

## Screen Acting and the New Hollywood: An Interview with Ethan Hawke

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*Years ago Warren Beatty asked me for a meeting. He said something that I really took to heart, that if you can stay true to yourself regardless of the fashion of the times, eventually your way of thinking will come back in fashion again. He said the problem is that people who are always chasing the fashion are always slightly behind. Whereas if you just decide, whatever your course is, to just stay on it, it will go and come back again several times over in the course of a long life. You'll sometimes be ahead of the times, sometimes be right with the times, but at least you'll not always be chasing the times.*

- Ethan Hawke

For many years considered the posterboy for Generation X, Ethan Hawke has carved out a career that defies simplistic categorization. Though he briefly flirted with studio-manufactured superstardom during the late-1990s – starring in the literate yet flawed *Great Expectations* (1998) and *Snow Falling on Cedars* (1999) – his career since then has been defiantly “personal” and virtually without compromise. His cinematic ventures are born of an eclectic intellectual curiosity: he adroitly alternates popular genre fare (such as *Sinister* [2012] and *The Purge* [2013]) with ambitious independent productions (most fruitfully his enduring collaborations with director Richard Linklater, interviewed by Dennis West and Joan M. West in *Cineaste*, Vol. XXXIX, No.4, Fall 2014). Not that Hawke’s genre work is simply a placeholder for heartfelt indie projects. From *Gattaca* (1997) and *A Midnight Clear* (1992) to *Predestination* (2014) and *Good Kill* (2014), Hawke has consistently gravitated toward concept-based rather than spectacle-driven genre cinema, bringing the same commitment to veristic performance that characterizes his work with Linklater. In short, Hawke has far surpassed the straitening label that tethered him to a particular moment in time. His earliest and most perceptive critics observed the complexities within his multifaceted persona. Robin Wood, for instance, composed a paean to the actor that located “sincerity,” “seriousness,” “vulnerability and [a] capacity for hurt” at the heart of Hawke’s star image. [1] These qualities, among others, find a legacy in the generation of actors that came to prominence during the New Hollywood era (roughly, 1967-1981), an era of filmmaking central to the interview that follows.

Hawke’s links to this foregoing cinematic tradition are both spiritual and literal. Most concretely, his career has intersected with a number of New Hollywood figures, from archetypal Seventies actors (such as Robert De Niro) to auteur filmmakers indelibly yoked to that period (Sidney Lumet). As a fledgling movie actor Hawke assiduously studied the performance styles and career trajectories of the New Hollywood stars. More abstractly, he shares with his New Hollywood forbears – including Jack Nicholson, Warren Beatty, Al Pacino, Gene Hackman, Dustin Hoffman, and Jeff Bridges – a tacit professional ethos that privileges the pursuit of art over base commercialism. Unlike most movie stars today (but wholly consonant with Nicholson and Beatty), Hawke does not risk artistic credibility by appearing in

ad campaigns for cars, coffee, or cologne. He is indifferent to fads, especially when they seem to relegate three-dimensional characterization; hence his apathy toward present-day superhero movies. He repeatedly inclines toward what he calls “old-school” film projects – movies which conjure an unflinching realism of character and place, foster an improvisatory atmosphere, utilize extensive location shooting, and motivate plot action by character psychology. (Examples from Hawke’s filmography include the palpably authentic *What Doesn’t Kill You* [2008], *Brooklyn’s Finest* [2009], *Staten Island* [2009], and Lumet’s *Before the Devil Knows You’re Dead* [2007].) His roles, like those of his New Hollywood predecessors, invariably possess a moral complexity at odds with the reigning Manichaeism of much so-called postclassical Hollywood cinema. This ambivalent morality is a constant in Hawke’s genre heroes as well as in his indie protagonists – consider the admirable yet irresponsible Vincent in sci-fi thriller *Gattaca*, the decent yet impressionable Jake in crime drama *Training Day* (2001), or the family men felled by hubris in *Sinister* and *The Purge*. The Hawke protagonist is oftentimes ineffectual, hesitant, self-doubting, and unmotivated, evincing a set of traits identified by Thomas Elsaesser with the prototypical New Hollywood protagonist. [2]

Like the New Hollywood actors cited above, Hawke exemplifies what Jeanine Basinger calls a “neo-star” – a player who embodies both movie star and character actor, rendering the line between the two categories fuzzy. [3] Basinger cites as an example Jack Nicholson, and indeed many of the New Hollywood players eschewed onscreen glamour for psychologically-complex character parts, redefining the traditional male movie star for Hawke’s generation of moviegoers. Finally, Hawke’s kinship with the New Hollywood player resides in an unswerving commitment to quotidian performance (as in Linklater’s *Before Sunrise* [1995], *Before Sunset* [2004], and *Before Midnight* [2013]) or slightly-heightened naturalism (as in certain genre entries, such as the melodramatic policier *Taking Lives* [2004]) – modes of performance that in the New Hollywood movies contributed to an overarching concern for verisimilitude. For all his affinities with the New Hollywood stars, however, Hawke is no mere epigone. He has subtly developed a distinctive brand of screen masculinity, and has cultivated an original, humanistic mode of performance in the New Hollywood tradition. Put simply, Hawke is a naturalistic actor *par excellence*.

The following interview engages many of the issues highlighted above and pursues two lines of inquiry. It offers an exploration of the New Hollywood cinema and its neo-stars, as filtered through Hawke’s perspective. Hawke describes how the New Hollywood ethos has shaped his own artistic sensibility, performance style, career decisions, and professional credo, and reflects on his collaborations with New Hollywood actors and directors. The interview also illuminates Hawke’s own films and performances. It spans the breadth of his career, from his film debut opposite River Phoenix in Joe Dante’s *Explorers* (1985), through his numerous films with Linklater, to his most recent movie releases. Among the latter, *Before Midnight* and *Boyhood* (2014) stand out as epic meditations on time – a theme evidently close to

Hawke's heart, as the following discussion demonstrates. The interview was held in Atlanta, Georgia on 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> December 2014.

### INFLUENCES: NICHOLSON AND BEATTY

#### **Do you feel that you share an artistic sensibility with the actors and filmmakers of the New Hollywood?**

Well, Philip Seymour Hoffman and I did *Before the Devil Knows You're Dead* because it was exactly the kind of movie we wanted to spend our lives doing. We were chasing the old-school definition of a New York actor – meaning, the actor-artist. Not the actor-movie star, not the actor with a trademark behind his name, not the actor with an advertising campaign who is trying to sell you anything. That was the idea. And the fact that we got to do that, to actually work with Sidney [Lumet] who was one of our Seventies heroes, and not to work with some imitation version of Sidney, was thrilling.

#### **What was your introduction to the New Hollywood films?**

*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* was one of the first movies I ever saw. That was pre-VCR, so I would see revivals on television and in the movie theaters. I remember my dad took me to see *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* at a revival house when I was ten years old – this was around 1980 – and the same with *Five Easy Pieces* and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. I saw all those movies in a movie theater between the ages of ten and twenty. So did Phil, and they were really formative for us.

Then the VCR came out. Christopher McQuarrie who wrote *The Usual Suspects* and Bryan Singer who directed it, we all went to high school together, and we had a little movie club in high school. Christopher and I were latchkey kids – we had nothing to do after school, and I remember sitting there watching *Apocalypse Now* for the first time on a VCR with Christopher and Bryan. Brandon Boyce, who wrote *Apt Pupil* and acted in *Milk*, was there too. There were a few people of my generation who were really chasing that kind of filmmaking.

