Identity, Authorship and Consumerism

An Interview with Moviemaker Jacob Gentry on the State of Cinema

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In the science-fiction road movie, *Night Sky* (2022), American filmmaker Jacob Gentry follows a petty thief (AJ Bowen) and a celestial vagabond (Brea Grant), on a trek across the American southwest, with a ruthless killer (Scott Poythress) in pursuit.

Gentry's feature debut, *Last Goodbye* (2004), explored the unexpected connections between a disparate group of characters: a vampire-slayer actress (Clementine Ford), a runaway teenage girl (Sara Stanton), and a preacher partial to whiskey (David Carradine), amongst others. He followed with a contribution to the three-part anthology film, *The Signal* (2007), whose plot revolved around the effects of a mysterious transmission that turns people homicidal.

Fourteen years after the time travel sci-fi drama, *Synchronicity* (2015), Gentry returned to the premise of mysterious signals, with the historical fiction *Broadcast Signal Intrusion* (2021), written by Phil Drinkwater and Tim Woodall. The film was inspired by the 1987 Max Headroom signal hijacking of two Chicago television stations. In their historical fiction, video archivist (Harry Shum Jr.) discovers what he believes to be a broadcast signal hacking. Finding similar signal intrusions, he slips down an obsessive rabbit hole when he realizes that they may be clues that will reveal what happened to his missing wife.

A subtle and ambiguous work, *Night Sky* will divide audiences. On the surface, nothing much seems to happen in *Night Sky*, but the film is nonetheless captivating. It honours Gentry's belief in spectatorship as an active rather than passive experience— what he describes to be a "literal physiological" process, where the audience creates the motion on-screen and gives the images personal meaning.

After *Night Sky's* world premiere at the August 2022 edition of FrightFest in London, Gentry spoke with *MSJ* about themes and ideas of identity and authorship in cinema, as well as the influence of consumerism on the medium.

PR: 'What we are' versus 'who we feel we are' can often be out of synch. I've spoken with directors who say that it took a number of films before they felt they could call themselves a filmmaker. When did you feel you could first call yourself a filmmaker, and what are your thoughts on what the word means?

JG: I say it just because it's easier to understand—it's a catch all thing. I also say filmmaker because I'm not just a director. I do other aspects. But if I were to really have my druthers about it, I'd say moviemaker because I've never been fortunate enough to make a movie on film. I don't use film, and even in the abstract terms of movie and film, outside of the format of what you shoot on, I feel like I make movies.

I've been doing this for so long that I don't ever remember a time when I didn't . . . Maybe when I was thirteen and I wanted to be a comic book artist, but I started making movies and showing them to people at such a young age.

The term filmmaker is so much of my identity that I don't interrogate that notion much, because I haven't wanted to do anything else—it's the only thing I know how to do. It wasn't like I was getting to an age where I had to figure out what I was going to do with my life.

Growing up people were always surprised: 'Wait, it's cool that you know what you want to do.' I was, 'Wait, you don't!' I'm a little envious of that open-ended curiosity: 'What is my

life going to be?' On the other side, filmmaking is something that encompasses so many aspects of not just the arts, but so many different jobs. It's everything from science to music, craft to technological know-how, to literature and philosophy. It has these endless tangents and side-streets you can go down, and so it doesn't feel like [it would] if I'm just going to play the violin.

If I have a violin solo on the score, that's just one small, but important aspect of the entire project. As much as it's amazing, I can't imagine doing only one thing like that. I admire people who do it because they get to level with their thing that I could never achieve with mine.

Filmmaking is more abstract because it doesn't even function the way that you'd write a novel—you type those words and they came from your brain. Even if you write the script, direct, and edit the movie, there are still so many other collaborations and outside influences—just the weather has so much of an influence on your movie.

PR: Do you regard the auteur theory, that emphasises the role of the director, as being valid, or does it need to be revised?

JG: … We need to educate people on what the auteur theory actually is, because when people use the term, and especially when they're disparaging of the idea, I don't think they're talking about the original notion of the auteur theory.

