

FROM *EL MARICHI* TO EL REY:
ROBERT RODRIGUEZ AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF A MICROBUDGET
FILMMAKER INTO A LATINO MEDIA MOGUL

By
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Zachary Ingle

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FROM *EL MARICHI* TO EL REY:
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ABSTRACT

Studies based on a director often follow a common model, generally resorting to an overview of that director's films and examining shared aesthetic qualities and themes. This sort of study was grounded in the auteur theory—following authorship approaches in literature—and was invested in a consistency that justified the place of film authorship as a worthy pursuit in academia. In this study, however, I examine Mexican-American filmmaker Robert Rodriguez through a discursive analysis, unencumbered to textual analysis or even a chronological approach, with a look at the media discourse, Rodriguez's own writings and interviews, and the pertinent scholarship. His debut award-winning debut feature, *El Mariachi* (1992), as well as the production diary that would soon follow, *Rebel Without a Crew: Or How a 23-Year-Old Filmmaker with \$7,000 Became a Hollywood Player* inspired a generation of filmmakers into making ultra-low (or microbudget) films. With films often released through Miramax/Dimension, Rodriguez has continued to make films that primarily cater to action (*Sin City* [2005], *Machete* [2010]), horror (*The Faculty* [1998], *Planet Terror* [2007]), and children's (the *Spy Kids* films [2001-2011], *Shorts* [2009]) audiences, all outside of Hollywood at his Troublemaker Studios in Austin, Texas. While still directing films, his most recent venture was founding the El Rey Network, which promotes itself as the first network for English-speaking Latinos.

After a brief introduction to the auteur theory in addition to contemporary approaches to authorship that suggest a move away from text-based analyses, I consider four broad areas that point to Rodriguez's growth from the director of the microbudget *El Mariachi* to his renown as the most prominent Latino media figure: social contexts (i.e., his Mexican-American identity), labor, economics, and technologies. I conclude that while Rodriguez's career has evolved

significantly over the last twenty-plus years of his professional career, he has steadfastly retained his adherence to his Mexican-American identity, his penchant for taking on many of the tasks of filmmaking (cinematography, editing, composing, etc.) despite having larger budgets, his parsimonious approach to budgets, and his technophilia.

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My fellow graduate student colleagues have been enormously helpful at my time here, especially the following: Juli Pitzer, Sho Ogawa, Daniel Mauro, David Sutura, Joshua Wille, Zach Saltz, Mike Van Esler, Hispano Duron, Charley Downey, Tina Louise-Reid, Amit Patel, Eric Lackey, Isley Unruh, Patrick Terry, Christina Hodel, Wes Lawson, Carol Burns, Stephanie Woell Wille, Marcus Mallard, Spencer Harkness, Carl Swanson, Courtney Sanchez, Najmeh Moradiyan Rizi, Barbel Goebel-Stolz, and Brian Faucette. A special thanks to Spencer and Joshua for information regarding filmmakers influenced by Rodriguez. Eric and Ron Wilson also informed me of excellent radio interviews with Rodriguez.

Of course, I am especially thankful for those who served on my dissertation committee: Michael Baskett, John Tibbetts, Germaine Halegoua, and Ben Chappell. My time in KU's Film and Media Studies program also could not have gone as smoothly without the assistance of Karla Conrad, the best administrative assistant a department could wish for.

The genesis of this project goes back to 2005. After finishing my Master of Divinity degree at Baylor University's George W. Truett Theological Seminary in 2003, I then worked in the Baylor University Libraries, trying to decide the next step in my education. I was considering ultimately getting a Ph.D. in film studies, but had only written one short film paper (in the one film course I had taken as an undergraduate). Working in the library offered me the opportunity to voraciously read film journals (primarily *Cinema Journal* and *The Velvet Light Trap*). I was struck by the lack of scholarship on Latino filmmakers up to that point, so I wrote a paper on Chicano identity in the films of Robert Rodriguez, which I not only used when applying to graduate schools at that time, but also presented at the 2008 Popular Culture Association meeting in San Francisco. Some of the thoughts from that early paper found their way into Chapter 2. I would like to thank Robert Reed for our late-night dialogues while working together in the library that informed my thoughts on Rodriguez, as well as for lending some of the DVDs and videos that I did not yet own.

The Office of Graduate Studies graciously bestowed upon me a Summer Research Fellowship for 2013, which allowed me to devote more time to writing and researching. The School of the Arts and the Department of Film and Media Studies were also always generous in awarding travel funds to allow me to present my research at conferences. Lene Brooke was always a pleasure to work with in regards to my travel.

For years I felt like the only Rodriguez scholar out there, until encountering fellow Rodriguez scholars such as Victoria Kearley (University of Southampton), Mauricio Espinosa (Ohio State University), Christopher Gonzalez (Texas A&M University-Commerce), Nathan Koob (University of Michigan), Enrique Garcia (Middlebury College), Mirasol Enriquez (UCLA), James Donahue (SUNY-Potsdam), and Frederick Luis Aldama (Ohio State University)

at various conferences. I am especially grateful for Mauricio's willingness to film the "Robert Rodriguez and the Cinema of Possibilities" symposium that was held April 11, 2013 at the Ohio State University when I was unable to attend. Christopher and Frederick have been constantly supportive of my work, asking me to contribute to their special issue and edited volume, respectively, devoted to Rodriguez. Enrique organized a panel at the 2015 SCMS conference devoted to Rodriguez with us, Frederick, and Christopher. I am also grateful for Frederick's mention of my work in his own book on Rodriguez (*The Cinema of Robert Rodriguez*); having publications is nice, but there is certainly a thrill when seeing others mention your work for the first time.

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Besides those who served on my dissertation committee, I would like to thank Catherine Preston from Film and Media Studies and Shawn Alexander from African and African American Studies for their faithful service and helpful remarks during my written and oral comprehensive exams. Their comments and my dialogues with them have also informed some of the thoughts of this dissertation. My family and friends were also a constant support network for me. My aunt Pam Young's profession as a postal worker surprisingly proved fruitful, as she kept me abreast of Rodriguez articles and interviews in popular magazines.

I am immensely grateful for all the feedback I have received as I have presented and published my work on Rodriguez. From Chapter 4, I presented a section at the Literature/Film Association in Lawrence in 2013, in addition to another portion at the 2014 KU Graduate Research Competition. A section of Chapter 5 was published in *Post Script* (“Robert Rodriguez’s *Spy Kids 3-D: Game Over* and the 3-D Resurgence”). I spoke on Rodriguez at several national conferences besides those mentioned above: the Society for Cinema and Media Studies in Boston (2012); the Western Literature Association in Lubbock, Texas in 2012; both the 2013 and 2014 *Film & History* conferences in Madison, Wisconsin; and the 2015 SCMS conference in Montreal. I also am thankful for the feedback I received from faculty and colleagues with my presentations at the 2012-2015 incarnations of the KU Film and Media Graduate Symposium. A certain amount of winnowing goes into any larger work such as this one, and for those wanting more on *Machete*, I encourage them to read my chapter “The Border Crossed Us: *Machete* and the Latino Threat Narrative” in *Critical Approaches to Robert Rodriguez* (University of Texas Press, 2015). I am grateful for Jessica Vasquez, formerly of KU’s Department of Sociology, whose helpful comments for a paper in her Sociology of Latinos class led to its publication.

Finally, this dissertation could not have been written with the support of my wife, Dr. Jemima Ingle, Associate Professor of Chemistry at the University of Saint Mary in Leavenworth, Kansas. She has read almost everything I have written since we were college freshmen in the spring of 1998. She has spent countless hours reading portions of it, listening to my many presentations, hanging out with me in Watson Library, and generally being supportive in numerous other ways, despite her disinterest in the subject.

This dissertation is dedicated to two of my grandparents who passed away during the time of its writing—Bill Ingle and Betty Owens Cowley—as well as my mother-in-law, Ruth Stewart Wirtz, who died only days before its defense.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Approaches to Authorship: An Introduction

In *The Simpsons* episode “Angry Dad: The Movie,” Bart Simpson wins an Academy Award for best animated short. As writer and director of the film, he has been looking forward to taking all the credit in his acceptance speech, but as he surveys the audience he changes his mind:

BART: This is it! I finally get to accept an award for MY movie. Except it’s not just my movie. It was my sister’s idea to make this into a short. And so many animators!

Everyday was somebody’s birthday. And you know what? It was my dad’s movie too! I only wish he were here and not at Cerritos Auto Square.

HOMER: You got your wish, boy. I’m proud of you. I’m sorry that I took all the credit.

BART: This whole thing is silly. I mean isn’t the idea of ONE person taking credit for an entire movie the stupidest thing you ever heard?

MARTIN SCORSESE: You make a lot of good points, Bart. A lot of good points. You’re a very thoughtful kid. You remind me of Deborah Kerr in *Black Narcissus*. Anyway, granted, despite what Andre Bazin might say, films are a collaborative art form. But hey, you can’t give an Oscar to everyone.

Throughout cinema history, directors have positioned themselves, or been promoted by critics and audiences, as the closest thing to “authors” in an admittedly collaborative medium. In the early days of cinema, filmmakers like D. W. Griffith and Mack Sennett promoted their films in such a way that audiences became familiar with their names and knew what to expect. The Classical Hollywood Era had its figures like Alfred Hitchcock, Howard Hawks, and Orson Welles, whose names were often promoted above the titles. During the rise of film societies on college campuses in the 1960s, it became fashionable to see the latest Ingmar Bergman, Federico Fellini, or Michelangelo Antonioni film. Moreover, filmgoers today still discuss films in terms of

auteurs; they know what they are expecting in a Quentin Tarantino, Wes Anderson, Kathryn Bigelow, Tyler Perry, or M. Night Shyamalan film. According to John C. Tibbetts and James M. Welsh, “Second only to the popularity and prestige of today’s movie stars is the recognition by critics and public of the presence and stylistic traits of a handful of directors.”¹ The debates over the film authorship have even entered the public arena in recent years. In 2006, screenwriter Guillermo Arriaga had a public feud with Alejandro González Iñárritu, who had directed his screenplays for *Amores Perros* (2000), *21 Grams* (2003), and *Babel* (2006), over the possessory credit. Despite their formidable collaborative relationship, Arriaga was disappointed in the amount of attention lavished on González Iñárritu: “When they say it’s an *auteur* film, I say *auteurs* film. I have always been against the ‘film by’ credit on a movie. It’s a collaborative process and it deserves several authors....I think it will be healthy to have a debate about it.”² This debate over film authorship mirrors its contentious place within film theory for the last few decades, when it had been declared naïve, romantic, and patriarchal. Robert Lapsley and Michael Westlake state, “Nothing in recent film theory has excited more controversy than its rulings on authorship.”³

While this study acknowledges this controversy, the emphasis is rather on authorship approaches within contemporary theory. Film authorship has expanded significantly since its peak (and subsequent wane) in popularity. For instance, I am more interested in how Robert Rodriguez has “grown” from an indie darling who made a \$7,000 Sundance hit into a steady

¹John C. Tibbetts and James M. Welsh, eds., *The Encyclopedia of Great Filmmakers* (New York: Checkmark Books, 2002), from editors’ introduction, xiii.

²Terrence Rafferty, “Now Playing: Auteur vs. Auteur,” *The New York Times*, October 22, 2006: A13. Arriaga has not worked with González Iñárritu since *Babel*.

³Robert Lapsley and Michael Westlake, *Film Theory: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 105.

director of uninspiring, mid-budget sequels, not to mention the head of his own television network. Therefore, the research question that guides this study is: How do these changes in Rodriguez's career reflect the evolution of American independent film since 1990?

But first a brief explanation of why Rodriguez has been chosen as the subject of this study. I contend that Robert Rodriguez may best epitomize the increased commercialization of the independent film industry in the last 25 years. His 1992 debut film, *El Mariachi*, established his place as an innovator among independent filmmakers, all on a shoestring budget of only \$7,000. Since then, he has always worked in genre entertainment, making more action films (*Desperado* [1995], *Once Upon a Time in Mexico* [2003], the *Sin City* films [2005-2014], and *Machete* films [2010-2013]), as well as horror films (*From Dusk Till Dawn* [1996], *The Faculty* [1998], and *Planet Terror* [2007]) and children's films (the *Spy Kids* series [2001-2011], *The Adventures of Sharkboy and Lavagirl* [2005], and *Shorts* [2009]), priding himself in making films cheaper than comparable Hollywood fare. Although Rodriguez has become the most successful Latino filmmaker and a technological innovator, his work has failed to garner much award attention (only *El Mariachi* and *Sin City* have won major awards). Still, even when his films have become increasingly derivative (i.e., sequels, remakes, reboots, spinoffs, and adaptations) of his previous work, it still exemplifies Jacques Rivette's assertion of the auteur as "somebody who directs in the first person."

Auteurism became entrenched within the growing field of film studies in the mid-twentieth century, since it coincided with the establishment of Anglo-American film education. The University Film Producers Association (now the University Film and Video Association) was founded in 1947 and the Society of Cinematologists (now the Society for Cinema and Media Studies) in 1959. In the UK, the Society of Film Teachers was also founded in 1959 (later

renamed the Society for Education in Film and Television). Thus the formation of these organizations occurred around the same time as the auteur theory was being championed by the *Cahiers du Cinema* critics.⁴ The auteur theory's place in the formation of these societies and in the rise of film education cannot be ignored, as the auteur theory helped legitimize film as an art form and a scholarly pursuit. The auteur theory's entrenchment within academia is evident on several fronts, but perhaps most visibly in the number of courses devoted to specific directors that are still taught in film programs across North America.

Yet the auteur theory faced criticism on several fronts. For one, it was often pointed out that filmmaking was a collaborative medium and thus auteurism was too individualistic (promoting an ideology of the subject) and naive. Why should the critical focus be on the director, while screenwriters, producers, actors, cinematographers, editors, production designers, and others suffer the neglect of scholarship? The auteur theory was also labeled as romantic, concerned with the isolated artist, the "artistic genius," but as Kobena Mercer elucidates, "We can all live without the return of Romantic notions of creative genius, which always placed the author at the center of the text—resembling the godlike figure of the 'universal intellectual' who thought he had an answer for everything—but we need to revise the notion that the author is

⁴The British journal *Movie* also promoted auteurism, although more judiciously, as critic Ian Cameron's remarks demonstrate: "On the whole we accept the cinema of directors, although without going to the farthest-out extremes of *la politique des auteurs* which makes it difficult to think of a bad director making a good film and almost impossible to think of a good director making a bad one. One's aesthetic must be sufficiently flexible to cope with the fact that Joseph Pevney, having made dozens of stinkers, can suddenly come up with an admirable western in *The Plunderers*, or that Minnelli, after years of doing wonders often with unpromising material, could produce anything as flat footed as *The Bells are Ringing*" (Ian Cameron, "Films, Directors, and Critics," reprinted in *Theories of Authorship: A Reader*, edited by John Caughie [London: BFI, 1981], 52).

simply an empty, abstract function of cultural discourse through whom various ideologies speak.”⁵

In the American context, critics of Andrew Sarris’s extremist polemic found him guilty of advocating a cult of personality, as well as saturating the auteur theory with cinephilia. Auteur theorists were also accused of promoting a “great man” theory of film history, wherein a select group of individuals, a pantheon (to borrow Sarris’s term), were seen as shaping film as an art. Furthermore, poststructuralists viewed auteurism as hopelessly naive in a post-Barthesian “death of the author” milieu, while feminists often accused auteurism of being patriarchal. Auteur theorists, therefore, were charged with ignoring the recent approaches to authorship advanced in literary theory, as well as those newer methods that took its place, such as reception studies. But even if it fell briefly out of favor within the academy, it never really left the industry, as studios have continued to market films occasionally by exploiting the director’s name. Paul Schrader’s statement about another topic considered outdated in film scholarship—the canon (“Canon formation has become the equivalent of 19th-century anti-sodomy laws: repudiated in principle, performed in practice”)—could easily be applied to the auteur theory.⁶

While Roland Barthes’s “death of the author” caused a seismic shift in the way authorship is discussed in film and literary theory, Michel Foucault’s work on the “the author-function” has received less attention. Its usefulness for humanism and capitalism may be a backhanded compliment, but he delineates four purposes for the author-function that I find helpful: (1) it points by name to a person that creates a designation; (2) this designation permits

⁵Kobena Mercer, “Dark and Lovely Too: Black Gay Men in Independent Film,” in *Experimental Cinema: The Film Reader*, edited by Wheeler Winston Dixon and Gwendolyn Audrey Foster (London: Routledge, 2002), 337.

⁶Paul Schrader, “The Film Canon: What Constitutes a Masterpiece?,” *Film Comment* (Sep/Oct 2006), 35.

categorizing; (3) such categorizing may help produce status in our culture; and (4) this categorizing will subsequently infer meaning onto a text.⁷

The Expansion of Authorial Approaches: A Review of the Literature

I have so far traced a brief history of how film authorship was originally conceived and debated, basically the auteur theory as promoted by *Cahiers du cinema* and Sarris, versus its detractors. But authorship has moved extensively beyond the early auteur critics looking for consistent themes in a director's body of work. Recent (especially post-2000) scholarly literature that extensively discuss authorship will now be addressed, particularly in its expansion of this controversial framework for theorizing about film. This is essential since the auteur theory, as described in many film textbooks, is still mired in the *Cahiers*/Sarris era. The following texts have largely been overlooked in the discussion of authorship.

Timothy Corrigan's work on authorship has become seminal in the way that authorship has been discussed in the last 25 years. He was the one who really pointed out how auteurism is being used "as a *commercial* strategy for organizing audience reception, as a critical concept bound to distribution and marketing aims that identify and address the potential cult status of an auteur."⁸ Often invoked in the discourse over authorship since 1990 is the distinction he makes between the "commercial auteur" and the "auteur of commerce." The former category is marked by an auteur recognition "either foisted upon them or chosen by them, that the celebrity of their

⁷See "What Is an Author?" in Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, edited by Donald F. Bouchard, translated by Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 113-138. The essay is based on a presentation delivered in 1969, two years after Barthes's "Death of the Author" essay.

⁸Timothy Corrigan, *A Cinema Without Walls: Movies and Culture after Vietnam* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 103. Emphasis in original.

agency produces and promotes texts that invariably exceed the movie itself, both before and after its release.”⁹ Thus a commercial auteur is someone with a high visibility that may exceed the texts themselves. Examples include filmmakers as varied as George Lucas, Woody Allen, Francois Truffaut, Steven Spielberg, Spike Lee, David Lean, Hitchcock, and John Sayles, as well as director-stars such as Clint Eastwood, Kevin Costner, Robert Redford, Mel Gibson, Barbra Streisand, and Sylvester Stallone. The auteur of commerce, on the other hand, is a “a filmmaker [who] attempts to monitor or rework the institutional manipulations of the auteurist positions within the commerce of the contemporary movie industry.”¹⁰ Francis Ford Coppola, Raul Ruiz, and Alexander Kluge are Corrigan’s three case studies for this category.¹¹ In a similar vein, Andrew Dewaard proposes a related term, “sellebrity auteur” (rather than the term “blockbuster auteur” that can reduce a director to his or her generic product) in his work on Spike Lee, since “it incorporates the brand identity and celebrity cachet that is now so integral to today’s auteur, while foregrounding the centrality of economic imperatives.”¹²

Corrigan also notes that “the subsequent auteurist marketing of movies whose titles often proclaim the filmmaker’s name, such as Bernard Bertolucci’s *1900* (1976), David Lean’s *Ryan’s Daughter* (1970), or Michael Cimino’s *Heaven’s Gate* (1980) guaranteed a relationship between audience and movie in which an intentional and authorial agency governs, as a kind of brand-name vision that precedes and succeeds the film, the way that movie is seen and received.”¹³

⁹Ibid., 107.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid., 108-136.

¹²Andrew Dewaard, “Joints and Jams: Spike Lee as Sellebrity Auteur,” in *Fight the Power: The Spike Lee Reader*, edited by Janice D. Hamlet and Robin R. Means Coleman (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), 348.

¹³Corrigan, 102.

This practice continues today, with filmmakers such as John Carpenter, Tyler Perry, and Lee Daniels (*The Butler*, 2013).

In his book *Authorship and the Films of David Lynch: Aesthetic Receptions in Contemporary Hollywood*, Antony Todd makes a case for a similar approach to authorship in the twenty-first century as he claims,

The intersecting industrial system of modern film production and reception present us with a set of author propositions a long way removed from those of the haughty literary establishment of 1960s [*sic*] to which Barthes and Foucault took exception. We are no longer dependent only on scholarship to conquer the text on our behalf because early auteurism has come to the fore in public criticism, while the author's name is now an ally of commerce. Meanwhile, a defining feature of the post-classical system, is its adaptability in feeding niche audiences; and this feature communicates...with those audiences through various populist and serious media channels that will reference the author's name when and where that reference seems fitting.¹⁴

Furthermore, viewers do indeed make their own meanings, thus “auteurism can be seen as an ideological (rather than scientific) operation through which the horizontal ontology of the text—be that formal, thematic, and/or industrial—will trigger the search for an authorial voice from the predisposed reader.”¹⁵ Todd focuses on the industrial auteur, building on the work of those such as Corrigan.

Just as auteurism was being questioned by critics and theorists in the 1970s, the word “auteur” was being used frequently for the major directors of New Hollywood (usually designated as the era of American cinema lasting from 1967 to 1982): Lucas, Spielberg, Coppola, Robert Altman, Bob Rafelson, Martin Scorsese, and Brian De Palma. Auteurism was now being utilized as a marketing tool, or as Derek Nystrom puts it, a “professional-managerial

¹⁴Antony Todd, *Authorship and the Films of David Lynch: Aesthetic Receptions in Contemporary Hollywood* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2012), 148-149.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 56.

class strategy.”¹⁶ Nystrom connects the rise of the New Hollywood auteurs to the concomitant labor union struggles in Hollywood. Looking at the films *Joe* and *Five Easy Pieces* (both 1970) as emblematic of these struggles, Nystrom concludes, “The story of American auteurism is one that cannot be told without acknowledging that auteurism was both the product of and a key player in the class struggles of the New Hollywood and those of U.S. culture at large.”¹⁷ Yet Nystrom extends the Marxist critique of auteur theory of previous decades, that auteur theory is primarily a conservative approach that ignores political ideology and class struggle.

In his article, “The Perfect Money Machine(s): George Lucas, Steven Spielberg, and Auteurism in the New Hollywood,” Jon Lewis maintains the fashionable, status quo disdain for Spielberg and Lucas as the reason for the demise of New Hollywood Cinema and the subsequent rise of the blockbuster era. Lewis does not discount the notion of auteurs, just certain *kinds* of auteurs, as he certainly prefers the likes of Scorsese and Coppola to Spielberg and Lucas. He admits that “if a director or producer’s claim to auteur status regards the degree to which he or she has controlled a project, Lucas and Spielberg are auteurs of the highest, strictest order.”¹⁸ (The same could presumably be said for Rodriguez.) Still, Lewis makes at least one notable point—that Lucas and Spielberg have generated an era in which postproduction has become increasingly important. Lewis’s focus on these two directors can affect one’s view of Rodriguez, since he has often mentioned them as major influences on his work.

¹⁶Derek Nystrom, “Hard Hats and Movie Brats: Auteurism and the Class Politics of the New Hollywood,” *Cinema Journal* 43:3 (Spr 2004), 18-19.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁸Jon Lewis, “The Perfect Money Machine(s): George Lucas, Steven Spielberg, and Auteurism in the New Hollywood,” in *Looking Past the Screen: Case Studies in American Film History and Method*, eds. Lewis and Eric Smoodin (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 71.

In a similar vein, Martin Flanagan points out that the concept of the auteur has only contributed to its reputation within Hollywood in the last decade, particularly in regard to the blockbuster. Writing in the wake of comic book adaptations by established “auteurs” Bryan Singer (*X-Men*, 2000; *X2*, 2003), Sam Raimi (*Spider-Man*, 2002), and Ang Lee (*The Hulk*, 2003), Flanagan notes a trend that would only continue, as former art house directors Alfonso Cuarón (*Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, 2004), Christopher Nolan (the Dark Knight trilogy, 2005-2012), Kenneth Branagh (*Thor*, 2011), and Guillermo del Toro (*Blade II*, 2002; *Hellboy*, 2004; *Hellboy II: The Golden Army*, 2008) have all been recruited for blockbuster/tentpole projects in order to make them more distinguished for critics and audiences. Jon Lewis describes the comic-book adaptation as an “important action-adventure subgenre in the post-auteur era,”¹⁹ but, if anything, the superhero genre may be the best example of how auteurs are marketed to enhance the cachet of such films. From the early days of the superhero genre (Richard Donner, Richard Lester, Tim Burton) to the genre’s explosive growth in this century, auteurs have been recruited to give their stamp on their films.

Like Flanagan, Yannis Tzioumakis has also examined auteurship and Hollywood marketing techniques, in this instance, the career of David Mamet. Contra the work of Corrigan and Lewis in the discourse of “industrial auteurism”—in other words, arguing for its significance—Tzioumakis asserts two ways in which industrial auteurism remains key for auteur criticism: first, film authorship is examined within an industrial-economic context; and second, it makes the study of authorship more flexible, namely that an industrial-assigned, intertext-based form of authorship can be studied alongside a traditional, textually-determined one.

¹⁹Jon Lewis, *American Film: A History* (New York: Norton, 2007), 365.

Most of the contemporary discourse so far has utilized an industrial approach—fitting for a commercial filmmaker/media mogul like Rodriguez—but some scholars have attempted to adapt the auteur theory to other frontiers in media studies. Carol Vernallis, for instance, explores differing music video styles through the lens of authorship in “‘The Most Terrific Sandbox’: Music Video Directors, Style, and the Question of the Auteur,” much like Rosalind Coward’s “Dennis Potter and the Question of the Television Author” attempted with television twenty years previously. Articles such as these by Coward and Vernallis appear as little more than attempts to legitimize these younger art forms, much as the *Cahiers* cohort endeavored to do with cinema, particularly “popular,” Hollywood product. The auteur theory is often appropriated when necessary to legitimize emerging media as worthy objects of study.

On a related note, Anna Notaro has also looked at auteur theory in new technologies, particularly films shared on the Internet. While these new technologies promote a “multiple, hybridized, collective authorship,” Notaro contends that the “aura of authorship, under new performative semblances, appears to be reaffirmed right at a time when it is most challenged.”²⁰ Though much of her article already seems dated (since it was published as YouTube was slowly gaining momentum as the primary outlet for budding amateur filmmakers), Notaro’s article helpfully points to the auteur theory’s continued relevance.