#### **So your contemporaries were all influenced by New Hollywood cinema.**

Well, the people that I was drawn to were. I started a theater company with the playwright Jonathan Marc Sherman, and Jonathan wrote a play called *Women and Wallace* that came out around the same year as *Dead Poets Society*. We were both young and a little isolated from our own generation by having had really early success. While everybody else was still in school, Jonathan was winning awards as a playwright and I was in *Dead Poets Society*, and we were drawn to each other. Jonathan was a big Seventies-phile; he obsessed on those movies. We would have parties – Steve Zahn, Sam Rockwell, and myself. You know, a lot of guys would sit around and watch Monday-night football, but we would buy a six-pack and watch the PBS version of Sam Shepard's *True West* for the nineteenth time. We would break

out the play and realize how John Malkovich was totally off book and how Gary Sinise was totally on point; it was fascinating to study their performances.

But we're talking about the period between 1967 and 1981. Weirdly, that track falls directly in line with what I would say is the greatest run in acting history, which is Jack Nicholson '69-81. I don't think anybody has come close to that level of work and that consistency. *Easy Rider* through *Reds*. Post-*Reds* there is some interesting work but most of it seems self-reflective in a way that nothing previous to *Reds* was. He wasn't "Jack" until *The Shining*. That's my theory about it. That period of filmmaking – what I basically call the Jack Nicholson years, '69-81 – is what I'm chasing.

**In terms of the mechanics of an actor's performance, what did you learn technically from studying Nicholson? Can you identify what makes him such an exceptional actor?**

Yeah, I can. There's a character in commedia dell'arte and in Shakespeare, a certain kind of Shakespearean clown that appears over and over again in Shakespeare's plays; they were usually written for the same actor. It's the mischievous one: Trofarello. Nicholson is in that mold. He has mined a certain aspect of the male psyche that exists in all of us – the part of us that wants not to give a shit. The part of us that wants to say "fuck you" to your boss, that wants to leave your girlfriend at a gas station and just walk away. It's the character that picks up and gets on a motorcycle. The one that's in the insane asylum and shouldn't be there. We all relate to that guy, and that man inside most of us never gets a voice. We're all trying so hard to do the right thing, to show up for work on time, and so on. You know that famous picture of Johnny Cash giving the finger to the camera? It's the same character. We empathize with him. He's not a bad person. He's not a criminal. He's a person who just feels that he can't wear a collar. He feels that he has a sock stuffed in his mouth, and he's throwing it out.

It's interesting – generally what gets the most praise in today's world of acting is what I call third-person acting. It's Daniel Day-Lewis at his best, or Sean Penn at his best, where it's like an Indian shaman and they're magically changing themselves. It's phenomenal. But Nicholson didn't do that. All the characters he played are different versions of the same character. If you look at *The Passenger*, *Cuckoo's Nest*, *The Last Detail*, *Chinatown*, and even what I would say is one of his most third-person performances, in *Reds* – Eugene O'Neill in *Reds* has got a giant "fuck you" in him and he marches to his own drummer. They're all aspects of the same self.

**What kind of actor are you, in this respect – closer to Nicholson?**

No. I mean, I've been really inspired by him. But Nicholson did that thing that is so rare for an artist. He captured the zeitgeist in a way that most artists don't get to do. He worked during what I would call an absolute renaissance in American cinema. There he is with the best of the best: Hal Ashby, Roman Polanski, Michelangelo Antonioni, Milos Forman, Warren Beatty, Bob Rafelson, Mike Nichols. His

performance in Nicholson's *Carnal Knowledge* is phenomenal. I know that he didn't go on to work at that level, but I also think that *Easy Rider* is not to be smirked at. It's a great film. Dennis Hopper probably did too many drugs, but *Easy Rider* is a very serious work of art, I think. Nicholson, Hopper, and Peter Fonda are all great in it. It's very prescient in its editing techniques. The music video owes a lot to that movie. Nicholson was working at a moment when exactly the kind of work that he was born to do was in fashion. Think about it: he got success a little later than most. He was about thirty-three when *Easy Rider* came out. Nowadays if you're thirty-three, you're washed up. It's hard to break after thirty-three. You can do it but it's hard.

**To my mind, Troy Dyer in *Reality Bites* is cut from similar cloth as Bobby Dupea in *Five Easy Pieces*. Both characters share a profound cynicism, intelligence, and presumption of superiority. Both are romantic figures riven by alienation and emotional repression.**

Of course. Well, you know what's funny about that? I think that's a great example of the period we live in. During the time period that *Five Easy Pieces* was made, there was a great fascination with that type of person – a person who was anti-corporate, anti-job, anti-accomplishment; a person who felt that life was meant for the living and not for making money; a person who struggled to fit in, who had real demons. I remember when *Reality Bites* came out, it was fascinating to hear how many people really struggled with the fact that Winona [Ryder]'s character ends up with my character, Troy, because the other guy [played by Ben Stiller] seemed like such a winner to them. How you define winner and loser is so interesting. Helen Childress who wrote *Reality Bites* felt that Troy would fit into the classic Nicholson type of folio. Helen loves that type of man. But America at that time did not anymore. They were over the Holden Caulfields of the world.

What was interesting for Rick [Linklater] and I was that, there in that moment of time, I was in the corporate version of the Gen X movie of our generation and he was directing the indie version of the Gen X movie of our generation. *Slacker* and *Reality Bites* were vying for the defining moment of that Douglas Coupland, Kurt Cobain era. We didn't see it that way [at the time], obviously; those are labels that people put on afterwards.

**Linklater is one of the few contemporary American directors to utilize long takes in ways that privilege the actors' performance. And in a film like *Cuckoo's Nest*, Milos Forman lets his camera linger on Nicholson just sitting contemplatively. Most of today's movies employ such rapid-fire editing that actors aren't granted the same kind of sustained performative emphasis.**

There's a shot near the end of *Cuckoo's Nest* where Nicholson is standing by the window and the curtains are blowing behind him. It's one of the best shots of all time. That moment is so magical because McMurphy can leave but he wants to congratulate his friend. He doesn't want to say goodbye to Billy. He wants to wait.

And that costs him, fatally. His decision to be there for the guys is a very telling gesture. I remember discussing that moment with Rick. There's a moment at the end of *Before Midnight* where Celine leaves the room and says what I always consider the hardest words that anybody could ever say to another: "I don't love you anymore." It's less grand in *Before Midnight* than in *Cuckoo's Nest*, but there's sometimes a moment when your life hangs in the balance and you have to decide: do you go after her or don't you? If Jesse just goes to bed that night and doesn't go after Celine, there's going to be a whole chain reaction that follows. But instead he decides to go back out and thinks, "Alright, I'm going to give her the benefit of the doubt and say she didn't mean that, and I'm going to try just one more time to seduce her." And because of that a whole other chain is set in motion. Rick does a very simple thing of showing me just sitting there and he cuts to a close up of the wine glasses, the bed unmade, the tea half-drunk. Rick makes it entirely his own, but it was influenced by that Milos Forman moment in *Cuckoo's Nest*.

**That hotel room scene in *Before Midnight* recalls a combusive scene in *Carnal Knowledge* too.**

The big one where they're screaming at each other?

**Yes – both scenes stage a battle of the sexes within an enclosed, confined space. *Tape* has similar elements too.**

*Tape* has that too, yes. To *Carnal Knowledge's* great credit, Nicholson comes clean about a level of misogyny that a lot of men don't admit to and that if you don't talk about it, it can't possibly get healed. I remember when I watched *Carnal Knowledge* for the first time I thought, I can't believe he said that! Neil LaBute in some of his best work tries to expose all that, but Nicholson's so likeable that it's so much more dangerous when he does it. I remember a director once talking to me about a moment in *Before Sunrise* when Jesse confides to Celine that sometimes he thinks he doesn't want to have a family; that sometimes he thinks his ambitions are more important than being a parent. And I remember this director saying he was just in shock about that –the characters we are supposed to like in movies are usually not allowed to say things like that. That's what Nicholson did over and over again. He'd say: you're going to like me, you're going to relate to me, and I'm going to say things that you don't admit to. You're going to have to ask yourself if you agree with it or not. And it's very dangerous.

