# Directing and Style 9


*Photograph from the set of* Precious *(2009). ©Lions Gate/courtesy Everett Collection*

***Somebody said if you give a script to five different famous directors, you'd get five different pictures. And I believe that.***

—Vincent Minnelli

## Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter, you should be able to do the following:

- Discuss the features of the director's job.
- Describe the concept of a director's style and stylistic movements.
- Summarize the auteur theory of directing.
- Describe the relationship among the director, the actors, and the writer.
- Identify some influential but non-traditional filmmaking styles.
- Name several pace-setting directors and their major works.

# 9.1 What Is a Director?

Making a movie is a genuinely collaborative effort. Large films employ hundreds of people who work together to create the finished product. Yet as with any endeavor that enlists the labor of so many people, there must be one person with the power and the overall vision to make sure that all the pieces come together as they should. In the case of a construction crew building a skyscraper, that person would be the foreman, who must translate the architect's plans so that workers can carry them out. Otherwise, what should be a building would be an incomprehensible mess. As with buildings, musical compositions, paintings, and other works of art, films are constructed according to certain plans using certain techniques and patterns that their creator believes will be both effective and expressive of something of his or her own personality.

*Courtesy Everett Collection*

▲ As a director, Bob Fosse brings his exuberance and energy to signature musicals such as *Cabaret* (shown here) and *All That Jazz*.

In making a movie, that person is usually the **director**. His or her role is often similar to that of the foreman, translating the screenwriter's story so that the actors and crew can carry it out. And like the foreman, it's up to the director to turn the elements he or she builds with—words, images, and sound—into something not just coherent but entertaining, even moving. It's no accident that when films are described, they're often talked about as the possession of the director—Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*, Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*, and the like. Of the many people who create a commercial movie, and it would be difficult to make one without all of them, the director is the most crucial. Much like the quarterback of a football team, he or she often receives an outsize measure of credit—or blame. While the director may not personally operate the camera or set the lighting or run the editing machine (though some do), he or she is still the boss in rehearsals, on the set, in the editing room, and wherever else the movie is made.

This is all the more remarkable when one considers that, beyond yelling "Action!" and "Cut!" at the beginning and end of scenes, there is no clear set of rules or regulations that all directors follow. Some are hands on, micromanaging almost every aspect of making the movie. Others are delegators, allowing more freedom among the actors and crewmembers. Some dictate entirely

what they want their actors to do, allowing for no improvisation. Others simply offer a loose set of parameters for a scene and let the actors go where they will with it. Some even shoot or edit their films themselves, while others prefer to work primarily with the actors and leave the technical details to specialists they trust. But whether you are talking about Alfred Hitchcock, a practitioner of the first type of directing described, or Mike Leigh, who uses the second method, or someone in between, the fact remains that the director is in charge of the production and is responsible for the final film. In this chapter, we will look at some of the methods directors use in their many roles, how they shape the film, and how central they are to the overall process.

## 9.2 The Director as Facilitator

While the director plays many roles in the production of a film, as we will see, perhaps the most important is that of the facilitator—the person who makes the trains run on time, so to speak. Overseeing every aspect of the production is, of course, a massively complicated job, one that requires a detailed level of planning and execution at every level. This is important because, unless studio executives meddle too much and take over the project, the film we see in the theater is largely the film that the director wanted us to see—the director's vision, interpretation, and take. In skilled hands, the director makes a film that takes us out of our world for two hours and into another—a world of the director's imagining.

### The Director and Style

©Paramount Pictures/courtesy Everett Collection

▲ Martin Scorsese's *The Wolf of Wall Street* is a prime example of his work, which is steeped in film history. Scorsese has created a distinctive body of films examining the psychology of men confronting their true selves through waves of excess and criminality.

We have discussed such cinematic elements as narrative plot structure, mise en scène, cinematography, editing, and sound in previous chapters. Although individual specialists perform the necessary duties in each category, often with their own personal preferences and styles, the director makes sure they work together to create a coherent and appropriate vision of the story on the screen. Each director tends to have favorite ways of arranging actors and props on the set, favorite types of camera angles and lighting schemes, favorite patterns of editing long or short takes into scenes, and favorite habits of using sound and image to reinforce or clash with each other. When we can recognize similar uses of techniques from one film to another, we are recognizing a **style**. That style may be associated with the screenwriter or head technicians such as the cinematographer or the editor, or even with some actors, but it is up to the director to approve of the major talents working on a particular project and to mold their visions to his or her own.

How the director achieves this varies from person to person and from film to film (and we'll discuss style in more detail shortly). It's also sometimes a function of the studio or a powerful producer, for example a David O. Selznick or a Jerry Bruckheimer. In early films, the director often truly served as a facilitator, and not much else. But visionary directors such as Cecil B. DeMille, Erich von Stroheim, and especially D. W. Griffith brought an artistic sensibility to the job that moved it far beyond that of a technical functionary. They and others helped establish the director

as not only an equal partner to the on-screen (and behind-the-executive-desk) talent but also the true author of a film.

## D. W. Griffith and *The Birth of a Nation*

No discussion of directors—indeed, of film itself—is possible without Griffith. Enormously gifted as well as hugely controversial, he in many ways set the stage for what we think of as the modern film director, as well as the modern film itself. Griffith started making movies in 1908 and directed more than 400 short films over the next five years, experimenting with a wide variety of story content and developing different filmmaking techniques that made his work stand out from that of most other filmmakers, especially those in America. Gradually telling longer and more complex stories on the screen, he finally left the fiscally conservative Biograph Company, which preferred the more economical 10-minute to 30-minute shorts, so that he could make feature-length movies on his own. His three-hour epic *The Birth of a Nation*, released in 1915, had a huge impact on film production and styles of cinematic storytelling, as well as on distribution and exhibition. Countless film historians agree that the popular and critical success of this film changed the industry forever. *Citizen Kane* inspired filmmakers with its exuberant technical style, but during its day *The Birth of a Nation* did much more. It told a story full of action, romance, suspense, terror, and heroism, as other films had done, but Griffith's mastery of cinematography and editing was able to captivate audiences of all social statuses for an entire evening's entertainment. Indeed, before *The Birth of a Nation*, movies typically lasted about an hour or less and appealed primarily to lower-income audiences who could not afford live theater. Griffith's ability in cinematic storytelling and his attention to historical detail struck a public nerve that made the film a "must-see" event, the first box-office blockbuster. Upon seeing the film, President Woodrow Wilson is said to have remarked, "It is like writing history with lightning." Whether or not this statement did in fact come from President Wilson, Griffith was able to manipulate audience emotions, rather than treating audience members as mere passive observers. He showed the immense power a director could wield over a film. In short, he turned it from simple entertainment (film's typical role in the culture up to this point) into cinematic art, while simultaneously demonstrating that it could be highly inflammatory propaganda.

Courtesy Everett Collection

▲ D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* portrayed the battles of the Civil War with a level of detail never seen before. Hundreds of extras were mobilized and shot to convey the impression of thousands at war.

Indeed today, while still considered probably the most influential film ever made, *The Birth of a Nation* is largely reviled because of the provocative way in which Griffith depicts the subject matter, even though he greatly diluted the extreme racism of its original source to make it more palatable for mainstream audiences of the time. Based on Thomas Dixon, Jr.'s 1905 novel *The Clansman*, dealing with the Civil War and Reconstruction, the film portrays black Americans in a condescending, negative light, while treating members of the Ku Klux Klan with sympathy and depicting them heroically. Riots broke out in the North when it was shown there, while Klansmen marched

in support of the film in the South—an immediate and instructive example of the effectiveness of cinema as a new and powerful form of storytelling. Its combination of elements engaged the senses of sight and sound simultaneously, providing a transportive experience the audiences were not accustomed to. For better or worse, Griffith had shown just what power a director could have, and movies would never be the same.

Sadly, today Griffith is remembered primarily for the hurtful racial controversy created by *The Birth of a Nation* (due largely to its overwhelming financial success—itself an indication of mainstream racial attitudes when the film was made). Few people seem aware that most of the controversial topics Griffith treated in his films were pioneering calls for progressive reforms and social justice, dramatically scathing condemnations of hypocrisy. His next major film was *Intolerance*, an experimental epic examining religious bigotry throughout the ages in three historical stories, all intercut with a parallel modern story about exploited laborers, self-serving reformers, and the injustice of capital punishment. Later, his *Broken Blossoms* treated child abuse, religious and racial bigotry, and interracial romance in the London slums. Sexual double standards and women's rights are at the root of *Way Down East*, whose heroine was an unwed mother trying to survive in a narrow-minded and hostile community. His epic action-adventure film *Orphans of the Storm* contrasted economic injustices and political scheming against the background of the French Revolution, with implicit (and some explicit) comparisons to the American Revolution and the then-recent Russian revolution. All of these films drew audiences into the lives of their central characters, using cinematic techniques to influence viewers' understanding that these potentially controversial issues were affecting individuals they'd grown to care about. Griffith understood that it took effective entertainment to make audiences see and think about deeper subjects they might otherwise ignore.