The auteur theory faced some of its most vocal challenges when feminist film theorists accused it of being patriarchal and chauvinistic. In her article on women filmmakers, Angela Martin goes one step further, saying that “auteurism...has nothing to do with women’s

²⁰Anna Notaro, “Technology in Search of an Artist: Questions of Auteurism/Authorship and the Contemporary Cinematic Experience,” *The Velvet Light Trap* 57 (Spr 2006), 86.

filmmaking.”²¹ Ironically, auteurism’s popularity declined significantly just as numerous American women filmmakers were entering the industry. Part of the problem she sees is that women filmmakers must, in order to be labeled auteurs, include a female voice to give it “authorial credence,” thus overlooking directors like Kathryn Bigelow, who are often criticized for making more “male-oriented films.” (Even if others such as Barry Keith Grant notes recurring themes and styles in the action films of Bigelow.) Martin (rightly) thinks too little attention has been given to women filmmakers. If it is indeed the case that women filmmakers are still ignored, newer introductory film textbooks, such as Wheeler Winston Dixon and Gwendolyn Audrey Foster’s *A Short History of Film*, with its particular emphasis on women filmmakers, may correct this gap. Provisionally concurring with Martin’s point about the essentialism of insisting on a feminine authorial voice, little remains to outright reject auteur theory within a feminist context. Indeed, some would consider it “convenient” for the established patriarchy of academe that the auteur theory would become less fashionable as women filmmakers became more prominent. Other feminist theorists such as Claire Johnston, Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, and Geetha Ramanathan, among others, have justified the use of the auteur theory within feminist film theory, divorcing it from its perceived patriarchy. Redressing the film canon with her particular work on Dorothy Arzner, Johnston, one of the key articulators of feminist theory in the UK, censures auteurists such as Sarris for ignoring the work of women filmmakers.²² Johnston argues, “Nevertheless, the development of the auteur theory marked an

²¹Angela Martin, “Refocusing Authorship in Women’s Filmmaking,” in *Auteurs and Authorship: A Film Reader*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), 128.

²²Although she shied away from the “feminist” label and this was not her not her primary objection to the auteur theory, Pauline Kael also took auteurism to task on the grounds that it championed certain male filmmakers. Varying opinions on the auteur theory led to the rift in 1960s American film criticism between those who followed Sarris (“Sarrisites”) and Kael (“Paulettes”). In their wake, most film critics seemed to have adopted a *via media* in the vein of Roger Ebert, respecting the authoritativeness of the director, while also judging films on their own merits (Todd Rendleman, *Rule of Thumb: Ebert at the Movies* [New York: Continuum, 2012], 10-12).

important intervention in film criticism: its polemics challenged the entrenched view of Hollywood as monolithic, and stripped of its normative aspects the classification of films by director has proved an extremely productive way of ordering our experience of the cinema.”²³

Do these recently-published articles on authorship depict a chorus of voices or a cacophony of caterwaulers? They run the gamut, from looking at specific case studies of auteurism (Todd, Nystrom) to examining its exploitation as a marketing tool (Lewis, Flanagan, Tzioumakis). Both Vernallis and Notaro adapt the auteur theory to newer media. Some (Martin, Begley) find the auteur theory indefensible on ideological grounds, while others (Grant and DeAngelis) display how it can be still be utilized in ways that seem both traditional and innovative at the same time. Premature pronouncements of the death of the auteur theory have been refuted, an auteuristic residue remains, even if it looks differently than it had in previous decades, disseminating into other scholarly frontiers.

Besides a few edited volumes,²⁴ there has not been a book-length treatment specifically on the auteur theory *qua* the auteur theory besides C. P. Sellors’s *Film Authorship: Auteurs and Other Myths*, a volume in Wallflower Press’s Short Cuts series. In terms of recent monographs of auteurist-based approaches, Todd’s *Authorship and the Films of David Lynch* remains one of the few written to really justify the place of authorship in a supposedly post-auteur era of film studies, although again Todd’s approach is narrower than mine, placing Lynch as an “industrial auteur,” created and marketed by Hollywood.

²³“Women’s Cinemas as Counter-Cinema,” reprinted in *Feminism and Film*, Oxford Readings in Feminism, edited by E. Ann Kaplan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 26.

²⁴Besides Grant, see Jeremy Braddock, and Stephen Hock, eds., *Directed by Allen Smithee* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001); and David A. Gerstner and Janet Staiger, eds., *Authorship and Film*, AFI Film Readers (New York: Routledge, 2003).

Auteurism has arguably maintained its status in academia, despite popular notions to the contrary. As mentioned above, film studies programs still teach courses on individual filmmakers, which testifies to professors who are still interested in the subject, but also that such classes remain popular and still guarantee sufficient enrollment. In a similar vein, books on directors are still the largest segment of publishing in film studies. The following is a selective list of book series devoted to directors by major publishing houses in the last decade: Directors' Cuts (Wallflower Press), Conversations with Filmmakers (University Press of Mississippi), Films of... Series (Cambridge University Press), Filmmakers Series (Scarecrow Press), Virgin Film Directors Series, Taschen's "The Complete Films" Series, Pocket Essential Series, Contemporary Film Directors (University of Illinois Press), and ReFocus (Edinburgh University Press), among others. As evident, they range from the scholarly (Wallflower's Directors' Cuts and Illinois Press's Contemporary Film Directors) to the popular (Pocket Essential Series and Taschen's line of film books). Numerous monographs are still published each year on individual filmmakers by popular, general academic, and university publishing houses. The edited collection, *Inventing Film Studies* (2008) contains a few essays that discuss the place of auteurism in the academy historically, as well as in the present day. In his chapter, "Little Books," Mark Betz notes that the popularity of director-oriented studies in the 1960s and 1970s has not really slowed in recent years; from 1997 to 2005, half of the "little books" (or film books published more for the popular market and not by university presses) were director monographs.²⁵ The number may not be quite as high for scholarly presses, but they still may be the largest subcategory.

²⁵Mark Betz, "Little Books," in *Inventing Film Studies*, edited by Lee Grieveson and Haidee Wasson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 340.

Still, there are several gaps in the recent literature and developments in the auteur theory. Most obvious are the insular tactics so limiting that they add little to the debate and to the advancement of authorship theory. This study seeks a larger scope in its argument for a more inclusive and comprehensive approach to authorship.

Organization and Scope of Study

The four central chapters will focus on four aspects where we can examine how Rodriguez has evolved from a low-budget filmmaker to a media mogul: social contexts, labor, economics, and technologies, even if a certain amount of fluidity exists among these four areas. For instance, Rodriguez's decisions concerning what technology to use is impacted by his social context(s), economics, and his view on labor. This is also significant in that, to the best of my knowledge, a filmmaker has not been explicitly analyzed using these four lenses before. I adopted this approach as it seems more pertinent to where authorship methods will be going in the future, removed from the typical organization of directors' studies that are organized chronologically or thematically.

Social Contexts

Chapter 2 *could* cover several social contexts that affect Rodriguez's work, but it will instead focus on Rodriguez's place as a Latino filmmaker, since this distinction places him outside the norm of American filmmakers. In fact, Gregory Nava (*El Norte* [1983], *Selena* [1997]) is the only other U.S. Latino filmmaker who has sustained a lengthy career in film. Several books have shaped my understanding of the contemporary Latino landscape, most notably those by Chavez, Macias, Vasquez, and Smith. Smith deals more with the new immigrant experience, which is not as applicable in an understanding of a fourth-generation

Tejano like Rodriguez, but Vasquez and Macias tackle later-generation Mexican ethnic identity. Unfortunately, both focus more on the Southwest (chiefly California and Arizona) experience, not that of Latinos in Texas. The major Latin American filmmaker-theorists can also shed light on Rodriguez's work.

Chavez examines media portrayals of Latinos as a "threat," but several other works have helped shape my understanding of Latinos in the media. Some of the notable works on Latino image studies in film and media that inform my research are Valdivia, Molina-Guzman, Beltran, Noreiga, List, and Ramírez Berg. The major works on Chicano cinema are Fregoso and Noriega. Noriega's *Shot in America* primarily addresses Chicano work in television, but also provides pertinent information on the early Chicano filmmakers. Fregoso and Keller, on the other hand, set the foundation for Latino images in film.

Labor

For the chapter on labor, I address several dimensions regarding Rodriguez's views on labor and the delegation of tasks on a film. Rodriguez's revival of the "cameraman" system of production, which Janet Staiger notes prevailed from cinema's beginnings until 1907, seems an essential part of his artistic persona. In this system, one individual usually conceived and executed almost all of the production tasks. Rodriguez often comments on these various tasks (writing, composing, editing, shooting, production design, etc.) in his interviews.

El Mariachi can be viewed as Rodriguez's attempt to bring the DIY ("do it yourself") movement of music recording and "zine" (self-published, small-circulation periodicals usually printed through a photocopier) production to the exclusive art of film. Although ostensibly a book about *The Simpsons*, Chris Turner's *Planet Simpson: How a Cartoon Masterpiece Defined a Generation* captures the zeitgeist of the early 1990s, including a chapter on the DIY

movement. This emphasis on DIY can be seen in the numerous references to creativity in his interviews. Other topics addressed in this chapter include Rodriguez's troubling statements and actions toward labor groups, the ways in which this director so often perceived as an individualist actually does collaborate, and where Rodriguez fits within the entirety of film history as it regards the tasks he typically performs on his films.

Economic

Since the direction of this study is on Rodriguez's shifting persona as a filmmaker "independent" from Hollywood, this chapter may be the most critical, as readers can trace the changes in American independent cinema—its increased commercialization—through the career of Rodriguez. John Pierson offers one of the more notable histories of American independent cinema, focusing on the 1984-1994 period. It includes a history of Miramax and Rodriguez's contract with them, but more significantly, Pierson details the exploitation of budget figures that occurred, especially in the wake of *El Mariachi*. Yet the work is more of an insider, documentary account of the movement from someone who helped shape the history he is writing than a comprehensive account of indie filmmaking in this period. More focused histories on the history of Miramax, such as Peter Biskind's *Down and Dirty Pictures* and Alisa Perren's *Indie, Inc.*, have been more helpful, not only because they discuss Rodriguez to a greater extent, but they help place him within the context of the 1990s American independent scene. *Indie, Inc.* contains a lengthy treatment of the history of Dimension Films, as well as Rodriguez's status as a "cinema of cool" auteur. But what these histories of independent filmmaking and Miramax fail to address adequately are the modes of production. Alison Macor places Rodriguez within a tradition of indie filmmaking in Austin, comparing his work to that of fellow Texan filmmakers Eagle Pennell, Tobe Hooper, Tim McCanlies, Mike Judge, and Richard Linklater. She includes two

chapters specifically to the production of *El Mariachi* and *Spy Kids*. Rodriguez's private studio, Troublemaker, also acts as an alternative industrial model.

Rodriguez's place within the microbudget revolution should not be ignored, as successful films (and, ultimately, franchises) like *Clerks*, *The Blair Witch Project*, and *Paranormal Activity* may have not have found a home within the marketplace if not for the example of *El Mariachi*'s exploitation of its budget. One of the key themes in Rodriguez's interviews, if not the central theme, is his pride in cutting costs while still making big, special-effects-laden, action fare. He still boasts of making genre films much cheaper (usually in \$40 million range) than they are made in Hollywood.

Technologies

Certainly the seminal texts on film technology that relate to Rodriguez's impact have been consulted. Influenced by George Lucas, Rodriguez was instrumental in Hollywood's conversion to digital filmmaking. Some of the books that address the ontological differences between digital and film include Lee Manovich's *The Language of New Media*. In it, he introduces the concept that shooting in digital moves filmmaking into a subcategory of painting and is not indexical. As its title suggests, Holly Willis's *New Digital Cinema: Reinventing the Movie Image* also addresses the ways in which the transition to digital represents a paradigm shift that may be incontrovertible. From the other perspective, John Belton views this upheaval differently in "Digital Cinema: A False Revolution."

Rodriguez established Troublemaker Digital and has worked as the visual effects supervisor on almost all of his films from *Spy Kids* on, a position he enjoys, as evident in the DVD supplemental materials. He has also been candid about his thoughts on special effects, as evident in his interviews with special effects trade journals, such as *Cinefex*.

Rodriguez has also been instrumental in the resurgence of 3-D in contemporary cinemas. Lenny Lipton's *Foundations of the Stereoscopic Cinema* remains the best guide on the technical specifics of stereoscopy, but its technical jargon, mathematical formulae, diagrams, and scientific rationale for how stereoscopy works will be of little use for this project, particularly since Lipton is not concerned with what I am concerned with, namely the history and theory behind stereoscopic cinema. Histories of 3-D are only now really being written, but Rodriguez's place in its resurgence has largely been ignored. Ray Zone arguably established himself as the premier historian of stereoscopy, with his volume on pre-1952 stereoscopy and its sequel, *3-D Revolution: The History of Modern Stereoscopic Cinema* that covers the history from *Bwana Devil* (1952) on. To his credit, Zone includes a brief chapter on *Spy Kids 3-D* and *The Adventures of Sharkboy and Lavagirl*, but he sees them as the dying breaths of the old anaglyphic (red/blue) 3-D system (despite both being shot digitally). Some of the scholarship that explores 3-D from a more theoretical standpoint include *Exploring 3D: The New Grammar of Stereoscopic Filmmaking* by Adrian Pennington and Carolyn Giardina. Not as comprehensive as Zone's work, Pennington and Giardina never mention Rodriguez. Still, they do provide another view on the place of 3-D in contemporary cinema. Some of the early 3-D theory, such as that found in Rudolf Arnheim's *Film as Art*, is particularly helpful. Arnheim lumped stereoscopy along with color, widescreen, and sound as technological advancements that would hinder film and make it no longer a distinctive art form, a contrast to Rodriguez's desire to involve more of the senses and return to "cinema as spectacle."²⁶

²⁶For more on the notion of spectacle and the "cinema of attraction," see Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attraction: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde," *Wide Angle* 8 (Fall 1986): 1-14.

Works that look at other innovative technological “dimensions” (such as smelling technologies, Sensesurround, etc.) are even less abundant, but Rodriguez’s desire to enhance the theatrical experience (from 3-D to Aromascope) places him in the tradition of early cinema’s emphasis on spectacle. Although *Spy Kids: All in the Time in the World in 4D* was a failure with both critics and audiences, Rodriguez’s decision to bring back the theatrical smelling experience also fits in with his disposition as a technological innovator. Roger Ebert’s blog at the release of the fourth *Spy Kids* film captures some of the history of smelling technologies in cinema, a technology *not* anticipated by Arnheim. Other technological issues covered in Chapter 5 include Rodriguez’s technophilia and his use of the digital backlot.

A Note on Primary Sources and the Previous Scholarship on Rodriguez

For this project, several primary sources were consulted. These include Rodriguez’s interviews, many of which are collected in my *Robert Rodriguez: Interviews*. Still, because of space, budgetary constraints, inability to contact the author/publisher, etc., I could not include every notable Rodriguez interview, so several others supplemented my research. Rodriguez has always been forthright in his interviews, as he frequently addresses the four broad concerns outlined above. Rodriguez’s *Rebel Without a Crew*, still a bestseller almost twenty years later among young filmmakers, is analyzed due to its impact on the indie film community. His production diary of *Roadracers* (published by Faber and Faber) is lesser known and long out of print, but it reveals Rodriguez’s disdain for working with a full film crew and a million dollar budget for the first time, and can be considered a sequel to *Rebel Without a Crew*.

For this study, I obviously consulted the previous scholarship devoted to Rodriguez, including Torres, Irwin, DeGenaro, Flanagan, and Benson-Alliott, among others. In addition, a handful of theses and dissertations have covered Rodriguez to some extent: Solorzano-

Thompson (2003), Wegner (2006), Raines (2009), Gronsky (2009), Galvan (2010), O'Brien (2011), and Fletcher-Resendiz (2011). Some are devoted entirely to Rodriguez (Fletcher-Resendiz, Galvan), Rodriguez and Tarantino (Rainey), or just the subject of a chapter (Gronsky, Solorzano-Thompson, Wegner, O'Brien). Just as with the aforementioned articles devoted to Rodriguez, none have taken a comprehensive overview of Rodriguez's oeuvre, looking for patterns, inconsistencies, etc. This work was sporadic until the latter stages of completing this dissertation, when three significant works on Rodriguez were released. Frederick Luis Aldama authored the first scholarly, in-depth study on Rodriguez, *The Cinema of Robert Rodriguez*. Within a few months, the film journal *Post Script* devoted a special issue to Rodriguez, comprised of eight essays (including my work on the resurgence of 3-D with *Spy Kids 3-D*) and an interview, while Aldama followed his early work with an anthology of eleven essays (with mine on *Machete*) on Rodriguez, entitled *Critical Approaches to the Films of Robert Rodriguez*. Yet the fact that scholarly attention to Rodriguez has grown exponentially during this time does not diminish the impact of this present study. Rather, it arguably points to the richness of Rodriguez's life and work. (Even before there were any academic books on Rodriguez, the visually striking nature of his work led to his films being featured on the covers of various academic books. See Appendix 1.) Even with these newer works, there are still numerous areas left unexplored, many of which I examine in the following chapters. Most of the above research has been focused on one of my components—Rodriguez's place as a Latino filmmaker—thus leaving several aspects less developed.

Methods

Regarding methods, this dissertation utilizes a few different tools. I am more interested in the mode of production and will avoid a close textual analysis of the films themselves. The most prominent type of analysis employed will be a discursive one, relying on various texts related to aesthetics, industrial determinants, and technological history, in addition to primary texts, such as Rodriguez's interviews, books, and DVD commentaries and features.

Although this dissertation examines a single filmmaker, it should be abundantly clear in this introduction that this author is fully aware of the criticisms against the auteur theory, particularly since the rise of poststructuralism and semiotics. This is not an "intervention" for the auteur theory, for its continued presence as one of the dominant means to discuss cinema, both popularly (audiences, film critics) and scholarly, suggests that it does not need rescuing. Attention instead focuses on the newer approaches to authorship that have expanded previous auteurist approaches that were, admittedly, substantially narrower in previous decades and susceptible to criticism.

There are few, if any, studies on the distribution of credits in Hollywood, so this is an area that requires more research. A quantitative analysis of feature film credits will be used to identify auteurs similar to Rodriguez, from classical to contemporary Hollywood and American independent contexts, as well as filmmakers from European, Asian, African, Australasian, and Latin American cinemas. Taking the distribution of credits at face value, few directors have been involved in practically all the key functions of pre-production, production, and post-production. This also ties into one of my key arguments—that I am examining authorship as a means of control more than looking for themes à la Sarris.

Significance of Study

This dissertation will use a multidimensional approach. Thus, this not only continues the trend discussed above, i.e., that authorship approaches transcend beyond the focus on themes, consistent style, etc., of the *Cahiers*-Sarris era, but also on a more basic level, integrate the current aims of film history and theory. It may also be the most expansive study yet of Rodriguez's work, incorporating several approaches. This author realizes that a dissertation could be written from a single chapter (e.g., Rodriguez as technological innovator) or even a chapter subsection (Rodriguez and 3-D). This is not a "kitchen-sink" approach, but rather one that shows how the interplay between Rodriguez and his perception of himself as a maverick is subverted as he moves increasingly away from the original mythic hero he created himself to be, the filmmaker who "sold his body to science" to make his first feature. New contributions to the field include one of the more expansive, non-textually-based, studies of a filmmaker. On a more specific level, my analysis of the distribution of credits and how it correlates to perceived authorship has not previously been done.

Surveying the auteurist landscape as it existed in the early 1990s, Corrigan stated, "Although auteurism today has effectively vacated the agency of a metaphysics of expressive causality and textual authority, the shell of auteurism—which remains in the form of a material publicity—opens a space for the dramatization refusing its own expressive authority, for a dramatization of subjectivity as, in fact, a material intersubjectivity responsive to the action of self-interpretation and self-critique."²⁷ To put it less perplexing terms, authorship has moved out of the romantic, textual-based approaches in the *Cahiers du cinema*-Andrew Sarris era of the 1950s and 1960s, through the auter-structuralism of Peter Wollen, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, Alan

²⁷Corrigan, 118.

Lovell, and Jim Kitses, who brought more rigorous theoretical approaches to autism in the late 1960s and 1970s,²⁸ to the commercial exploitation of the auteur by studios. This was evident in the directors championed by studios in the New Hollywood era, which began around the time of *Bonnie and Clyde*'s release in 1967. The era was said to have ended with the box office and critical disasters of *Heaven's Gate* and Coppola's *One from the Heart* (1982), victims of Hollywood's fascination with blockbuster franchises and opening weekends, according to scholars such as Jon Lewis. But the continued exploitation of filmmakers in the 1980s, including Spielberg, Coppola, Scorsese, Lynch, and Carpenter, among others, proves that the studios still utilized the exploitation of the director to their advantage, even if directors sometimes had less control over their films than we like to imagine. I contend that Hollywood has not changed in this regard; the studios still market directors as auteurs when it is to their benefit. This can be done even subtly; for example, a trailer mentions "From the director of *Saw*, comes a new thriller...." in order that audiences will assume that since they liked *that* particular film, they will like *this one*. Thus, a cult of the film director still persists, even in an anonymous form, and this dissertation explores how Rodriguez's authorship is positioned both within media discourse and in his own self-promotion.

²⁸Marek Haltof, *Peter Weir: When Cultures Collide*, Twayne's Filmmaker Series (New York: Twayne, 1996), xii. Also worth noting is Steph Heath's comments on the subject, as he postulated that the author could no longer be the *source* of discourse, but rather a fiction fashioned as an *effect* of that discourse.

CHAPTER 2

SOCIAL CONTEXTS

Introduction

A fourth- or fifth-generation Mexican-American,¹ Rodriguez's mother grew up in El Paso while his father was raised up the Rio Grande Valley. Still, Rodriguez notes that his childhood was not immersed in Mexican culture. His family did not speak Spanish at home, partly because they feared he would later face discrimination. In an interview with *Hispanic* magazine, Rodriguez admitted his early ambivalence toward his culture: "I didn't really understand my Mexican heritage until I went to college because there's so much separatism there.... That's when it really hit me that there was a difference at all."² Rodriguez's ethnicity was simultaneously deemed a positive and a negative in his early career. Columbia had scored a tremendous success with *Boyz n the Hood* (1991), directed by John Singleton (who was only a few months older than Rodriguez), and were eager to sign another minority director. But Rodriguez's production diaries reveal the prejudice he initially faced after making *El Mariachi*, as he had to convince wary producers that he could indeed speak English, despite having directed a Spanish-language film.³

¹Fifth-generation, according to Carina Chocano, "King of Dreams," *Texas Monthly*, April 2014, 174. Other sources have reported him as a fourth-generation Tejano. To further complicate matters, Aldama labels him "a third-generation Latino" (*Cinema*, 23). These discrepancies are presumably due to whether one is focusing on the paternal or maternal side. According to Rodriguez's brother Marcel: "When Texas became Texas, we were already here" (*ibid.*).

²Rene Rodriguez, "Latinos Abound in *Spy Kids*," *Hispanic*, April 2001, 94.

³Robert Rodriguez, *Roadracers: The Making of a Degenerate Hot Rod Flick* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), 13, 15.

In her work on contemporary Latino cinematic masculinity Victoria Kearley describes Rodriguez as a filmmaker akin to Quentin Tarantino and other indie filmmakers interested in generic cinema by “creating narratives that pastiche those of his youth, while simultaneously ‘Hispanicizing’ them and creating a hybrid of Mexican and U.S. popular cultures.”⁴ Frederick Luis Aldama further identifies the following three characteristics as Rodriguez’s model of Latino filmmaking:

1. Choose to completely make natural the presence of a character’s Latino ethnicity—it simply *is* as it *is* for Anglo characters in most films.
2. Cast Latino actors in Latino roles—or any other role.
3. Choose to highlight Latino identity in ways that playfully foreground or overturn the stereotypes.⁵

This model aligns with Rodriguez’s view on why Hollywood is so slow to include more Latino characters: “It’s a very reactive business. This just shows that we not only need to pressure Hollywood to write more Latin characters, but we need more Latin filmmakers who can go in and make that argument and create in their own image so that it’s authentic, and yet universal.”⁶

In this chapter, I examine the social contexts of Rodriguez’s transformation from a microbudget filmmaker to a Latino media mogul in a span of twenty years. There are several such social contexts that I *could* explicate here: that he has lived almost his entire life within a 100-mile radius of Central Texas; that he himself was one of ten children, and that he is a divorced father of five; or, that he was raised in a middle-class family, but struggled financially in his early adult years until achieving upward mobility. Not to

⁴Victoria Kearley, “Cultural Crossover: American Independent Cinema and Hispanic Masculinities,” in *Directory of World Cinema: American Independent 2*, edited by John Berra (Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2013), 38.

⁵Frederick Luis Aldama, *The Cinema of Robert Rodriguez* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014), 22.

⁶*Ibid.*, 141.

mention his Roman Catholic religious background, his heterosexual orientation, or having grown up in the 1970s and 1980s. But this chapter focuses primarily on the sociological context of being a latter-generation Tejano and how that has affected his career. From his place within the tradition of Latin American cinema and the Chicano cinema movement to the promotion and distribution of his films, I explore how these various social contexts have shaped his career, as well his transition from *el mariachi* to *el rey*.

A note on terms: although Rodriguez usually calls himself and his characters “Latin,” I primarily use the designation “Latino” throughout this chapter, rather than “Hispanic” (a problematic term because its current ubiquity is due to its inclusion for the first time on the 1970 U.S. census, not to mention its transatlantic link to Spain, thus ignoring Lusophone Brazil), the nationally specific “Mexican-American,” or the similarly narrow and politically-charged “Chicano.” I will also generally avoid such designations as Latina/o or Latino@ for the sake of simplicity.

Rodriguez’s Films—First Cinema? Second Cinema? Third Cinema?:

Guerilla Filmmaking in Latin American Theory and Praxis

Before delving into the specifics regarding Rodriguez’s Latino identity in his work, it may be helpful to situate his work with New Latin American Cinema, as well as the Chicano film movement. The major Latin American filmmaker-theorists can shed light on Rodriguez’s work. Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino suggested the possibility of a “third cinema” in their 1969 essay “Towards a Third Cinema,” declaring the “first cinema” as Hollywood and the “second cinema” as auteur-oriented, typically

European cinema. The first seeks solely to entertain, while the latter too often indulges in its own individual artistic creation. Their proposed Third Cinema is a collaborative one, less concerned with the filmmaker's name above the title. Perhaps the most notable example of this in film history (besides Solanas and Getino's own Grupo Cine Liberación), is the Dziga-Vertov Group of Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin. In some ways, Rodriguez bridges all three categories. He certainly makes Hollywood-type films, with moderate-sized budgets aimed at mass entertainment. Yet, his collaborations with Quentin Tarantino, Frank Miller, or even his working relationship with ex-wife Elizabeth Avellan, arguably positions him as someone able to work within the Third Cinema, even if his films lack the political didacticism (with the possible exception of *Machete*) that Solanas and Getino propose. Brazilian filmmaker Glauber Rocha also proposed guerilla filmmaking as an "aesthetics of hunger." This guerilla filmmaking necessitates the ability to tackle several different tasks, which Rodriguez certainly embodies.