**Pauline Kael wrote that Nicholson adopts "a satirical approach to macho." [4]**

Yeah, I think that's true. He was willing to mock being macho while at the same time *being* macho. Remember the much-talked-about scene in *Five Easy Pieces* where he cries to his dad? It's very, very hard for that man to weep. In today's vision of masculinity, it's all changed – now we have the sensitive male. But at that moment, it was a big deal for that character to cry. And Nicholson really does it. You know, Phil

said a great thing to me once. He said, “If I see another actor act restrained, holding it back, I’ll go crazy.” All these actors are holding back their emotions, but all of us in life lose it sometimes. We lose it, and that’s the part that I want to see. I’m so glad that Nicholson didn’t sit with his father and give an anguished sigh. He *lost* it. That’s what happens when a big pivotal moment in your life happens: you yell at your wife, you sob for your mom, whatever it is. Phil and I were talking about this in regards to *Before the Devil Knows You’re Dead* when he pulls over the car and just sobs. I was so proud of Phil for that moment because it’s utterly real.

**Your screen persona challenges traditional definitions of masculinity but in a different way than Nicholson. You’re one of the few male stars to unflinchingly portray fear and embarrassment. Whether it’s Todd Anderson wrestling with self-consciousness in *Dead Poets Society* or Jake Hoyt pleading for his life in *Training Day*, you put masculine fear on screen more nakedly than most male stars do. Have you actively sought to develop a distinctive kind of screen masculinity?**

I’ve been really interested in what that means. We’re living in a period following the feminist movement which leaves masculinity in this weird place. I think that our generation is trying to figure that out – how to try to maintain masculinity in a world that truly respects women, a world that doesn’t differentiate between a heterosexual male and a gay male. I mean, the world is getting smarter, right? And yet, one of the things that I try to do with masculinity, for example in the *Before* trilogy, is to truly show men with women in a realistic fashion. In Steven Spielberg’s and Tom Hanks’ *America*, Richard Linklater, Julie Delpy and I released *Before Sunset* where everyone in the audience wants Jesse to cheat on his wife at the end. This was at the end of the Clinton era and just as the Bush era was taking over, and everyone was talking about the importance of family values – values that are only meaningful if they’re true. I was very proud of the fact that Jesse is just honest in that movie. He’s honest about being scared that he’s going to blow his whole life to chase some dream of family values. He’s worried that he’s going to be a bad person if he *doesn’t* chase those values – all those real things. We brought that into *Before Midnight* by asking: is it possible to make a truly romantic film about two people deep in the middle of their lives, in the middle of a relationship, and not tell one lie?

**The example from *Before Sunset* is a case of what you were saying before about Nicholson – Jesse’s behavior cuts against what conventional society deems permissible and yet the audience roots for him.**

There was a really interesting moment in my life that relates to this exact subject. We were shooting *Before Midnight* and there’s a scene where we’re out on the terrace overlooking the Mediterranean, and a beautiful young man and woman walk by, and Jesse checks out the young girl’s ass. Well, the cameraman was really upset by that, to the point that when we broke for lunch he said, “Why did you do that? Jesse wouldn’t do that.” “You don’t think Jesse notices a young woman’s ass?” “But Jesse and Celine really love each other.” I said, “Listen brother, you can really love a

woman and still notice that some twenty-five year old's ass is awesome." This idea that true love exists without humanity, without the stuff of life, without the complexities of life...

### **It's dishonest.**

It's totally dishonest. And he was saying, "I can't handle it, I wanted to work on this movie because I love Jesse and Celine and now you're telling me that he's checking out young girls' asses, it's so upsetting!" I said, look, this is why we've got to make this movie. It's so that you don't buy this phony bill of goods that we're all dying to buy. People don't want to believe that true love can be really hard. Some couples find true love and still break up. People don't want to believe complexities like that. They want Jack and Rose to *die* on the Titanic so that they don't have to face the complexities of life.

***Before Midnight* has been very well-received, as has *Boyhood*. Back in 2007 you said in an interview, "I remember when I was 18, I thought I would make a movie like *Reds* someday. Now I'm almost as old as Warren Beatty when he made it...but I'm nowhere *close* to doing something that good."** [5] **Post-*Boyhood*, do you still feel that way?**

Well, one of the hardest moments of my life was when I went to see the twenty-fifth anniversary of the release of *Reds*. I watched Warren Beatty speak about it, and he was very moving and beautiful. It was a little heartbreaking to me because I was turning forty. I started in this business really young. When *Dead Poets Society* came out I had really grand aspirations, embarrassingly so. And Warren Beatty was one of my favorites. *Splendor in the Grass*, *Bonnie and Clyde*, *Shampoo*, *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*: these movies changed my life, particularly *Reds*. They were my favorite movies. Around the time that *Dead Poets Society* came out, that was the career I wanted to achieve. And it was hard to look in the mirror at forty and realize that I really hadn't done it. I'd had a nice career, but Warren Beatty had had a great career. I remember he gave this talk at Lincoln Center and I walked home afterwards, and I kind of cursed my time period a little bit. For every movie I've made, there are so many movies that I haven't been able to get off the ground. For example, I've just finished shooting this Chet Baker movie [*Born to Be Blue*], and twelve years ago Rick and I had one of the best scripts I ever read that was about Chet Baker, and we couldn't get it made. Financiers are not interested.

It was very difficult as I turned forty not to start second-guessing all the decisions I made. I made decisions based on a 1970s aesthetic, turning down comic book movies in pursuit of trying to be true to my ethos. I didn't want to be famous for being in tights. That's not what I wanted to do, so why would I win if I did it? There are a lot of actors that love comic book movies, and they should go and make them. I wasn't one of them. I wanted a career like Warren Beatty. But we don't control all the elements at work, and I'd like to believe that I could have made movies at that level.

So that night when I walked home from the Lincoln Center I felt that it was no longer possible to make a movie like *Reds*. It wasn't even in the realm of possibility. Now, ironically, since that moment, I have to take it back. It *is* in the realm of possibility – you just have to be dedicated. I'm in utter shock that *Boyhood* and *Before Midnight* found an audience. I didn't know anybody cared about that kind of thing. It's amazing how every generation feels like all the original ideas have been used up. They're not used up. You just have to work hard and you have to work a lot, and you can find it.

My hat's off to Warren Beatty. How did he get the money to make a movie about Communism in 1980 and get it released by a studio? I made myself feel a little better by thinking it wasn't entirely up to him. The time period wanted that. Corporate America wasn't so controlled. Maybe I'm just making myself feel better, but anyway...

**Beatty's ability to maintain a high level of integrity across his career furnished a model for you too, didn't it?**

You've got to hand it to him. He didn't pour any water in his beer. I really respect that. Every movie he has made, almost without exception, has tremendous thought put into it. Even *Dick Tracy* displays a lot of artistry. You know, *Bulworth* isn't a perfect film but it's got the spark of genius to it. *Reds*, for my money, is one of the great films of all time. Warren Beatty was born to do that. There are a lot of films in the tier right below it – *Splendor in the Grass* is one of my absolute favorite movies. Beatty didn't work as much as Nicholson in that period but if you look at *Bonnie and Clyde*, *Reds*, *Heaven Can Wait*, *Shampoo*, and *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*, he's got a pretty good run in that little window too.

But you know what Beatty had that was different from Nicholson? Beatty was a romantic. He's good with women in a way that very few people are.

**Nicholson doesn't have that?**

He has it. In *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, he's very good. But in general he lights up when the girls aren't in the room, or when he's fighting with women. He can fight with a woman, like in *Carnal Knowledge*. But the movies we're talking about are not female movies. *Five Easy Pieces*, *Easy Rider*, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, *The Last Detail*. He's particularly amazing with Diane Keaton in *Reds*, but there's this profound loneliness and inability to connect with her.