Other directors would follow Griffith's course. Orson Welles would write, direct, and act simultaneously in *Citizen Kane*, taking the role of facilitator about as far as one could. He was neither the first nor the last to tackle three or more creative roles in a single film (just look at Charlie Chaplin, Woody Allen, Spike Lee, and Clint Eastwood, to name a few), but there may be no greater example than Welles, and some believe no greater movie than *Citizen Kane*. After Griffith, directors from Cecil B. DeMille, Frank Capra, and Alfred Hitchcock to Martin Scorsese, Steven Spielberg, and Tim Burton have established their own names as far more important than their films' stars and titles in the mind of the public. However, it was Griffith who set the standard for imposing his personal style on every movie he directed and many others he merely supervised. As may be gathered from the discussion so far, directing has been traditionally a male profession. However, female directors with strong personal visions have emerged throughout film history (such as Lois Weber, Dorothy Arzner, and Ida Lupino) and have become more common in recent years (including Julie Dash, Andrea Arnold, Julie Taymor, Kathryn Bigelow, and others). There would still be, and still are, hack directors, of course, men and women who simply piece bits of the language of cinema together without much thought beyond 90 minutes of running time and a paycheck. But D. W. Griffith showed that the director could make the film his own, an artistic statement as personal as a novel, a poem, a painting, or a symphony. This concept gave rise to a theory of film criticism that focused heavily on the director.

## 9.3 Auteur Theory

Given the importance of the director's role in the making of a movie and how easily identifiable certain cinematic styles can be throughout the work of some directors, it is often convenient to discuss a film as though the director was the sole creator, like the author of a book. "Auteur" is

the French word for author, and therein lies the meaning of **auteur theory**. When applied to film directing, auteur theory posits that the director is indeed the author of the film, imprinting it with his personal vision. This can be an excellent starting point for analyzing certain films, both thematically and stylistically, and is in fact exactly how the auteur theory got started. Film critic and future director François Truffaut put forth the theory in the French film magazine *Cahiers du Cinema* (*Notebooks on Cinema*) in 1954. The theory gives enormous, almost total, responsibility for a film's success or failure (artistically, not at the box office) to the director. The theory was not, and is not, universally accepted. Film critics Pauline Kael and Andrew Sarris kept a running feud going in various magazines about the validity of the theory; Sarris championed it (he is, in fact, credited with popularizing it in the United States), while Kael, always opposed to the over-intellectualization of movies, attacked it, writing in *Film Quarterly* in 1963, "How was one to guess what art was and was not based on a logic that seemed hidden to all other critics? . . . Interior meaning seems to be what those in the know, know. It's a mystique—and a mistake" (1963). (It is quaint, and somewhat romantic, to think back to a time when film critics were such an important part of the conversation regarding movies and their cultural impact.) See Table 9.1 for examples of some directors who can be considered auteurs.

Raymond Cauchetier/courtesy Everett Collection

▲ French New Wave directors such as François Truffaut, whose film *Jules and Jim* is pictured here, began as critics who championed the director as the author (auteur) of the film.

Despite the misgivings of Kael, one of the most influential American critics of the 20th century, the auteur theory is still a generally accepted way of critiquing films. Its greatest American supporter, Andrew Sarris, defined it in specific ways that we will use here, as well (see Table 9.2), which others may or may not apply to their own understanding of what makes an auteur.

**Table 9.1** Notable auteur directors and key films

| | |
|---|---|
| **D. W. Griffith** | *The Birth of a Nation, Intolerance, Trueheart Susie, Broken Blossoms, Way Down East, Orphans of the Storm, America, Isn't Life Wonderful?, The Battle of the Sexes, The Struggle* |
| **Frank Capra** | *American Madness, It Happened One Night, Mr. Deeds Goes to Town, Lost Horizon, You Can't Take It With You, Mr. Smith Goes to Washington, Meet John Doe, It's a Wonderful Life* |
| **Alfred Hitchcock** | *The Lodger, The 39 Steps, The Lady Vanishes, Suspicion, Shadow of a Doubt, Spellbound, Notorious, Rope, Strangers on a Train, Rear Window, Vertigo, North by Northwest, Psycho, The Birds, Family Plot* |
| **John Ford** | *The Iron Horse, Hangman's House, Pilgrimage, The Informer, Stagecoach, The Grapes of Wrath, How Green Was My Valley, They Were Expendable, My Darling Clementine, She Wore a Yellow Ribbon, The Quiet Man, The Searchers, The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* |

*(continued)*

| | |
|---|---|
| **Akira Kurosawa** | *No Regrets for Our Youth, Drunken Angel, Stray Dog, Rashomon, Seven Samurai, Throne of Blood, The Hidden Fortress, Yojimbo, High and Low, Sanjuro, Red Beard, Dersu Uzala, Kagemusha, Ran, Dreams* |
| **Ingmar Bergman** | *Sawdust and Tinsel, Smiles of a Summer Night, The Seventh Seal, Wild Strawberries, The Magician, The Virgin Spring, Through a Glass Darkly, Winter Light, The Silence, Persona, Hour of the Wolf, Shame, Cries and Whispers, Scenes From a Marriage, The Magic Flute, Fanny and Alexander* |
| **Jean-Luc Godard** | *Breathless, A Woman Is a Woman, Contempt, Les Carabiniers, My Life to Live, Band of Outsiders, A Married Woman, Le Petit Soldat, Pierrot le Fou, Masculine-Feminine, La Chinoise, Weekend, Tout va bien, Film Socialisme* |
| **Michelangelo Antonioni** | *Story of a Love Affair, Il Grido, L'Avventura, La Notte, Eclipse, Red Desert, Blowup, Zabriskie Point, The Passenger, Identification of a Woman* |
| **David Lynch** | *Eraserhead, The Elephant Man, Dune, Blue Velvet, Wild at Heart, Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me, The Straight Story, Lost Highway, Mulholland Drive, Inland Empire* |
| **Martin Scorsese** | *Mean Streets, Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore, Taxi Driver, New York, New York, The Last Waltz, Raging Bull, The King of Comedy, After Hours, The Color of Money, The Last Temptation of Christ, Goodfellas, Cape Fear, The Age of Innocence, Casino, Gangs of New York, The Departed, Shutter Island, Hugo, The Wolf of Wall Street* |
| **Steven Spielberg** | *Duel, The Sugarland Express, Jaws, Close Encounters of the Third Kind, 1941, Raiders of the Lost Ark, E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial, Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom, The Color Purple, Empire of the Sun, Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade, Hook, Schindler's List, Munich, A.I., War Horse* |
| **Spike Lee** | *She's Gotta Have It, School Daze, Do the Right Thing, Mo' Better Blues, Jungle Fever, Malcolm X, Crooklyn, Clockers, Girl 6, Bamboozled, Miracle at St. Anna, Oldboy* |

**Table 9.2** Guidelines for considering a director an auteur

| | |
|---|---|
| **Technical Competence** | Movies must be well made (cult directors can be exceptions to this) |
| **Distinguishable Personality** | Movies must have recognizable style and attitude |
| **Interior Meaning** | Body of work should express consistent world outlook |

## Technical Competence

Sarris (1962) breaks the auteur theory into three concentric circles, the first of which is the outer circle, **technical competence**. It may seem obvious, but, at least according to Sarris, technical competence is one requirement of the auteur; he famously wrote, "A great director has to be at least a good director" (Levy, 2001). This is somewhat misleading, as the definition of "competent" is something that is difficult to quantify. A director such as Michael Bay, who has directed *Bad Boys*, *Transformers*, *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen*, and *The Rock*, is technically proficient, even gifted, in that he blows things up in noisy and entertaining ways. This delights audiences; his films have made nearly $1.5 billion at the box office. Yet most serious critics would not consider him an auteur in the classic sense. If one holds them up to most standards of critical evaluation (for example, the truth test we discussed in Chapter 1), his movies simply aren't that "good," at

least not good at rewarding in-depth analysis searching for deeper layers of meaning. Among films that he has directed or produced, critics have given him a 6 percent positive rating on RottenTomatoes.com, a website that aggregates reviews from major critics around the country.