The New Latin America Cinema filmmakers had several aims. Film was not perceived as only a medium for entertainment. "Film not only entertains and informs, it also shapes taste, intelligent judgment, and states of consciousness," according to Gutierrez Alea. He added that film should "elevate the viewer's revolutionary consciousness." The New Latin American Cinema birthed several treatises, manifestos, and the like. For Solanas and Getino, documentaries are the foundation for revolutionary filmmaking, with their memorable *The Hour of the Furnaces* (1968) as a prime example. The film treats the limits of bourgeois nationalism, the impossibility of a democratic bourgeois revolution if it was not continued as a socialist revolution, and the Latin

American horizon of national struggle. The Brechtian film was so overtly political, that in exhibition the film was stopped at predetermined points for open dialogue, surely an excellent example of the Third Cinema's characteristic of film as praxis. (Although it remains difficult to determine how often this was actually practiced.)

New Latin Cinema practitioners had been influenced by Marxism like the Italian neorealist filmmakers who influenced them, but it was a different era than the postwar situation in Europe. The Italian filmmakers were reacting to a *temporary* state of affairs ushered in by war, not to the hundreds of years of poverty, colonization, and underdevelopment that Latin American filmmakers were responding to. Many Latin American countries (Brazil, Argentina, Chile) faced fascistic regimes at some point during this period, so the New Latin American Cinema filmmakers called for revolution. Third Cinema in particular is rooted in revolution, for it came about in the wake of the Vietnamese victory over the French, Algerian independence, and within its own context, the Cuban revolution. Solanas said, "The projector is a gun that can shoot 24 frames a second." (A sentiment that Gutierrez Alea humorously riffed: "I have always been worried about the widely held belief that cinema is a heavy-caliber ideological weapon, because I believe that film has very seldom surpassed the efficacy of a simple Molotov cocktail.") The Cuban film industry barely existed in the prerevolutionary days, when it was primarily a site for American and Mexican productions, particularly pornography. But ICIAC (or the Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industria Cinematográficos) was founded in the wake of the Revolution, when revolutionary films were needed for a revolutionary people. Thus, the New Latin American Cinema can be placed politically as further to the left of the other simultaneous global cinematic movements.

As mentioned above, the Third Cinema proposed by Solanas and Getino was obviously a reaction against the dominant Hollywood cinema, which has always been represented disproportionately in Latin American theatres. Third Cinema was a revolution aimed at Hollywood's hegemonic cinematic imperialism on the aesthetic front almost as much as colonization on the political front. This polemic all positioned New Latin American Cinema as something different not only to Hollywood, but the prevailing perception of the purpose of cinema throughout the world.

There are several other theorists and theories that should not be overlooked. With the Cinema Novo aesthetic in mind, Rocha wrote the brief treatise "An Esthetic of Hunger" in 1965. Writing to a country with vast economic disparity, Rocha emphasized the necessity of making the middle classes aware of the debilitating poverty of most Brazilians. "An idea in the head and a camera in the hand" was another famous saying attributed to Rocha.

On a related front, Cuban director Julio García Espinosa introduced the concept of an "imperfect cinema" in 1969, one not interested in quality, technique, or good taste, although its rationale for existence differs from the grindhouse cinema promoted by Rodriguez and other devotees. Imperfect cinema can also utilize any genre. One example of this may be the Argentine thriller *Tiempo de revancha* (Adolfo Aristarain, 1981), a film that speaks to the dictatorship in the country's Dirty War period. Imperfect cinema does not need film criticism either, because intermediaries are unnecessary.

The term "guerilla filmmaking" also came out of the New Latin American Cinema movement (not surprising considering its appellation). While the term has been coopted in the decades since its first appearance (even by Hollywood—see *Bowfinger*

[Frank Oz, 1999]), its original advocates considered it necessary for its practitioners to be knowledgeable in all *aspects of the filmmaking process*. While Rodriguez shares elements with several of these characteristics of New Latin American Cinema, it is perhaps this last aspect of guerrilla filmmaking where he continues the Latin American filmmaking tradition.

Rodriguez's Place in Chicano Film History

Even a brief recounting of the history of the Chicano film movement cannot be discussed without first situating it within the Chicano Civil Rights Movement as a whole. Chicano activism was at its peak in the 1960s, when Caesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers fought for changes among Latino agricultural laborers, student walkouts occurred in high schools, and the national organization of the Brown Berets paralleled the activist work of the Black Panthers. Chicanos protested the Vietnam War, in which a disproportionate amount of their people were coming home in body bags.

Hollywood had employed Latino stereotypes, characters, themes, and actors for decades before a movement of Chicano filmmakers finally got off the ground. The first wave of Chicano films consisted almost entirely of documentaries. These filmmakers were the first Mexican-American film theorists. Politically, they shared the aims of the Chicano Movement as a whole, and they were committed to a political cinema much like the New Latin American Cinema movement then flourishing. Many got their training through the New Communicators program in 1968 and at UCLA's Ethno-Communications Program in 1969-1973. (Note that these are the same years that a major wave of new African-American filmmakers, such as Charles Burnett and Julie Dash,

were also at UCLA.) It was indeed a movement, with many of the filmmakers working together, mostly within the southern California context. But they still had their sights on speaking to the entire Chicano community, holding the first Chicano Film Festival in San Antonio in 1975.

The most prominent of the early Chicano filmmakers was Luis Valdez, often labeled the father of modern Chicano film and theatre. A Chicano activist in the 1960s, his work has continuously been rooted in political concerns of particular significance to Latinos. His film *I Am Joaquín* (1969), based on “Corky” Gonzales’s poem, a classic work of Chicano literature, has been identified as the first Chicano film. Valdez was well-versed in Aztec and Mayan culture, and in the film, as in much of his work, he stressed his indigenous over his European identity. As a result, one can see yet another connection between his work (and in much of the early Chicano cinema) and the New Latin American Cinema. The link becomes even more obvious as *I Am Joaquín* offers a historical lesson while also calling for revolutionary action.

Valdez’s *Zoot Suit* (1981), based on his play, was a watershed moment for Chicano cinema, launching a second wave of Chicano cinema, one that was more mainstream for decade declared the “decade of the Hispanic.” A combination of filmed play, Hollywood musical, historical film, and courtroom narrative, it was the first Chicano studio feature. Based on the Sleepy Lagoon murder trial and Zoot Suit Riots in 1943 Los Angeles, this Brechtian film deals with cultural identity, even as it reexamines a notorious instance of racism in our country’s history. Valdez’s crossover success with *La Bamba* (1987), another first for a Chicano director, prefigured those of filmmakers I will discuss below. Despite being a musical biopic of Ritchie Valens, the film was not without

subversive tendencies. Ritchie's brother, Bob, represents the revolutionary subject of cultural nationalism, while Ritchie is the typical, assimilated *agringado* ("like a gringo"). Thus the film focuses on Chicano cultural identity as an identity crisis.

Jesús Salvador Treviño serves an example of the radical nature of the early Chicano movement. Most significantly, he tried to align Chicano cinema with Latin American liberation theology, despite claiming to be an atheist in his autobiography. His *Raices de Sange* (1978) has a barrio aesthetic, and the barrio in the film is essential for the protagonist to reconnect with his working class roots. This film about Chicano unionism also analyzes immigration within the context of international revolution, promoting Pan-Latin Americanism in this struggle. The Tejano Treviño would not direct another feature after *Raices de Sange*, but he has established a successful career directing in television.

Yet the work of Chicana filmmakers should not be overlooked, as they both critiqued the work of the Chicano filmmakers and provided their own perspective as women. *Agueda Martinez* (1977) by Esperanza Vasquez was one such work. Sylvia Morales's *Chicana* (1979) was a feminist critique to the landmark *I Am Joaquín*. Lourdes Portillo, cofounder of Cine Acción in 1980, may be the most significant Chicana filmmaker. Her *Despues del Terremoto* (1979) was a short film that had conventions of the telenovela. The documentaries she made later (*Las Madres: The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo* [1986], *La Ofrenda: The Days of the Dead* [1989], and *El Diablo Nunca Duerme* [1994]) prove her development as a documentary filmmaker and as a source of Latina political resistance. Other notable Chicana filmmakers include Grace Castro Negrata,

Esther Renteria, Susan Racho, and Maria Muñoz. Unfortunately, these films made by Chicana filmmakers seem to have had no visible influence on Rodriguez's work.

Chicano film historians Charles Ramírez Berg and Chon Noriega see Chicano filmmaking as born out of the protests over demeaning stereotypes in the media. For instance, Noriega's *Shot in America* details the "Frito Bandito" (the animated character of Tex Avery's creation) controversy as leading to the launch of Latino media watchdog organizations, which further led to a greater Chicano presence on TV. This was particularly the case in the gains Chicano filmmakers made in public television. For instance, Treviño's *Yo Soy Chicano* (1972) was produced for public television station KCET in Los Angeles.

Moving past what we consider the first wave of Chicano filmmaking, there are certainly filmmakers that carry on the legacy of the early Chicano filmmakers. The first example that comes to mind is Gregory Nava, whose breakout film, *El Norte* (1982), was an epic melodrama about a Guatemalan brother and sister trying to navigate their way from their country to the U.S. via Mexico. The film has several stylistic flourishes, notably in its color palette, which grows more monochromatic as they enter Mexico and then the U.S., highlighting their eventual disillusionment. They also try to understand the differences in Mexican, Chicano, and (their own) Mayan cultures. Yet the film seems to suggest that all immigrants can succeed in the U.S. economic system as long as they do not fear deportation.

Nava's epic *My Family* (1995) was described as a Mexican-American *Godfather* by some critics when initially released, but this is no crime film. Rather, it is a multi-generational saga that touches on many of the key points relevant to twentieth-century

Chicano history. He even made a crossover music biopic, *Selena* (1997), similar to Valdez's *La Bamba*, which also deals with contemporary concerns for Chicanos. It is an overlooked film by Chicano film scholars in my opinion, even though (because?) it addresses Tejano identity issues in the 1990s. His only films that have not had as their focus Latino or Mexican characters or concerns are *A Time of Destiny* (1988) and *Why Do Fools Fall in Love* (1998). Even his most recent film, *Bordertown* (2006), has as its subject the Juarez murders of women working in the *maquiladoras*.

Cheech Marin will always be remembered for his work in the “Cheech and Chong” films, but his *Born in East L.A.* (1987), which he directed, wrote, and starred in, proved that a film could be commercially successful (I certainly remember how popular this film was among my classmates) *and* politically aware. A response to anti-Latino measures in the 1980s, especially the Simpson-Rodino Immigration Reform Act and the English-Only Initiative, *Born in East L.A.* involves a third-generation Mexican-American mistakenly deported to Mexico. On the surface it may seem like only a silly comedy that revels in numerous Chicano stereotypes as it walks the tightrope between realism and parody, but the film had to have been a source of pride to those Chicanos who had toiled so long in films that lacked an audience. For Marin, “I’ve always said that my method is to slip the message into your coffee. You don’t taste it, it goes down smooth, but later you feel the effect.”⁷ Attesting to its favor among the Latin American filmmaking and critical community, *Born in East L.A.* won three awards at the Havana Film Festival (including both the Best Screenplay and the Glauber Rocha Award for Marin), surprising

⁷Dennis West and Gary Crowds, “Cheech Cleans Up His Act,” *Cineaste* 16:3 (1988), 37.

considering that the festival largely ignores U.S. Latino cinema.⁸ Marin has received numerous ALMA Awards, including their career achievement award in 2012.

Another actor who only directed one film, but a notable one at that, is Edward James Olmos. Perhaps the face of Chicanos in the 1980s through his roles in *Miami Vice* (NBC, 1984-1989) and *Stand and Deliver* (1988), his crime drama, *American Me* (1992), was at that time the most expensive film ever directed by a Chicano, costing \$20 million, but indicative of the new faith Hollywood had in films reaching the large and ever-flourishing Latino market.

But the most successful Latino filmmaker, Rodriguez, and his work arguably established a third wave of Chicano filmmaking. He was born in 1968, two decades after Valdez, Treviño, Nava, Marin, and Olmos, all of whom had grown up during the Chicano movement. The radical 1960s were a different political landscape for Latinos than for Rodriguez coming of age in the 1980s. In an interview with Ramírez Berg, Rodriguez displays a general disdain for this earlier generation of Chicano filmmaking forefathers. When he first got to Los Angeles, he remembers meeting “the old-guard Chicano filmmakers” who he describes as “abrasive, sly, and sleazy-feeling in a way.”⁹ Rodriguez even admits to being little interested in Nava’s (arguably his main rival in terms of Chicano filmmakers) work, saying he had never seen *My Family*, although he did enjoy *El Norte* when he was forced to watch it in high school. Considering the types of films he enjoyed as child (action, science-fiction, horror), it should not surprise anyone that

⁸For more on *Born in East L.A.*, see Chon A. Noriega, “‘Waas Sappening?’: Narrative Structure and Iconography in *Born in East L.A.*,” *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture* 14 (1995), 107-128.

⁹Charles Ramírez Berg, *Latino Images in Film: Stereotypes, Subversion, and Resistance* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 256.

Rodriguez was too young and not the appropriate audience for the early Chicano films. Perhaps with age Rodriguez has reached a greater appreciation for his Chicano forebears; despite not being a grindhouse film typical of the network, *Zoot Suit* and *La Bamba* have aired numerous times on El Rey, with promos proclaiming Valdez the “Godfather of the Chicano Film Movement.” As an even greater tribute, Valdez was only the fifth subject selected for Rodriguez’s *The Director’s Chair* (2014-) series on the network, following bigger names such as John Carpenter, Guillermo del Toro, Quentin Tarantino, and Francis Ford Coppola. Not bad considering Valdez has only directed two features.

Still, I argue that Rodriguez has more in common with the Chicano filmmaking tradition than even he has as yet realized. From *El Mariachi* to his largest-budgeted films, Rodriguez has always prided himself on making films for a fraction of what they would cost using the typical Hollywood division of labor. He credits this drive to his “Latin nature,” but Chicano theorists would identify this sensibility as *rasquachismo*, a focus on resourcefulness and an underdog perspective. (I will address this more below.) This underdog perspective also shows up in Rodriguez’s interviews where he has often referred to himself as a “rebel,” the guy working outside of Hollywood’s confines and constraints.

Rodriguez’s Latino identity is evident to some extent in arguably all of his films, even if he has no desire to make films for people to “appreciate” or to hit people over the head with his Latino identity. One way he does this is through his casting of notable Latino/a, Latin American, and Spanish actors. Films like *Machete* address several political issues of concern for Latino audiences, especially immigration. Even though the similarities between someone like Rodriguez and a Chicano filmmaking pioneer like

Valdez or Treviño may not be readily apparent, I consider it a subject at least worthy of further scrutiny, as we attempt to understand how Rodriguez's ethnic identity fits into his oeuvre and his persona as an indie filmmaker. One can even see his early drive to make films resulting from concern over both the lack of Latinos in the media, as well as false depictions: "Growing up Mexican American, the role models I had were Cheech & Chong. If I want to see myself depicted differently, I have to go out and make my own films, because nobody else really cares."¹⁰

Kyle David Wegener identifies Rodriguez as a "post-chicano" artist, his specialized term for artists who were born after 1960 and who came of age during the Reagan era. These artists are not only less likely to use the term "Chicano" when they self-identify, but also represent their Chicanoness "without any nostalgic allegiance to the past but with an understanding of the harsh realities of the present."¹¹ Rodriguez's Latino/Chicano/Tejano identity also is magnified when we examine the place of *rasquachismo* and *pochismo* in his work.

Chicano Aesthetic Sensibilities: *Rasquachismo* and *Pochismo*

Rodriguez's link with the *rasquachismo* movement has surprisingly merited little attention from Rodriguez scholars. Even though Rodriguez seems to largely separate

¹⁰Veronica Chambers, "Hyphenate Robert Rodriguez," *Premiere*, January 1993, 31. Of course, Rodriguez probably could not have foreseen that Cheech Marin would appear in at least seven of his films. For Tommy Chong, Rodriguez was wrong on both counts (Mexican, American), as Chong is a Canadian of Chinese/Scots-Irish descent, but one can understand the confusion.

¹¹Kyle David Wegner, "Children of Atzlan: Mexican American Popular Culture and the Post-Chicano Aesthetic" (PhD diss., State University of New York at Buffalo, 2006), 12. Christopher González coined the term "post-post-Latinidad" to describe Rodriguez's work. See his "Intertextploitation and Post-Post-Latinidad in *Planet Terror*," in *Critical Approaches to the Films of Robert Rodriguez*, edited by Frederick Luis Aldama (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015), 121-139.

himself from his Chicano cinema heritage, I maintain that *rasquachismo* provides a link from his views on labor and budgets to his Mexican-American identity. *Rasquache* is Spanish for “crummy” or “trashy,” of little value. But Tomás Ybarra-Fausto, the key articulator of *rasquachismo*, considers its positive characteristics: witty, irreverent, ironic, playful, and elemental. It is more attitude than taste. Ybarra-Fausto refers to it as a “private code,” and it is worth noting that Rodriguez never mentions the word *rasquachismo* in interviews, even as his filmmaking focused on parsimony, a perceived bad taste (his grindhouse aesthetic), and an underdog perspective squarely aligns with it as a sensibility. Although Rodriguez’s middle-class upbringing (his father a salesman, his mother a nurse) may preclude him from being associated with the movement, his frequent invocation to being one of ten children reinforces a shared sense of what it means to value thriftiness, where things are, in the words of Ybarra-Fausto, “held together with spit, grit, and *movidas*” (defined as the “coping strategies you can use to gain time, to make options, to retain hope”). Again, Ybarra-Fausto: “One is never *rasquache*, it is always someone else, someone of a lower status, who is judged to be outside the demarcators of approved taste and decorum.”¹²

In his article on *Nacho Libre* (2006), Ilan Stavans sees the Jared Hess film as the epitome of a *rasquache* aesthetic in contemporary cinema, mentioning in passing other films that “strive for a similar sensibility,” namely *Casa de Mi Padre* (Matt Piedmont, 2012) and *Machete*. While he considers them kitschy like *Nacho Libre*, they are not

¹²Tomás Ybarra-Fausto, “*Rasquachismo*: A Chicano Sensibility,” in *Pop Art and Venacular Cultures*, edited by Kobena Mercer (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 58.

considered as *rasquache*.¹³ Yet Stavans's definition of *rasquachismo*—"the quality of apparent bad taste in popular Mexican artifacts that are infused with subversive power"¹⁴—is one far removed from the conception of the term employed by Chicano scholars, as it is divorced from the socioeconomic context of Ybarra-Fausto's description of "a sensibility of the downtrodden [that] mirrored the social reality of the majority of Chicanos who were poor, disenfranchised, and mired in element daily struggles for survival."¹⁵

In another article, Stavans does comment on Rodriguez's connection to another popular term in *rasquachismo* theory, *lo cursi*, often translated as "tacky" or "kitch": "Rodriguez firmly makes *lo cursi* his realm. His movies are melodramatic to a fault. He isn't as much as master of *sensiblería* [sentimentality] (like Pedro Almodovar) as he is a slave to it: he presents Hispanic themes uncritically, afraid of taunting their limitations which is what an artist should do."¹⁶ Exploring the connections between *lo cursi* and Rodriguez's penchant for camp and the grindhouse aesthetic may be worth further investigation for Rodriguez scholars.

Pocho is a derogatory term for Mexican-Americans who have presumably tried to assimilate in American culture and lost their Mexican roots. As David Maciel notes, it was the most common term for Mexican-Americans from the 1940s through the 1960s (until *Chicano* became more popular). *Pocho* also connoted a class bias, as Mexican-

¹³Ilan Stavans, "Nacho Libre: Or the Inauthenticity of Rasquachismo [*sic*]," in *Latinos and Narrative Media: Participation and Portrayal*, edited by Frederick Luis Aldama (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 112.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 115.

¹⁵Ybarra-Fausto, 64.

¹⁶Ilan Stavans, "Tarantino & Rodriguez: A Paradigm," in *Critical Approaches to the Films of Robert Rodriguez*, edited by Frederick Luis Aldama (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015), 194.

Americans were considered to be from the lower classes, “since it was widely believed in Mexico that only the poor, the unskilled, and the illiterate emigrated to the United States.”¹⁷ Rodriguez has openly used the term *pochos* in more recent years. Indeed, scholars like Cruz Medina¹⁸ have documented how current Latino artists embraced their *pochos* identity. Similar to that double consciousness that W. E. B. DuBois wrote about in *Souls of Black Folk* (1903), it is usually expressed more negatively in Chicano culture as “*ni de aquí, ni de allá*” (“neither from here [U.S.], nor from there [Mexico]”).

Rodriguez’s Love Affair with Latin Music

Rodriguez further inserts Latino elements in his film with his fondness for Latin music, from making his first hero a mariachi to infusing almost all of his films with a Latin soundtrack. He has helped promote bands such as Los Lobos, Tito & Tarantula (actually playing with them when they toured Germany), Del Castillo, and his own band, Chingon.

The Mariachi Character

As described earlier, Rodriguez’s decision to make his first hero come from such a non-heroic background as being a mariachi illuminates his admiration for Latin music. It has been suggested that the humble mariachi provides one of the great recent heroes in cinema, a hero of mythic proportions. One commentator suggests that the crippling of the mariachi’s left hand alludes to the “crippling effect of the community’s indifference to

¹⁷David R. Maciel, “Pochos and Other Extremes in Mexican Cinema; or, El Cine Mexicano se va de Bracero, 1922-1963,” in *Chicanos and Film: Representation and Resistance*, edited by Chon A. Noriega (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 103.

¹⁸See Cruz Medina, *Reclaiming Poch@ Pop: Examining the Rhetoric of Cultural Deficiency*, Latino Popular Culture (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

the mariachi as a traditional Hispanic figure of folkloric wisdom.”¹⁹ To be sure, the mariachi achieves the status of an epic hero for Rodriguez, comparable to those of Spielberg and Lucas, as well as a source of pride in achieving a childhood dream: a movie with a Latin action hero. *El Mariachi*, *Desperado*, and *Once Upon a Time in Mexico* still remain the starting point for fans and critics alike to better know the cinematic art of Rodriguez. James Donahue has written that “The mariachi is now reconceived as a vehicle for significant character development, cultural critique, and possibly even reconfigurations for how America audiences understand Mexico.”²⁰ I would add that the films may have even altered the way white Americans even think of the mariachi; recall how mariachi bands were little more than a punchline in previous film and television depictions.

The Soundtracks and Latin Artists

Rodriguez’s role as a composer will be discussed in greater depth in Chapter 3, but worth noting here is his penchant for reviving traditional Mexican music, such as the mariachi melody “Malagueña Salerosa.” Heather Raines postulates, “By taking the melody of the ‘Malagueña Salerosa’ and expanding upon it, Rodriguez is indicating to this viewer that there are going to be aspects of traditional Mexican history present, but that this is a new and expanded story, not just a pedantic recreation of the myth of El Mariachi.”²¹ Even a closer listen to the music in several of Rodriguez’s films reveal an

¹⁹Mark Irwin, “Pulp & the Pulpit: The Films of Quentin Tarantino and Robert Rodriguez,” *Literature & Theology* 12 (March 1998), 77.

²⁰James J. Donahue, “The Development of Social Minds in the ‘Mexico Trilogy,’” in *Critical Approaches to the Films of Robert Rodriguez*, edited by Frederick Luis Aldama (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015), 188.

²¹Heather J. Raines, “Auteur Direction, Collaboration and Film Music: Re-imaginings in the Cinema of Rodriguez and Tarantino,” MA thesis, University of Ottawa, 2009, 83.

indebtedness to Latin American musical culture. Although mostly an original score, *Sin City* includes Mexican composer Silvestre Revueltas's "Sensemaya: Chant for the Killing of a Snake," written in 1938.²²

Tito Larriva, front man for Tito & Tarantula, was born in Juarez, Mexico and cameos in several of Rodriguez's films, besides his contributions to the soundtracks of *Desperado*, *From Dusk Till Dawn*, *From Dusk Till Dawn 3*, *Once Upon a Time in Mexico*, and *Machete*. His band again appears in the revived Titty Twister bar in *From Dusk Till Dawn: The Series*.

Rodriguez's Band, Chingon

Rodriguez's band, Chingon, has performed on the soundtracks for several Rodriguez films, including *Once Upon a Time in Mexico*, *Planet Terror*, and *Machete*. According to one slang dictionary, *chingon* refers to "an important person; a leader,"²³ but typically has a vulgar connotation and might better be translated as "badass" or "fucking great." ("CHINGON" is also printed in large letters on the back of Machete's armored car that he uses to cross the border in *Machete Kills*.) Their lone album to date was entitled *Mexican Spaghetti Western* (2004), a title that also could describe the "tortilla western" Mariachi trilogy.

²²Raines, 79. Rodriguez explains his music theory-laden technical reasons for this appropriation in John Allina, "Triplets in Sin," *Film Score Monthly*, Mar/Apr 2005, 17. Reprinted in Ingle, 120-121.

²³"Chingon," in *The Routledge Dictionary of Modern American Slang and Unconventional English*, edited by Tom Dalzell (New York: Routledge, 2009), 194.