A lot of male actors lose something with women when they're on screen. I worked with Krzysztof Kieslowski's brilliant DP, Slawomir Idziak, on *Gattaca*. He used to say that Kieslowski believed that when a man and a woman were on screen, all of humanity was on screen. To him, a two-shot with a man and a woman who were honestly conversing was true cinema. That was something I thought I would be able to do. I prided myself on that. Everything I've ever written has to do with the male-female dynamic, whether it's *The Hottest State*, *Ash Wednesday*, the *Before* trilogy. Even *Boyhood*, which is a giant portrait of divorce, pulls back and forth between the

masculine and feminine. It's something that's really important to me, and I'm very proud of my work with Winona and Julie, for example.

## PERFORMANCE STYLE AND TECHNIQUE

**Orson Welles said he admired Cagney because he was larger-than-life but always “cinematically true.” We could say the same of Nicholson’s performances in *The Shining*, *As Good as It Gets*, and *The Departed*, where he brings veracity to a broad playing style; and of certain barnstorming performances by Pacino. As an actor celebrated for a highly naturalistic performance style, how do you regard this hyperbolic style of acting?**

I admire it. It's a different register. About twenty years ago I decided that my favorite kind of acting is the kind of acting you don't see. I'm really proud of my work in *Training Day*, but my dream was that it was invisible. Whereas Denzel [Washington] is doing something that looks like great acting, and it *is* – I'm not saying it isn't – but I would say his work in *Flight* is far more simple. Denzel's one of my favorite actors too. He's one of the great movie stars like Cagney. Most movie stars aren't serious actors, but Denzel is.

We talked earlier about third-person acting. What I try to do is first-person acting. My daughter said to me, “Every character you play is exactly like yourself.” I said to her, “I know, but are they like each other?” The guy in *Before the Devil Knows You're Dead* is not Jesse. And the guy in *Training Day* is not Mason Sr. They are totally different, but they all are created from the first-person point of view. The aim is to not tip your hand that you're acting.

**Has the Method been a meaningful concept for you in your work?**

People don't like to hear about it anymore, but I always think that everything stems back to a basic principle of Stanislavski's. I'm always amazed by how many young actors have never heard the expression “relaxation, imagination, concentration,” which is the basis of Stanislavski. When people think of the Method they think of some weird approach that involves actually doing drugs if your character takes drugs. In so many movies you sit and watch some actor trying to make themselves cry, trying to force their will on the camera. They have this preconceived idea about what they're going to do. The thing that I've been cultivating my whole career is not to do anything and to let life happen, let your emotional life flow through you. And if you find yourself crying, you can cry. One of the most amazing actors I ever worked with was Winona Ryder because she could laugh, she could blush, and she really does that old-school listening and talking that acting is about, which is to actually imagine you're really the character. Steve Zahn used to talk about it as *play*. What you're trying to cultivate is that Zen childlike place of actual play. As disciplined artisans who have spent our whole lives working on this, now we're actually just giving

ourselves over to a full imaginative exercise. And if you can do that, the power of every person's imagination is very intense and magnetic. The best performers do this. When Denzel Washington is at his peak you believe he's a pilot of an airplane because *he* believes it.

**I want to ask you about the physical aspect of acting, because I think you're a physically eloquent actor. Brian De Palma has said that he admires Pacino's body movement on screen, and I know what he means by that...**

I know what he means too.

**Thanks to the *Before* films, you're one of cinema's most adept exponents of the walk-and-talk technique. How do you go about creating authentic bodily behavior within a naturalistic context?**

Well, Julie would always say this: people think that the hardest thing about acting is crying or yelling or having to do an accent; but truly listening, walking, talking, and moving like a real human being is what's really hard. Part of working out the character's bodily behavior involves creating an environment where it's okay whatever happens. People often talk about how lucky we all were that Ellar Coltrane in *Boyhood* turned out to be so amazing. And we *were* really lucky, and that's great. But was it really luck? It has to do with the fact that Rick was going to wholly embrace whoever Ellar was, and that embrace creates a receptivity and a relaxation toward creativity that brings out the best in Ellar. It's not luck exactly. It's luck that Ellar was such a serious young man, but I also think Rick sensed that in Ellar as a young boy. Years ago, Rick was looking for two collaborators to make *Before Sunrise* with, and of all the people he could have cast, he cast two people that went on to write and direct their own movies. That's the type of person he actively sought out.

**Did studying the New Hollywood actors yield any lessons in the value of voice as an expressive or dramatic tool?**

When you think about Jimmy Stewart or Jack Nicholson, there's an authenticity to those voices. It's almost a clichéd thing to say but when someone writes well, people say he has a "voice." Well, in acting, having a voice is equally important; the accomplishment is when your voice comes out of you in an authentic manner. As fucked up as it is, Nick Nolte has a voice. There's something true about that voice. There are certain actors that have a beautiful voice, and it's very important to cinema. Phil had a really wonderful voice. He could work with it always. It's very different in *Capote* than it is in *Synecdoche, New York*. Jeff Bridges and Tommy Lee Jones have wonderful voices; Meryl Streep has a voice that slides right through you. They know how to use it.

But voice is a very under-utilized tool in contemporary cinema. Younger actors often are very much cut off from their voice. There's a posturing and a posing that happens with them. A lot of the time it's not the actor's fault. It's the fact that the

cinematographer has come to be a very important part of the filmmaking process. The problem with that is that unless the cinematographer is matched with a really great director, actors start posing. A cinematographer will tell actors, “Stand still, turn your head to the left, turn to the right,” and so on. It kills the actor’s spontaneity. And the actor neglects their voice. They’re thinking in two dimensions.

**What about voice in the other sense you just mentioned? As a newcomer, how did you avoid imitating the actors you admired? Christian Slater admits to mimicking Nicholson early in his career. Pacino said that he found himself mimicking Brando until “I found my own voice.” [6] How did you find your own personal style of expression?**

*Before Sunrise* was a real breakthrough for me. All of us have a voice; it’s a question of whether adolescence or life destroys it. For me, I didn’t really learn how to talk until I worked with Rick. It took me a little while to find my voice in a real way. You know, when I was younger I was so apoplectically jealous of River [Phoenix]. I was his friend and I admired him, and I was driven by him. I remember watching *Amadeus* and just thinking, “Fuck – I’m Salieri.”

**And you were only fourteen years old.**

Yeah, exactly. But it helped me. I didn’t realize it until he died, but he was helping me every day he lived. He was such an inspiration. When I think of finding my own voice, I think of challenging myself on the set of *Dead Poets Society* to be as brave and as honest as him.

There was a breakthrough scene for me during the making of *Dead Poets Society*. I had this scene where it’s my birthday and my parents have forgotten about it. We were doing the scene and Peter Weir asked me what was wrong. I told him that the scene was totally fake. We talked about it and he said, “You’re right, that’s phony, let’s do it differently.” That was an important moment for me. When Ben Stiller wanted *Reality Bites* to happen, I brought my own ideas to the table, and when I first met Rick I was so excited because Rick *wanted* me to do that. He wanted me to bring my own material to a character and to really take it to a place that was personal. I think that’s what the audience wants to see; they don’t want to see some reheated meal, they want to see *actual* creativity.

**Did you learn anything valuable from acting with Robert De Niro that you’ve carried into your subsequent work?**

Absolutely. I had a horrible time on *Great Expectations*. It was a very difficult film for Gwyneth [Paltrow] and I. Alfonso [Cuarón] is extremely talented and passionate but was very difficult to work with. The script wasn’t ready when we started. I’m just so script-oriented. I mean, I love improvisation but it has to start from a place of something that already works. Improvisation is kind of like icing; there has to be a cake. English was a second language for Alfonso, and the fact that the dialogue wasn’t working was not interesting to him. So we had a hard time. And then De Niro came

in, and it was awesome. It was six days of shooting of absolute creativity, and I remember saying to Alfonso, “Why are we having a good time now?” De Niro brought all that with him. He wasn’t waiting for permission to do the kind of work he wanted to do – he just did it. Whereas I was waiting for my “Martin Scorsese” to tell me I could take acting seriously. What I didn’t know was that Alfonso *wanted* to take acting seriously, he just didn’t know how to tell me to do it. De Niro just turned up and did it.