On the other hand, there's a director like Quentin Tarantino, a former video-store clerk who immersed himself in movies and uses in his own films "quotes" from the many movies he has seen. His movies are just as technically good—and as distinctive—as Bay's. But he is also very much an idiosyncratic "author" of his films (he writes the scripts), marrying technical competence with a personal passion, providing a much more satisfying experience. Exceptions to this technical competence criterion are directors like Ed Wood (*Glen or Glenda*, *Bride of the Monster*, *Plan 9 from Outer Space*) and Dwain Esper (*Narcotic*, *Maniac*, *Sex Madness*), whose films have achieved cult status for their sheer incompetence as much as their peculiar twisted bizarreness. Yet many consider Wood and Esper to be auteurs, as they fit squarely into the next of Sarris's criteria.

## Distinguishable Personality

A **distinguishable personality** is the middle circle in Sarris's theory. For instance, the films of Alfred Hitchcock—one of the auteurs Truffaut identified in his essay—display an easily identifiable personality, or style, as we discussed earlier. They may be macabre, creepy, and sometimes downright scary: Movies such as *Psycho*, *Rear Window*, and *North by Northwest* share a gleefully dark look at humanity, while at the same time managing to be tremendously entertaining. When considering a director's body of work, then, a distinct personality will often come to the fore. David Lynch is another director whose films, which include *Eraserhead* and *Blue Velvet*, offer a dark take on life that might best be described as weird. Yet through his use of humor and identifiable technique, Lynch's films are enjoyable and sometimes moving. As with Hitchcock, Tarantino, Spielberg, Capra, and many others, audiences approach some directors' films expecting certain things, because of their track history.

Courtesy Everett Collection

▲ Scene from the movie *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. Frank Capra is best known for his sympathetic portraits of ordinary Americans, such as his film *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. Many of his films made during the Great Depression capture a sense of enduring American values. Among his most popular works, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* portrays an optimism and idealism about the political process, which may seem unfamiliar or naïve to 21st-century audiences.

A flaw crops up in this "personality" aspect of the theory, however. How can we explain a director like Danny Boyle, whose eclectic body of work includes such diverse titles as *Slumdog Millionaire*, *Trainspotting*, and *28 Days Later*? He willfully chooses to bounce from one genre to another to keep himself interested, as he explained in an interview:

> I think it creates a kind of freedom, really, of expression. The problem with being experienced and skilled . . . is that they're techniques. They're not always the way to the heart of the person or the people. They're tricks that you know work, and you can make them work. It's

> always balancing those things, and the way to really balance them is to take on the unknown. (Goodykoontz, 2008b)

Thus, Boyle seemingly strikes down not only the distinguishable personality aspect of the auteur theory, but also that of technical competence. And yet all serious critics would consider Boyle, winner of an Academy Award for *Slumdog Millionaire*, a brilliant director. But is he an auteur? He certainly has great command over his films, and they have a distinctive feel, though it's somewhat hard to describe; offbeat comes as close as any term to doing it justice. The auteur theory is not always a perfect form for analyzing films, as Boyle and his work illustrate.

## Interior Meaning

The least specific of Sarris's terms, **interior meaning**—his third circle—would seem to involve the distinguishable personality spread over a director's collected works. What is he trying to accomplish? What is he trying to say? (Think back again to our truth test.) Sarris isn't really clear, so it's left to others to try to sort it out. Some find Sarris's insistence that it can't actually be described in words to be a bit much, while recognizing that a common interior meaning is something that is felt by the viewer, the way a director's personality is expressed through his films' techniques, attitudes, and choices of subject material.

Here again one might turn to Hitchcock or Tarantino. Each of their films is distinct from one another, yet all have a common feel to them. Both directors, through their movies, have something to say (and certain ways they like to say it), not only about film but also about life and human interaction. And they are specific about how they distribute that message through their work, which allows audiences to enjoy the distinctions between their movies while concurrently recognizing them as Hitchcock or Tarantino films.

## Auteur as Marketing Strategy

The auteur theory extends beyond analysis and into the way films are promoted. Billboards, radio ads, and television commercials trumpet the latest Steven Spielberg or Martin Scorsese film. This is understandable in some respects because some directors have earned their outsized reputations. The auteur theory of criticism gives them creative credit for their films and at the same time turns them into stars. This is obviously not true of every director, even great ones. Mike Leigh may well never have made a bad movie, and he exerts almost total control over his films (even as he allows for extensive improvisation, which we will note shortly). But his films are fiercely independent in spirit, not lending themselves to expensive marketing campaigns. His numerous movies, which include *Happy-Go-Lucky*, *Secrets & Lies*, and *Life Is Sweet*, have a combined box office gross that is less than one major Hollywood blockbuster's opening weekend. Thus, his name has little public recognition, and you're lucky if you see much promotion for his films at all.

On the other hand, director James Cameron's name is such an integral part of the relatively few films he has made that someone unfamiliar with their titles might reasonably assume that "James Cameron's" is a formal part of their title. Then again, his films have made more than $1.9 billion combined, including the two highest-grossing films of all time, *Avatar* and *Titanic*. Cameron, too, is an auteur, controlling almost every aspect of his films, even inventing the technology used to make them. He may be highly regarded, but it is clear that turning directors into stars has a clear monetary advantage for some, while others worthy of such attention toil in near anonymity. A number of directors over the past century have enjoyed the same or even greater "stardom" than their actors, including D. W. Griffith, Cecil B. DeMille, Erich von Stroheim, Ernst Lubitsch,

Frank Capra, Alfred Hitchcock, Francis Ford Coppola, and Steven Spielberg, but in the eyes of the general public who buy the tickets, this remains the exception rather than the rule.

### Controversy and Debate Surrounding Auteur Theory

As discussed previously, the auteur theory is far from foolproof when it comes to both making movies and analyzing them. There are simply too many holes in the theory. As Pauline Kael points out, some great films are made by directors who willfully show a disdain for what is commonly thought of as technical competence. (Kael, who died in 2001, might well have appreciated the do-it-yourself charms of a film like *Paranormal Activity*, which is filmed like a glorified home movie yet is still a powerfully frightening experience—in part because of the pseudo-amateur nature of the filmmaking.)

Others decry the auteur theory on the basis of the collaborative nature of making films. Why should the director be placed above the screenwriter or the actors in terms of influencing the outcome of the movie? Therefore, it's necessary to understand the auteur theory but not become a slave to it. Although an imperfect method of thinking about the director's role, the auteur theory is still a valid and crucial one, recognizing the personal stamp that the best filmmakers put on their films, elevating them from mere entertainment to something more substantial.

Courtesy Everett Collection

▲ Scene from the movie *Modern Times*. Charlie Chaplin made the transition from actor to auteur early in his career and had both the power and the popularity to continue making silent films into the 1930s. He produced, directed, wrote, starred in, and edited *Modern Times*. He also composed the score.

It is important to note that a film's auteur need not necessarily be the director. Sometimes producers, screenwriters, or even actors have the most obvious and identifiable control over the films they're involved with. Writer auteurs such as Joss Whedon, Charlie Kaufman, John Huston, Billy Wilder, and Preston Sturges, among others, have gone the next step to become directors or producers of their own scripts, whereas other non-director auteurs with power prefer to hire the writers, producers, directors, cinematographers, or actors who can help achieve their vision. Some actors (e.g., Johnny Depp, Sylvester Stallone, and Mel Gibson) have the power to choose their own scripts, directors, and producers and thus might be considered just as much an auteur as a powerful director, whether or not they actually produce or direct themselves on screen.

## 9.4 How Directors Do It

Despite their importance in the making of a film, one might spend days on a movie set and never be quite sure just what it is, exactly, that the director does. That's because each director works in his or her own way. Some work almost as CEOs of a company, delegating and overseeing the work of others. To be sure, the final film's content, look, and style rest with them, but they allow trusted crewmembers to help achieve their vision. Others do almost everything themselves, particularly

on smaller-budget films. There is no right or wrong way to make a movie; what matters is what we see on screen. How the director achieves this is as individual as the films themselves.

## The Concept of Style

Most—though not all—films, even if they play with the form, follow the basic tradition of narrative storytelling. We meet the characters, there is some form of conflict, and then there is a resolution. However, there is plenty of room inside that basic format for the director to impose a personal style upon the film. Directors such as Quentin Tarantino, Tim Burton, and Martin Scorsese have a strong sense of style—in each case, artfully rendered violence and bloodshed are often essential elements of the storytelling—recognizable elements that the audience comes to expect.