The Promotion and Distribution of Rodriguez's Films to Latino Audiences

Besides the ways in which *rasquachismo*, *pochismo*, and Latin music function in the discourse over Rodriguez, the ways in which his films are promoted and distributed further solidify Rodriguez's social context as a Latino filmmaker. As the title of his meticulous study *The Promotion and Distribution of U.S. Latino Films* suggests, Henry Puente considers how U.S. Latino films have been marketed and distributed within Latino communities. Of the 69 U.S. Latino films examined that were released between 1981 (*Zoot Suit*) to 2010 (*Machete*), six are Rodriguez's: *Desperado*, *Spy Kids*, *Spy Kids 2*, *Spy Kids 3-D*, *Once Upon a Time in Mexico*, and *Machete*. Similar to other Latino-oriented films, *Desperado* used a multi-pronged approach to reaching Latino markets, including a Spanish-language advertising campaign, the circulation of Spanish-subtitled prints, and the promotion of its soundtrack on Spanish-language radio. These approaches helped the film gain awareness as it became the first Latino film to receive a saturation release of over two thousand screens.²⁴ But Puente also notes the film may have suffered from Sony's marketing campaign that heavily stressed *El Mariachi*; potential moviegoers may have feared the sequel was also in Spanish at a time when interest in foreign films was at a historically low level.²⁵

Spy Kids relied on a vast array of promotional tie-ins, to the tune of creating awareness for what would become the first Latino blockbuster franchise. Television spots aired on Telemundo and Univision, and according to Elizabeth Avellan, "They made sure that when they promoted it on the Latino channels that they did promote the film as a

²⁴Henry Puente, *The Promotion and Distribution of U.S. Latino Films* (New York: Peter Lang, 2011), 82-83, 88.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 90.

movie with a lot of Latino characters. It was a family film about Carmen Cortez and the Cortez family.”²⁶ Although no intermittent Latino film had equaled *Desperado*’s opening on over two thousand screens, *Spy Kids* would overwhelmingly surpass that barrier, opening on over *three* thousand screens. Specific trailers for the Latino market focused on Banderas, Marin, and Alexa Vega.²⁷ *Spy Kids 2* also opened the New York Latino Film Festival.²⁸ Although Dimension marketed the films as primarily family-friendly rather than as Latino films, they invited representatives from Latino newspapers and Spanish television shows to press junkets, incorporated a Spanish-language advertising campaign for *Spy Kids 2*, and shipped Spanish-language dubbed or subtitled prints for all three films.²⁹ In return, Latinos disproportionately supported the film (19% of moviegoers for first *Spy Kids* when Latinos represented 12% of population).³⁰ Sony marketed and distributed *Once Upon a Time in Mexico* in a similar fashion, with less positive results. Twentieth-Century Fox did not do the same with *Machete*, however, since *Once Upon a Time in Mexico* was one of the last films to be released simultaneously in Spanish-language prints.³¹

With a gross of \$54 million, *La Bamba* (1987) held the record for the highest-grossing Latino film until the first three *Spy Kids* films all shattered it (\$112/85/111 million, respectively). In fact, even *Once Upon a Time in Mexico* slightly surpassed *La Bamba* by a million dollars (although somewhat of a pyrrhic victory when adjusting for

²⁶Ibid., 136-137.

²⁷Ibid., 137.

²⁸Ibid., 142.

²⁹Ibid., 153-164.

³⁰Ibid., 159.

³¹Ibid., 197.

inflation). These films are still the highest-grossing Latino-oriented films, securing Rodriguez's reputation as the first Latino filmmaker with several box-office successes, despite retaining Latino-oriented characters and themes. Until his recent flops (discussed in Chapter 4), box office returns for his films have almost always exceeded production plus marketing costs, which has been difficult for most U.S. Latino films since 1980.

Programming the El Rey Network

While the origins and structure of the El Rey Network will be treated in greater detail in Chapter 4, here I will discuss the network's programming, particularly as it relates to the concerns of this chapter. As to its name, many in the media cited the hero's name in *Planet Terror* (actually El Wray) as a source of inspiration. Rodriguez has also been asked if it was a reference to how he saw himself, but he replied: "I'm more like the court jester...the troublemaker, the hooligan."³² Rather, he claims that the name came from the omnipresence of "El Rey" products in Mexico that stimulated his choice: "What's cool about it, is you've seen it so much that when you see the El Rey network, people go, 'I've heard of that.' It's like it's always been there, but it's only now raising its head. Almost like the culture itself."³³ Still, this is not how viewers may understand it, as Carina Chocano reflects: "Despite his protestations, Rodriguez himself is seen by a lot of people as, well, El Rey. Not in the sense of a despot or tyrant but in the sense of a benign overlord ruling a make-believe space in which he can extend the creativity and imagination of his childhood in perpetuity."³⁴

³²Chocano, 172.

³³Ibid., 104.

³⁴Ibid., 174.

The syndicated programming the first year included *Starsky and Hutch* (1975-1979), *The X-Files* (1993-2002), *Dark Angel* (2000-2002), *Texas Justice* (2001-2005, an arbitration-based reality court show filmed in Houston), and *Core Culture* (1999-2004, an X-games show), leaving only *Dark Angel*, with its lead Jessica Alba, with any apparent Latino/a connection. For a network promoting itself as geared towards Latinos, looking for the particularly “Latino” qualities in reruns of *Starsky & Hutch* and *The X-Files* may be a fool’s errand. (Airing *Miami Vice* in the second year made more sense for the network’s identity.) Still, the network was constantly promoted in the media as an English-language network for Latinos. Even before the network launched, several promos were featured through El Rey’s Facebook page, such as the “Blowtorch” promo that begins with the words, “The Network for people who won’t check a box,” a statement that could be interpreted in a variety of ways, but one that alludes to the decennial census controversies over how best to count Latinos. El Rey’s original programming emphasized Latinidad to a much greater extent, from *Matador* (2014) and *From Dusk Till Dawn* (2014-), to wrestling program *Lucha Underground* (2014-) and reality show *The Cutting Crew* (2015).

As Chocano puts it, “El Rey occupies the section of the Venn diagram where Latinos, non-Latinos, and people who like vampire shows and flamboyant sports intersect—the world of Robert Rodriguez. It’s a sensibility manifested as a network, a televised compendium of popular taste. Arguably the first Hispanic-skewed network to not strictly target Hispanics, it doesn’t so much fill a niche as explode one.”³⁵ Perhaps it does not “strictly” target Latinos, but the network—even from its name—still has young

³⁵Ibid., 102

English-language Latinos as its primary target audience. Despite the promotion as the English-language network for a predominantly Latino audience, the network even briefly tried airing Spanish-language films, in a series called “Practice Your Spanish With...” beginning with *Blade Runner* (1982).

In his seminal study of television, Raymond Williams defined televisual “flow” as how networks hold their audience from program to program.³⁶ Space does not permit an extended guide to a sample week’s worth of programming here, but as I watched from August 19-25, 2014, the only discernible Latino-targeted advertisements were for Televisa Publishing, Univision Mobil, and two spots for 5-Hour Energy, one featuring professional baseball player Carlos Beltran and another with Mexican soccer player Oribe Peralta. In terms of programming, only a Liga MX (Mexican Primera Division) soccer game (Club Tijuana vs. Pumas de la UNAM), which aired Sunday, August 24, 12-2 pm CT, with English-language commentary, stood out. More than half of the advertisements were internal, promoting El Rey’s programming as well as its brand. In later months, a National Hispanic Heritage Month (September 15-October 15) promo aired over a dozen times daily, which highlighted several people of Latino descent associated with the network, closing with Rodriguez as “Founder.” But this campaign became less notable when a Black History month promo also aired (although less often) in February 2015, as well as a “Kung Fu Lady Marathon” in honor of International Women’s Day on March 8, 2015.

³⁶See Raymond Williams, *Television*, Routledge Classics (London: Routledge, 2003).

Rodriguez has thus demanded to have some say in how Latinos are depicted in media and how Latinos are able to have that outlet for their own media creations. Despite the network's goal in targeting English-speaking Latinos, it is debatable how much of the network's programming actually caters to this market. Regularly watching the network leaves a stronger impression that Rodriguez, as programmer-in-chief, is much more concerned with airing the kinds of material that his own idiosyncratic taste is geared towards: "We're very much about curated content, movie fans, explaining why things are there, and picking things that audiences don't usually know about to turn them on to something that we're genuinely fans of."³⁷ Such examples of curated content included a "Kaiju Christmas Marathon" as well as the frequent airings in January and February 2015 of Italian genre films, specifically spaghetti westerns and *gialli*.

Rodriguez's ownership of the network is hard to miss, as rarely a commercial break goes by without an appearance. One minute-long promo certainly connects Rodriguez's self-aggrandizement of his beginnings to his new network:

Hello, I'm Robert Rodriguez. I started my film career about twenty years ago, with a movie called *El Mariachi* that I financed by selling my body to science. I had a quest for diversity in filmmaking and in media. I have now founded the El Rey television network, which is going to be exciting, visceral, addictive entertainment, but with an eye towards keeping that diversity, having the face of the network more resemble the face of the country. This is the people's network. I want ya'll to join me, and ride with El Rey.

Notice that the promo does not specifically mention Latinos, resorting instead to a general commitment to diversity. "Director Robert Rodriguez," "\$7,000 Budget" and

³⁷Christina Radish, "Robert Rodriguez Talks *Matador*, His Belief in Passion Projects, Looking Forward to Season 2, and More," *Collider*, Sep 2, 2014. <http://collider.com/robert-rodriguez-matador-interview/>. Retrieved Feb 9, 2015.

“Winner Sundance Audience Award” flash on the screen when he mentions *El Mariachi*. The logos, as well as clips, from *Desperado*, *From Dusk Till Dawn*, *Sin City*, *Planet Terror*, and *Machete* (his children’s films are noticeably absent) also appear on screen. The sound has a raw, amateurish quality to it, recalling the sound of Rodriguez’s first “Ten-Minute Film School.”

The promo concludes with Rodriguez mentioning it as “the people’s network.” Although not yet implemented, the network plans to soon launch the People’s Network Initiative, which will directly solicit material from viewers. Fans already have been recruited to produce promo spots for the network. Rodriguez also intends to recruit writers and directors from the fan feedback loop to expand the network’s original programming, which will ideally lead to greater diversity: “Filmmakers need to get training somewhere. That’s the only way we’re going to get the diversity in programming that (the industry) needs. We’re going to have to go outside Hollywood to find those new voices.”³⁸

Conclusion

Because this study is more concerned with such matters as control, economics, auteur persona, technologies, labor, and branding, I eschewed the type of textual analysis so often a part of filmmaker studies. Although Rodriguez has not received as much credit as a Mexican-American cinematic artist as Luis Valdez and Gregory Nava have (at least

³⁸Littleton, Cynthia. “Robert Rodriguez’s El Rey Network Builds Heat with Young Latinos.” *Daily Variety*. March 12, 2015.
<http://variety.com/2015/tv/news/robert-rodriguezs-el-rey-network-builds-heat-with-young-latinos-1201450851/>

in the earlier scholarship on Chicano cinema), his ethnic identity remains one of the most critical keys to his significance as a major American director.

The purpose of this chapter has not been to offer some sort of litmus test as to how Latino/Mexican-American/Tejano Robert Rodriguez and his films actually are. Rather, I have attempted to illustrate the significance of Latino elements, from the social contexts he arose out of as a filmmaker to the promotion and distribution of his films, even if some Latino/a media scholars have received him with a marked ambivalence. Numerous studies have concluded that the representation of African-Americans on film and television is proportional to their actual population, while the representation of Latinos in popular media is disproportionately low. I think Rodriguez, as much as almost any other Latino filmmaker, has worked to redress this imbalance. As Gonzalez puts it, “Rodriguez presents viewers with the possibility of transferring a similar empathetic response for real people—people they know little to nothing about—to real human beings who otherwise might only register as statistics on a CNN ticker at the bottom of their television set.”³⁹

After the early successes of *El Mariachi* and *Desperado*, Rodriguez was already proclaimed as the most powerful Hispanic in Hollywood by the major magazine *Hispanic*, beating out both Edward James Olmos and Banderas.⁴⁰ Despite not having a major box office hit in almost ten years, Rodriguez recently made *The Hollywood Reporter*’s list of the “Top 25 Latinos in Entertainment” (at #5), presumably due to El Rey rather than the underwhelming *Machete Kills* and *Sin City: A Dame to Kill For*.⁴¹ He

³⁹Gonzalez, “Intertextploitation,” 138.

⁴⁰Alex Avila, “25 Most Powerful Hispanics in Hollywood,” *Hispanic*, Apr 1996, 20.

⁴¹Rebecca Sun, et al., “Top 25 Latinos in Entertainment,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, Oct 17, 2014, 108-112.

has appeared on lists of the most powerful Latinos for twenty years, and this author expects to see his name continue to appear on such lists for decades to come.

The two major awards for Latinos in the film and television industry, the ALMAs and the Imagen Awards, are emblematic of the mixed reception Rodriguez typically receives from Latino media. He has received only one ALMA Award to date (Best Director for *Spy Kids*), with his only Imagen Award for *Spy Kids 2*. Yet while these two award bodies have been reluctant to embrace his films, they have recognized him for his career achievement. ALMA bestowed upon Rodriguez one its highest honors in 2013, the Anthony Quinn Award for Achievement in Motion Pictures. Imagen awarded him with the Norman Lear Writer's Award in 2003.

With the release of films like *Machete* and its sequel, not to mention the launch of *El Rey*, Rodriguez has emphasized his Latino identity as much at this stage in his career than he ever has, even if his underlying philosophy has never changed, as revealed in a recent interview with Aldama:

The key: if someone is trying to make a film and they're Latin, make it mainstream and accessible so it's not pigeonholed as Latin....[My films] are Latin films, and they're not. You have to be very clever about it. Latins don't want to feel like they have to go off to a corner and watch their own movie in their own cinema. It has to be more subversive than that. You have to be very clever about it. Latin audiences want to feel like they're part of the whole world culture. That's what I mean by making sure it is mainstream and accessible.⁴²

This desire for mainstream accessibility remained a growing concern for this filmmaker in his transformation from microbudget filmmaker to a Latino media mogul.

⁴²Aldama, *Cinema*, 141.

CHAPTER 3

LABOR

Introduction

This chapter will examine a host of issues related to the function of labor in Rodriguez's oeuvre. But we must first examine the various roles Rodriguez typically performs while making his films, what he calls his "mariachi" style of guerilla filmmaking, his one-man band approach that he has maintained for over twenty years. It is this aspect that is the strongest aesthetic argument for his significance as a major contemporary filmmaker, or as Frederick Luis Aldama proposes, "That is, with Rodriguez we have an auteur in the sense of a creative mind who has a *total vision* and *total control* of the making of the whole *with a specific audience in mind*—an audience that seeks above all else to be entertained."¹ I contend that while Rodriguez's decision to tackle so many roles in his films may be an aesthetic one—albeit motivated by economics—it cannot help but shape his troubling views on labor. Besides looking at the division of labor in his work, collaboration, his role in an International Association of Technical Stage Employees (IATSE) strike, and his opinions toward unions will also be scrutinized.

¹Frederick Luis Aldama, *The Cinema of Robert Rodriguez* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014), 6. Emphasis in original.

Rodriguez, Jack-of-All-Trades: An Examination of the Division of Labor

Since I am working with an auteurist framework that emphasizes control (the circumstances of production) over themes and style, it seems appropriate to begin this chapter on Rodriguez and labor by examining each of his roles in the filmmaking process. From his films as a student to his most recent, Rodriguez has not abandoned his “jack-of-all-trades” approach to guerilla filmmaking. Even while his budgets have ballooned from \$7,000 to \$65 million, Rodriguez still usually has a hand in most aspects of the filmmaking process. But this is not to say that does not share duties at times (even co-directing) or even direct someone else’s script. (His collaborative process will be discussed later in this chapter.) As the chart on the next page demonstrates, Rodriguez has chosen to take on several of the core tasks of filmmaking: directing, writing, producing, shooting, and editing, as well as some of the (relatively) smaller tasks, such as composing, production design, sound, and visual effects. In his review of *Spy Kids*, Kenneth Turan stated, “While the possessory credit has lately been the subject of understandable debate, there’s little doubt that this is a case where the ‘a film by’ line would have some meaning.”²

²Qtd. in Leila Cobo, “I’m Able to Write the Score as I’m Shooting the Script,” *Billboard*, Aug 2, 2003, 70. Reprinted in Zachary Ingle, ed., *Robert Rodriguez: Interviews* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 109.

Title	Director	Writer	Producer	Cinematographer	Editor	Composer	Sound^	Visual Effects Supervisor^^	Production Designer
Bedhead*	*	*		*	*	*	*		
El Mariachi	*	*	*	*	*		*		
Roadracers	*	*			*				
Desperado	*	*	*		*				
Four Rooms ("The Misbehavers")	*	*			*				
From Dusk Till Dawn	*		*(ex)		*		*		
The Faculty	*		*(un)		*		*		
Spy Kids	*	*	*		*	*	*	*	
Spy Kids 2	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Spy Kids 3-D	*	*	*	*	*	*		*	*
Once Upon a Time in Mexico	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Sin City	*			*	*	*	*	*	
The Adventures of Sharkboy and Lavagirl	*	*		*	*	*	*	*	
Planet Terror	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	

Shorts	*	*	*	*	*	*	*		
Machete	*	*	*		*	*	*		
Spy Kids: All the Time in the World	*	*	*	*		*	*		
Machete Kills	*		*	*	*				
Sin City: A Dame to Kill For	*		*	*	*	*		*	

*Additional credits on *Bedhead* include animator.

Ex-Executive producer

Un-credited producer

^These various sound tasks include sound effects, sound editor, sound effects editor, and sound re-recording mixer.

^^He has also been credited as a visual effects executive producer for *Spy Kids 2*, *Once Upon a Time in Mexico*, *Planet Terror*, *Shorts*, *Predators*, and *Machete*.

Rodriguez often comments on these various tasks (writing, composing, editing, shooting, production design, etc.) in his interviews, and why he performs so many of the tasks: “I don’t even know about the current generation, but all the new generation coming up, there’s [sic] gonna be multi-hatted movie-makers, because they’re gonna start the way I did, which was on video, where you’re the whole crew....I made *Mariachi* that way because I was just used to making it that way. Crew for what? To watch me work? You can get out of control really quickly by divvying up all the jobs.”³ Notice that

³Keith Phipps, “Robert Rodriguez,” *The A.V. Club*, <http://www.avclub.com/article/robert-rodriguez-13753>. Reprinted in Ingle, 73. This sharply contrasts with one of his comments from *Rebel Without a Crew*, when he discovered he no talent for set decoration: “I guess that’s what happens when you try to wear too many hats. You find that most of them don’t fit.” Robert Rodriguez, *Rebel Without a Crew: Or How a 23-Year-Old Filmmaker with \$7,000 Became a Hollywood Player* (New York: Dutton, 1995), 44

Rodriguez uses the term “movie-maker,” a term he often prefers to the more specific term “director.” For him, it is a matter of focus, control, and creativity:

The reasons directors get burned-out is not because they do too much, but because they do too little....Most directors focus on one job and lose the way. The more you hand out assignments, the more it becomes about the other people making their own movie....Everybody’s trying to get their signature on the thing and the finished product often looks like a mess. Why not just do things the way you want to do them?⁴

One should note Rodriguez’s use of the term *signature*, an auteurist conception that correlates with Alexandre Astruc’s concept of the *camera-stylo*.

If anything, Rodriguez advances that he does not tackle all the positions he does because he considers himself fully capable at all of them; rather, his artisanal approach it makes more sense and is also more efficient. As Aldama notes, “So while his orchestration of all the elements is total, this is driven less by the ambition to give the product a distinctive authorial stamp than by time and money.”⁵ The self-deprecating Tejano filmmaker assesses himself thusly: “It’s why I do so many different jobs. It’s not because I actually think I am good at them—I know I suck at all of them—but it gives you a different perspective, and it makes you better at your central job, to do those other jobs.”⁶ In the *Spy Kids 2* DVD commentary, which of all his commentaries best encapsulates his aesthetics at the point in his career, Rodriguez references an anecdote from the book *Art & Fear: Observations on the Perils (and Rewards) of Artmaking*.⁷ To summarize:

⁴David Hochman, “Once Upon a Time in Moviemaking,” *Premiere*, Oct 2003, 70. Reprinted in Ingle, 115.

⁵Aldama, *Cinema*, 6.

⁶From *Predators* Blur-Ray commentary.

⁷David Bayles and Ted Orland, *Art & Fear: Observations on the Perils (and Rewards) of Artmaking* (Santa Barbara, CA: Capra, 1993).

A pottery class is divided into two. Half of the class was graded on quantity (fifty pots merits an “A,” forty pots a “B,” and so on), while the other students would be graded on making one “perfect” pot that semester. Surprisingly, by semester’s end, the quality pots actually came from the “quantity” group, as those students actually turned out numerous “perfect” pots, while those students concerned with quality, making the best pot possible, were incapable of producing anything as they would overthink the process.

Hence his justification for taking on tasks where he still had a great deal to learn: “Art should be flawed. Art is made by humans, and humans are flawed. So when you can accept the fact that it’s going to be flawed, you’re free. And since I knew this movie [*Spy Kids 2*] had to be made by a child, I was free to make a lot of mistakes and live with those mistakes and let that be part of the charm of the movie.”⁸

He also constantly credits improvements in technology as auxiliary reasons why he has continually added roles to his filmmaking resume, rather than delegating tasks, since his debut film *El Mariachi*. Furthermore, the fact that he had a reputation for his “mariachi” style of one-man filmmaking allowed him the leverage to maintain more control of his productions when he was working for other studios: “I want to shoot that specialization myth down. Be everything! The most powerful thing is to become self-sufficient, to walk into a room knowing you could actually make a film all by yourself. Then you’re not begging.”⁹ The ability to perform multiple tasks allows one more freedom, or in the words of Rodriguez, transforms the moviemaker into a “walking studio.”

⁸*Spy Kids 2: Island of Lost Dreams*, DVD commentary, 40:27-42:28.

⁹Michael Haile, “From Rags to Riches,” *Boxoffice*, Aug 1995, 9. Reprinted in Ingle, 18.

Rodriguez has cited Buster Keaton and his smaller crews as a model of filmmaking.¹⁰ He even expects the same “jack-of-all-trades” approach from his crew at Troublemaker Studios and some of it has rubbed off:

Everyone becomes one of those ‘slash’ people—set decorator/art director/whatever. I figure, I’m doing fifty jobs, so everybody else has to do at least three! But they are all excited about that. In fact, they don’t even want to work on other movies now. And if they do, they come back saying: “It’s unbelievable! No one wants to do anything, no one is excited—it’s such a drag!”¹¹

Perhaps surprisingly, Rodriguez even considers his experience in film school as actually detrimental to this “jack-of-all-trades” approach, as he remembers crew members usually being assigned just one job.¹²

Even though his films since *El Mariachi* have been much bigger, Rodriguez continually tries to recreate the energy, the excitement, and the environment of his first feature film. In a 2003 interview he stated,

The way we work always feels like your first movie; and ask any director what his favorite movie experience was, he will probably say his first film when everybody did everything. Everyone pitching in—that’s the way it should be....As I go on making movies...it becomes more and more like my experience on *El Mariachi*. I’m actually doing more jobs now than I did on *El Mariachi* because of the effects and orchestral scoring and a lot of other things that movie didn’t have....In fact, the bigger the movies get, the easier it is do more of it myself—because, really, they are only bigger in scope.¹³

Contrast this with other filmmakers such as David Lynch (*Eraserhead*, 1977), Charles Burnett (*Killer of Sheep*, 1977), and Christopher Nolan (*Following*, 1998), who also wore

¹⁰Phipps. Reprinted in Ingle, 67.

¹¹Jody Duncan, “Working at the Speed of Thought,” *Cinefex* 92 (Jan 2003), 41. Reprinted in Ingle, 101.

¹²Chris Chiarella, “HT Talks to...Robert Rodriguez,” *Home Theater*, April 2006, 42.

¹³Duncan, 41. Reprinted in Ingle, 101.

multiple hats on their ultra-low-budget feature debuts similar to Rodriguez, yet later delegated some of the roles to others as their budgets increased.

Yet there exists other opinions on this style of filmmaking. To Vsevolod Pudovkin,

The work of filmmaking has all the properties of an industrial undertaking. The technical manager can achieve nothing without foremen and workmen, and their collective effort will lead to no good result if every collaborator limit himself only to a mechanical performance of his narrow function. Team-work is that which makes every, even the most insignificant, task a part of the living work and organically connects it to the general task. *It is a property of film-work that the smaller the number of persons directly taking part in it, the more disjointed is their activity and the worse is the finished product of their work—that is, the film.*¹⁴

Of course, it remains debatable whether Pudovkin envisioned in 1926 that crews would grow to their behemoth-like size today, with large departments (art, photography, editing, sound, first unit, second unit, postproduction unit, etc.) handling the various aspects of filmmaking. Rodriguez thinks he has “streamlined” and “unified” the filmmaking process by being his own department head. He again considers his method of filmmaking as reclamation of an earlier era, bucking the hegemonic Fordist model of labor championed by Hollywood for a century. He boldly claims,

What you end up with is something that feels like three different movies. The director is shooting one movie with the actors; an action crew is shooting stunts that you may or may not use; and another separate crew is shooting the effects. I’ve never liked to split things up like that; because then, instead of an organic whole, it feels like a patched-together Frankenstein monster at the end—which it is.¹⁵

¹⁴V. I. Pudovkin, *Film Technique and Film Acting*, translated and edited by Ivor Montagu (New York: Grove, 1970), 164. Emphasis mine.

¹⁵Duncan, 25. Reprinted in Ingle, 87.

But this is not to suggest that Rodriguez is the first filmmaker to insist on control, an essential for many filmmakers since cinema's origins. Pioneering Hollywood filmmaker Lois Weber insisted on it in her works, as revealed in a 1916 interview:

A real director should be absolute. He [*sic*] alone knows the effects he wants to produce, and he alone should have authority in the arrangement, cutting, titling or anything else which it may be found necessary to do the finished product. What other artist has his creative work interfered with by someone else?...We ought to realize that the work of a picture director, worthy of the name, is creative.¹⁶

And so I contend that just as women directors like Weber and writers like Frances Marion become marginalized in an increasingly lucrative industry, so also did alternative forms of filmmaking in which a director was able to tackle more of the jobs on the set.

I will now look at the comments by Rodriguez (and his collaborators) on each of the following roles *besides* directing: screenwriting, editing, composing, production design, sound, supervising visual effects, and cinematography. When asked if he could choose just one role, he admits to seeing them all as an organic whole. In other words, he considers it natural to write, direct, shoot, cut, design, and compose for his own films.¹⁷ This is why Danny Trejo, his frequent star, labeled him the “automatic transmission of movie-making.”¹⁸ These different roles point to how, at least in this one area, Rodriguez has changed little in his transformation from the director of *El Mariachi* to the founder of the El Rey Network.

¹⁶Qtd. in Anthony Slide, *Lois Weber: The Director Who Lost Her Way in History*, Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1996, 57-58. Originally in *Moving Picture Weekly* 2, no. 21 (May 20, 1916): 25.

¹⁷Chiarella, 42.

¹⁸Kurt Volk, ed., *Grindhouse: The Sleaze-Filled Saga of an Exploitation Double Feature* (New York: Weinstein Books, 2007), 220.