It was interesting because then Chris Cooper came in and he just did it too. I still had a little kid’s mentality: “I want to do what my director tells me.” After that, I really challenged myself to stop looking to the director to determine the way that we were going to work. Like I just said to you about waiting for Peter or Rick to say it’s okay to contribute – no, I won’t wait for them to say it’s okay, I *know* it’s okay. Then you start to realize that you have agency in your own life, and you’re just going to contribute however the hell you want to, instead of being just an employee.

**In their later careers, De Niro and Pacino in particular have been criticized for making apparently frivolous film choices. Have you continued to be impressed and influenced by the later work of the New Hollywood actors?**

Well, it’s hard when somebody achieves an incredibly high level early on in their career. It’s like that great Paul McCartney line: “People keep saying ‘What have you done since The Beatles?’ and I say ‘What have *you* done since The Beatles?’” You can’t keep winning superbowl; nobody can. We’re all human. And we’re all only as good as the times we live in. I think that Hoffman, Pacino, De Niro – and maybe Hackman and Nicholson, although they’ve retired now – these guys are all still capable of working at a high level. The world’s just not asking it of them, and they’re not making it happen either. But maybe they never did. Maybe the culture made it happen. Did you see Scorsese’s documentary on Dylan, *No Direction Home*? It’s really interesting because when you walk away from that documentary, you feel that the times made Dylan. You know, John Lennon used to say that the time period made The Beatles. These guys were responding to the world turning.

It’s hard to get old, for everybody. I think that theater actors survive better; they’re more disciplined. When you look at Chris Plummer, Jason Robards, and Donald Sutherland, you see that the theater training is there for them as they get older. Being a movie star has a lot to do with being a matinee idol. See, I always thought if I rooted my self-esteem in being an actor rather than a star, nobody could ever take it away from me. If you root your self-esteem in being a movie star, and you wind up being *not* like Warren Beatty – who was able to pull it all off – then your whole self-worth can be taken from you.

**You mentioned young actors. In your view, what was the legacy of the New Hollywood acting style and approach?**

Here's what happened. Julia Roberts happened. The newest thing that happened to acting besides Nic Cage was Julia Roberts. Nic Cage is commedia dell'arte. He is the first person to take us away from naturalism since Lee Strasberg and Brando. Nobody else has done it. I'm not saying you have to like it, but it's original.

**But didn't Nicholson do that with his expansive performance in *The Shining*?**

Yeah, but it's not the Nicholson I love the most. I know what you mean...

**The Devil in *The Witches of Eastwick*, the Joker in *Batman*...**

...And he went on to do that, yeah. But here's the thing. Everybody likes to say that *Star Wars* and *Raiders of the Lost Ark* changed cinema, but that's looking at it from a producer's angle. The producer's stance, after *Heaven's Gate*, was: "Fuck the auteur, fuck the Seventies director, fuck Blaxploitation films; we're going right down the middle, and we're going to make a lot of money." That's the producer's way of looking at it. From the acting angle, I think people were still trying to do good, very serious acting all through the Eighties. But then Julia Roberts came along with *Pretty Woman*. There is such a power to her personal charisma that everybody started chasing that line. It launched ten years of smile-and-say-your-line acting. Julia Roberts is a phenomenal actor – it's her imitators that drive me crazy. It's a generation of young women thinking that if they have a really great smile, they'll be relevant in a movie. I should say Tom Cruise in the same breath, because he was the male version. They both inadvertently took us out of a search for authenticity. You can't underestimate the powerful influence of *Top Gun* and *Pretty Woman* on a generation of young actors. People imitated the superficial elements of them. Tom Cruise has delivered countless tremendous performances – *Magnolia*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, many others. He pours his whole soul into every performance and hasn't phoned in a performance a day in his life. But many of the actors who came after Tom Cruise and Julia Roberts imitated the frosting and didn't imitate the cake.

**You don't seem to be an actor overly concerned with peddling your own charisma or protecting your vanity. In films like *Tape* and *Brooklyn's Finest*, you don't flinch from allowing yourself to look unglamorous, even ravaged. You've described *Tape* as being a turning point for you, marking a transition from an adolescent actor to an adult actor. Did part of this transition have to do with relinquishing your vanity about how you look?**

I'm one of those lucky people that as I age I get more comfortable. I remember looking back on a photo shoot I did when I was younger with Bruce Weber and feeling completely humiliated by the pictures, because they were pretty. I look back on them now and think, "I wish I still looked like that." But I didn't realize that, really, all of my heroes weren't lauded for being pretty. I truly think that, as a culture, instead of releasing women from the trap of the beauty myth, young men are

succumbing to that trap too. I see it with young men I'm working with in acting: there's an obsession with aesthetic. You know, Phil was one of my heroes, and it's amazing that he reached the heights he did in this culture without giving a shit about that game. Look at the opening of *Before the Devil Knows You're Dead*, look at him in *Boogie Nights*, look at him in...

***Happiness.***

*Happiness*, of course. He was always willing to do that. It's really inspiring because what Phil was never confused about was the point of making movies. If the point of making a movie is to make a million bucks and have it play at the mall, then you may as well be selling insurance. He really believed in the Seventies ethos, that the point of making movies was to tell stories, to be a part of the consciousness of a culture alleviating its shame and living in honesty. To be Philip Seymour Hoffman you have to be incredibly talented to puncture that balloon. I – by many accounts – looked exactly like what corporate America wants a young American male to look like, and they were still hard on me. They were hard on me with my teeth, everything. They would wear on you.

There is one actor we're not talking about who really does embody the same ethos. Two or three years ago I was sitting at home watching the Oscars, and I just got kind of despondent about how fake everybody looked. Star after star after star, and they all looked like they just walked out of Banana Republic or the Gap or Old Navy or something. And then out came Sean Penn, and I was like "Oh, a human being." It was such a relief.

**The New Hollywood antiheroes were not one-dimensional figures either, and they refused straightforward Manichaeism. It seems to me that, working in a very different climate, you've consistently managed to find or create morally complex characters, whether it's in *Gattaca* or *Tape* or even *Boyhood*.**

Very much so. *Before the Devil Knows You're Dead* is another example. *Brooklyn's Finest*. Absolutely – all of my favorite movies that I've worked on. Even *Training Day*, you know, is a total sibling of *The French Connection*. Jake is willing to be corrupted, he just didn't want to go *that* far.

**You get the impression that he would go even further if the Denzel Washington character would just...**

...would stand by his side. If he hadn't been betrayed by him, he would have kept going. He's not that opposed to smoking a little crack: "Okay."

DIRECTORS: LUMET AND LINKLATER

**Do you have a philosophy about how best to work with directors?**

There's a great Brando quote that I've always taken into my work, which is that you have to always try to spiritually marry your director. I always try to do that with a director, to make the same movie they're trying to make. Not to try to force them to make a Richard Linklater film, but to bring what I value and my personal thoughts to help them make *their* movie.

**At what point in production do you establish that shared vision? There isn't rehearsal or much rehearsal on a movie...**

Sometimes there is and sometimes there isn't. Well, for example, if a director doesn't ask for rehearsal, then you know he doesn't care about rehearsal. You're not going to have time to teach a director the value of rehearsal. You can suggest it to a certain extent. I usually like to tell them the Marlon Brando quote and say "I need to be making the same movie as you. If I think this scene is supposed to be a scream-fest and you tell me it's all supposed to be underplayed, I won't have time to adjust on the day. I need time so that our imaginations are working together." When they realize that's all I want from a rehearsal, sometimes I can get rehearsal out of them.