The concept of a director's *style* dates back to the days of D. W. Griffith, if not before. Within 10 years of Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Intolerance* (1916), Russian director Sergei Eisenstein directed the enormously influential film *Battleship Potemkin*. Eisenstein was a champion of the montage, the cutting between perspectives and shots in a scene to either heighten the dramatic effect or, in some cases, alter it. The most famous, and most copied, example of this is in the Odessa Steps segment of *Potemkin*, in which Cossacks open fire on civilians, including women and children. The part of the scene in which a baby carriage rolls precipitously down the long line of steps after the mother is brutally murdered is positively iconic; it has been quoted in near-countless films, most explicitly in Brian DePalma's *The Untouchables* and Woody Allen's *Love and Death*. Eisenstein constantly cuts back and forth between scenes of terrified citizens and the advancing Cossacks. His theory was that juxtaposing dynamic shots one after another was more important to establish meaning than adherence to conventional continuity editing guidelines. Montage is an essential element in Eisenstein's concept of style, and it helps define his films.

Other examples rely less on technique and more on mise en scène and overall atmosphere. David Lynch, mentioned earlier, uses creepy, sometimes surreal images and sounds to shape the style of his films. Note the bizarre noises in the background throughout much of *Eraserhead*, Lynch's surreal film, which add to the unease and overall weird vibe of the movie. (That Lynch shot the film in black and white adds to the effect.) Even in a film that is, at least on the surface, more mainstream, such as *Blue Velvet*, Lynch manages to create a subversive atmosphere. The opening shot famously captures the idyllic small town, with flowers and picket fences, but the camera delves in more and more closely, finally showing the insects burrowing underground. Thus, Lynch immediately establishes that he will explore the ugliness beneath the happy exterior, a recurring theme with Lynch that he accomplishes through a strong sense of style. The style consistent throughout his films includes choices in sound effects, colors, wide-angle lenses, placement of actors within settings, and often-dreamlike logic in character interaction.

## Subject Matter

Subject matter over the course of a career is a crucial element of Sarris's version of the auteur theory of criticism. Are the movies the director makes important to them on a personal level, or are they simply guns for hire? A technical master such as Steven Spielberg or Martin Scorsese could, in theory, make any movie look good. Yet leading directors rarely take on projects whose subject matter doesn't appeal to them directly. Scorsese grew up in New York City and saw firsthand the tough kind of characters that would populate many of his films, such as *Mean Streets*, *Taxi Driver*, and *Goodfellas*. The characters, style, and action in the films ring true because of

Scorsese's lifelong familiarity with the subject matter. He is a gifted enough director that he could fake it. But in a stunning scene like that in *Goodfellas* in which Ray Liotta as Henry Hill walks through a side entrance of the Copacabana nightclub with his future wife, Karen (Lorraine Bracco), through the kitchen and onto the club floor in one long tracking shot, Scorsese combines his filmmaking brilliance with a genuine knowledge of how people like Hill operated to create a remarkably authentic feeling.

Other directors, such as Boyle and Jason Reitman, bring themselves to their subject matter in different ways. Reitman, the director of *Up in the Air*, *Juno*, and *Thank You for Smoking*, is the son of director Ivan Reitman, a director and producer whose films include *Ghostbusters*. Their films have different sensibilities, and they choose different subject matter, with Ivan typically making comedies, while Jason tackles drama (albeit mixed with humor). In an interview, the younger Reitman reflected on these different styles:

> My father is the son of a Holocaust survivor . . . He wants to make movies that make you happy . . . I grew up in Beverly Hills and never had to worry where my next meal is going to come from. That affords you the ability to be more challenging. (Goodykoontz, 2009e)

©Warner Bros./courtesy Everett Collection

▲ Director Oliver Stone is especially well known for his political biographies, including *JFK* (shown here), *Nixon*, *W*, and *Alexander*. Stone blurs fact and fiction in a style uniquely his own.

Each director, in other words, brings his or her own history and life experiences to films. One of the most ironic cases of the combination of director and subject matter is Francis Ford Coppola's selection as director of *The Godfather*. Coppola famously didn't want to direct, in part because he wanted to concentrate on directing his own scripts and not major studio productions that he feared would prevent him from bringing enough of his own style and sensibility to the picture, and also because he worried about the negative portrayal of Italian Americans. Coppola was right; the studio interfered throughout, from casting (executives were especially resistant to hiring Al Pacino as Michael Corleone) to the length of the film. Coppola fought to make the film the way he wanted, however, and the result was both a box-office sensation and what is generally considered one of the greatest movies ever made. Coppola didn't want to direct *The Godfather Part II* either, wanting Scorsese to do it, but he eventually relented and created another masterpiece. In these cases, Coppola's ambivalence about the subject matter is overcome by his bringing his own sensibility and personality to the film, despite studio interference and other problems.

## Working With Actors

Of all the director's many roles, his or her work with actors is the hardest to define; indeed, it's an almost mysterious ritual that varies among actors, directors, and movies. And yet beyond setting up shots and other technical work, the director's most important task is to coax a good performance out of his or her actors. It may involve pressure, praise, patience, or, more likely, a combination of all three. "The truth is, if you discourage an actor you may never find him again,"

the French director Jean Renoir says. "An actor is an animal, extremely fragile. You get a little expression, it is not exactly what you wanted, but it's alive. It's something human" (Stevens, 2006).

On its face, coaxing the appropriate performance seems an almost impossible task—the actor is trying to bring something to the role, to the scene, that feels genuine. The director wants the same thing, of course, but the actor's version must mesh with the director's vision. These typically are not people with small egos or hesitancy when it comes to opinions on how things should be done. Somehow actor and director must come together on what is needed, scene by scene, throughout the film, maintaining believability and consistency throughout. But how is this all accomplished?

Actors often repeat the same phrase when asked what they most desire in a director: that he or she makes them feel safe. They're referring to the freedom to take chances with their performances, the trust that the director will select the best take when putting the movie together. (Remember, many takes of the same scene are usually shot; the director pieces the film together from what he or she considers the best of the lot, much like trying to assemble a jigsaw puzzle.) It is a precarious dance between carrot and stick, one illustrated by the director George Cukor's remarks about directing Greta Garbo in *Camille*. Asked generally about the performance, Cukor said, "With Garbo you must create a climate in which she trusts you" (Stevens, 2006).

Over time, some directors and actors are successful enough together that they work together again and again. Martin Scorsese and Robert De Niro, for instance, have made nine films together. "We just have a good, terrific relationship," De Niro said of their work (Goodykoontz, 2009c). This again echoes the theme of trust that an actor requires of a director to do his or her best work. Conversely, if that trust is missing, the work suffers. Said Mira Sorvino, "As an actor if you don't feel safe, kind of, you tend to protect yourself more and batten down your hatches. It's much harder to give a truly vulnerable performance when you feel a little bit defensive" (Goodykoontz, 2010b).

*Courtesy Everett Collection*

▲ Scene from the movie *The Wings of Eagles*. From westerns to iconic WWII films, director John Ford and star John Wayne created classic American cinema.

An essential part of a director's makeup should be confidence—not just the confidence to choose the right take, to pursue the performance he or she wants, but also to trust the actors to make decisions about their performances, perhaps finding the right ingredients for the scene in the process. Director Mike Leigh is known for meeting with his actors for months before a movie is shot, working out the characters with the actors instead of imposing the character upon them.

Not every director shares the sentiment of finding safe harbor for actors to work in. Hitchcock famously allowed no improvisation, knowing exactly what he wanted from his cast in each scene. Among the many quotes variously attributed to him: "I never said all actors are cattle; what I said was all actors should be treated like cattle" (Hardman, 2010).

Whatever method the director uses to bring the proper performances out of his or her cast, as with every other element of filmmaking, the final results are what is most important. Talk of

rifts between actors and directors fuels gossip magazines and television talk shows, but those are fleeting concerns. What matters to the audience is the film they see, not what it took to make it. As director Mike Leigh says, ". . . what I want the audience to take as theirs, is what's on the screen, the film itself. Never mind the prep work" (Goodykoontz, 2008a).

## Point of View

In some respects, the point of view of all films is that of the director, but sometimes films give the audience the view of one of the characters. In *Forrest Gump* or the original 1982 theatrical release of *Blade Runner*, we see the story unfold through the eyes of the central character: Forrest (Tom Hanks) in the former, Rick Deckard (Harrison Ford) in the latter. In both cases, the films use voice-overs to establish the first-person point of view. While neither Forrest nor Deckard is a completely reliable narrator—that is to say, they do not have an omniscient, or all-knowing, point of view concerning the story—they are nevertheless our entrée into the film, and we watch what unfolds as it happens to them, even as they comment upon it.