As far as I understand it, the auteur theory is a way to follow a filmmaker and to see things that are recognisable, or have a carryover from movie-to-movie—that have a signature. It's fascinating to me that there's this notion that it somehow means that movies aren't a collaboration, or literally only one person makes it, and we celebrate the idea. Even anybody who would trash the auteur theory, still talks about movies in terms of directors, which I totally understand.

It's a collaborative medium and we put so much emphasis on the director that it does feel disproportional. However, when you're learning about movies, or exploring movies, most people, no matter how they feel about the auteur theory, if they're serious about cinema, they're going through the channel of following a director. They discuss movies in terms of directors, and they dismiss movies in terms of directors. So as much as there seems to be a current [feeling that] the auteur theory is bullshit, we still constantly talk about movies as if they're made by one person.

So my take on it is we just all need to come to an consensus on what we're talking about when we say that. If we do mean that it's just one person that makes a movie and there's no collaboration, then of course, no one would disagree with that being a nonsense idea.

PR: So if we can reach a consensus on what the auteur theory means, it remains a valuable means of critiquing and understanding cinema?

JG: As far as I understand it, and I could be totally wrong, it was a way for the *Cahiers du cinéma* to look at what was Hollywood in the 40s and 50s. It was a factory and nameless in terms of artisanal aspects. It was just about the actors, the leads of the movie, and it was a way for them to say, 'Here's all these people that actually had signatures, and used styles and filmmaking grammar that was carried over from movie-to-movie.' Without that happening, there's no notion of something being Hitchcockian or Fellini-esque. It's just a nice way to understand something, and even genre to a certain extent is the same thing. You're saying [here are] these signifiers that make it a thing.

… I do feel it also varies from movie-to-movie, from director-to-director and from filmmaker-to-filmmaker, because somebody like David O. Selznick would be the auteur. There are these interesting ideas that [Arnold] Schwarzenegger was an auteur in the 80s, or Tom Cruise is an auteur, or Kevin Feige.

It's fascinating, and my long way of answering your question is to say let's all decide what we're talking about when we say that, because I don't think most of the conversation about the auteur theory is actually talking about Andrew Sarris's initial proposition for how [François] Truffaut, [André] Bazin, Jean-Luc Godard, and all of those guys were writing about movies. They were basically saying, 'Look, Howard Hawkes's movies have a thing.' Most people up until that point didn't know there was a guy named Howard Hawkes who made these movies, that all seemed to connect.

PR: I've had conversations with filmmakers that have left me with the impression that their reverence for literature, places cinema in its shadow. Talking to Director Jane Magnusson, she spoke about how cinema needs more time, and her belief that '… the history of cinema will eventually get the same status as the history of literature.' If cinema is still young and we're discovering what it is meant to be, or can be, do we need to blow up the art form?

JG: Well, it's interesting because it's an expensive medium and that's the defining thing. That's why it's predominantly about narrative, storytelling, and generating emotions. It's basically about entertainment and that has to do with the fact that it's an extremely expensive art form, and so you have to pay for it.

There are amazing and incredibly expansive film industries all over the world, and some are nipping at the toes of Hollywood. But for the most part, the last hundred years has principally been defined by Hollywood cinema. It's the only cinema I can think of, correct me if I'm wrong, that doesn't have any sort of state sponsorship. It's not paid for by taxpayers, it's an industry that's a complete capitalistic endeavour, but that also means we've now corporations taking over. I mean, corporations were taking over in the 60s and 70s when Paramount became Gulf and Western, and then Disney and Warner Brothers became AT&T. Those are going to have stock holders, and tech companies are going to have a different influence on what cinema is.

So the idea of Stan Brakhage, or what Godard was doing, even in his old age with video essays, you have to ask, 'What encompasses cinema? Are these essays on YouTube made by a young person the same thing as *F For Fake* by Orson Welles?' Perhaps it is—I don't know.

Fig. 1 | Monica Vitti in L'Avventura. Cino Del Duca, 1960.

Cinema is very young and we haven't scratched the surface of its potential, but I do think there's a little bit of a stalling because of the consumerist imperative to make it about narrative. Ultimately, if you're going to blow it up, you have to divorce yourself from the idea that all cinema has to tell a story, that has a beginning, a middle, and an end. And functionally, it has to be able to be experimental.