Sidney Lumet wanted more rehearsal than Phil and I were ever asked for on any other film. It was four weeks and we did a full-blown run-through of the movie. All the cast was present and we ran through the movie in a warehouse in the East Village for the AD and the DP, with little chairs and with tape on the floor like it was a play. I'll never forget this, because Sidney stopped at one point and he said to Phil, "I think [Hoffman's character] Andy is supposed to cry in this scene." And Phil said, "Yeah, he will." "What do you mean he will?" "On the day, he will." Sidney said: "*This* is the day. We're making the movie *today*. Just because it's rehearsal doesn't mean we're not making the movie." And Phil was like, "Are you fucking serious?" Sidney said, "Yeah." And Phil leaned over to me and said, "Do you think Pacino had to do this?" (laughs)

**I gather from Lumet's book, *Making Movies*, that he undertook this kind of rehearsal on most of his movies. Is this one of the practices that marked him off from the younger directors you've worked with?**

The way things work now, it's very different. When I did *Dead Poets Society* the studio paid for all of us – Robin [Williams] and the boys, everybody– to get together two weeks before shooting. We lived in the Radisson together and worked in the conference room. We acted the whole script out, we did improvis, and the producers *cared* enough about the project to pay for us to do that. Nowadays, instead of rehearsal, a producer will say to a director, "Just talk to the actor on the phone; Skype with him if you have to." That's how movies get made now.

Antoine Fuqua, who I think is a really great director, said to me on *Training Day*, "I'm coming from a different world; I see *Dog Day Afternoon* and I want to make a film of that quality. What do I need to do to create an environment where you and Denzel can do that kind of work? What has to happen? What's in your way, what are

the obstacles?” He didn’t know how to do it; he didn’t go to acting school. Sidney grew up caring about acting. He was an actor and a student of [Elia] Kazan. Antoine has grown up in a world where there is a different vocabulary being used. He’s coming out of music video and advertising. When you talk about this era of advertising, that’s where the rubber meets the road – the whole culture is pulling against rehearsal; the producers just want you to make the film as fast as you can. They admire *Dog Day Afternoon*, but how to actually make a film like that is starting to be as mysterious to them as stonemasonry.

**Rehearsal is clearly an important aspect of your collaborations with Linklater. How much rehearsal time was devoted to *Tape*, for instance?**

We rehearsed for four weeks and shot for eight days. Our whole attitude was, “All things be ready if our minds be so.” We just rehearsed and rehearsed and rehearsed, and then shot like that [clicks fingers]. *Tape* is an unbelievable feat of editing. What a lot of people don’t notice about *Tape* is that the camera never returns to an angle. That’s why it’s not a filmed play – it is cinema. I’ve never seen a movie made that way. Rick said it was the hardest movie to edit of his life.

You know, there is a strong case to be made that Linklater is a protégé of Robert Altman. He would resist that because Altman is *one* of his major heroes; he also likes Fassbinder, Truffaut, Eric Rohmer, and many others. One of the best collaborations of my life, obviously, is working with Rick. Our second film together, *The Newton Boys*, I don’t think you could find one good review of. And yet I knew something special was happening. As a person who is in the arts, you have got to know your own mind. The world may not agree with you. You don’t have to be arrogant about it, you just have to know it and have your self-respect.

**So to what extent do you invest in the finished product as compared to the process?**

The process is obviously vital and it’s ultimately everything. If the process is satisfying and enriching, ultimately it will work to something good. If it’s vital, you’re not wrong. How many times have we seen a movie get nominated for Best Picture that people roll their eyes at ten years later?

**Or the reverse of that, like *Gattaca*...**

*Gattaca* is a great example of that. When *The Newton Boys* came out, basically the zeitgeist had turned against [Matthew] McConaughey. You could rerelease that movie today, now that McConaughey is back in fashion, and everybody would love it. I once worked with Max von Sydow and I was complimenting him on how great *Three Days of the Condor* is. He said that they couldn’t get a good review for that movie; he said the critics were just sick of [Robert] Redford at that point. He’d had too many hits in a row and the critics were tired of Redford, and that’s the way the zeitgeist moves. So you just can’t take it seriously.

Mostly I think the end product is incredibly important. I need the [finished] work to have a certain integrity to it. It doesn't need to be fiscally successful, it doesn't need to be critically successful, but it needs to have its own integrity. Even if you don't like *The Woman in the Fifth*, you can't mock it. There's a serious artist at work making that movie. Pawel [Pawlikowski] is up to something there.

You know, River and Phil both sadly succumbed to self-destruction. For me it's really hard because the two actors of my generation who inspired me the most both died of heroin overdoses, which is kind of heartbreaking. I'm grateful because I've now lived twenty years longer than River did; pretty soon I will have lived twice as long as him. And I feel particularly grateful that I met Rick when I was young. He had really beautiful theories about a life in the arts. He came to the arts later than most; he was a baseball player and he developed a heart arrhythmia and had to give it up, and it was very hard for him – all he cared about was baseball. He literally couldn't run to second base. So he had to just stop completely. And he started thinking, well, what the hell else am I going to do with my life? He started studying the lives of artists, and he realized that if you could eliminate self-destruction, your chances of success go up exponentially. So he said, "Alright, I'm not going to do drugs, I'm not going to give in to that calling of temporary relief, I'll look reality in the eyes." He was saying this to me when we were making *Before Sunrise*, and it was a really good thing for a twenty-three or twenty-four year-old to hear.

**And his films do that too, don't they? Look reality in the eyes.**

Yeah, they do. *Boyhood* has as dark an eye on alcohol as Cassavetes' *Faces*. If you ever watch *Faces* you can see that Cassavetes was thinking a lot about alcoholism. But even in *Boyhood*, you see people trying to numb themselves all the time, with disastrous results.

**Since you brought up Cassavetes: I gather that you were introduced to his films by Seymour Cassel while shooting *White Fang*. You worked with another of his muses, Gena Rowlands, on *Taking Lives*. Was Cassavetes symbolically important in fostering your passion for the creative experience of acting in film?**

Gena talks about the legend-building around Cassavetes. She hears people saying of new directors, "He's the next John Cassavetes," and she thinks, "John was miserable." Only now in hindsight, she says, do you feel the romance of that poverty and how hard he had to work. She talks about the *indifference* that ninety-five percent of the industry felt towards him. There were a few bubblings of success, an Oscar nomination here and there, but generally his movies never made any money, they never translated into anybody letting him make another movie, it always was a struggle. And there was so much pain in that struggle that she wouldn't really wish it on anybody. I've seen her say this to young filmmakers in a way that is very powerful, I think. She tells them that just because you feel that the world is indifferent, you just have to see beyond it. You have to take solace in yourself and in your friends, and

believe in other artists that you admire, and you have to keep marching. You should not look to the superficial accolades of the present moment, you know? The whole time we were making *Boyhood*, the whole world could be completely indifferent but we kept on going.

**Critics have applied the myth of improvisation in Cassavetes' filmmaking to Linklater's production practice too.**

I know. People always ask about improvisation, and the only scene in either the *Before* trilogy or *Boyhood* that was actual improvisation was the campfire scene in *Boyhood*.

**The campfire conversation was improvised as the camera was rolling?**

Yeah. Usually what happens is we'll have a three- or four-day process of improvising and then sit down with a typewriter and sculpt it out. Ellar was just getting to the age where he was blossoming as a person and he really wanted to improvise a little bit. I told Rick that I thought we could do it. We had a couple of subjects that I was going to bring up, things that Ellar liked to talk about – *Star Wars*, some rock bands, *Pineapple Express*. In the first couple of cuts of *Boyhood* that I saw, that campfire scene was much longer. Rick boiled it down to one comment about *Star Wars*. What's funny is that Rick did that a couple of years before we'd even heard rumors that the new *Star Wars* movies were going to be made.