In other films, such as *Casablanca*, the director simply portrays the action, allowing it to unfold in front of the audience without comment, letting the movie speak for itself. The film is no less engrossing because of this; director Michael Curtiz relies on the brilliant performances of his leads, Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman, along with a stellar supporting cast, to draw us into the film, even if it is only as an observer. We learn what the characters learn, when they learn it. In the case of *Blade Runner*, the voice-over was imposed by the studio, so Ridley Scott removed it from his 1992 and 2007 director's cuts of the film, preferring to let his use of the mise en scène, cinematography, and editing convey the film's point of view.

Courtesy Everett Collection

▲ *Being John Malkovich* may be one of the more bizarre point-of-view films. This story offers a portal directly into the mind of the subject for whom the film was named.

In films such as *The Sixth Sense*, director M. Night Shyamalan seemingly sets the story up from the classic third-person point of view; as with *Casablanca*, we simply watch the story of a boy who believes he can see dead people unfold. But at the climax of the film, we find that we have been fooled, that, while we know basically what psychologist Malcolm Crowe (Bruce Willis) knows, we know far less than his patient, young Cole Sear (Haley Joel Osment) knows. It is that unreliability of what we know, or what we think we know, that makes the film so satisfying (along with top-flight technical direction and acting).

Whether chosen by the director and cinematographer or written directly into the script, the most effective point of view for a film varies. Documentaries, for instance, are often more effective when they approach a subject with a specific point of view, not necessarily of a character but in the sense of conveying the filmmaker's attitude. Some audiences love Michael Moore; others hate him for the unabashed

liberal viewpoint he brings to his films, such as *Bowling for Columbine*, *Fahrenheit 9/11*, and *Capitalism: A Love Story*. Yet without a point of view, his films might as well be news reports on CNN. Even though the documentarian is not always the most reliable narrator, his or her point of view is essential to making us care about the film and the subject it illuminates.

This is true even with less strident documentary directors, such as Errol Morris. His brilliant film *The Thin Blue Line*, which investigates the arrest, conviction, and sentencing to death of Randall Dale Adams, charged in the shooting death of a police officer, at first seems to be simply a laying out of the facts of the case. However, by the way he presents the story—choosing a point of view—Morris implicitly makes the case that Adams did not commit the crime. (He eventually makes the case more explicitly, as well.) In part due to the uproar caused by the film, Adams was eventually released from prison.


©Lions Gate/courtesy Everett Collection

▲ Michael Moore's *Sicko*, a film about health-care reform, was a direct attempt by Moore to spark a debate about public policy. He takes a similar approach in *Fahrenheit 9/11*, a film about the George W. Bush presidency.

Point of view can also refer to individual shots within a film—how we see them. (In horror films, for instance, we often see the terrified face of a victim before the director cuts to the insane killer wielding a knife, offering us both points of view.) This was discussed in the chapters on cinematography and editing. Both are critical tools in giving the audience a character's point of view. Directors' choices establish their own perspectives on the content—and without a strong point of view, the story would flounder, making it all but impossible to keep the audience engaged.

## Shaping the Story

In almost all cases, even if the director did not write a film, he or she has almost unlimited rein to shape the story as he or she sees fit. This may infuriate screenwriters and actors, but any enterprise as massive as the making of a film almost always works better with one person in charge. There is debate, for instance, about who should be credited with writing *Citizen Kane*; it is credited to both Orson Welles and Herman Mankiewicz, but how much Welles contributed to the shooting script is an open question. Pauline Kael wrote about Mankiewicz's contributions in arguing against the auteur theory. (Ironically, the only Academy Award *Kane* won was for the screenplay, shared by Mankiewicz and Welles.) However, there is no debate as to who shaped the story, indeed, the entire film: Welles. Yet interestingly and perhaps tellingly, Welles shares the final screen credit with cinematographer Gregg Toland and is recorded as having stated that while preparing Citizen Kane he studied "the masters: John Ford, John Ford, and John Ford" and ran Ford's *Stagecoach* some 40 times for himself and his crew.

It was Welles's first feature film, and he was given **final cut**, or the final say on what is in the completed film, which is most unusual for a first-time director (studio executives often have the final say). But Welles would quickly prove that he was unlike any other director, new or experienced.

His radical technique, including deep-focus shots (covered in Chapter 6) in which characters in the foreground and background remain in clear focus, shaped the story tremendously. Based in part on newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst, *Kane* is the story of a man who inherits great wealth and learns ambition. He wants to do good in the world, mostly as a crusading newspaperman, but he is eventually done under by his excessive appetite for power. Welles brilliantly uses the tools of a director to interpret the story. When Kane is flying high, for instance, he's shot from below, making him seem larger than life, someone in a position of power. Later, when he signs away part of his fortune, Welles puts himself at a great distance from the camera, almost in the background, tiny beneath enormous windows, giving the audience the sense of a small man, far less powerful. Welles is not only using the language of cinema; he is at times inventing it on the fly, shaping the story to his own will.

Other directors rework a familiar story into their own style. The Japanese director Akira Kurosawa co-wrote and directed *Ran*, based upon Shakespeare's *King Lear*. However, Kurosawa makes the story his own, in part by changing basic elements. Where King Lear has three daughters, for instance, Hidetora, the protagonist of *Ran*, has three sons. More strikingly, Kurosawa imposes his masterful technique, including the use of vivid colors, to give the film its own look and feel. Kurosawa's distinctive style, which here includes managing a massive amount of extras used in huge scenes, gives the film an epic scope. Kurosawa takes a well-known story and, through his brilliance as a director, shapes it into something that is his own. Likewise, Kurosawa's fondness for American westerns led him to adapt their formulas to stories set in medieval Japan, and his very Japanese films *Rashomon*, *Seven Samurai*, and *Yojimbo* were all later remade by others as westerns—the latter also as a noir gangster film!

Courtesy Everett Collection

▲ John Sturges took Kurosawa's tale of *Seven Samurai* and transposed it to Mexico, creating *The Magnificent Seven* (shown here).

Numerous films since the very beginnings of cinema have been remade by other directors (sometimes even by the same directors, such as Cecil B. DeMille and Alfred Hitchcock), demonstrating how the same basic material can be reinterpreted by different artists (or even by the same person at different times). Some notable films with three or more versions include *Dracula*, *The Maltese Falcon*, *The Front Page*, *Chicago*, *Beau Geste*, *The Shop Around the Corner*, *King Kong*, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, *The Sea Wolf*, and *Robin Hood*, and countless other films have at least two different versions. Some are very close remakes, using essentially the same shooting script and often even the same camera angles, whereas others may be completely rewritten and reimagined by later filmmakers. Still other films have stood as such individual creations that no one has ever remade them, including *Citizen Kane*, *Gone With the Wind*, *Intolerance*, and *North by Northwest*. In the case of *Gone With the Wind*, it was producer David O. Selznick's vision that dominated, while the other three are very much distinctive works of their directors.

# 9.5 Challenging the Audience: Alternatives to Traditional Hollywood Style

As we have seen in preceding chapters, filmmakers very quickly established effective ways to tell a story cinematically, as opposed to merely recording performances of actors in front of sets. Techniques of cinematography, editing, and sound were discovered by trial and error, both to enhance the impact of a story and to make it easy for audiences to follow. The idea developed that films ought to keep viewers' attention on the story without even realizing they were watching a film. Some storytelling techniques, however, serve at times to challenge the audience to understand and enjoy a film, rather than to make it easier. Others focus on specific styles of artistic interpretation of the story content, consciously rebelling against the conventional style and techniques used by most commercial movies.

In the heyday of Hollywood studio production from the 1920s to the 1950s, each studio also had its own style. When a number of directors in a certain time or place display marked similarities in their styles, their collected work may be identified as part of a cinematic movement. The choice of which filmmaking techniques to use, and how and when to use them, can define a director's personal style, but when numerous directors (usually in a certain place or time) use similar techniques, a style might be part of what is called a **movement**, which influences still other filmmakers. Some movements that ran counter to the traditional Hollywood style that many of the previously discussed directors used are as follows.

## Dogme 95

Perhaps the most famous recent example of this is Dogme 95, which Danish filmmakers Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg came up with in 1995. ("Dogme" is Danish for *dogma*, which is a set of rules.) The directors, in a reaction to big-budget blockbuster films, established a set of rules about how their films would be made, which they called the "vows of chastity." They include, among other, more technical requirements:

- filming only on location
- using no background music or unnatural sound
- using hand-held cameras only
- filming in color only without special lighting
- not crediting the director

While the purpose of Dogme 95 was to pare filmmaking down to its most basic form, without the trappings of big-budget movies, it greatly affects the ability to tell stories. For instance, it prohibited any superficial action, which is often used to help move along the plot of a typical film. Results have been mixed; critics and audiences have generally rejected most of the films made under the Dogme 95 rules, often saying that the ambitious stories they



▲ Thomas Vinterberg's *The Celebration* was the first Dogme 95 feature film. Vinterberg was among an audacious group of young Danish filmmakers who rejected "Hollywood bloat" and embraced a low-budget aesthetic grounded in raw emotion and immediacy.

tell are too pretentious and too hard to follow. Thus, while not always successful (and even von Trier frequently ignores its precepts in his films), Dogme 95 does involve the audience in an important way, challenging it with a story that may be hard to follow, and at best the films are more appreciated than enjoyed.

