens by a branch of one of the largest studio conglomerates in the world. But that does not mean there is no independence left. The filmmakers here look not just to Tarantino but to men like Steven Soderbergh and John Sayles for inspiration, two directors who have perfected the art of operating within the studio system without becoming slaves to it.

One of the keys to negotiating this uneasy truce between commerce and art lies in technology. And it may be the burgeoning film-making technologies that will truly change the face of the filmmaker of tomorrow. No longer is filmmaking a forum for the few. The speed, ease, and affordability of digital video may have imploded the film-making world as we knew it. The filmmakers in this book represent the beginning of this shift. They are the last to be reared solely on celluloid and the first to enjoy the flexibility of the digital world. Nowhere is that reflected more clearly than in the story of Kerry Conran, an unassuming CalArts computer maven who began creating miraculous worlds in the comfort of his own apartment. It is not just the technology available to the makers of film that has made a difference to the directors of today. In an altogether different way, the advent of the Internet is surely one of the key factors in the career of Richard Kelly, whose *Donnie Darko* was rescued from box-office oblivion thanks to a fervent online following.

Like Kerry Conran, virtually all of the filmmakers in this book charted their own unique paths to successful careers. Of course, there is Kevin Smith famously cobbling together a modest budget for *Clerks* on maxed-out credit cards, but there are also people like Richard Kelly spending more than \$40,000 on an ambitious short film, and a playwright, Neil LaBute, with no film experience whatsoever, creating one of the most provocative debuts in the modern era of the medium.

While talking to these filmmakers, I quickly realized that their stories—their journeys from wide-eyed adolescents to celluloid power players—were as compelling and illuminating as many of their films. Often their moviemaking dreams seemed almost too far out of the realm of possibility to even say aloud. “Daring to think that I could ever make films in Hollywood was beyond even a fantasy,” Kerry Conran told me. When asked how his parents reacted to the news that he wanted to make movies, Kevin Smith said, “It was as if I’d said to them, ‘I’m going to go discover the nineteenth dimension.’ It was a foreign fucking notion to them. They were like, ‘OK. Good luck with that. We support you, but if it doesn’t work out, go get a real job.’”

My goal for the group of directors I chose to talk to for this book was simple: to bring together a group of filmmakers who represent the breadth of talent and diverse voices making films for American audiences today. That meant filmmakers who have specialized in comedy, those who have specialized in drama, and those whose specialty has been in having no specialty. Perhaps the greatest testament to the breadth of talent that exists today is that twenty-two more filmmakers could have been added to this book without any diminishment of talent.

I had no hard and fast criteria for the filmmakers in this book other than talent and significant and promising contributions to American filmmaking. No arbitrary age requirement was determined, no quotas were given. If a book like this were done thirty, twenty, or even ten years ago, the lack of diversity would have been striking. Even today, the reality remains that Hollywood filmmaking is still dominated by one gender and race. However, the playing field today is undeniably shifting and

will, no doubt, continue to do so, though there is still a ways to go. Karyn Kusama reflected on how, as a female director, often she was treated as something special, an anomaly, after her first film, *Girlfight*: "I don't want to be considered, like, the miracle baby."

I was continually surprised by the generosity and candor of my subjects. Access and time are the greatest assets an interviewer can receive. All the filmmakers in this book were extremely generous with their time, some speaking with me on as many as four or five occasions. And in an industry where honest communication sometimes seems hamstrung by publicists, I was pleased by how many of these filmmakers spoke with disarming honesty. I remember being taken by surprise as Patty Jenkins revealed to me that, on the eve of filming her breakthrough movie, *Monster*, she was on the brink of death because of a freak accident. I have a feeling that Trey Parker would have told a chimpanzee how much he and partner Matt Stone "fucking hate actors" the afternoon we spoke. I just happened to be the one chatting him up that day. I recall a wide-ranging conversation with F. Gary Gray where I found him interviewing me almost as much as I was him. Halfway through our afternoon on the phone, he admitted he was extremely nervous, having never spoken in such depth to a writer about his career. Only weeks after his second film had left movie theaters, I found myself in a coffee shop with Dylan Kidd, dissecting what had gone wrong on his sophomore effort, *P.S.*, after everything had gone right with his first, *Roger Dodger*. I met Michel Gondry at a SoHo restaurant for lunch as he was taking a break from editing his third film. He admitted to being fearful about what his still-in-progress work would turn out to be, this only months after his *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* had been named one of the best films of the year by virtually every major film critic and institution.

Fear, in fact, was a recurring theme in my talks with many of the filmmakers: fear of temptation, fear of money, fear of failure. Kevin Smith told me that he thought he might have been kicked out of the moviemaking club because of the disappointing returns of *Mallrats*. Luke Greenfield predicted that fear would be the overriding theme of his career. Fear was perhaps rivaled only by feelings of self-doubt. Per-

haps it is the nature of the business to always believe someone more talented and driven is out there gunning for your job, but the men and women making movies today seem to doubt themselves at every moment. Michel Gondry has yet to be satisfied with any of his film work. F. Gary Gray says he dusts off his résumé every time he sees the first cut of one of his films. It goes beyond doubt for Trey Parker and Matt Stone; it's more about misery, as they told me how every moment of making movies is excruciatingly painful for them. Filmmaking, as if it were a surprise, is not a business for the weak.

Despite the pain and self-doubt and borderline paranoia, each of these filmmakers holds an astounding measure of optimism and self-confidence. Their trepidation about making movies is rivaled only by their singular belief at times that they are truly meant to be making films. Many are resolute that this is their one true destiny.

The first films of many I spoke with stand as testament to their belief that their stories, however uncommercial they may have seemed, demanded to be told. If there is a lesson to be learned from this group, it is perhaps to tell the story you want to tell however you can tell it. You will find no release slate for a major studio that includes such seemingly commercially averse properties as *Donnie Darko*, *Monster*, and *George Washington*. But each found its way to the screen thanks to a vision that could not be compromised.

It is hard to believe sometimes that filmmaking as we know it is less than a century old—an extraordinary art form still in its infancy. The filmmakers here are aware of the past, hopeful of the present, and a little wary of the future. After all, just as the moviemakers of today are assuming the mantle of the last generation, there are always others rising to take their place. As Karyn Kusama says, "There're always new, young mavericks around the corner."

Josh Horowitz
July 2005

CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>ix</i>
<i>Introduction</i>	<i>xi</i>
Joe Carnahan	1
Kerry Conran	15
Jon Favreau	29
Michel Gondry	45
F. Gary Gray	60
David Gordon Green	74
Luke Greenfield	89
John Hamburg	104
Patty Jenkins	118
Richard Kelly	133
Dylan Kidd	149
Karyn Kusama	163
Neil LaBute	177
Doug Liman	192

McG	207
Trey Parker & Matt Stone	223
Todd Phillips	240
Brett Ratner	254
Kevin Smith	269
Chris & Paul Weitz	286

JOE CARNAHAN

“I decided I didn’t want to turn out like one of these guys at Starbucks, sitting there talking about what kind of movie they’re going to make.”



PHOTO BY MICHAEL COURTNEY
© PARAMOUNT PICTURES. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

SELECTED CREDITS

Blood, Guts, Bullets and Octane (1998)—writer/director
Narc (2002)—writer/director