**Your role in *Boyhood* reminds me of the father you played in *The Hottest State*. Although you feature in only one major scene, I think the latter is one of your finest performances. Do you perceive any affinities between the two characters?**

Well, they're portraits of the same man.

**Literally?**

Literally. My father is a soft-spoken man who was into muscle cars, who came from Texas and fell into the insurance business, and so was Rick's father. Rick and I had a very similar vision of the portrait of fatherhood we wanted to do in *Boyhood*. Austin Pendleton, who made *Catch-22* with Orson Welles and Mike Nichols, was the only real acting coach I've ever had and I was very proud that Austin called me and said that that scene [in *The Hottest State*] was the finest acting I've ever done. The goal was to achieve what we were talking about earlier: absolute transparency. You can't see any acting.

But yes, both those characters have learnt to live in the present moment and they're not abusing themselves for their past mistakes. They're trying to move forward. Being at peace with your past mistake doesn't mean that you think it's okay that you did it. It just means that continuing to lacerate yourself for a past mistake perpetuates the pain for everybody involved. Rick loves that scene in *The Hottest*

*State*. One might make the case that Rick wanted me to play that character [from *The Hottest State*] in *Boyhood*.

**One gets the impression that by the end of both films these characters will be happier and more successful as men and as fathers.**

The fact that in *The Hottest State* my character can say, “It doesn’t matter what it says about me but it says a lot about you”...That’s him parenting, which is something he hadn’t done before. But *now* he can do it, and you get a sense from him that he’s glad this kid showed up. Even though it’s hard on him, he’s glad it happened.

*Boyhood* gets to put that character from *The Hottest State* at the centerpiece of the movie, which is really fun.

**Some of the finest New Hollywood films are character-driven rather than plot-driven. Hence the actors have more license to sculpt and flesh out a character. Is this emphasis on characterization part of the appeal of working with Linklater?**

Definitely. Rick is absolutely allergic to drama. If he smells a plot working in a script he rolls his eyes, you know? Genre films love plot and they ask the actors to *sell* plot. Whereas Linklater never asks me to sell any plot, so it’s all character and it’s much easier to create a three-dimensional portrait. Rick does this thing that’s awesome in *Boyhood* and the *Before* trilogy – he replaces plot with time. He uses this vast period, this canvass of time, to create the illusion of plot.

A couple of times I’ve tried to push Rick into making a more plot-oriented movie that might fall into a genre category to see what he would do with it. It would be so interesting: what would he do if he had that kind of material? But to his great credit, he’s really allergic to violence. There’s so much violence against women, for example, in movies already that he wants to try to get through his career without having a scene about a dead girl, you know? It would be such a victory if he could do it. I think Rick would admit that it’s virtually impossible. I don’t have a problem with screen violence in the same way, because I look at it more in the Shakespearean guise. People love stories that have sex and violence in them. *Julius Caesar* is littered with dead bodies. I’m okay with it as long as it’s infused with something real. It’s amazing that Rick’s had a career without killing anyone [on screen], it’s awesome, but it’s very hard. I guess he finally does it in *Bernie*, but it’s so beautifully done.

Here’s another reason why I admire Linklater so much. He was put in director jail after *The Newton Boys*. How did he respond? He made *Tape* and *Waking Life*. *Waking Life* was completely innovative and a totally new form of animation, a totally new form of expression, and one of the greatest examples of form matching content – a movie about dreams that looks and feels like a dream, and it’s full of ideas and has a kind of punk-rock sensibility, just as *Slacker* does. And *Tape* embraces this new DV technology, and becomes Rick’s version of *Celebration* and those Dogme movies that we both admired.

**Wasn't Linklater at one stage developing a sequel to *The Last Detail* called *Last Flag Flying*? What was the intention with that project?**

It's a great script. The idea was to get Nicholson and Randy Quaid and maybe Morgan Freeman to replace Otis Young, who passed away. But Nicholson doesn't want to do it because so many people are gone. That's the rumor I've heard. He ultimately feels that that ship has sailed. You could make it without Jack, but it would have been great to get Jack. Rick couldn't reach him. But Rick did work on the script really hard, and the reason why the film would have been brilliant is that it would have directly spoken to where we are as a nation, where we are as a culture, and it would have spoken directly through the film community: where film is now, compared to where it was then. Often Rick gets compared to Robert Altman, but Hal Ashby is probably a better comparison. Right now, though, the competition isn't that high.

**In terms of contemporary directors?**

Uh-huh. I mean, what qualifies as an art film now is Chris Nolan making a *Batman* movie, and I'm not saying that it's not good but it's not *Apocalypse Now*. It's still a comic book movie, you know? And Nolan is the best, everyone agrees about that, but it's so hard for directors who really want to break the rules. Breaking the rules was in fashion in the 1970s period we're talking about.

**Are there any films from the last decade that achieve the heights of the New Hollywood films? For example, I think of Fincher's *Zodiac*, which seems to evoke the atmosphere of *All the President's Men*.**

I've never heard anybody compare *Zodiac* with *All the President's Men*, but that's exactly what it is. The genius of *All the President's Men* is that it doesn't make any attempt to tell a back story. It doesn't make any attempt to create an artificial plot, it simply presents the action. And that's what *Zodiac* does too. [Mark] Ruffalo's work in *Zodiac* is great. Virtually everything Mark does is in the spirit of what we're talking about. *You Can Count on Me* is a Seventies movie that wasn't made in the Seventies. I would say *Blue Valentine* too. *Blue Valentine* doesn't exist without John Cassavetes; it's a direct descendent. If *Zodiac* is a descendent of *All the President's Men*, *Blue Valentine* is a descendent of *A Woman Under the Influence*.

## ACTING IN GENRE CINEMA

**We've touched on the present-day vogue for comic-book and fantasy movies. Certain New Hollywood films such as *Star Wars* anticipated the fantasy cinema that dominates Hollywood today, and you pay homage to them in *Boyhood's* campfire sequence. When you first watched the original *Star Wars*, did it expand your sense of what cinema could be?**

Absolutely. It's easy to blame those *Star Wars* films and *Raiders of the Lost Ark* for turning the world corporate, but the truth is they're great films. It's not their fault that everybody imitated them. *Raiders* is one of the best films of its kind. I often use Harrison Ford as an example whenever I have to act in an action sequence. He manages to make action scenes that are still about the human being. Almost nobody else can do it. No matter what amazing situation Indiana Jones is stuck in, you're totally invested in *him*. Other people have come close: Matt Damon in the *Bourne* trilogy manages to do it, where you believe there is a real person there.

**What do Ford and Damon do differently than other action stars?**

It's very difficult to define it. There's something that happens to actors when they get around stunt coordinators. They start doing what they're told. So you see the actor throwing a punch, and they stop having an emotional life because they're trying not to screw up the horse or the car, or shoot the gun wrong, or accidentally punch the other actor in the face. So they stop acting. I don't know why Harrison Ford is so good at it but I know that doing stage combat in the theater is a big advantage. Like we were saying before about voice, a lot of people think that old-school training isn't relevant anymore, but it *is* relevant. You can learn through stage combat how to make a character credible in action sequences on screen. The Brits are much better at it than the Americans, generally speaking; people like Ian McKellen and Patrick Stewart take their stage training into their film work, and they excel at it.

**When interviewed about the genre films you've made – such as *Getaway*, *Sinister*, and *The Purge* – you've often used the phrase “old school.”**

Yeah, because all the genre films that I've made don't have any effects budget.