Other cinematic movements arose at different periods of film history in a variety of countries and gradually worked their way into many mainstream productions and especially into modern independent moviemaking.

## German Expressionism

German Expressionism was a heavily stylized approach to visual art that purposely distorted things to express a psychological feeling or attitude about them. It began around the time of World War I and was adapted to film shortly thereafter, using stark architectural designs, a preponderance of jagged edges and diagonals instead of vertical and horizontal patterns, and extreme contrasts of light and dark. Films such as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) were obviously artificial studio-bound creations, with distorted, painted backdrops and exaggerated makeup to express a troubled view of a troubled world. *Metropolis* (1926) was an artfully bleak depiction of a future mega-city. Expressionism was not popular with average moviegoers when used in its most intense form. However, Hollywood horror films of the 1930s and crime thrillers of the 1940s and 1950s, later labeled as film noir, adapted its striking visual patterns to more realistic yet suggestive studio settings through artful arrangements of light, shadow, and camera angles. The style of films such as *Son of Frankenstein* (1939) had obvious origins in German Expressionism, as do *Batman* (1989), *Tim Burton's Corpse Bride* (2005), and many other films by Tim Burton. Likewise, later films such as *Sin City* and *Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow* consciously imitate Expressionistic films from the past, now often using heavily stylized digital imagery to replace the heavily controlled studio look of their predecessors.

*Photo by Mary Evans/Decla-Bioscop AG/Ronald Grant/Everett Collection*

▲ *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* is one of the most famous and influential German Expressionist films. It set the stage for what could be accomplished if film were free to explore graphically the dark corners of the human psyche.

## Italian Neorealism

Italian Neorealism as a movement grew out of necessity after much of Italy's film industry was destroyed in World War II. This movement consisted of movies that could no longer create artificial fantasy worlds with famous stars, and turned that disability to their advantage by using what they did have plenty of—reality. Well-worn actual locations and ordinary-looking, non-glamorous actors became key elements of this style. During the last half of the 1940s and into the 1950s, many filmmakers shot on real city streets and in real buildings (many still in ruins), often using non-professional actors, instead of using movie stars and carefully designed movie studio

settings. Films such as Roberto Rossellini's *Paisan* (1946) and Vittorio DeSica's *Bicycle Thieves* (1948) reflected everyday life while demonstrating that moving, human stories didn't need studio glamour. The grittiness of the stories told in this manner affected filmmakers around the world and helped inspire independent filmmakers without the means for lavish studio productions or expensive-name stars. Some of the Dogme 95 productions bear a resemblance to films of the neorealism movement, but Italian Neorealist films did not reject enhancing the story with background mood music and continued to use tripods and camera dollies when possible.

### French New Wave

The French New Wave began in the late 1950s, when a group of film critics and movie buffs decided to start making their own films, using an eclectic blend of traditional techniques they admired, elements of Italian Neorealism, and new, experimental ways to tell stories on film. Many embraced handheld cameras and location shooting. Many decided to avoid traditional transitions such as fades and dissolves to mark the obvious ends of scenes, preferring to cut directly to new locations or to scenes happening the next day. Some preferred long takes, with others trying very fast or unusual cutting choices. Many embraced the fact that films are, in fact, an artificial way of presenting reality, incorporating jump cuts that had obvious continuity gaps but sped up the pacing of scenes, and "mistakes" such as lens flares from aiming the camera toward light sources, mismatched actions, and even characters talking directly to the audience rather than to other characters. They also were not afraid to have unhappy endings, plots that did not resolve the stories, or numerous unexplained story elements. Not all French New Wave films used the same styles, but all were drastic departures, in one way or another, from the style of filmmaking then being used by commercial studios. Major filmmakers of the movement were Jean-Luc Godard, François Truffaut, Alain Resnais, Claude Chabrol, and Eric Rohmer. Some of the key films include *The 400 Blows* (1959), *Breathless* (1960), *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961), and *A Married Woman* (1964). Noah Baumbach's *Frances Ha* (2013) was a conscious attempt to recapture the feeling of French New Wave films.


*Photo by Raymond Cauchetier/Everett Collection*

▲ Jean-Luc Godard's first feature, *Breathless* (1960), challenged all the conventions of Hollywood storytelling and construction. It captured the spirit of the coming decade.

## 9.6 Some Pacesetters

So many directors have done so much good work that a comprehensive accounting of them and their films would fill several books. Likewise, not every film by each director will be discussed. However, it is instructive to examine the body of work of a few whose films are both good enough and distinctive enough to serve as examples for the study of directing. These are auteurs in the sense that we have defined, maintaining almost complete control over their films. This is not necessarily a guarantee of success or quality; sometimes complete control turns out to be not such a good thing. But generally speaking, these directors make the films that they want to make, mostly for better, though occasionally for worse.

## Martin Scorsese

Martin Scorsese's body of work is ambitious, yet it falls back on familiar themes: violence and guilt delivered in an intense style. These are present in *Mean Streets*, the story of a local hood trying to advance himself. Robert De Niro's slow-motion entrance into a bar set to the strains of "Jumpin' Jack Flash" by the Rolling Stones is powerful, as well as influential. Quentin Tarantino and others would also use rock music to shape scene and character. *Taxi Driver* established both Scorsese and De Niro as major players in the film industry. In this film, De Niro plays a taxi driver who slowly turns violent; Jodie Foster stars as an underage prostitute. Scorsese's choices of themes and style were groundbreaking, particularly his use of violence in the climactic confrontation. The film was controversial upon its release (and years later, when John Hinckley, Jr., said he was inspired to shoot Ronald Reagan by his obsession with Foster's character), but it showed Scorsese to be almost fearless in his work.

*Raging Bull* again paired De Niro and Scorsese, with De Niro playing boxer Jake LaMotta. Shot in black and white, the film's intense brutality and violence are often rendered in slow motion when LaMotta is in the ring. *Goodfellas* is another example of Scorsese's use of male camaraderie and violence, as it tells the story of real-life gangster Henry Hill. Scorsese revisited the same themes in *Gangs of New York* and *The Departed*. An avowed film fan himself, Scorsese marries technical prowess with a distinct point of view in his best films, yet he could depart from his familiar gritty urban subject material in films as diverse as *The Age of Innocence*, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, and *Hugo*.

## Steven Spielberg

The most popular director in history, both in terms of the box office (combined, his films have made more than $3.7 billion) and, arguably, love from the audience, Spielberg has taken sometimes maddening diversions into simplistic, feel-good territory, yet his career also includes seminal films such as *Jaws*, *Schindler's List*, and *Saving Private Ryan*. Capable of making exceptional entertainments, such as *Minority Report* and *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, Spielberg is typically at his best combining his innate sweet nature with a mistrust of authority figures—in other words, a childlike point of view. *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial*, a story about an alien found by a lonely boy who must keep him from nefarious government agents and scientists, is perhaps the ultimate expression of this.

Spielberg's *Jaws* was the first true summer blockbuster. Spielberg did not write the script; however, he crafted a terrifying film from Peter Benchley's book about a massive great white shark terrorizing a New England town. It was the first film to have a **wide release**, or to be distributed nationwide on the same date. It also pioneered the practice of television advertising. Yet for all of this, it wouldn't have been a success without Spielberg's genius, both in creating a sense of fear in the audience (including the use of John Williams's score when the shark was about to attack) and in getting believable performances out of his cast. There is just enough humor to leaven the horror, making the film immensely satisfying.

*E.T.* became Spielberg's signature film, as suggested earlier, for both good and bad. Although the original film is brilliant, a near-perfect depiction of childhood hopes and fears, for the 20th anniversary edition Spielberg digitally altered the movie. Among other changes, he replaced guns being held by police officers with walkie-talkies, an apt example of his yearning for innocence, sometimes at the expense of narrative truth. (Later tinkering in future releases would restore the guns.)