Screenwriter

Rodriguez has written every film he has directed, save for *From Dusk Till Dawn* (written by Quentin Tarantino), *The Faculty* (Kevin Williamson), and the *Sin City* films (Frank Miller), while writing one screenplay he did not direct—*Curandero*. (He only received a “story by” credit for *Machete Kills*.) When Robert Newman and the ICM agency first signed him, it was as a “writer/director,” which initially surprised him: “I didn’t realize I was a writer, but I guess I’ve always written my own stuff. That sounds cool—writer/director.”¹⁹ A decade later, little changed in his perception of his writing abilities: “I never considered myself a writer even though I’d written everything I shot. I wrote so I would have something to direct.”²⁰ Still, he has been candid about his approach and techniques for writing, especially in his interviews with Charles Ramírez Berg²¹ or *Creative Screenwriting*,²² where he confesses that the best way for him to write is to do so early in the morning, on his laptop while still in bed. Concerning his philosophy of writing, he seems to privilege character over story. He also admits to employing “free association and just sitting around coming up with things,”²³ even joking that the script for *Once Upon a Time in Mexico* was written in only five days and that he thus does not deserve credit for it since it was written “subconsciously.”²⁴ Yet he

¹⁹Rustin Thompson, “The Reformation of a Rebel Without a Crew,” *MovieMaker*, Sep/Oct 1995, 8. Reprinted in Ingle, 21.

²⁰Christian Divine, “Deep in the Heart of Action,” *Creative Screenwriting*, March/April 2001, 88. Reprinted in Ingle, 62. Had he forgotten about *From Dusk Till Dawn* and *The Faculty*?

²¹Charles Ramírez Berg, *Latino Images in Film: Stereotypes, Subversion, and Resistance* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 240-261.

²²See Divine, “Deep,” 86-88; and Christian Divine, “Secret Agents and Desperadoes,” *Creative Screenwriting*, July/August 2002, 4-8. Reprinted in Ingle, 58-63, and 78-82, respectively.

²³Josef Krebs, “BackTalk: Robert Rodriguez,” *Sound & Vision*, October 2005, 130.

²⁴Divine, “Secret,” 8. Reprinted in Ingle, 81.

certainly seeks advice from others, reading interviews in *Creative Screenwriting* and declaring to own every book on screenwriting.²⁵

Writing his own films also allows him more control on the set, partly because his writing is so personal:

Since it's something I wrote, it's very easy for me to know what to do. Because it's so subjective. If it was something I was just directing, it'd be more difficult, because then everyone's opinion is valid. But because I'm the creator, I can say, "No, no, that can't be like that, because this goes back to when my brother did that to me when I was eight years old." That's why I love doing stuff that I wrote, because you're just twenty steps ahead of everybody, because it goes back so far into your life that they just trust you and follow you.²⁶

Editor

In documentaries and interviews, Rodriguez often claims editing his favorite part of the whole filmmaking process, and indeed, it was the fast-paced editing of *El Mariachi* (with over two thousand cuts in a scant eighty minutes) that drew the attention of Hollywood and landed him with ICM, which really pushed *El Mariachi* to festivals and eventually landed the film a theatrical distribution deal. But *El Mariachi* does not maintain its hectic pace throughout, as Rodriguez employed slow motion to "stretch the movie out," "make it look more expensive," and give it more of an "epic feel."²⁷ Cutaways, such as those to the dog, were used to disguise when the soundtrack slipped out of sync. Rodriguez was proud that he was given final cut in most of his earlier, pre-Troublemaker films,²⁸ as evident in the final credit of *From Dusk Till Dawn*'s opening

²⁵Reprinted in Divine, "Deep," 87-88. Reprinted in Ingle, 60-61.

²⁶Phipps. Reprinted in Ingle, 69.

²⁷Thompson, 9. Reprinted in Ingle, 22-23.

²⁸Rodriguez did not officially have final cut for *El Mariachi*, but claimed that since he was the editor and the "only one who knew where any of the footage was," there was little the studio could change. The studio liked his version, so it ended up not being an issue (Thompson, 10; reprinted in Ingle, 24).

credits: “Edited and Directed by Robert Rodriguez.” (Note the intentional order.) He acknowledges the centrality of editing, sharing his editing philosophy: “Editing is so important—that’s the main thing. For me, going to shoot the movie is like going to the grocery store to get the best flour, the best milk, the best eggs; and then you’ve got to go into the kitchen, where too much of this and not enough of that will ruin the whole thing. So that’s why I edit myself.”²⁹ His editing philosophy has more in common with the Soviet formalists than with Andre Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer: “I make movies for people like me who feel they don’t have time to watch movies—just get me in and out as quick as you can. The editing gets so fast after a while it turns into subliminal moviemaking.”³⁰ Furthermore, being his own editor streamlines the whole process: “Because I’m the editor, I edit my movies in my head *first*.”³¹ For him, such previsualization is especially necessary when making the action-oriented, high-concept features he has always made, while also cutting unnecessary costs by shooting excessive footage.

Some of Rodriguez’s most enlightening comments on editing come from an appendix to his *Rebel Without a Crew*, also titled “The Ten-Minute Film School.” Writing of his experience of cutting *El Mariachi* in the most expedient method, i.e., off-line or ¾" and without numbers, he promotes the simplicity of not cutting on film:

Some people say that cutting on film itself rather than video or computer gives the filmmaker a much closer relationship to the film by allowing hand manipulation of the images, as opposed to pushing electronic buttons to cut your film. If you like the sound of that, do yourself a favor and take some film home at night and fondle it all you want. But when it comes time to cut your movie use a video or

²⁹Brian O’Hare, “Moving at the Speed of Thought,” *MovieMaker* 75 (2008), 55. Reprinted in Ingle, 136.

³⁰Jami Bernard, *Quentin Tarantino: The Man and His Movies* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1995), 229.

³¹Duncan, 19. Emphasis in original. Reprinted in Ingle, 86. Those who have worked with the Coen brothers (and Hitchcock, for that matter) have made similar comments about their working style.

computer system....When you're cutting your own movie, the movie you've lived and breathed since forever, the ideas you get on how to put it together come so fast that cutting on film only slows down that momentum—the waiting and the time consumed kills you creatively....I've found that video editing is much more conducive to the way I think, and you can cut a scene almost as fast as you can see it play in your head.³²

Of course digital editing, usually with the Avid software, would become standard for most Hollywood films within only a few years. Rodriguez credits George Lucas for his trailblazing efforts in electronic editing with *Return of the Jedi* (1983), but promotes himself as the only one to follow in Lucas's vein ten years later. Things would change drastically another decade later, when "You put a gun to an editor's head today, he won't edit on film," according to Rodriguez.³³

Rodriguez also displays pride in his ability to do postproduction at Los Cryptos, the editing bay connected to his home. When asked about his editing at home, he admits, "Oh, I edit everything at home....The room where I work on my films is just a big-boy version of the one I had when I was 12. I just roll out of bed and work on my movie....I do the sound mix, music, and everything right there in my garage."³⁴ Jay Mahavier, first assistant editor on most Rodriguez films since *Spy Kids 3-D*, confirms this statement, saying that Rodriguez does the offline editing, scoring, visual effects reviews, and sound mixing at this location.³⁵ He sometimes has films playing in the background to inspire him, identifying the oddly disparate *Heavy Metal* (1981) and *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1992) as two such films.³⁶

³²Rodriguez, *Rebel*, 208.

³³Phipps. Reprinted in Ingle, 71.

³⁴Krebs, 130.

³⁵Volk, 145.

³⁶Berg, 243.

Enthusiastic about his deal with Columbia, Rodriguez boisterously proclaimed in a 1995 interview, “The day I don’t edit my own movie is the day I’m just doing it for the money,”³⁷ a statement that has mostly held true, as he has continued to edit all of his films, save for *Spy Kids: All the Time in the World*. If anything, Rodriguez has maintained his innovative approach to editing that was clearly evident in *El Mariachi*. Two of his most recent films were particularly inventive. *Planet Terror* used its splices, “missing reels,” and other artificial editing techniques to play up its “grindhouse” flavor (this will be discussed in more depth later in this chapter), while *Shorts*’s nonlinear story was highly unusual for children’s film. The unorthodox ordering of the film’s episodes (0-2-1-4-3-5) almost rivaled *Pulp Fiction* and *Kill Bill Vol. 1* with its narrative complexity, a choice that divided critics. Although both gave the film slightly favorable reviews, *Austin Chronicle*’s Marjorie Baumgarten deemed it “kiddie postmodern,”³⁸ while Elizabeth Weitzman of the *New York Daily News* said, “The script isn’t strong enough to carry such a confusing structure, and the distraction feels like an attempt to build up a somewhat slight effort.”³⁹

Composer

Commencing with *Spy Kids*, Rodriguez has scored all of his films since then, except for *Machete Kills*, which still features holdover Chingon songs from the first film. (Rodriguez did not take a personal credit for *Machete*, but his band Chingon scored the film.) Even before Rodriguez decided to compose the music for his own films, he had a

³⁷Haile, 9. Reprinted in Ingle, 18.

³⁸Marjorie Baumgarten, Review of *Shorts*, Aug 21, 2009, <http://www.austinchronicle.com/calendar/film/2009-08-21/shorts/>

³⁹Elizabeth Weitzman, “Fun in a Falling Rock Zone,” *New York Daily News*, Aug 21, 2009, 41.

tendency to play his guitar at times while directing. Rodriguez has been candid in two interviews specifically devoted to the music in his films: Leila Cobo's *Billboard* interview includes Rodriguez's confession of how the musical composition process works for him, while John Allina interviewed Rodriguez for *Film Score Monthly* about his use of three composers (including himself) for *Sin City*.⁴⁰ In the former interview, Rodriguez admits to having no formal education in music, but that he did take piano, guitar, and saxophone lessons in childhood, all instruments with which he maintains proficiency. He can read music, but doesn't know theory "that well." When questioned as to how he is still able to score films with such "rudimentary knowledge," he stresses his control over the creative process by insisting that he knows his characters better than anyone else and his characters typically have a musical identity.⁴¹ He avoids using a music supervisor because music coming from the filmmaker him- or herself makes it a more organic progression, not "hav[ing] to rely on somebody else putting it into the film."⁴² Rodriguez further emphasizes the flexibility and control he prefers over the process: "By doing my own music, I'm able to write the score as I'm writing the script."⁴³ Of course, economic imperatives are often in the mind of Rodriguez when making decisions, and writing and performing the songs himself (or having his actors perform them) cuts licensing fee expenses.

In the interview only two years later for *Film Score Monthly*, Rodriguez seemed less reluctant to have others assist him with his score. For *Sin City*, he collaborated with

⁴⁰John Allina, "Triplets in Sin," *Film Score Monthly*, March/April 2005, 16-18. Reprinted in Ingle, 119-123.

⁴¹Cobo. Reprinted in Ingle, 110-111.

⁴²*Ibid.*

⁴³*Ibid.*

John Debney (Academy Award nomination for *The Passion of the Christ*, 2004) and New Zealand composer Graeme Revell (perhaps best known for his score for *Dead Calm*, 1989). According to Rodriguez, he based his decision to bring in Debney and Revell for *Sin City* because of the film's narrative structure: "You know, I have three directors [Frank Miller, Tarantino, and Rodriguez], I have three stories, maybe I should have three composers....So I thought that'd be really cool if even though the themes would all be the same, based on the *Sin City* theme, each one had their own composer identity as well."⁴⁴ Despite this claim that the three stories lent themselves to three different composers, *Sin City* was also a less personal film than the previous four (*Spy Kids* trilogy, *Once Upon a Time in Mexico*) he had made. Even though he absolved himself of some of the musical tasks, Rodriguez comes across as more thoughtful about the musical process for his films, discussing details about instrumentation, meter, and traditional film noir scores. Revell acknowledges Rodriguez's musical progression:

Robert just sort of developed a really funky kind of approach to music writing. It's very interesting the way he puts elements together as well. And in this case, the *Sin City* ideas, he's getting quite comfortable with samplers and what they can do, putting acoustic elements into samplers and changing notes around, and using all the plug-in elements. He's got great facility now to go along with his ideas.⁴⁵

Debney concurs: "Robert really has a gift of finding nice, rather simple, catchy phrases, motifs, and turning them into a score. There are a lot of really talented composers who can skillfully craft a score, but there aren't a lot of them that can write a catchy melody, and Robert does that."⁴⁶ But Rodriguez's ideas still informed the scores of his co-

⁴⁴Allina, 16. Rodriguez also composed the introductory frame story.

⁴⁵Ibid., 17-18.

⁴⁶Ibid., 18.

composers, having already selected for himself the main theme, musical ideas, and instrumentation before shooting began: “Music is such an important part of the movie that you don’t want to have to rush a composer to come up with all of that.”⁴⁷

Rodriguez’s musical composition in his films has even drawn some scholarly attention—Heather J. Raines wrote her thesis on the use of music in the films of Rodriguez and Tarantino.⁴⁸ She argues that the auteur theory has not really been applied to directors “whose control extended to music as well as the image,”⁴⁹ ignoring previous work on the use of music in Hitchcock’s films, who of course did not compose his scores, yet maintained collaborative relationships with those who did.⁵⁰ Although she sees both Rodriguez and Tarantino as using music in an intentional, impactful way, Raines delineates a key difference between the two. She labels Tarantino a *mélomane*, indicating someone with a passion for music.⁵¹ But Rodriguez, on the other hand, is a “true auteur” (although she does qualify this at times), someone who composes his own music as an extension of his auteurist control. Her chapter “Rodriguez, an Auteur (Most of the Time)” examines the ways that his music interrelates with the themes of his characters and settings, focusing on *Once Upon a Time in Mexico*, *Sin City*, and *Planet Terror*.⁵² She views his ability to score his own films an advantage over other film composers, in that he can “adapt the music to his needs,”⁵³ as he “creates a musical world before he creates a

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Heather J. Raines, “Auteur Direction, Collaboration and Film Music: Re-Imaginations in the Cinema of Rodriguez and Tarantino,” MA thesis, University of Ottawa, 2009.

⁴⁹Ibid., 7.

⁵⁰See Jack Sullivan, *Hitchcock’s Music* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006). This was followed by David Schroeder, *Hitchcock’s Ear: Music and the Director’s Art* (London: Continuum, 2012).

⁵¹Raines, 7. From the Greek *mélōs* for “song” and *mania* for “madness.”

⁵²Ibid., 61-90.

⁵³Ibid., 18.

visual world.”⁵⁴ Rodriguez can also play with the various levels of musical narrative in a film, sometimes employing all levels (diegetic, non-diegetic, meta-diegetic,⁵⁵ and trans-diegetic⁵⁶) within the same scene.⁵⁷ Still, Rodriguez prefers non-diegetic, traditionally-scored music in his films. Even when he “borrows” from pre-composed music, Raines asserts that he still “make[s] it his own, by either re-orchestrating it and having his actors sing it, or by using traditional music.”⁵⁸ His collaborations when composing do not deter him from his auteurist control, as “he maintains complete control over his films, both visually and sonically.”⁵⁹

Rodriguez has also proven himself adept in a variety of musical styles, from the Latin influences of *Once Upon a Time in Mexico* to the spy music soundtrack of the *Spy Kids* trilogy, from the film noir score of *Sin City* to the grindhouse soundscape of *Planet Terror*. Composing for *Once Upon a Time in Mexico* especially makes sense considering the musical nature of its hero:

If it’s something that you’ve written—I’ve been working on this movie since the first *Mariachi* (ten years)—it’s so much in your head, very much like the characters. And the music is so important to an internal character like this, that I wanted the music and the character to come from the same place. So even though I’m not the best screenwriter I write the dialogue somehow and write these characters, I thought I should be writing the music as well because even though,

⁵⁴Ibid., 15.

⁵⁵Borrowed from metadiegetic narrative theory, Raines defines this as “any music that pertains to that narratological realm” (99). As an example, she proffers the first scene in *Once Upon a Time in Mexico*, when Belini (Cheech Marin) describes the Mariachi character to Agent Sands (Johnny Depp) and there is a flashback of El Mariachi (Antonio Banderas) playing his guitar. Later in the film, El Mariachi plays his guitar in front of the cathedral, which triggers a flashback of Carolina (Salma Hayek), another example of meta-diegetic music according to Raines (104-105).

⁵⁶Raines’s neologism to denote music that moves from diegetic to non-diegetic, or vice-versa, within the same scene (105-106). One common example would be the music in a scene that the viewer assumes is non-diegetic music until a character turns up the radio in the car. There are several examples of trans-diegetic music in *Planet Terror*, such as the “*Grindhouse* Main Titles” theme during the credits that is also revealed as the song go-go dancer Cherry Darling is dancing to.

⁵⁷Ibid., 118-119. She again offers the opening scene in *Once Upon a Time in Mexico* as an example.

⁵⁸Ibid., 119-120.

⁵⁹Ibid., 120. See pp. 121-122 for further section on collaboration.

technically, it might not be as advanced as someone who has scored a long time it will have the right feel with a character and it will be really married together. It will feel like it's coming from that same place because it is coming from that same place.⁶⁰

Even when he does use source music, such as *Once Upon a Time in Mexico*'s traditional Spanish folk music sprinkled in with more recent Spanish music from the previous decade, Rodriguez's musical choices fit his story.⁶¹ Not surprisingly, he is also transparent about the scoring process for him, showing how he scores on his keyboard with Digital Performer and its library of samples, all within the cozy confines of Los Cryptos.

There are a few other contemporary filmmakers who compose their own scores, such as John Carpenter, Sally Potter, and Tom Tykwer. Rodriguez refers to Carpenter as a formative influence in his work, frequently citing *Escape from New York* (1981) as the film that inspired him to become a filmmaker. But these contemporary directors have their precursors in film history, as Charles Chaplin, Satyajit Ray, and others also composed for most of their films.⁶² This indicates an artist maintaining control over the production, not only by involving oneself in the phases of pre-production, filming, and post-production, but by realizing the significance that music has over the audience's interpretation of a film.

Yet Rodriguez absolves himself at times of complete auteurist control over the score. Besides the aforementioned collaboration on *Sin City*, Rodriguez shared scoring

⁶⁰From "Exclusive Interview with Robert Rodriguez," DVD feature on *Mexico and Mariachis: Music From and Inspired by Robert Rodriguez's El Mariachi Trilogy*, CD/DVD (Burbank, CA: Milan Records, 2004).

⁶¹Raines, 16.

⁶²Indeed, if *Birth of a Nation* really was the first film for which an original score was composed to be played along with film, it is interesting that Griffith is credited along with Joseph Carl Breil.

duties on *Shorts* with George Oldziey and Carl Thiel. Rodriguez has established his credibility as a composer to the extent that he was the lead composer for *Kill Bill: Vol. 2* (with some additional work by The RZA of the Wu Tang Clan). This was done as a favor to Tarantino, so that Tarantino would in turn serve as a “guest director” of a brief segment in *Sin City*. Rodriguez also wrote two songs each for both *Hot Fuzz* (Edgar Wright, 2007) and *Hell Ride* (Larry Bishop, 2008).

The liner notes for the soundtrack releases further illustrate Rodriguez’s concern for the soundscapes of his films. He highlights this centrality particularly with the *Once Upon a Time in Mexico* soundtrack: “There aren’t a lot of opportunities in movies where it’s necessary for the music to drive the film, but in this series, because El Mariachi is a guitar player and music infuses his life, I could have long passages where the music playing in his head is telling the story. I listen to the score now and think that, if anything, it is definitely part of the strange, unique world that belongs to *El Mariachi*.”⁶³ For *Planet Terror* he notes,

Writing music has become a major part of how I make my movies....When I first started writing my script for the double feature *Grindhouse*, I had an idea for a main title theme that sounded like something a go go dancer would grind to. I wrote the “Main Title” theme, and liked it so much I decided to make my lead character, Cherry Darling, actually be a Go Go Dancer [*sic*] in the film so that she could dance to the song during the opening credits. I played the song to Quentin, and he immediately got the vibe of the whole movie experience we were aiming to create. I wrote the rest of my script to this main title song. Later when it came time to do the rest of the score, I had to figure out how to blend that “grind” with the synth pad sounds of the early eighties horror movies that inspired me.⁶⁴

⁶³Robert Rodriguez, liner notes for *Once Upon a Time in Mexico* original motion picture soundtrack, CD, Burbank, CA: Milan Records, 2003. His comments can also be found on the soundtracks for *Spy Kids* and *Planet Terror*, among others.

⁶⁴From liner notes on *Planet Terror* soundtrack (Studio City, CA: Varèse Sarabande Records, 2007).

Production Designer

As the chart above indicates, Rodriguez has only been credited as production designer on three of his films, all of which were released in 2002-2003. His decision to serve in this capacity may have initially been because of the transition to shooting in digital: “I do a lot of my own production design, but when I get the film back I’m always disappointed because it never looks like it did when we were making the movie. HD turned that around. HD was the first time I saw that what I was getting was what I had seen on the set.”⁶⁵ But it may also have been based on his frugality. Speaking about the unnecessary waste most production designers are prone to, he notes: “If I am my own production designer and I know I only need two walls, I only build two walls.”⁶⁶ He builds as little a set as he can get by with because “no matter how wide your lens is, the camera never sees what your eye sees” and big sets are no longer as impressive.⁶⁷ An example of this occurred while shooting *Spy Kids 2*, in the scene in the underground lair. The set consists of only three rocks, which he wheeled over for reverse shots: “Now, no production designer would ever allow the director to show up in the lair and see three rocks. He [*sic*] would have wanted fifty rocks. But knowing what I can do, it’ll look like fifty rocks in the end.”⁶⁸ Rodriguez feels that certain creative positions, such as production designers, often feel the need to justify their existence, consequently hiking up unnecessary expenses.

⁶⁵Brian McKernan and Bob Zahn, “A Digital Desperado,” *TVB Europe*, Aug 2002, 28. Reprinted in Ingle, 76.

⁶⁶Duncan, 25. Reprinted in Ingle, 88.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, 32. Reprinted in Ingle, 96.

⁶⁸Phipps. Reprinted in Ingle, 67.

This even comes to handling smaller roles, such as designing props. For instance, Rodriguez claims to have designed the gadgets for the *Spy Kids* series, which attempt to even surpass the fetish for gadgets in the James Bond films: “That’s why instead of hiring an army of people to design gadgets for me, and picking the best ones, I made myself come up with the gadgets. Because I knew that would give it character....Yeah, it means I have to do more work, but I already wrote the characters....”⁶⁹ Yet Rodriguez has inexplicably stepped down from production design duties, and Steve Joyner has been his production designer since *Planet Terror*.

Sound

After being credited for sound effects in *Bedhead* and as the sound editor for *El Mariachi*, Rodriguez continued to take a sound re-recording mixer credit for most of his films. He received the same credit for *Predators* (2010), while acting as sound effects editor in addition to sound re-recording mixer for *Spy Kids 2* and *Once Upon a Time in Mexico*. His innovative approach to sound factored into some of the manic energy for which *El Mariachi* was acclaimed, with the dog again often cited as an example. Still, his comments on sound in interviews and in DVD supplemental features do not merit nearly enough attention as his composing.⁷⁰

Visual Effects Supervisor

Rodriguez has been credited as visual effects supervisor and/or visual effects executive producer for all of his films (including *Predators*) since *Spy Kids*, as well as the *From Dusk Till Dawn* television series. This decision was made to streamline the process

⁶⁹Ibid. Reprinted in Ingle, 73.

⁷⁰For comments from his collaborators (including supervising sound editor Tim Rakoczy and re-recording engineer Brad Engleking) on his philosophy of sound, see Volk, 144-149.

between him and the special effects vendors, so he could work directly with artists.⁷¹

Because his interest in visual effects appears to be an extension of his technophilia, I will discuss this role and his visual effects company, Troublemaker Digital, further in Chapter 5.

Cinematographer

I have selected this role to examine last not because it is the least important—as it is certainly one of the most critical—but it will transition into my next point as I attempt to place Rodriguez within the tradition of the earliest filmmakers. Rodriguez’s decision to shoot his own films arguably coincides with Satyajit Ray’s view concerning the director serving as cinematographer, that “ideally, the director should be his own cameraman or at least be able to impose a visual approach on his cameraman.”⁷² Ray proffers Orson Welles and Jean-Luc Godard as examples of those directors still able to impose their vision while still working with a cinematographer. According to Ray, “When a director is a true *auteur*—that is, if he controls every aspect of production—then the cameraman is obliged to perform an interpretive role. Whenever he does more than that, the director should humbly part with some of his credit as an *auteur*.”⁷³

Because Rodriguez and his “mariachi” style meant he was a “rebel without a crew” on *El Mariachi*, he necessarily operated the camera, an Arriflex 16s. After being frustrated early on while shooting *Roadracers*, he wrote, “Self-advice: You should *always* operate your own camera, Rob. That way you can’t blame anyone when it doesn’t

⁷¹Aldama, *Cinema*, 144.

⁷²Satyajit Ray, *Our Films, Their Films* (New York: Hyperion, 1994), 68.

⁷³*Ibid.*

come out the way you want it.”⁷⁴ He would then operate the camera (uncredited because he was breaking union regulations) guerilla-style for many shots in the film. Rodriguez made the decision to continue to operate the camera on his first big studio feature, *Desperado*, for which he took lessons on how to use a Steadicam. Explaining why he would do so when the budget obviously would allow for someone else, Rodriguez stated,

Well, it doesn't really save you anything if you know what you want and you really enjoy operating, especially because I do a lot of hand-held and change my mind very quickly. While the shot's going on, I don't have to cut and explain it to somebody else. That's just too much delegation. It makes more sense to operate the camera, get what you want, and give it a real energy....I would hate to be sitting behind the camera and looking at the monitor. You just don't feel as involved....I still have the freedom to change my mind and grab stuff as the scene is going, when inspiration really hits. It's fun, strapping that thing on and moving around. People get out of your way and listen to you really closely.⁷⁵

Discussing his shooting of *El Mariachi*, particularly the hand-held sequences, Rodriguez admits to not being “a good operator,” but that his “shots are a little more interesting because they're not so locked down and smooth,” avoiding the sterility of a Hollywood movie.⁷⁶ He also likes operating the camera himself as he thinks he gets a better sense of how the film looks through the lens than he would on a video monitor. This is similar to Ray's justification for operating his own camera as it allowed him to “know exactly what is happening in the shot all the time.”⁷⁷ Besides *El Mariachi* and *Desperado*, Rodriguez was also credited as a camera operator for *From Dusk Till Dawn*, *The Faculty*, *Spy Kids*,

⁷⁴Robert Rodriguez, *Roadracers: The Making of a Degenerate Hot Rod Flick* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), 54.

⁷⁵Thompson, 9. Reprinted in Ingle, 23-24.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, 11.

⁷⁷Qtd. in Bert Cardullo, ed., *Satyajit Ray: Interviews* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 83. Ray, who worked often with non-professional actors, also thought they preferred not seeing his face while directing.

Spy Kids 2, *Once Upon a Time in Mexico*, *Sin City*, *Planet Terror*, and *Shorts*, while also actually being credited as director of photography of most films since *Spy Kids 2*, as he felt that digital made it easier to serve as his own cinematographer. (This natural drift toward shooting in HD will be the subject for further discussion in Chapter 5.)