**And consequently they rely more on practical effects than on CGI.**

That's what turns me on. “Okay, we're *actually* going to drive that car across the field.” As opposed to *X-Men* or something, where they would animate it all. I feel that the genius of a movie like *Bullitt* is that you feel the camera is in the car and that Steve McQueen is in the car and that they're really in San Francisco. For me, there's a power to that kind of storytelling. That's why the period of filmmaking that we're talking about is so relevant, because at that time what they were doing was truly celebrating people's inner lives. Even in the action genre movies. That's what Harrison Ford is doing, he's having an inner life while the action is happening. Steve McQueen, there is an inner life happening. Hackman in *The French Connection*, it's beautiful. For *Training Day*, that was *the* model for that movie. That was one cop movie that had done it before, even with its use of authentic landscape.

**There's a chase scene in *Brooklyn's Finest* that could have been culled from *The French Connection*.**

Oh, completely. Antoine is begging us to bring a Seventies ethos to all the performances. He genuinely is on location; he's working with real cops. We had to do

these drive-runs, and it was really scary. We were shooting in the hottest district in the United States of America, the NYPD wouldn't guarantee our safety, we had the Nation of Islam as our security force, and it was intense. Antoine basically said, "Look, when you watch *The French Connection*, you can smell and feel the city, it's tactile." New York is tactile in a way that it's just not tactile in a Marvel movie. I enjoy the fantasy element of *The Hobbit*, but I've been astounded by how much it's been turned into a pornography of violence – these films fetishize violence. That's different in a movie like *Training Day* where only two people get killed in the whole movie. *Training Day* is an insanely violent film, because there is the *threat* of violence, and when a character is killed you feel that there will be repercussions for it. But in *The Hobbit*, which isn't even rated R, the violence just doesn't stop – all those beheadings.

You know, my choice of film roles has partly been informed by the Seventies genre films. I grew up on them, and Joe Dante was my first teacher. When we were filming *Explorers*, Joe really impressed upon me that there is no such distinction as low art/high art. I like John Carpenter, the original *Assault on Precinct 13*, *The Thing* – that's a serious filmmaker working, and Kurt Russell is brilliant as Snake Plissken in *Escape from New York*. That to me was not selling out. To me, selling out was being owned, being a part of corporation advertising. If I could be a part of independent cinema in any category, a cinema where the director was author, where we on the set were the creative people, that's what I dreamt about. So a movie like *Sinister* or *The Purge* – which is basically a Seventies drive-in film released by a studio – is way more interesting to me than doing a movie for Paramount where I'm just there to sell watches for James Bond or something. I didn't want to do that.

**Have the New Hollywood films been useful resources in your own film work? When you're preparing to act in, say, *Brooklyn's Finest* or *What Doesn't Kill You*, do you look at earlier crime pictures like *Serpico* and *The French Connection*?**

Absolutely. *Rocky* was a real inspiration to Ruffalo and I on *What Doesn't Kill You*. Just how real Stallone is in that movie. He doesn't seem to be acting well; he seems to be acting kind of badly, but he's so real that it's awesome. *Rocky* has an authenticity to it that is pretty stunning because of its utter simplicity. It's not a well-made film, but it has a heart of gold. And its use of location, the use of Philadelphia, is so palpable.

Mark had met an actor who had just gotten out of prison and who had learned about acting while he was in jail. Mark read the script and loved it, and he came to me and said, "You know, I think this script is really good, and I think if we do it, this guy could direct it." I learned a lot about acting from this guy, Brian Goodman. He wasn't talking about acting as if he had studied it at Julliard; he talked about acting in a real way, shot straight from the heart. It was really meaningful. We just tried to go at it like we were making *Rocky*. I was so proud that we got the film made. We couldn't get it released, and the company went out of business. It's an example exactly of the

period we live in, which is that a movie that has a lot of heart to it just isn't fashionable anymore.

***What Doesn't Kill You* is another film that would fit effortlessly into the Seventies context.**

It would, definitely. Mark and I talked about *Scarecrow* too. This was our dream of making our version of *Scarecrow*: a two-hander that was totally performance-driven and authentic. That's all it needed to be. We did wild things on that movie. We'd go into some of the poor neighborhoods. I was supposed to pull Mark out of a little crack den, so we went to an actual crack den. I'd never been in the room before the cameras were rolling. We really went about it the old-school way.

## THE FUTURE

**You're in a good moment right now.**

An actor's life, you go in and out of fashion. When I think back to *Dead Poets Society* and *Reality Bites*, everything was going great until I finally did a few commercial movies. I did *Gattaca*, *Great Expectations*, and *The Newton Boys*, and all three bombed. They were my first three big studio movies once I was famous, and all of a sudden I was passé. All of a sudden I couldn't get a meeting for a movie. It's worse than being unknown because everybody does know you and they know they don't want you. They want the new version of you.

I remember I really wanted to get an audition for *Saving Private Ryan*, and I found out that Spielberg's favorite World War II movie was *A Midnight Clear*. They were using scenes from *A Midnight Clear* to audition people for *Saving Private Ryan*, but they wouldn't audition me! Because everyone was like, "No, we've seen him, we need somebody new." But as it turned out, this was the best thing that ever happened to me. I made *Hamlet*, *Tape*, *Chelsea Walls*, *Before Sunset*. I wrote *Ash Wednesday*. It was a whole period of thinking, "I refuse to be kicked to the minor leagues – I refuse." And then *Training Day* came out and things got easy again for a while, but then they got hard again. The last few years have been some of my favorites, and they were born out of hardship.

**From an actor's point of view, are you optimistic about the future of American film?**

I'm always optimistic because I think that you have to be. The world is changing in so many ways and it's an exciting time to be a young person, because the doors are wide open. Who's the next Jim Jarmusch? What are they going to be able to do with these crazy phones and the technology today? But I do also worry, because without commercial support they might be relegated to the basement to work. So I don't know...I don't know.

**In terms of your own career and your current and upcoming projects, you've reunited with colleagues with whom you've worked successfully in the past.**

Yeah. The success of *Before Midnight* and *Boyhood* has put me temporarily back in a place where I'm getting to do the kind of work I want to do, where it's a little bit easier. The Chet Baker movie is a really unique movie because it's not a biopic, it's a reimagining of Chet's life. It's kind of like a Seventies movie. I think it's influenced by *Synecdoche, New York* too. The film I'm shooting here in Atlanta, *The Phenom*, is also a throwback to the kind of movies we've been discussing; those are the kinds of movies that are the hardest to get made nowadays. And I got to make a spaghetti western [*In a Valley of Violence*], my latest attempt at a real genre movie. It's directed by Ti West, who is a kick-ass young filmmaker. We went with about a dollar-and-fifty-cents and made a spaghetti western out in the desert. And then I got to do a really political film with Andrew Niccol called *Good Kill*.

**You directed *Seymour* as well.**

Yeah, and I got to direct again – which was really exciting for me.

**The response has been very positive.**

Go figure, you know? It's been wonderful because I felt that after *The Hottest State* they wouldn't let me direct again. But I think with *Seymour*, *Boyhood*, and all the rest of it, the past twelve months have unquestionably added up – here at age forty-four – to the best year of my artistic life.

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**Notes:**

1. Robin Wood (2001) "Hawke Ascending," *CineAction* 55, 2-13. See also Robin Wood (1996) "The Little Space in Between: Preliminary Notes on *Before Sunrise*," *CineAction* 41, 4-13.
2. See Thomas Elsaesser (2004) "The Pathos of Failure: Notes on the Unmotivated Hero," in Thomas Elsaesser, Alexander Horwarth, and Noel King (eds), *The Last Great American Picture Show: New Hollywood Cinema in the 1970s* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press), 279-292.

3. Jeanine Basinger (2007) *The Star Machine*. New York: Random House, 537-538.
4. Cited in Martin Torgoff (1984) "Jack Nicholson," *Interview* Vol. XIV No. 8 (August), 45.
5. Quoted in Gregory Kirschling (2007) "Ethan Hawke," *Entertainment Weekly* (August 31), 16.
6. Lawrence Grobel (2006) *Al Pacino: The Authorized Biography*. London, New York, Sydney, Toronto: Simon & Schuster.