Spielberg also made more "mature" films, such as *Schindler's List*, the story of a German businessman who saved Jewish workers from the Holocaust. This film, along with *Saving Private Ryan*, a World War II drama, and *Munich*, a dramatic telling of the aftermath of the massacre of Israeli athletes during the 1972 Summer Olympics, established Spielberg not just as a popular craftsman but also as a serious auteur. After his initial directing successes, he would often serve as an influential producer or executive producer—instead of director—on many projects that interested him, but he could also return to his popular roots to direct three more "Indiana Jones" films or to blend serious fact-based World War I history with popular sentimental elements and lush Hollywood style in *War Horse*.

©Universal/courtesy Everett Collection

▲ *Schindler's List* was a departure from Spielberg's typical family fare. It is a profoundly personal film, and it led to his creating the Shoah Foundation, which has recorded thousands of testimonies from survivors of the Holocaust.

## Ingmar Bergman

Ingmar Bergman is a hugely influential Swedish director, screenwriter, and producer who championed deeply personal filmmaking while tackling difficult existential topics such as faith, good and evil, and man's nature. In films such as *Wild Strawberries*, *The Seventh Seal*, and *Fanny and Alexander*, Bergman used an almost novelistic approach to tell his stories. In *The Seventh Seal*, for instance, Antonius Block (Max von Sydow), a knight home from the crusades, plays chess with Death (Bengt Ekerot) as his homeland is ravaged by the Black Plague. Death has come for Block as well, but he puts him off with the game while pondering questions such as the existence of God.

In films such as *Persona*, he ventured into more experimental and self-referential "metafiction" and later would imbue Mozart's comic opera *The Magic Flute* with his own visual and thematic sensibilities (emphasizing both the dark duality of human nature and the storytelling tradition itself). His film of *The Magic Flute* begins with an audience watching a stage performance before fully entering into the comic drama, thus becoming a cinematic meditation on the nature of art and performance. Bergman's intensely personal films influenced filmmakers such as Woody Allen, Robert Altman, and Stanley Kubrick, who also brought a highly personal approach to their films.

## Nicole Holofcener

Though she has made only five feature films—she has worked on such television shows as *Six Feet Under* and *Sex and the City* as well—Holofcener has proved to be a master at capturing small moments and genuine dialogue (she also writes her films). In films such as *Walking and Talking*, *Lovely and Amazing*, and *Enough Said*, she has proved particularly adept at finding a voice for women, who are typically underserved in movies. Watching her films sometimes feels like dropping in on a conversation, sometimes one that is uncomfortable. This is particularly true in *Please Give*, which most critics argue may be her best movie. The characters—a husband and wife who run a snobby vintage-furniture store in New York, their daughter who lusts after a $235 pair of jeans, a mean old lady next door and her granddaughters—represent various forms of duplicity and guilt, and Holofcener, as in her previous films, is able to home in on their true emotions. It's not always comfortable to watch, but it feels real. The same goes for *Enough Said*, a

story of a divorced woman who befriends another divorced woman at a party and starts dating a man she meets at the same party, gradually coming to the horrible realization that the ex-spouse each complains to her about is her other new friend. Holofcener's ear for dialogue and ability to tell stories in such a naturalistic fashion may not lead to her helming a blockbuster, but her small, quiet films are as good a depiction of everyday lives as currently exists.

## Quentin Tarantino

Like Scorsese and Spielberg, Tarantino grew up a film fanatic. His work as a clerk in a video store, where he watched films compulsively, informed his cinematic vocabulary, allowing him to "quote" films that affected him when he began making films of his own. His films are wholly original, which gives them a quality that audiences respond to. In films such as *Reservoir Dogs*, *Pulp Fiction*, and *Kill Bill*, Tarantino uses violence in an almost operatic fashion, with bloodshed an integral part of his storytelling technique. The combination of his technical mastery and an almost gleeful use of violence sometimes masks the serious work of an auteur. While Tarantino's films may not be as strictly personal as, say, Bergman's, they are unique and easily recognizable as his own.

This approach has not been met with universal favor. In *Reservoir Dogs*, for instance, a scene in which Michael Madsen's character cuts off the ear of a policeman he is holding hostage, while dancing to the song "Stuck in the Middle With You," offended some audiences and critics. His disregard for traditional linear narrative structure in *Pulp Fiction* (and, again, its use of violence) also drew complaint. Yet if one looks beyond the shock value, one finds a commentary on the stupidity of random violence, or the more realistic way in which memories are accessed in telling stories. With *Inglourious Basterds*, Tarantino's love for film and disregard for traditional storytelling allowed him to portray a world in which film literally ended World War II. In this film more than most, Tarantino crams in numerous references and allusions to film history, technology, and the filmmaking process that can be recognized only by others as deeply into all aspects and genres of cinema as he is. In *Django Unchained*, he does a somewhat similar historical wish-fulfillment fantasy loaded with movie allusions, this time with a story set in the Old West and the Deep South before the American Civil War. The audacity (some might say "self-indulgence") and expertise involved in his films are breathtaking and available only to those in full command of their gifts—an auteur.



▲ Scene from the movie *Reservoir Dogs*. Quentin Tarantino's trademarked brutality is not universally appreciated. Critic Roger Ebert suggests that *Reservoir Dogs* needed more than attention-grabbing violence. "Tarantino doesn't do much with his characters except to let them talk too much, especially when they should be unconscious from shock and loss of blood" (Ebert, 1992).

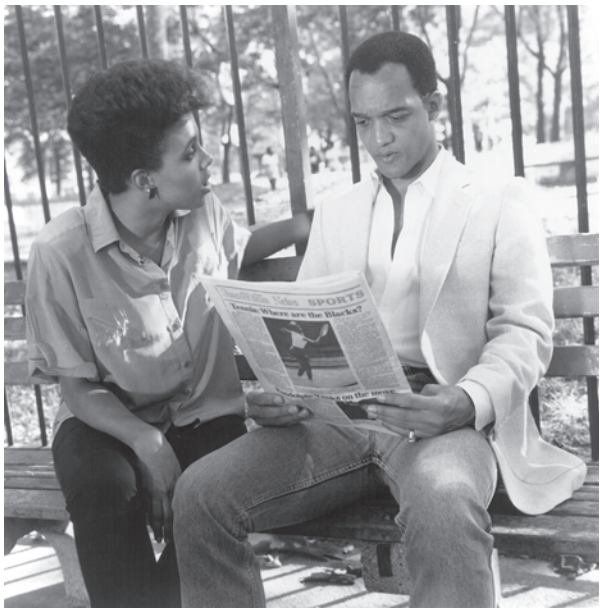
## Sofia Coppola

Coppola's introduction to the mainstream film world was not exactly a welcome one: Her performance as Mary Corleone in *The Godfather: Part III*, her father Francis's lackluster follow-up to his brilliant first two *Godfather* films, was almost universally panned. She fared far better when she stepped behind the camera. The five features she has directed, *The Virgin*

*Suicides*, *Lost in Translation*, *Marie Antoinette*, *Somewhere*, and *The Bling Ring*, reveal a rarity among directors: a unique vision and sensibility. Quirky, personal, offbeat, and entertaining, Coppola's body of work has won high praise (as well as an Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay for *Lost in Translation*; she was also nominated for Best Director). Perhaps it is not surprising that a life spent in film would lead to such an eclectic career in storytelling—the long stretches of boredom achieved through holding shots a beat or two too long in *Somewhere* contrast greatly with *Marie Antoinette*, in which she used bands such as New Order and Gang of Four in the soundtrack to help tell the story of the 18th-century queen of France. Only 28 when *The Virgin Suicides* was released in 1999, she remains one of the most original directors of her generation.

## Spike Lee

Directors of diverse backgrounds are sorely absent in mainstream film. Yet Spike Lee has made deeply personal films for almost his entire career, never shying away from race. In movies such as *Do the Right Thing*, *Malcolm X*, *Jungle Fever*, *Bamboozled*, and *Miracle at St. Anna*, Lee tackles issues such as prejudice and disaffection with passion, empathy, and, often, humor. Unafraid to court controversy, he uses his films as statements, casting a harsh light on the treatment of African Americans. In *Do the Right Thing*, for instance, which Lee wrote, directed, co-produced, and played a leading role in, he offers an unflinching examination of racial relations in a Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood in Brooklyn. Tensions on a hot summer day erupt into violence and tragedy, with Lee leaving the audience to decide whether his character, who throws a garbage can through the pizzeria where he works, has indeed done the right thing. He ends the film with contradictory quotes from Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X on the justification of violence.






▲ Scene from the movie *She's Gotta Have It*. Spike Lee burst on the scene fresh out of NYU film school. *She's Gotta Have It* was fresh and bold and showed a world unfamiliar to many audiences.