Of course, there are also several other tasks Rodriguez has been involved in, from his credit as a chef for *Planet Terror* to his uncredited roles with publicity and marketing, as he claims to “go all the way through to the trailers and the posters.”⁷⁸ But he does not handle everything; after his experience of learning how to light, shoot, and do sound on *El Mariachi* (which he acknowledges as the best sort of film school possible for him), he concedes, “I ended up liking all those jobs—and the ones I didn’t like I gave to other people. I don’t hold the boom mike anymore.”⁷⁹ Again, his remarks are remarkably similar to those of Ray. When asked why he handled so many aspects of filmmaking, Ray replied, “It’s not a question of necessity but of what you want to do. I got used to the system from the beginning, and now I don’t like anything to be done without my knowledge.”⁸⁰ Additionally, despite his pulchritude often commented upon, Rodriguez does not act in his own films, unlike some previous directors comparable to him, such as Chaplin, Keaton, Welles, Erich von Stroheim, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, or Shinya Tsukamoto. Rodriguez’s “multi-hatted” approach to filmmaking not only assures him more auteurist control over his productions, but they make his films more personal. As he stated in one interview, “When you see the hand of an artist, that’s always great, but

⁷⁸O’Hare, 55. Reprinted in Ingle, 136.

⁷⁹Ibid., 56.

⁸⁰Qtd. in Cardullo, 85.

when you feel the soul of an artist, that's hard to touch and it's hard to do.”⁸¹ He at times compares the medium of film to another medium such as painting, insisting that “the bigger the movies get, the more personal they have to become,”⁸² which again seems counterintuitive to Hollywood's hegemonic method of filmmaking, but Rodriguez has continually positioned himself as an anti-Hollywood rebel.

Janet Staiger and the “Cameraman” System of Production

As a result of Rodriguez's decision to tackle several of the traditional labor roles on the set and in postproduction, I thus contend that he embodies a revival of the “cameraman” system of production described by Janet Staiger. In *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, Staiger identifies six different modes concerning the division of labor in early American filmmaking: the “cameraman” system of production (which prevailed from 1896-1907), the “director” system (1907-1909), the “director-unit” system (1909-1914), the “central producer” system (1914-1931), the “producer-unit” system (1931-1955), and the “package-unit” system (from 1955 on).⁸³ The cameraman system usually involved one individual who conceived and executed almost all of the production tasks. Innovative cameramen such as Edwin S. Porter, W. K. L. Dickson, and Billy Bitzer (pre-Griffith) were practically “one-man crews,” performing the tasks later delineated as

⁸¹Phipps. Reprinted in Ingle, 74.

⁸²From “Exclusive Interview with Robert Rodriguez,” DVD feature on *Mexico and Mariachis: Music From and Inspired by Robert Rodriguez's El Mariachi Trilogy*, CD/DVD (Burbank, CA: Milan Records, 2004).

⁸³Janet Staiger, “The Hollywood Mode of Production to 1930,” in David Bordwell, Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press), 93. Not all historians agree with this view of cinema's evolution as it relates to the division of labor; Charles Musser argues for a move from the collaborative system to a director-unit system in *Before the Nickelodeon: Edwin S. Porter and Edison Manufacturing Company* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 449, 546n67.

directing, writing (selecting the subject matter), production design, cinematography, and editing. As Staiger stipulates, “Like the artisan/craftsman, the cameraman knew the entire work process, and conception and execution of the product were unified.”⁸⁴ This system of the division of labor, or rather lack thereof, could no longer meet audience demand after the nickelodeon boom (which started around 1906), necessitating mass production and a more detailed division of labor. Like almost all decisions in the evolution of Hollywood, this was based on economics, since “training craftsmen was more expensive than dividing labor.”⁸⁵ This is not to say that this system ceased to exist in cinema history; certainly a few artists have followed this model from early cinema’s history, but it seems particularly relevant in the discussion of Rodriguez and how he has chosen to divide labor in his films.

A Quantitative Study of the Distribution of Credits:

Towards a New Taxonomy of Directors

Methods

In this section I will examine the distribution of film credits among film directors and attempt to make several groups based on this distribution. This sort of new taxonomy is much more objective than the one (in)famously employed by Andrew Sarris.⁸⁶ The

⁸⁴Ibid., 116.

⁸⁵Ibid., 116-117.

⁸⁶Sarris’s groups, with selective, represented directors: “Pantheon Directors” (Hitchcock, Welles), “The Far Side of Paradise” (Capra, Sirk), “Expressive Esoteria” (Boetticher, Ulmer), “Fringe Benefits” (Rossellini, Truffaut), “Less Than Meets the Eye” (Lean, Wilder), “Lightly Likable” (Curtiz, Whale), “Strained Seriousness” (Jewison, Kubrick), “Oddities, One-Shots, and Newcomers” (Corman, Lupino), “Subjects for Further Research” (Browning, Maurice Tourneur), “Make Way for the Clowns!” (Jerry Lewis, Mae West), and “Miscellany” (Kramer, Van Dyke). Andrew Sarris, *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions, 1929-1968* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968).

rationale for this is I propose that whether filmmakers solely direct or choose to also write, produce, star, etc. in their own films may make a difference in how audiences perceive these films as personal, auteurist works. To the best of my knowledge, there has been no such previous quantitative study of this kind. I collected a list of over one 1100 major filmmakers representing 55 national cinemas, making films from 1895 until today. One hundred and twenty-two women are represented. Three caveats should be mentioned, however: first, for a study such as this one, credits (per IMDb) had to be taken at face value; secondly, filmmaking tandems (e.g., Straub/Huillet, Dominique Abel and Fiona Gordon, the Coen brothers) were not included in the data since they are not individuals; and thirdly, most filmmakers change throughout their careers, adding or subtracting tasks as their careers evolve. I have chosen to pinpoint the roles a filmmaker would most likely have on a given *feature* film. (Only “producer” was counted, not executive producer, co-producer, associate producer, line producer, etc.) The individual groups with represented directors are listed in Appendix 2, but here is a table with the tabulation of the data.

Findings

Roles	Abbreviation	Number
Director (only)	<i>D</i>	367
Director/Writer	<i>DW</i>	379
Director/Producer	<i>DP</i>	44
Director/Writer/Producer	<i>DWP</i>	80

Director/Writer/Editor	<i>DWE</i>	20
Director/Writer/Actor	<i>DWA</i>	27
Director/Writer/Actor/Composer	<i>DWAM</i>	1
Director/Producer/Actor	<i>DPA</i>	4
Director/Writer/Producer/Cinematographer	<i>DWPCin</i>	1
Director/Writer/Producer/Actor	<i>DWPA</i>	5
Director/Writer/Producer/Editor/Actor/Composer	<i>DWPEAM</i>	1
Director/Writer/Editor/Actor	<i>DWEA</i>	3
Director/Producer/Cinematographer/Editor	<i>DPCinE</i>	1
Director/Producer/Editor/Actor	<i>DPEA</i>	1
Director/Producer/Editor	<i>DPE</i>	4
Director/Writer/Producer/Editor	<i>DWPE</i>	11
Director/Writer/Producer/Composer	<i>DWPM</i>	1
Director/Writer/Cinematographer	<i>DWCin</i>	2
Director/Writer/Cinematographer/Editor	<i>DWCinE</i>	3
Director/Writer/Cinematographer/Editor/Actor	<i>DWCinEA</i>	1
Director/Writer/Art Direction	<i>DWArtD</i>	1
Director/Writer/Character Design	<i>DWChDes</i>	1
Director/Editor	<i>DE</i>	3
Director/Cinematographer	<i>DCin</i>	6
Director/Actor	<i>DA</i>	9
Director/Composer	<i>DM</i>	1

Director/Choreographer	<i>DChor</i>	1
Director/Writer/Composer	<i>DWM</i>	6
Director/Writer/Cinematographer/Production Designer	<i>DWCinPD</i>	1
Director/Writer/Production Designer	<i>DWPD</i>	1
Director/Writer/Producer/Editor/Actor/Composer	<i>DWPEAM</i>	1
Director/Writer/Producer/Cinematographer/Editor	<i>DWPCinE</i>	3
Director/Writer/Producer/Cinematographer/Editor/Actor	<i>DWPCinEA</i>	1
Only made short films		40
Unidentifiable (too difficult to determine) ⁸⁷		144

Conclusion

Again, these categories do not neglect certain “slippage” that occurs among them. For instance, while Alexander Korda is marked as **D**, most readers will be familiar with Korda as a producer, but again, I am concerned with the types of roles these individuals tackled on the films when they were credited as director. (As Korda became one of the major producers in the 1930s, he directed less often, some of his productions being directed by his brother Zoltan.) I also am not making any sort of value judgment, that the more roles a director is credited for, the more significant a filmmaker. Besides creating some fascinating groupings (*Can you imagine Rainer, Kitano, and Kevin Smith in the same room?*), it is still an intriguing taxonomy and may initiate a new sort of auteurist discourse. There are few trends worth noticing. For one, international

⁸⁷This designation was reserved for directors who were too evenly divided into two or more categories.

filmmakers were more likely to belong to the **DW** group than their American counterparts (especially from the classical studio era) who were more often just credited as director. Secondly, directors have generally added on or reserved more roles for themselves as the decades pass, perhaps because of newer technologies. Thirdly, independent filmmakers generally have more control by performing more functions than their studio counterparts, again as one might expect.

Thus, if one applies the same criteria to determine what category Rodriguez would fall under, one comes up with Director/Writer/Producer/Cinematographer/Editor/Composer/Camera Operator/Visual Effects Supervisor (or Visual Effects Executive Producer), or **DWPCinEMCamOPVE**. This definitely puts Rodriguez in a category by himself, exerting an amount of control over his films practically unprecedented in film history.

Although few filmmakers have been credited for as many roles as Rodriguez, he does stand in a tradition of other filmmakers who have served as their own cinematographers.⁸⁸ The list narrows down for those who have done so consistently, i.e., most of their pictures, as Appendix 2 indicates: Robert Flaherty, Wladyslaw Starewicz, Jean Rouch, Sven Nykvist, Russ Meyer, Jan Troell, D. A. Pennebaker, Fernando Solanas, Su Friedrich, Jon Jost, Kazuo Hara, Ulrike Ottinger, Jorgen Roos, Thierry Zeno, Ross

⁸⁸The list of those who have been credited as cinematographer on at least *one* of their feature films includes the following: Robert Flaherty, Merian C. Cooper/Ernest Shoedsack, Joris Ivens, Orson Welles, Leni Riefenstahl, Stanley Kubrick, Bruce Brown, Mario Bava, Samuel Fuller, Herschell Gordon Lewis, D. A. Pennebaker, George Romero, Paul Morrissey, Russ Meyer, Nicolas Roeg, John Waters, Lasse Hallström, the Maysles Brothers, Charles Burnett, Don Coscarelli, Fernando Solanas, Ken Burns, Gregory Nava, Peter Hyams, Lloyd Kaufman, Maya Deren, Shinya Tsukamoto, Wim Wenders, Guy Maddin, Su Friedrich, Steven Soderbergh, Rodriguez, Tony Kraye, Christopher Nolan, Doug Liman, Richard Linklater, Nuri Bilge Ceylan, Abbas Kiarostami, Shane Carruth, Jonas Mekas, Quentin Tarantino, Agnes Varda, Jon Jost, and Quentin Dupieux, among others.

McElwee, Steven Soderbergh, Costa Botes, Makoto Shinkai, Tsukamoto, and Rodriguez. Of these, only Meyer, Soderbergh, Troell, Jost, Tsukamoto, and Rodriguez have directed a substantial number of fiction features, a form less conducive to the cameraman system of production, making an already short list that much more selective.

Of course, the credits do not tell the whole story, as some directors perform other tasks without receiving credit. For instance, Satyajit Ray was usually just credited for direction, screenplay, and music, even though this polymath often served as casting director, editor, camera operator, title sequence designer, costume and set designer, as well as handle publicity.⁸⁹ (In his films, most of these tasks are credited to other individuals.) Although he never took an onscreen credit as cinematographer (this usually went to Soumendu Roy, Subatra Mitra,⁹⁰ or in his later films, Barun Raha), Ray admitted that after his first few films, he was his own cameraman as well.⁹¹ Likewise, Soderbergh acts as the DP and (and sole editor) on many of his films, but opts for a pseudonym for both (“Peter Andrews” and “Mary Ann Bernard,” respectively).⁹² But now that I stated my case for Rodriguez’s control on most of his films, one must also remember that he has harbors no fears about collaboration.

⁸⁹Cardullo, x.

⁹⁰Primarily known for his innovation of bounce lighting.

⁹¹Qtd. in Cardullo, 15. In a 1968 *Film Comment* interview with James Blue he states, “I find [directing and shooting at the same time] easier, because the actors are not conscious of me watching, because I’m behind the lens....I find it easier because they’re freer” (15). In a vein similar to Rodriguez, Ray notes that there are also fewer unnecessary takes when the director acts as his own cameraman.

⁹²In a similar vein, Joel and Ethan Coen have also edited most of their films under the collective pseudonym of “Roderick Jaynes.”

“Does This Look Like a Team-Orientated Group of Individuals to You?”:

Rodriguez, Collaborator

In *Predators*, one of the few films to *begin* with a *deus ex machina*, several of the top mercenary soldiers from around the world come to consciousness as they are parachuted to another planet. None of them know any of the others, and they are types of individuals who generally work alone. When one character notes that they need to work together to overcome the unknown obstacles on this alien planet, Cuchillo (Danny Trejo) responds, “Does this look like a team-orientated [*sic*] group of individuals to you?”

Rodriguez has a reputation as a DIY filmmaker (more on that below) who performs most tasks on his productions, but he has also chosen to collaborate on a handful of projects.

Now that we have looked at the various roles Rodriguez takes on during his productions, a thorough examination of his collaborations is in order, particularly as they may, on the surface, appear to undermine some of my earlier claims regarding Rodriguez’s views on labor. Rodriguez claims he is “very collaborative,” and these instances in which he acquiesces some of his control can prove enlightening. He claims to enjoy going back and forth from his own creations (*Mariachi* trilogy, *Spy Kids* trilogy) and those of others (*From Dusk Till Dawn*, *The Faculty*, *Sin City*), as he particularly sees the latter as a challenge to offer his own take on the material: “I can actually add something to this. I can bring this to life in a way that I don’t think anyone’s figured out how to do yet.”⁹³

Rodriguez and Tarantino have collaborated a few times: each directed a segment in the anthology film *Four Rooms*; Tarantino has a small role in *Desperado*; Rodriguez directed Tarantino’s script for *From Dusk Till Dawn* and both co-executive produced the

⁹³Chiarella, 43.

sequels; Rodriguez scored *Kill Bill Vol. 2*; Tarantino served as a “Special Guest Director” for *Sin City*; and they made *Grindhouse* together, with each directing one half of the double bill, besides working on the other’s film in various capacities as well.⁹⁴ For *From Dusk Till Dawn*, Rodriguez confides that Tarantino would at times offer him advice on the set, and the DVD featurette “Hollywood Goes to Hell” reveals Tarantino even directing the actors to an extent, including George Clooney.⁹⁵ For *Sin City*, Tarantino directed roughly ten minutes from “The Big Fat Kill” segment (the scene with Jackie Boy [Benicio Del Toro] and Dwight [Clive Owen] in the car). Rodriguez commended Tarantino for putting his “stamp” on the film with that scene. Of course, Tarantino’s one day on the set provided an additional exploitable element for the film.

The film *Curandero* (2005) has drawn little attention from scholars of Rodriguez or even Mexican horror film scholars, as the film had only shown at one small festival and never received a theatrical release before its eventual DVD release in 2013. Directed by Eduardo Rodriguez (no relation), the film stars *El Mariachi* lead Carlos Gallardo, and was based on an original screenplay by Robert Rodriguez.

Renowned comic artist/writer/creator Frank Miller was known primarily for his first run on *Daredevil* #158-191 (1979-1983) and his groundbreaking *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), before his film noir-influenced *Sin City* comics (1993-1997) for Dark Horse shook the comics world. Miller had some experience in Hollywood, writing the screenplays for both *Robocop 2* (1990) and *Robocop 3* (1993), although he had never directed a film before Rodriguez asked him to co-direct *Sin City* with him. For

⁹⁴They produced each other’s segment of *Grindhouse*, with Tarantino also acting in *Planet Terror*.

⁹⁵On the *From Dusk Till Dawn* Collector’s Series DVD.

Rodriguez, this was mainly because he wanted to faithfully adapt Miller's vision: "I don't want to make Robert Rodriguez's *Sin City*; I want to make Frank Miller's *Sin City*."⁹⁶ In some interviews, Rodriguez apparently suggests that this decision was an afterthought: "I thought, if [Miller] didn't mind hanging around, he should just be there the whole time. That way, I'd have the only guy who's ever been to Sin City right there on the set! And I knew the actors would love that, because he'd be able to tell them things about the characters that aren't even in the books."⁹⁷ Miller paints a somewhat different picture, as he stated that he would not have let his stories be adapted if he had not been able to direct, as they were "too precious" to him. Concerning how this working relationship played out on the set, Rodriguez would usually be behind the camera while Miller sat behind the monitor, while both worked with the actors.⁹⁸ Perhaps overconfident despite this lack of experience, Miller decided to direct on his own, helming the big-budget adaptation of Will Eisner's *The Spirit* (2008), which was influenced by *Sin City*'s style, but not nearly as successful with audiences or critics. Nevertheless, Miller served in the same capacity (co-director) for *Sin City: A Dame to Kill For*. For *Machete*, Rodriguez opted to co-direct again, this time with Ethan Maniquis, who had worked his way up from assistant/apprentice editor for Rodriguez's early films to his co-editor on *Planet Terror* and *Shorts*. Rodriguez has said little about why this decision was made, while Maniquis has not directed another film since.

Fox asked Rodriguez to write an original screenplay for a *Predator* sequel back in 1995, hoping that a strong script would lure Arnold Schwarzenegger into reprising his

⁹⁶"How It Went Down: Convincing Frank Miller to Make the Film," feature on *Sin City* Blu-Ray.

⁹⁷Chiarella, 43.

⁹⁸Ibid.

role from the 1987 film. The screenplay was largely forgotten for almost fifteen years. By that time, Rodriguez was busy making *Machete* and preparing for another *Spy Kids* sequel, so the decision was made that *Predators* would be a Troublemaker Studios production, but Rodriguez would not direct. He chose filmmaker Nimród Antal, as his critically-acclaimed Hungarian film *Kontroll* (2003) reminded him of his own low-budget sensibility and resourcefulness on *El Mariachi*, while *Armored* (2009) proved Antal could work with a large ensemble cast of strong personalities.⁹⁹ They were additionally like-minded in the design of the various predators. But Rodriguez was pleased that Antal did not merely mimic his directing style: “I walk into a set and he’s approached the scene completely differently, shooting it completely different from how I would do it, and in a great way.”¹⁰⁰ By his own admission, Rodriguez was barely on the set of *Predators*, but the behind-the-scenes features and commentary (in which he dominates the conversation) reveal that Rodriguez was often there on the set, arguably more involved than the typical producer in ensuring that his vision was realized. When he was asked how “just” producing was compared to directing, Rodriguez replied, “It’s a cakewalk. I didn’t realize how much easier producing is than directing....It was the strangest experience to see [Antal] with my crew....It was like I was having an out-of-body experience.”¹⁰¹ He also admits to having no interest in interfering with any of the director’s decisions, although he would be available at all times to offer advice to Antal. Rodriguez even humbly saw it as learning experience, stating that he can always learn from watching another director, even one with much less experience. Despite these comments on his seemingly positive

⁹⁹Commentary, *Predators* Blu-Ray.

¹⁰⁰From “Evolution of the Species: Predators Reborn,” feature on *Predators* Blu-Ray.

¹⁰¹Commentary, *Predators* Blu-Ray.

experience, there are as yet no films on the horizon for Rodriguez in the sole capacity of a producer, though it seems like a valid option for someone working on several projects at a time.

Rodriguez expresses his apparent understanding in the differences between film and television while working on *From Dusk Till Dawn: The Series*, saying that after scripting the first episode, he then took it to the writers' room, where he and his team of writers built the story arc and breakdowns for each of the seasons. Again, this supports Rodriguez's ability to adapt to a medium and to acquiesce control over a project when necessary.

Of course, the most substantial collaborator throughout Rodriguez has been his ex-wife, Elizabeth Avellan, who acted as Rodriguez's producer on every film from *El Mariachi* through *Spy Kids: All the Time in the World*, save for *Roadracers*. (She did get an executive producer for *Sin City: A Dame to Kill For*). Born in Caracas, Venezuela, Avellan came from a wealthy family. Her grandfather, Gonzalo Veloz, was one of the founders of commercial television in that country. She even executive produced and was one of the featured interviewees in *In & Out of Focus* (2002), a documentary about those in Hollywood trying to balance their careers with motherhood. Avellan produced four films after Rodriguez's romantic dalliance with Rose McGowan during the 2006 shooting of *Planet Terror*, which led to their amicable separation and eventual divorce in April 2008. Although her vital significance for building the Troublemaker empire cannot be overstated, she has also expanded her work outside of the Troublemaker domain. She acted as executive producer for *Sucuestro Express* (Jonathan Jakubowicz, 2005), Venezuela's highest-grossing film of all time, and one of the first to secure international

distribution. She has also mentored young Latin American filmmakers like Nicolás Lopéz, the Chilean director/writer of films such as the Eli Roth-produced *Aftershock* (2012). Avellan remains the co-owner and VP of Troublemaker Studios.

For evidence of how Rodriguez collaborates with his assistant directors, the grip department, and the art department, Sarah Kelly's *Full Tilt Boogie* (1997) is recommended. This feature-length, making-of documentary about *From Dusk Till Dawn* was successful in its own right, showing at the Venice Film Festival and Toronto International Film Festival, among others, while also getting a limited theatrical release in the U.S. and overseas. But even in this enlightening filmic document of the behind-the-scenes action of a Rodriguez set, it remains difficult to ascertain how exactly Rodriguez works his crew. Furthermore, *From Dusk Till Dawn* was also a less personal film, but more importantly, one of his most "Hollywood" in terms of its mode of production, and thus not indicative of the typical Rodriguez film, especially in the post-2001, Troublemaker era.

Rodriguez's (Troubling) Economic Practices:

***From Dusk Till Dawn*, the IATSE Strike, and Rodriguez's Opinion of Unions**

When discussing Rodriguez and labor, one matter that has drawn little attention has been his attitude toward unions. After being praised for shooting *Desperado* with an almost entirely Mexican crew¹⁰² (a practice repeated for *Once Upon a Time in Mexico*),

¹⁰² Returning to Acuña for filming, Rodriguez insisted that the crew for *Desperado* be over eighty percent Latino/Latin American and the department heads all be Mexican or Mexican-American in order to preserve the authenticity of *El Mariachi*. At the time, Columbia said it was the highest percentage of Mexican technical talent ever assembled for an American film (Todd Llano, "Movie Maze: How Hispanic Films Make it to the Big Screen," *Hispanic*, July 1995, 26).

he first drew some ire while shooting *From Dusk Till Dawn*. Rodriguez and writer/executive producer/actor Tarantino went with a non-union crew. While this is not uncommon, the fact that it was shot in Los Angeles gave this case a higher profile. As a result, the International Association of Technical Stage Employees (IATSE) asked for a list of employees from Tarantino and executive producer Lawrence Bender so the crew could vote on whether or not the set should be unionized, but Tarantino and Bender refused.¹⁰³ IATSE then filed a complaint with the National Labor Relations Board. They complained that not only were their members not employed by the production, but that this also meant less payments into the union's health and pension fund.¹⁰⁴ This apparently was not a cost-saving measure, but rather an issue of control.

In *Full Tilt Boogie*, Avellan offers her opinion that the IATSE attacked Rodriguez because he was a one-man crew on his films (referring to him as a “cameraographer” for *Desperado*). Although the documentary has a lengthy section on the film's labor troubles, Rodriguez gets off lightly, as the film's interviews primarily assign culpability to Bender and Tarantino for the protracted labor struggles. Trade articles also seemed to place more of the blame on Tarantino and Bender than Rodriguez. In *Variety*'s account of IATSE's complaint, Rodriguez is not mentioned until the end of the article, stating that “sources say” that he actually had a “financial core” membership in the Directors Guild of America, not full-fledged membership, allowing him to drop out of the guild temporarily during the production.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³Dan Cox and Rex Weiner, “Strike May Dawn on ‘Dusk’ Shoot,” *Variety*, June 19-25, 1995, 8.

¹⁰⁴Greg Spring, “Tarantino Snubs Big Film Union,” *Los Angeles Business Journal*, July 10, 1995, 9.

¹⁰⁵Cox and Weiner, 8.

This was not Rodriguez's last confrontation with unions; the Austin Federation of Musicians balked at his attempt to commission the Austin Symphony for some nonunion recording sessions on *Once Upon a Time in Mexico* (although the scores for the middle two installments of the *Spy Kids* series were under contract).¹⁰⁶ But later interviewers have broached Rodriguez's continued troubling attitude toward unions. When asked how the unions affect his ability to perform multiple tasks on a film, he replies, "I've got all the union cards! Production design, cinematography....editing, sound mixing," but that he had left the Writer's Guild because "they were trying to tell [him] what to do with [his] credits."¹⁰⁷ Despite this seeming due diligence in following protocol by joining these unions, he criticizes their role in the same interview as "clubs" out to "take your money" and "elitist." In a later interview, he defends his actions, saying that the Writer's Guild and Director's Guild don't like hyphenates and have too much infighting.¹⁰⁸ He defends this claim by referring to his idol, George Lucas, as someone who has thrived without union membership.¹⁰⁹ Rodriguez's relationship with the Directors Guild of America would not be without controversy again, as he resigned from the DGA because they would not allow him to share directing credit with Miller for *Sin City*, a direct violation of the guild's "one film, one director" rule. More troubling, however, is that Rodriguez displays no apparent awareness of the necessity of unions or of their historical significance: "As soon as you find out you don't need these guys, it's all over for

¹⁰⁶Aldama, *Cinema*, 49. Rodriguez formed the Texas Philharmonic Orchestra, consisting of musicians from the Dallas-Fort Worth, Austin-San Antonio, and Houston areas, to record the music for these two films.

¹⁰⁷Mel Rodriguez, "Robert Rodriguez's New Toy," *MovieMaker*, Sum 2003, 46. Reprinted in Ingle, 103.