PR: The consumerist imperative of cinema means that any attempt to redefine cinema will require a collaboration with the audience. They occupy an intricate role in the discussion of what cinema is, and what cinema can be.

JG: I know there's a lot of experimental and abstract films, but they don't proffer in the same way—they don't infiltrate the consciousness of people. I think because of television being so good, and being explicit and literal, lacking in ambiguity, the desires of the audience have become a lot more like the idea of metaphor.

This has been the most interesting functional element of cinema as far as I'm concerned. But the idea that something can be a metaphor for something has dissipated, and because a lot of people watch movies while also doing other things, they are thinking, 'Okay, I just need the facts of the plot.' How it's presented and how the images are unveiled, and how the onion layers are pulled back, is of much less importance than literally, 'How did they get to that place? What are the twists and the turns? What are the surprises? I just need the *Wikipedia* entry on the plot of this thing.' As opposed to something like Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'Avventura* (1960), where Antonioni movies are almost all metaphor—they're ambiguous and they function on that (Fig. 1).

I've always thought the most interesting aspect of it, is there's the literal physiological thing that we fill in the blanks. So before cinema became completely digitally projected, you were sitting in the cinema where it's dark half the time, and your mind is creating the illusion of motion. It's an active process. It's not passive. Your mind has to actually turn these images that are flickering in front of you into movement, and give them meaning.

By [that] token, with storytelling having a sense of metaphor, and what a lot of great cinema does is, people can have different takes on what it means. It's like a really good pop song will mean something different—it's never going to mean the exact same thing to every single person, and yet it can be just as powerful with all those different meanings.

PR: In the 60s and 70s, cinema enjoyed a cultural relevancy that is lacking today. I've often wondered whether audiences were more engaged and passionate about films and movies then, and whether now, cinema and art matter less?

JG: I just don't think it's as much [about] art; I think it's a lot more [about] consumer products. I'm not passing judgement on that. I'm just saying that's what it is, and it has always been: 'What do you understand cinema to be?' My experience and what I've spent most of my life understanding it to be is changing dramatically, and it's up to me to decide whether or not

that's daunting and harrowing, or is it exciting? Maybe it's a mixture of both, but I don't think the way I understood cinema most of my life is the same, or will ever be again.

At least in my perception of it, it just happened to be that way. The real cosmic truth of it all could have been different, but the way I understood it is that it seemed the same from when I was a kid to when I was an adult, but now I'm a little bit older, it's not the same thing. It just doesn't function as a monocultural, shared experience by everyone—everything is … different.

At the same time, there can be pure cinema the way that I always understood it, and the way that I like it, which is cool. I don't disparage anybody else's take. If their idea of cinema is *The Avengers* (Joss Whedon, 2012), then God bless them.

Living in Los Angeles is great because there's still a cinema culture that's perpetuated by people like Quentin Tarantino, with the New Beverley cinema. You can go and watch a movie projected on film, that was shot on film, and the experience is a little bit closer to the idea of [going to] church.

But look, my idea of cinema is completely different than someone who was raised in the 50s, where it was you just show up in the middle of the movie, and you're half paying attention to it. You're making out with your significant other, your date and there's a different energy. Going back to the World War Two era, in the 30s and 40s, there wasn't television, so people went to the cinema to get their news. That was where their news, cartoons and movies were, and they'd sometimes sit in there and watch three or four movies.

It's just changing, and for me it just means that perhaps the budgets get smaller for things that wouldn't exist in a cinematic way. I can mix and match and that's kind of the fun thing. I can use some of the tools of digital filmmaking in those things to make something that's trying to give an analogue cinematic experience. *Night Sky* would be an example of that, where it's trying to approach wandering into a small cinema and not really knowing what you're going to watch. It's like an exploitation movie that maybe has more to it, but you wouldn't know that from the poster. I like those kinds of movies— I like the movies that are sold like they're a biker flick or a surf movie, or a barbarian picture, but [have] some interesting things going on in it that you can recognize . ▪

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