It is nearly impossible to think of an Anglo director infusing a film such as *Do the Right Thing* with the passion Lee does. Most directors run from racially charged issues, whether out of political correctness or the fear of offending or alienating a paying audience. Lee embraces such controversy in his films. This allows him the freedom to say what he wants and to say it in a manner almost unequaled elsewhere. When it was released in 1989 (and to this day), *Do the Right Thing* was condemned by many as an incitement to racial violence and exploitation of ethnic stereotypes; at the same time, others praised the film as a vivid dramatization of the senseless tragedy that racial bigotry and irresponsible behavior can lead to. Many critics consider it his masterpiece. Such conflicting interpretations reveal that Lee achieved his primary purpose—to get people to think about the issues.

## Kathryn Bigelow

Much like Lee, Bigelow occupies a unique position among directors—a woman who is a member of the "boys' club" that film directing often seems to be, and the only woman to win an Academy

Award for Best Director, for *The Hurt Locker* (which also won Best Picture). Far from the stereotype of a woman director, expected to specialize in romantic "chick flicks" and relationship dramas, Bigelow's films often stake out traditionally male territory: action movies, with an energy and originality that bristles. Does this demean her talents in any way? As film critic Manohla Dargis writes in *The New York Times*:

Photo by Jonathan Olley/©Summit Entertainment/courtesy Everett Collection

▲ Bigelow, shown here on the set of *The Hurt Locker*, is one of the few women to cross Hollywood's gender divide with films whose appeal is not aimed mainly at other women.

> Gender is the least remarkable thing about her kinetic filmmaking, which gets in your head even as it sends shock waves through your body. . . . She still makes relationship movies, but the relationships evolve both through the chatter at which women are supposed to excel and the contact of bodies, often male, sometimes female, running, surfing, parachuting, living, and dying out in the world. (Dargis, 2009)

Bigelow, then, transcends the easy stereotypes of the female director. She is, simply, a good director, period, either in front of or behind the camera. For all of the accolades rightly given *The Hurt Locker*, perhaps a more interesting example of Bigelow's work is *Near Dark*, her offbeat take on the vampire film. In one memorable scene, vampires descend upon a dive bar and dispatch every representation of American macho sensibility residing inside, quickly and, as the saying goes, with extreme prejudice. Yet despite its action and violence, *Near Dark* remains a rural romance at its heart. Bigelow's original take is fascinating, entertaining, and wholly her own.

And, in what may be a sign of being fully accepted into the boys' club of filmmakers, Bigelow is not above controversy. Her 2012 film *Zero Dark Thirty*, about the search for and eventual killing of Osama Bin Laden, was almost universally praised by critics, yet some attacked what they saw as the depiction of torture leading to useful information in the hunt. Bigelow and screenwriter Mark Boal deny this; as with most accomplished filmmakers, Bigelow allows the audience members to make up their own mind, a distinction sometimes lost among those who complain about the film.


©Focus Features/Courtesy Everett Collection

▲ Wes Anderson's films, such as *Moonrise Kingdom* (pictured here), have a stylized, almost picture-book feel that is evident in both the way they are shot as well as the unique, offbeat characters he chooses to represent.

## Wes Anderson

Wes Anderson is among the more eccentric modern directors to make films using major stars (frequently Owen Wilson and Bill Murray) that are often able to gain

mainstream acceptance while displaying his quirky and very personal style. Among his directorial work are *Rushmore*, *The Royal Tenenbaums*, *The Fantastic Mr. Fox*, *The Darjeeling Limited*, *Moonrise Kingdom*, and *The Grand Budapest Hotel*. His films tend to showcase dysfunctional or unusual relationships, especially within families. All of Anderson's features have won or been nominated for numerous critical awards for their unique visions. Many have found substantial commercial success as well, although some viewers are turned off or confused by his peculiar stylized approaches to framing scenes and his often-unlikeable characters. Anderson has also co-produced films with similar themes directed by other quirky auteurs such as Noah Baumbach and Peter Bogdanovich.

# Summary and Resources

## Chapter Summary

Although it takes many people to make a movie, none is more important to the process than the director. Through a combination of technical skill, building a relationship of trust with actors, and following his or her personal vision of the film, the director serves as a master facilitator on set (and in the editing room). The auteur theory holds that the director is the author of the film, shaping it as a personal expression. This is not a foolproof theory but a useful starting point. Directors distinguish their films by their concept of style, subject matter, point of view, and ability to work with actors. All help the director to shape the story. The best directors use a cinematic vocabulary, even quoting from other films, to make the film that they want us to see; in effect, it is through the director's eyes that we view the final picture.

A great deal of film analysis examines not only how filmmaking techniques shape the viewer's understanding of a given film but also how their style fits into a director's body of work, a studio's output, or a cinematic movement. A film's style is a recognizably consistent use of various cinematic techniques involving its mise en scène, cinematography, editing, sound, and overall structure. Many directors tend to favor certain techniques, thus establishing a personal style that distinguishes their work from others. When a number of directors in a certain time or place display marked similarities in their styles, their collected work may be identified as part of a cinematic movement. Perhaps the most pervasive filmmaking style of the past century is that developed by the Hollywood studio system, but several internationally influential cinematic movements arose as alternatives, including Dogme 95, German Expressionism, Italian Neorealism, and French New Wave. Today's directors may choose to incorporate elements of any or all of these styles while developing their own unique approaches.

## Questions to Ask Yourself About Style and Directing When Viewing a Film

- Does the director show technical competence, distinguishable personality, and interior meaning?
- Is the director's point of view evident?
- How is the film similar to or different from past work from the same director?
- Does the director use any non-traditional storytelling techniques?
- What is the director trying to tell you through the film?

## You Try It

1. D. W. Griffith's film *The Birth of a Nation* is controversial because of its degrading depiction of black Americans and its glorification of the Ku Klux Klan. Given the power that Griffith wielded over his productions, how much blame should one assign to him for this? Do you believe a film can still have artistic merit, even with loathsome values or an overtly propagandistic point of view? Why or why not?
2. Give examples of the tenets of the auteur theory—technical competence, a distinguishable personality, and interior meaning—in a film you have seen by Martin Scorsese, Steven Spielberg, or Spike Lee. In your experience, how much does the marketing of a film as the work of a specific director influence whether you will see it and what you expect from it? Try to think of a film that you have seen or avoided because you knew the previous work of the director.
3. Discuss the importance of subject matter in the films of Quentin Tarantino or Spike Lee. For example, in Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds*, the subject is World War II, but it is seen through his unique vision. Go to www.movieclips.com and search "Inglorious Basterds" to watch the following clip:

   "The Jew Hunter"

4. What films can you think of where the name of the director, producer, or writer is more important to you than its actors? What is it that you particularly appreciate or value in the work of certain auteur filmmakers? Go to www.movieclips.com to view the following scene from Steven Spielberg's *Minority Report*, which shows his distinctive visual style:

   "Spider Robot"

   Even with a star as big as Tom Cruise, this is still very much a Spielberg movie.

## Key Terms

**auteur theory** A theory of film criticism, popularized in France during the 1950s, that treats the director of a film as its primary author. In certain cases, a particularly influential producer or screenwriter may also be considered an auteur filmmaker.

**director** The person with the ultimate responsibility for the overall film. The director interprets the script through a personal vision and decides the overall "look" with the production designer and cinematographer; also directs actors and the action while shooting.

**distinguishable personality** Andrew Sarris's second prerequisite for an auteur that is also the most widely accepted: that a director's personality can be seen in all of his or her works, over and above the contributions of others involved in making the film.

**final cut** The last edited version of a movie before it is released, approved by the director if he or she is powerful but subject to producer and studio re-editing if the director has less power.

**interior meaning** The third of Andrew Sarris's prerequisites for an auteur: that his or her body of work contain a possibly indefinable but consistent attitude and vision of the world, recognizable through the films' content and style.

**movement** An influential trend in filmmaking in which a variety of different directors exhibit similar styles, usually occurring at a certain time and place.

**style** (as related to film) Recognizable patterns in choices of various filmmaking techniques that may make films of an individual director obviously the work of that person (supporting the auteur theory), and also help define a cinematic *movement*, such as Expressionism, Neorealism, and New Wave.

**technical competence** Andrew Sarris's first of three prerequisites for an auteur: that a director be able to make a competent film.

**wide release** A film distribution strategy in which a film opens the same day in at least 1,000, and possibly more, theaters across the country, as opposed to a limited release of only a few dozen to a few hundred prints that gradually move from city to city, or a platform release opening in a few theaters and gradually expanding to a few hundred and then a few thousand as audience interest builds.