¹⁰⁸Christine Radish, "Director Robert Rodriguez Talks *Spy Kids: All the Time in the World* and *Sin City 2*," *Collider*. <http://collider.com/robert-rodriguez-spy-kids-4-sin-city-2-interview>

¹⁰⁹Mel Rodriguez, 46. Reprinted in Ingle, 103.

them.”¹¹⁰ He further solidifies his position by basing it on individual freedom: “I’m all about freedom in art. Those guys want to control it. I’m from Texas, so when someone tells you which way to ride your horse, you think, ‘I’ll just go to a different ranch. You guys are riding it backwards anyway,’”¹¹¹ not the first time Rodriguez would tie his Texan identity to his self-persona as a maverick. It apparently extends to his crew as well, who are also largely non-union, a “devoted team that follows him from film-to-film.”¹¹²

While Rodriguez’s remarks can certainly be read as anti-union and thus problematic, they can also be aligned with his “jack-of-all-trades” approach to filmmaking. A filmmaker who tackles ancillary roles such as production design, cinematography, and editing may understandably overlook the functions that the Art Directors Guild, the American Society of Cinematographers (not a union or guild, but a professional organization nonetheless), and the Motion Picture Editors Guild play in American filmmaking. Likewise, independent filmmakers around the globe have been asserting their independence from traditional union-based filmmaking. In her study of the New Independent Argentine Cinema, Tamara Falicov documents how a new generation of independent filmmakers drew from a proliferation of film school graduates leading to a “flexibilization of labor.” This phenomenon, combined with a downsizing of all industries including film, has subsequently weakened the role of film union Sinidcato de la Industria Cinematographica Argentina (SICA).¹¹³

¹¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹¹Ibid.

¹¹²Nathan Koob, “Free Association: Robert Rodriguez and Artistry through Industry,” *Post Script* 33 (Sum 2014), 35.

¹¹³Tamara L. Falicov, *The Cinematic Tango: Contemporary Argentine Film* (London: Wallflower, 2007), 128.

Still, that is not to say that Rodriguez should be completely absolved of all wrongdoing in the *From Dusk Till Dawn* debacle, or in his opinions towards unions in general. Nathan Koob posits,

If Rodriguez suggests that the way he operates should be more widely adopted, nothing in his arguments cover the fact that not every filmmaker/producer, and certainly not the industry, can be trusted to respect worker's rights without the strength of something like a union looking out for them. In his discourses, Rodriguez seems to suggest that this post-Fordist neo-liberal practice is the price of independence and fails to reveal the many ways these practices do not benefit "below-the-line workers" or, in a broader sense, the general population.¹¹⁴

Others, such as Christopher González, have come to Rodriguez's defense, arguing that the decision to go non-union was, and often is for him, an artistic/economic one: "In the case of *From Dusk*, his choices were to compromise his project because of a lack of funds or to circumvent the budget issue with innovative thinking that happened to go against the union. His decision angered many folks, but Rodriguez is hardly a stranger to that when his craft is at stake."¹¹⁵

Rodriguez and the DIY Movement

El Mariachi can be viewed as Rodriguez's attempt to bring the DIY ("do it yourself") movement of music recording and "zine" (self-published, small-circulation periodicals usually printed through a photocopier) production to the more exclusive medium of film, which has also had a noticed effect on his views toward labor.

Ostensibly a book about the cultural impact of *The Simpsons*, pop culture journalist Chris

¹¹⁴Koob, 36.

¹¹⁵Qtd. in Frederick Luis Aldama, et al., "Five Amigos Crisscross Borders on a Road Trip with Rodriguez," in *Critical Approaches to the Films of Robert Rodriguez*, edited by Aldama (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015), 207.

Turner's *Planet Simpson: How a Cartoon Masterpiece Defined a Generation* captures the zeitgeist of the 1990s, without the advantage of much hindsight. In it he includes a section on the DIY movement, which originated in the punk scene of the 1980s. The DIY impetus, in a nutshell, is this according to Turner: "If the system does not work for you, if it has no place for you, then do it yourself. Start your own record label, produce your own album, organize your own tour."¹¹⁶ Although primarily associated with popular music, the DIY movement affected film culture with the publishing of zines and the rise of American independent cinema of the 1980s.¹¹⁷ Zines admittedly harken back at least as early as the science fiction fanzines which began in the 1930s, but the ubiquity of photocopiers in the 1980s made them a popular avenue for zines dedicated to horror films, as well as "paracinephiles," the lovers of trash cinema. New festivals, distributors, and technology allowed independent filmmakers to gain more exposure. It is easy to see Rodriguez's connections to this movement, and Turner even references Rodriguez along with fellow indie filmmakers Richard Linklater, Kevin Smith, and Tarantino in his discussion.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶Chris Turner, *Planet Simpson: How a Cartoon Masterpiece Defined a Generation* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo, 2004), 144. For more scholarship on the DIY movement, see Dawson Barrett, "DIY Democracy: The Direct Action Collectives of US Punk Collectives," *American Studies* 52:2 (2013): 23-42; Rochelle Smith, "Antislick to Postslick: DIY Books and Youth Culture Then and Now," *Journal of American Culture* 33 (Sep 2010): 207-216. For a treatment on the movement across the Atlantic, consult George McKay's edited volume *DiY Culture: Party & Protest in Nineties Britain* (London: Verso, 1998).

¹¹⁷In his discussion of Bart Simpson as a prototypical punk icon, Turner states: "Much as Bart has applied the DIY ethos to summer-camp rebellions and school pranks, so too did the DIY spirit inspire revivals in places far removed from the music industry....Hollywood, which had by the late 1980s sunk into a period of intense stagnation, rampant greed and creative bankruptcy. The film industry was in the kind of bloated rut that music had occupied a few years earlier, churning out little besides overpriced, overproduced, brain-dead spectacles. And then out of nowhere came the shoestring-budgeted, myth-making indies, whose tales of how they got their movies made became almost as well known as the movies themselves" (146). This description seems to describe *El Mariachi* and *Clerks* as much as any other film.

¹¹⁸Turner, 147.

This emphasis on DIY can be seen in the numerous references Rodriguez makes to creativity in his interviews. For instance, he discusses the necessity of creative people being able to also understand the technology necessary to get their work out there, as in his common refrain “art challenges technology, and technology challenges art.” Yet creativity still resumes its place of emphasis:

The technical part of any of these [tasks] is really 10 percent of the process. The rest is creative. If you’re creative, you can figure out how to paint, how to write a book....You ask different artists from different media and they all tell you the same thing about the creative process. It’s finding that creative instinct, that creative impulse, then following it through becomes the chore of filling in the blanks.¹¹⁹

Rodriguez arguably connects the freedom offered through digital technologies as the offspring of the DIY movement. In a 2005 interview, he saw filmmaking at that time as a revolution similar to what happened to “music 12 years ago or so, when people realized that they could make a whole album in their house. Now, you can do that with a feature. It’s not hard at all.”¹²⁰ Still, as evident from the previous section, Rodriguez has proven himself adept at moving back and forth from a DIY mentality to a “DIWO” (“Do It With Others”) one.

Conclusion

This chapter has addressed several of the most critical aspects to understanding Rodriguez’s work regarding labor. His indefatigability and adeptness at various aspects of filmmaking (directing, writing, producing, composing, editing, photographing, special effects, and sound mixing) are a marvel and have been inspirational to a younger

¹¹⁹Cobo.

¹²⁰Krebs.

generation of filmmakers. While his troubling attitudes toward unions have not gone unrecognized here, Rodriguez has always considered himself both an artist and an entertainer, but one who prides himself in achieving this while also being more cost effective. These economic concerns will be the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4

ECONOMICS

Introduction

How does one define “American independent cinema”? Independent film histories can detail movements (1980s, 1990s), significant films (*Shadows* [1959]; *Strangers in Paradise* [1984]; *Sex, Lies, and Videotape* [1989]), companies (Miramax, Focus Features), and filmmakers associated with the term, from John Cassavetes and John Sayles to Wes Anderson and Paul Thomas Anderson. “American independent cinema,” according to John Berra, is “both a mode of production, and a form of thinking, relating to the financing, filming, distribution, and cultural appreciation of modern film.”¹ But “independent film” has become such an overused phrase in popular media and scholarly literature that it is largely devoid of any substantive meaning.

Yet another question arises: Does an American independent cinema even exist? Again, Berra: “No filmmaker or producer is truly ‘independent,’ in that they cannot exist separately from the field of economic power, in this case represented by studios, distributors, exhibitors, and promotional media.”² Despite eliminating such a large swathe of those filmmakers and institutions (Sundance, the Independent Spirit Awards, and IFC), associated with the American independent film movement, I think Berra’s totalizing statement may be presumptuous. Surely a few filmmakers—Jon Jost (whose films have never exceeded budgets of \$40,000) and a few experimental filmmakers like

¹John Berra, *Declarations of Independence: American Cinema and the Partiality of Independent Production* (Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2008), 9.

²*Ibid.*, 15.

Jonas Mekas come to mind—are truly “independent,” even if they still depend on festivals, museums, and academia to promote their work. Realizing that the whole idea of “independent cinema” is problematic, this chapter, like much of this study, relies on a discursive analysis of how the media positions Rodriguez within the discourse on American independent film, as well as how Rodriguez continually maintains his own status as an independent filmmaker. In this chapter, I address many topics related to economics, from the influence of *El Mariachi* on American independent cinema to Rodriguez’s use of paratexts, and from his various companies to his new venture as founder and chairman of the El Rey Network. This chapter’s narrative arc depicts a filmmaker’s journey from microbudget filmmaker to media mogul, or from *El Mariachi* to El Rey.

You Gotta Have a Good Story: The Legend Behind *El Mariachi*

The Film

The legend of Rodriguez’s first film, *El Mariachi*, has been recounted many times and has become the stuff of film lore. All this for a film that Rodriguez himself admitted, “If I had known people might see this movie I’d have worked harder on it.”³ Planning to film the first of three direct-to-video Mexican action films in order to make a demo reel and get a “real” film production job, Rodriguez and former high school classmate/cousin Carlos Gallardo filmed *El Mariachi* in the border town of Acuña, Coahuila, Mexico, Gallardo’s hometown and already a frequent filming location for the two (first making a

³Robert Rodriguez, *Rebel Without a Crew: Or How a 23-Year-Old Filmmaker with \$7,000 Became a Hollywood Player* (New York: Dutton, 1995), 128.

short entitled *Ismail Jones and the Eye of the Devil* in 1984).⁴ As Frederick Luis Aldama points out, Rodriguez's decision to shoot in Mexico was not based on a "kind of economic outsourcing or Anglo fantasy wish-fulfillment experience," but rather the desire to see more Latino heroes on screen.⁵ Filming was done on a shoestring budget—under \$7,000—and sound was recorded "wild" immediately after shooting. How Rodriguez came up with the budget was simple arithmetic: he had spent \$800 on the eight-minute *Bedhead*, so he figured he could make an 80-minute film for \$8,000. When asked about his reputation for making cheap movies, Rodriguez replied, "It's my Latino influence! I can't help it. I can't stand being wasteful of money—even when it's someone else's money."⁶

When Rodriguez realized his film was getting some attention, he thought he would have to remake it for Hollywood. (In fact, one Disney producer wanted him to remake it in English and change the Mexican mariachi to an Anglo rock star.⁷) The film debuted at the Telluride and Toronto film festivals in September 1992, before garnering even greater attention when it won the Audience Award at Sundance in January 1993. After a screening at the Berlin Film Festival, it finally premiered in domestic theaters on February 26, 1993, possessing the lowest budget for a movie ever released by a major studio. Eclipsing \$2 million domestically, *El Mariachi* would make \$5 million worldwide, with an additional \$1.5 million in the VHS market.⁸ Further accolades included the Independent Spirit Award for Best First Feature (also nominated for Best

⁴Frederick Luis Aldama, *The Cinema of Robert Rodriguez* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014), 26.

⁵Ibid., 36-37.

⁶Rene Rodriguez, "Latinos Abound in *Spy Kids*," *Hispanic*, Apr 2001, 94.

⁷Aldama, *Cinema*, 37.

⁸Ibid., 28.

Director), landing in the National Board of Review's top ten foreign-language films of the year (losing to Chen Kaige's *Farewell My Concubine* [1993]), and a Special Award for "Exceptional Directorial Debut"⁹ and another Audience Award at the Deauville Film Festival, despite facing stiff competition from Ang Lee's *The Wedding Banquet* (1993), Bryan Singer's *Public Access* (1993), and Dominic Sena's *Kalifornia* (1993).

El Mariachi has indubitably received some recognition for its place in film history, even being inducted into the National Film Registry in 2011 for its "cultural, historical, and aesthetic significance." Yet the film's artistic merits are rarely broached in the discourse surrounding the film, especially from contemporary critics who emphasized its price tag over any aesthetic merits. Aldama explicates why this microbudget film still merits discussion, even on artistic terms:

El Mariachi is conceived in terms of a generic approach—*narcotraficante* and adventure warrior, [Sergio] Leone Western and road movie, say—but Rodriguez complicates this generic approach with his infusion of the philosophical, the comical, and the tragic, with the doppelgänger and the comic-book sensibility. This is how he *makes new* and revitalizes our experiences of the conventions of multiple genres.¹⁰

Aside from its memorable price tag, the film still occupies some space within the cultural imagination, so much so that a Spanish-language telenovela based on the series commenced in 2014, airing on MundoFox and Hulu.¹¹

But the film also signaled a new talent in the industry, one that would hire ICM's Robert Newman as his agent and be courted by the studios, eventually signing with Columbia Pictures. A film school dropout without any connections to southern

⁹Robert Rodriguez, *Roadracers: The Making of a Degenerate Hot Rod Flick* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), 23.

¹⁰Aldama, *Cinema*, 41. Emphasis in original.

¹¹Developed by Sony, Rodriguez is neither involved with, nor even consented to, the series.

California, he was, as Quentin Tarantino put it, “that fat girl.” “Robert is exactly what Francis Ford Coppola was talking about [in the documentary *Hearts of Darkness*]. The basic idea being that someday, some fat girl in Ohio is going to make the greatest movie in the world in her backyard and that the world’s going to wake up. In a weird way, Robert is that fat girl.”¹²

The Book

Filmmaking diaries/journals were less common before the American independent cinema boom of the 1980s. According to Satyajit Ray, writing during the 1970s,

A film maker rarely writes about films. He is either too busy making one, or too unhappy not to be able to make one, or too exhausted from the last one he made. Cocteau could write a film maker’s diary because he was a sort of superior dabbler who never knew the sustained pressures of professional film making. Eisenstein used words as copiously as he used celluloid; but then he was a teacher and a theoretician as much as a film maker. Others have written about their films at the end of their careers. But by and large film makers have desisted from adding footnotes to their own work. This reticence has encouraged the growth of a mystique which has helped the film maker to sustain his ego while concealing his vulnerability. His ego is an indispensable part of his equipment.¹³

Whether their motives are more for self-promotion or to make filmmaking more invisible and accessible, filmmakers such as Spike Lee began publishing diaries on the making of their films, from original conception to theatrical release. Lee decided to do this for most of his earlier films, including *She’s Gotta Have It* (1986, *Spike Lee’s Gotta Have It: Inside Guerilla Filmmaking*), *School Daze* (1988, *Uplift the Race: The Construction of*

¹²David Hochman, “Once Upon a Time in Moviemaking,” *Premiere*, Oct 2003, 71. Reprinted in Ingle, 116.

¹³Satyajit Ray, *Our Films, Their Films* (New York: Hyperion, 1994), 1. Elsewhere Ray notes, “In writing about my own work, I have realised why film makers have written so little about film making. So complex is the process, so intricate and elusive the triangular relationship between the maker, the machines and the human material that is deployed, that to describe even a single day’s work in all its details of conception, collaboration and execution would call for abilities beyond most film makers. Even with such gifts, a lot of what goes on in the dark recesses of the film maker’s mind would go unsaid, for the simple reason that it cannot be put into words” (10).

School Daze), *Do the Right Thing* (1989), and *Malcolm X* (1992, *By Any Means Necessary: The Trials and Tribulations of the Making of Malcolm X*).

While *El Mariachi*'s ridiculously low budget certainly sent shockwaves through both Hollywood and the American independent filmmaking community, its low box-office total meant that a small minority actually saw the film in theaters. Yet the legend behind the film grew through media outlets, but also in his published tell-all account of the entire process, *Rebel Without a Crew: Or How a 23-Year-Old Filmmaker with \$7,000 Became a Hollywood Player*, published by Dutton. In it, Rodriguez describes how he came to raise half of his budget through a month-long stay in a research hospital (in the chapter entitled "I Was a Human Lab Rat") where he was able to write his screenplay, raise half of his budget, and meet Peter Marquadt, whom he would cast as his main villain. This unorthodox approach to film fundraising also appears in many of the early interviews,¹⁴ building up the mythic lore surrounding the film and this rising independent filmmaker. In contrast to the aforementioned production diaries of Spike Lee, less of *Rebel Without a Crew* deals with the idea, preproduction, and shooting of *El Mariachi* (less than third of the book), as the postproduction, shopping his film around (first to Spanish-language video companies like Film-Mex, Mex-American, and Cine-Mex, before being courted by almost all of the major Hollywood studios), and the film's successful aftermath on the festival circuit are instead emphasized. For instance,

¹⁴Andy Marx, "He Hit It Big. He Hit It Fast. Let 'El Mariachi' Play," *Los Angeles Times*, May 31, 1992, 18; Veronica Chambers, "Hyphenate Robert Rodriguez," *Premiere*, Jan 1993, 31; Peter Travers, "On the Move with Robert Rodriguez," *Rolling Stone*, Mar 18, 1993, 47. But the first major news story in the trades was a front page story in the April 23, 1992 issue of *Daily Variety*, over four months before its first public screening at Telluride.

Rodriguez spares little detail on the tedious four months of postproduction work, as he made a rough cut on his VCR and synched the sound to ¾-inch video tapes. He also describes making the final cut at a CATV facility in Austin. The book includes two appendices: “The Ten-Minute Film School” (which would come to be a regular DVD feature) and the original screenplay (including his annotations).

***El Mariachi* and the Microbudget Revolution**

El Mariachi’s influence on independent filmmaking of the last two decades should also be addressed, particularly in how it helped launch the “microbudget” revolution. Several notable low-budget successes existed before *El Mariachi*. In the era of New Hollywood, *Night of the Living Dead* (1968, \$114,000), *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974, \$83,532), and *Halloween* (1978, \$320,000), had all proved that low-budget independent films could attract large audiences. But *El Mariachi* was one of the first in a wave of risible budgets promoted advantageously by the filmmakers, distributors, and festivals, when films “made for the cinematic equivalent of pocket change,” would be used as a “marketing hook that could also have been a disguised warning to audiences to state that these films were rough and ready.”¹⁵

Generally, independent film budgets can vary widely, from tens of *thousands* of dollars to tens of *millions*. (The \$102 million *Cloud Atlas* [2012] was technically an independent film.) I am here defining “microbudget” films (also known as “no budget” or “ultra-low budget”) as films generally costing less than \$60,000. (This is admittedly an arbitrary figure, but tied to the budget for *The Blair Witch Project*, whose innovative

¹⁵Berra, 26.

marketing campaign has surely shaped the discourse on the potential success of these types of films.¹⁶⁾ The chart below includes some of the major microbudget films along with their reported budgets, domestic grosses, and profit-to-cost ratios.

Movie	Year (Theatrical Release)	Budget	Domestic Gross	Profit/Cost Ratio
Slacker	1991	\$23,000	\$1,228,108	5,240%
The Living End	1992	\$22,769	\$692,585	2,942%
El Mariachi	1993	\$7,000	\$2,040,920	29,056%
Clerks	1994	\$27,000	\$3,151,130	11,571%
The Brothers McMullen	1995	\$23,800 ¹⁷	\$10,426,506	43,709%
In the Company of Men	1997	\$25,000	\$2,804,473	11,118%
The Blair Witch Project	1999	\$60,000 ¹⁸	\$140,539,099	234,132%
Primer	2004	\$7,000	\$424,760	5,968%
Tarnation	2004	\$218.32	\$592,000	271,062%
Paranormal Activity	2009	\$15,000 ¹⁹	\$107,918,810	719,359%

¹⁶This is also the budget that John Pierson believed was the lowest possible cost, *after* blowing up the feature to 35mm, remixing sound, and securing insurance. See John Pierson, *Spike, Mike, Slackers & Dykes: A Guided Tour Across a Decade of American Independent Cinema* (New York: Hyperion, 1997), 235.

¹⁷Listed erroneously as \$238,000 on Box Office Mojo. Other sources: \$25,000 or \$28,000.

¹⁸A less cited figure is \$35,000, which will still make the film second to *Paranormal Activity* in profit-to-cost ratio.

¹⁹The figure most frequently cited. Also listed as \$11,000 in some promotional materials, as in Missy Schwartz, "Meet the Stars of 'Paranormal Activity,'" *Entertainment Weekly*, Oct 23, 2009, 11-12. This would make for an astonishing 980,980% return on investment!

Again, the above chart does not reflect international box office, home video revenue, or sequels, as in the case of *El Mariachi* (two), *The Blair Witch Project* (one), and *Paranormal Activity* (five and counting). Although *El Mariachi* no longer holds the record for profit-to-cost ratio (and one wonders when the next *Blair Witch/Paranormal Activity* sensation will arrive), it still may have the lowest budget of any feature to make over a million dollars.²⁰

It must be understood that almost all of the costs above were those before the films were blown up to 35mm or had their soundtracks remixed. Independent film distributor/historian John Pierson estimated that a mid-1990s film with these costs, as well as others such as securing insurance, deferments, music rights, and other lab deliverables, would drive budgets up to at least the \$100,000-150,000 range.²¹ Marketing costs can be substantially greater, as they were for *El Mariachi*—\$1 million.²²

But are we making too much of the “microbudget” film? Pierson seems to think so: “The distance between a \$2.5 million budget, which almost no one can raise privately, and \$250,000 is vast. However the gap between that mid-level and the ultra-low \$25,000 is deceptive.”²³ Nevertheless, in terms of marketing, the difference is noticeably greater, as films such as *El Mariachi* and *Clerks* could exploit the underdog narratives of their respective directors selling his body to science or maxing out his credit cards. According to Holly Willis in her work on the rise of digital cinema,

The [independent film] movement’s chief narrative was the rags-to-riches story about a boy who made a movie for no money and went on to make millions at the

²⁰See list “Movies With Lowest Budgets to Earn \$1 Million at US Box Office” at <http://the-numbers.com/movie/budgets/>

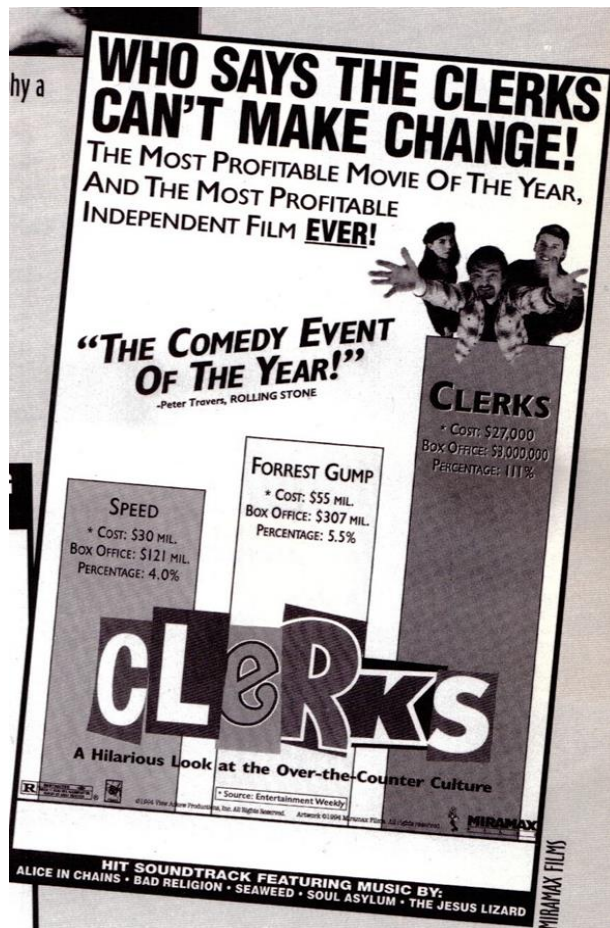
²¹Pierson, 235. For more, see chapter “How Low Can a Budget Go?” (234-238).

²²Aldama, *Cinema*, 33.

²³Pierson, 234.

box office. It is the perfect American story, and the narrative not only fueled the fantasies of innumerable would-be filmmakers, but made overt the intersection of filmmaking and the market, giving the public a very tantalizing embodiment of one of the most American of mythologies, namely that anyone can become rich and famous.²⁴

Although Willis makes no mention of any particular filmmakers she has in mind, surely Rodriguez exemplifies this truth of this statement as much as any other American filmmaker. These underdog narratives also worked in tandem with the ridiculous profit-to-cost ratios for these films, as in the advertisement below, depicting the greater return on investment for *Clerks* versus blockbusters *Forrest Gump* and *Speed* (both 1994).



²⁴Holly Willis, *New Digital Cinema: Reinventing the Moving Image* (London: Wallflower, 2005), 15.

Although *Slacker* and *The Living End* preceded *El Mariachi* in theaters, the reported budget of \$7,000 for *El Mariachi* was exploited in its promotion and garnered significant attention from the press in a way that the other two films did not, as the other two films were positioned as capturing Generation X angst and the New Queer Cinema, respectively. (Emphasizing the low cost is also a far cry from the situation just a few years previous when Hal Hartley exaggerated the negative cost of his debut *The Unbelievable Truth* as \$200,000 when it actually cost \$75,000, for fear of distributors shying away from a film with such a paltry production cost.²⁵) In fact, one of the earliest interviews with Rodriguez in the mainstream press was Greg Barrios's *New York Times* article "A Borrowed Camera, \$7,000, and a Dream," published February 21, 1993. Maybe the most exploited, precise budget figure up to that point, it was used constantly in the promotion of the film, and would be cited frequently by Rodriguez, including the subtitle for his first book (*Or How a 23-Year-Old Filmmaker with \$7,000 Became a Hollywood Player*).

Returning to the central framework of this thesis—the evolution of a filmmaker vis-à-vis the independent film scene—microbudget films have become a major assertion of authorship, representing a singular vision. All of the directors of the films in the above chart have parlayed their success into careers, whether staying fiercely independent (Gregg Araki, Edward Burns) or eventually crossing over into the mainstream making films with larger budgets (Neil LaBute, Kevin Smith). Even if some of the films may not appear transgressive on the surface, they inherently possess that quality:

²⁵James Mottram, *The Sundance Kids: How the Mavericks Too Back Hollywood* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2006), 18-19.

The value of low-budget films is: they can be transcendent expressions of a single person's individual vision and quirky originality. When a corporation decides to invest \$20 million in a film, a chain of command regulates each step, and no one person is allowed free rein....Often [low-budget] films are eccentric—even extreme—presentations by individuals freely expressing their imaginations, who throughout the filmmaking process improvise creative solutions to problems posed by either circumstance or budget—mostly the latter. Secondly, they often present unpopular—even radical—views addressing social, political, racial or sexual inequalities, hypocrisy in religion or government; or, in other ways they assault taboos related to the presentation of sexuality, violence, or other mores.²⁶

Furthermore, this microbudget revolution that *El Mariachi* certainly influenced still continues today, particularly since digital filmmaking can push production costs even lower and “prosumer” digital cameras allow amateur filmmakers to make films that, at least in terms of their look, compare favorably with films with higher budgets. In the end, Rodriguez proved that making a movie did not require much in the way of resources (money, equipment, or cast and crew), but rather industry and a lot of imagination. Concerning the importance of creativity when making low-budget films Rodriguez states, “Low-budget movies put a wall in front of you and only creativity will allow you to figure out how to get around that wall.”²⁷

Rodriguez's Influence on Indie Filmmakers

Historical accounts have generally not given Rodriguez enough credit for his impact on contemporary American independent filmmaking. As the subtitle of his tome *The Sundance Kids: How the Mavericks Took Back Hollywood* might suggest, James Mottram admits his bias toward West Coast filmmakers who were more likely to work

²⁶In V. Vale, Andrea Juno, and Jim Morton (eds.), *Incredibly Strange Films* (San Francisco: RE/search, 1986), 5.

²⁷Robert Rodriguez, *Rebel*, 175.

within the system (e.g., Steven Soderbergh, Paul Thomas Anderson, Bryan Singer) over the more radically “independent” filmmakers from the East Coast (Jim Jarmusch, Todd Solondz, Hal Hartley), with Rodriguez and Linklater awkwardly not belonging to either camp. (Mottram still manages to devote one of his 24 chapters to the two Austin-based filmmakers.²⁸) This lack of attention may also be due to Mottram’s apparent disinterest in filmmaking from marginalized cultures (while Sofia Coppola and Kimberly Pierce are included, Rodriguez is the only non-White filmmaker of the fourteen he discusses in depth), but it may also be due to the types of films Rodriguez generally makes:

Aside from the fact that Rodriguez warrants mention in this book because of his contribution to the development of Tarantino’s career, does he merit serious consideration in his own right? Rodriguez, after all, is not a director who has impacted upon Hollywood in the way Tarantino did; his admittedly inventive films are fast, cheap celluloid adrenalin rushes, as unpretentious as they are throwaway. What they don’t do is hold up a mirror to contemporary society, a task Rodriguez gleefully leaves for other, more ‘worthy’ directors.²⁹

Kevin Smith has cited *Slacker* as the film that inspired him to become a filmmaker, but he has also credited Rodriguez as an early inspiration. He recalls a Howard Stern interview in which Rodriguez said, “If I had any advice for a filmmaker, it would be: Write only what you have access to,”³⁰ advice Smith embraced wholeheartedly in his decision to film *Clerks* in the same convenience store in which he worked.

Rodriguez’s *Rebel Without a Crew* has also had an effect on countless filmmakers whose stories have not been told. Ben Steinbrauer’s documentary *The Next Tim Day* (2006) tells the story of the eponymous filmmaker who self-distributes “the first straight-

²⁸Mottram, 85-104.

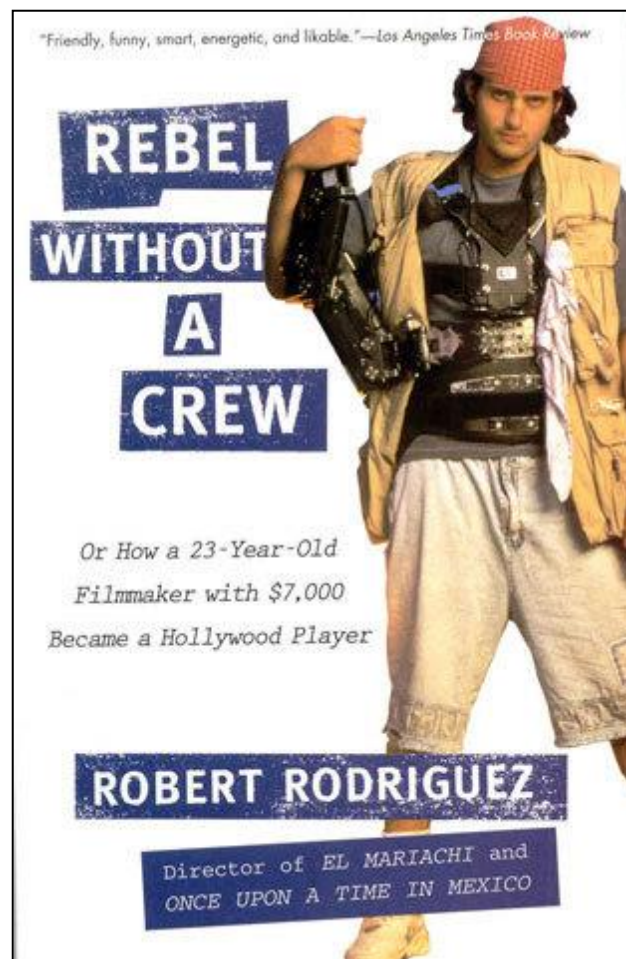
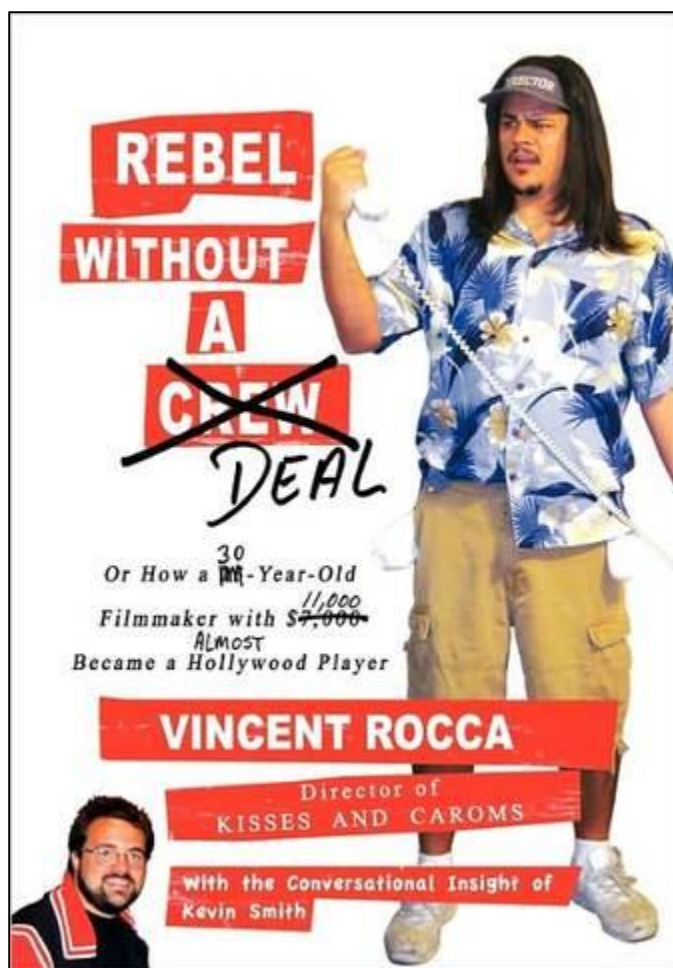
²⁹Ibid., 88.

³⁰Vincent Rocca, *Rebel Without a Deal: Or How a 30-Year-Old Filmmaker with \$11,000 Almost Became a Hollywood Player* (Granada Hills, CA: Poverty Works, 2010), 324.

to-DVD TV show,” *Hood News*, in his hometown of Galveston, Texas.³¹ Day became inspired to become a filmmaker by reading *Rebel Without a Crew* while in prison. His DVDs even include a “10½ Minute School” and he frequently cites Rodriguez as his inspiration. *The Next Tim Day* climaxes with Day meeting Rodriguez at a University of Texas speaking engagement. Although Tim Day may not have made his “big break” yet, two filmmakers who have frequently cited *Rebel Without a Crew* and have achieved substantially more attention are the Canadian twin sister filmmaking tandem, Jen and Sylvia Soska. Their directorial debut *Dead Hooker in a Trunk* (2009) was made for only \$2,500, but received enough attention that they were able to work with bigger budgets on further horror efforts, *American Mary* (2012) and *See No Evil 2* (2014).

To further emphasize its popularity, *Rebel Without a Crew* even has spawned its own spoof, Vincent Rocca’s *Rebel Without a Deal: or, How a 30-Year-Old Filmmaker with \$11,000 Almost Became a Hollywood Player*. The book’s cover mimics *Rebel Without a Crew* almost perfectly:

³¹Although Day has no credits listed on IMDb outside of his role in the documentary based on him, his biography there reads, “Day was born in 1976 in what he describes as Galveston’s ‘hood’ to a 14-year-old single mother. He didn’t meet his father until he was 9. NOW [*sic*], the entrepreneur, hustler and mini-movie star has come a long way from his days as one of Galveston’s most wanted cocaine peddlers. His raw ambition and insatiable drive to succeed compelled his idol—filmmaker Robert Rodriguez—to interrupt a speech at the University of Texas in Austin just to offer him encouragement.”



Vincent Rocca describes his experience making and seeking distribution for his microbudget film *Kisses and Caroms* (shot in 2003, released in 2006), a film released direct-to-DVD after one festival screening at the obscure Delray Beach Film Festival. Rocca's account is certainly forthright, including how his film was partially funded through making softcore porn: "Kevin [Smith] sold his comic book collection to make *Clerks*, Rodriguez sold his body to make *El Marachi*, and we sold porn to make *Kisses and Caroms*."³² Like Pierson's *Spike, Mike, Slackers & Dykes*, Rocca also intersperses

³²Rocca, 26.

his diary with interviews with Kevin Smith. Rocca, who has not directed a film since (although he has produced two low-budget independent genre films), has capitalized to a small extent on his one film. He even responds to posts on IMDb message boards for those with questions about his film or who simply want to criticize it. I suggest that the release of *Rebel Without a Deal* arguably demonstrates the popularity of *Rebel Without a Crew*, that Rocca could still build on Rodriguez's work fifteen years after its original publication. It also serves as a reminder that for every microbudget success like *El Mariachi* or *Paranormal Activity*, there are thousands of films made by directors hoping to mimic this success, but are unable to secure theatrical distribution or make a return on their modest investment.

Indeed, Rodriguez's influence reverberates around the world. The subject of *Wakaliwood: The Documentary* (2012), Nabwana I. G. G. has recently become a YouTube sensation (over 4 million views of his trailers on his channel) with films like *Who Killed Captain Alex?* (2010) billed as "Uganda's first action movie." Nabwana, who had never left the immediate vicinity of his village, was brought to Austin by Alamo Drafthouse CEO Tim League to discuss his films. When League asked him what inspired him to become a filmmaker, he replied "*Rebel Without a Crew*."

Another case is Uruguayan filmmaker Fede Alvarez, who had drawn attention with his shorts *El cojonudo* (2005) and *Panic Attack!* (2009) before directing his first feature, the 2013 remake of *Evil Dead*. Alvarez has also credited *Rebel Without a Crew* as a formative influence in his filmmaking, and was hired to direct an episode of *From Dusk Till Dawn: The Series*. But Rodriguez's influence has been acknowledged outside of the independent scene. In a recent interview in *Smithsonian*, popular food writer and

television personality Anthony Bourdain acknowledged some of the major filmmaking influences for his show *Anthony Bourdain: Parts Unknown* (CNN, 2013-present): Soderbergh, Terrence Malick, Shinya Tsukamoto, Wong Kar-Wai, Seijun Suzuki, Michelangelo Antonioni, and, somewhat incongruously, Robert Rodriguez.³³ Discussing the influence of the “Ten-Minute Film School” series (addressed in depth later) and *Rebel Without a Crew*, Brian O’Hare wasn’t exaggerating when he wrote, “There are no doubt legions of young moviemakers like Rodriguez out there, studying the master’s tricks.”³⁴

The Follow-up to *El Mariachi*: *Roadracers* as Film and Book

Rodriguez followed up his fiercely independent debut with a film more in line with traditional Hollywood filmmaking, even if on a much smaller budget. In 1994, Showtime asked several directors to helm made-for-television films for their series *Rebel Highway* (1994), produced by *Halloween* writer-producer Debra Hill, as well as Lou Arkoff. All of the films were “remakes” (most just borrowed the title) of American International Pictures (AIP) films of the late 1950s. Rodriguez’s *Roadracers* served as the series debut, followed by Uli Edel’s *Confessions of a Sorority Girl*, John Milius’s *Motorcycle Gang*, Joe Dante’s *Runaway Daughters*, John McNaughton’s *Girls in Prison*, Allan Arkush’s *Shake, Rattle, and Rock!*, Mary Lambert’s *Drag Strip Girl*, William Friedkin’s *Jailbreakers*, Ralph Bakshi’s *Cool and the Crazy*, and Jonathan Kaplan’s *Reform School Girl*. (Tarantino was originally set to remake Corman’s *Rock All Night* [1957] before backing out.³⁵)

³³Ron, Rosenbaum, “Without Reservations,” *Smithsonian*, July/Aug 2014, 35.

³⁴Brian O’Hare, “Moving at the Speed of Thought,” *MovieMaker* 75 (2008), 50. Reprinted in Ingle, 132. His next statement is debatable, however: “He, after all, is the future of moviemaking.”

³⁵Rodriguez, *Roadracers*, 89.

With *Desperado* delayed by Columbia Pictures for a year due to *Last Action Hero*'s lackluster box-office performance and the Heidi Fleiss scandal,³⁶ Rodriguez took over *Roadracers* after Wes Craven dropped out to direct *New Nightmare* (1994).³⁷ Rodriguez admitted to being hired primarily on his reputation for making such a cheap debut film. It may have been his first experience with a crew and a lot bigger budget (*El Mariachi*'s miniscule budget increased a hundredfold), but as a made-for-television production, it was still a "rush job" in comparison to his later work. Rodriguez's disdain for what he perceived as the prototypical wastefulness of Hollywood, as well as that for a crew that he was not able to choose himself but was assigned to him (the crew were contracted for the entirety of the series) stands out throughout the published *Roadracers* production journal. He and friend Tommy Nix had only ten days to write the script, with a mere thirteen days to shoot the film and fifteen days to edit. Although *Roadracers* was given the tightest budget with which to work, the film was selected from the ten in the series to be the debut episode and was the only video included in the electronic press kit sent to journalists.³⁸ Despite several other high-profile directors attached to the series, it remains the highest-rated episode on IMDb.

Nevertheless, Rodriguez notes the film's significance primarily in terms of lessons learned. Frank in his journal, his disappointments frequently appear: "It's really frustrating when you put so much care into making something and everyone else around here is just collecting a paycheck."³⁹ He longs for a smaller crew throughout the

³⁶Ibid., viii-ix.

³⁷Ibid., 4-5.

³⁸Ibid., 98-99.

³⁹Ibid., 97.

production and post-production of the film and usually concludes that the best (and cheapest) way to get things done is to do it yourself: “The budget meeting was hilarious today.... No wonder movies are so expensive here. I wish they would just give me the budget and let me take it down to Texas and produce the thing myself....I told them I’d rather have less crew. They laughed because all the other directors wanted more crew!”⁴⁰

These would be recurring themes in interviews conducted throughout his career.

He is especially disdainful of waste in the typical Hollywood production:

The sound guy come up and says, ‘It’s gonna cost X-amount for this.’ They don’t know any better, so they just believe it and they pay it. It’s like the Pentagon spending five hundred dollars for a hammer. I try to use common sense and not throw money away. Usually what happens is, somebody will make a movie, and when they go on to the next movie they take their old budget from the last movie and just modify that one. So they keep doing everything the same way, being afraid of taking chances. There are such new technologies and new ways of doing things, you don’t have to be that old-school wasteful anymore.⁴¹

This parsimonious approach to filmmaking also has its benefits. Rodriguez emphasizes that lower budgets force him to tackle his projects with more creativity: “It’s just real easy to have a money hose there; as soon as another challenge or problem comes up, you just aim it and wash it away. That’s a job, is to take on those challenges creatively, because that’s going to make the movie better, because it’s a creative endeavor.”⁴²

While *Rebel Without a Crew* has continuously remained in print since its first publication in 1995, *Roadracers: The Making of a Degenerate Hot Rod Flick* was published by Faber and Faber in 1998, and soon went out of print. (Whether or not this

⁴⁰Ibid., 30.

⁴¹Rustin Thompson, “The Reformation of a Rebel Without a Crew,” *MovieMaker*, Sep/Oct 1995, 10-11. Reprinted in Ingle, 27.

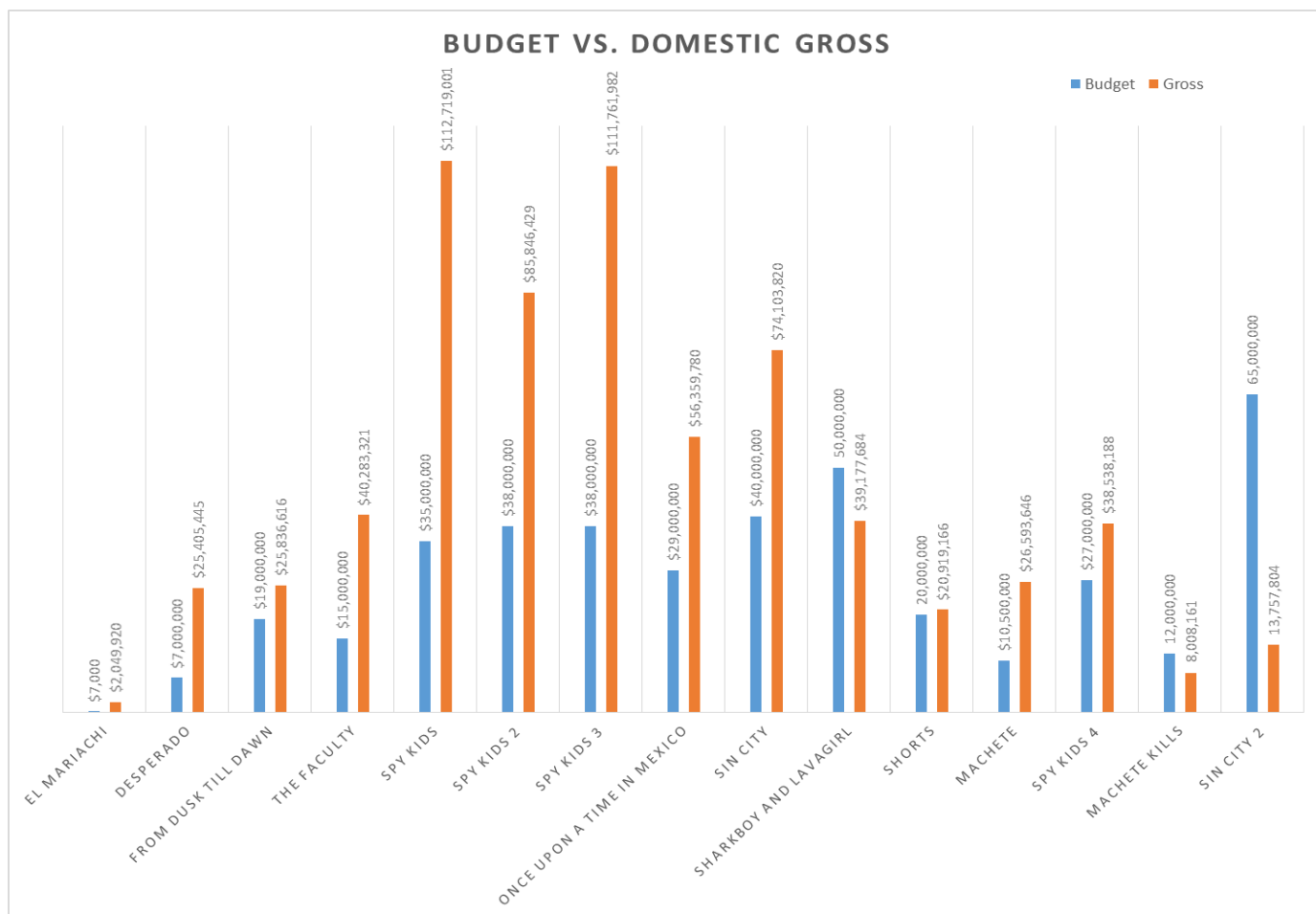
⁴²Keith Phipps, “Robert Rodriguez,” *The A.V. Club*, <http://www.avclub.com/article/robert-rodriguez-13753>. Reprinted in Ingle, 65-66.

was due to Rodriguez's harsh comments about some of his crew remains uncertain.) In many ways a sequel to *Rebel Without a Crew*, it retains much of that earlier book's format, with its production diary (including stills and storyboards) and screenplay, but no "Ten-Minute Film School." The film itself was finally released on DVD and Blu-ray in 2012, the first home release for the film since its original release on video. But for Rodriguez scholars, the book may be more interesting than the film itself. While the film's budget of \$1 million (\$700,000 according to some sources⁴³) was rather anemic compared to Hollywood budgets during its time, Rodriguez bristled throughout the production with having to work with a full crew.

A Closer Examination of Rodriguez's Budgets

After the \$7,000 budget of *El Marachi* and an increase of at least a hundredfold for *Roadracers*, the budget for *Desperado* would see an additional tenfold increase (although \$7 million was still a very low sum for a mid-1990s action film). Rodriguez's budgets would continue to rise, before tapering off. Below is a table of production costs and domestic grosses for Rodriguez's features, per Box Office Mojo. These point to how drastically Rodriguez has changed, perhaps questioning whether or not he can still hold claim to being a maverick, low-budget filmmaker.

⁴³For example, the budget quoted in "Ten-Minute Film School: The Making of a Degenerate Hot Rod Flick," on *Roadracers* DVD/Blu-Ray. Rodriguez also mentions in the book that his film cost much cheaper than the others in the series had been budgeted at, \$1 million, and that part of the reason he was brought on board was that the four entries previously shot had gone over schedule and over budget, and that he was to help the producers recover some of these overages.



<u>Movie</u>	<u>Budget</u>	<u>Gross</u>
El Mariachi	\$7,000	\$2,049,920
Desperado	\$7,000,000	\$25,405,445
From Dusk Till Dawn	\$19,000,000	\$25,836,616
The Faculty	\$15,000,000	\$40,283,321
Spy Kids	\$35,000,000	\$112,719,001
Spy Kids 2	\$38,000,000	\$85,846,429
Spy Kids 3	\$38,000,000	\$111,761,982
Once Upon a Time in Mexico	\$29,000,000	\$56,359,780
Sin City	\$40,000,000	\$74,103,820
Sharkboy and Lavagirl	50,000,000	\$39,177,684
Shorts	20,000,000	\$20,919,166
Machete	\$10,500,000	\$26,593,646
Spy Kids 4	\$27,000,000	\$38,538,188
Machete Kills	12,000,000	8,008,161
Sin City 2	65,000,000	13,757,804

This table does not include the *Grindhouse* double bill, which according to Box Office Mojo cost \$67 million (although Aldama offers the more conservative figure of \$53 million⁴⁴). According to most accounts, *Planet Terror* was by far the less expensive of the two. His production of *Predators* had a similar budget to his other productions, \$40 million, and made \$52 million domestic and \$127 worldwide. *Roadracers* and *Curandero* are also not listed, as the former was a TV movie and the second was never released in theaters. Worldwide grosses are notoriously less precise and inflation-adjusted figures can be problematic (how best to account for re-releases?), but those interested can consult Rodriguez's page on Box Office Mojo for those figures as well.

The first observation is that Rodriguez's budgets have leveled off, defying journalists such as Michael Haile who, after the cost doubled from *Desperado* to *From Dusk Till Dawn*, predicted that he would soon be directing \$100 million films,⁴⁵ which is not the case even twenty years later. Still, to say that his budgets are far removed from the \$7,000 *El Mariachi* would be an understatement, as none of his other feature films have had budgets less than \$1 million. When Charles Ramírez Berg queried his ability to still adhere to a guerilla aesthetic when making a film like *Spy Kids* Rodriguez replied, "Now, I'm a higher-profile filmmaker, and I have to hire union employees, and you want to hire better actors, and every piece of equipment is expensive, and the cost goes up. But I still find it hard to spend money, even now when I'm spending other people's money."⁴⁶ From his humble beginnings, Rodriguez's budgets have ballooned to the \$40 million (and

⁴⁴Aldama, *Cinema*, 114.

⁴⁵Michael Haile, "From Rags to Riches," *Boxoffice*, Aug 1995, 9. Reprinted in Ingle, 19.

⁴⁶Charles Ramírez Berg, *Latino Images in Film: Stereotypes, Subversion, and Resistance* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 258.

upward) range, although the table above depicts how his largest budgets have been at this range since *Sin City*, they have, for the most part leveled off, even though the average cost of just *marketing* a Hollywood film had risen to over \$40 million by 2014.⁴⁷ His desire to save money on his films connects to his *rasquache* identity, as previously discussed in Chapter 2.

From 2002 to 2005, Rodriguez was an annual fixture on *Premiere*'s "Power 50 List," but his lackluster box office in the wake of his millennial successes may lead to an uncertain future for his filmmaking. No film since *Sin City* has even crossed the \$50 million mark domestically. Despite rising ticket prices and 3-D premium surcharges, Box Office Mojo reports the average domestic box office for his sixteen features as \$44,149,366,⁴⁸ which barely eclipses his budget ceiling. Although each of the first three *Spy Kids* films achieved blockbuster status, Rodriguez sequels since have been less of a sure thing. An examination of the box office tallies for the recent sequels reveal diminishing returns when he chooses to go back to the well too often: *Spy Kids: All the Time in the World*, a 62% decline from an average of the three previous films; *Machete Kills*, a 70% decline; and the most precipitous of all, *Sin City: A Dame to Kill For*'s 81% decline. Therefore, it may be a paucity in original ideas, rather than commercial incentive, which serves as the driving factor in the decision to prolong these tired franchises.

⁴⁷Pamela McClintock, "New Movie Math: Spend \$200 Million, Pray for Profits," *Hollywood Reporter*, Aug 8, 2014, 42.

⁴⁸<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/people/chart/?view=Director&id=robertrodriguez.htm>

Four Rooms and the “Class of ‘92”

As Linklater notes, “There’s always a class of Sundance people, who come out every year....Quentin has this theory he and Robert and Allison Anders were Sundance ’92. They fancied themselves as the Class of ’92 and tried to mythologize themselves.”⁴⁹ Indeed, the label stuck, and Rodriguez, Tarantino, Allison Anders, and Alexandre Rockwell became known as Sundance’s “Class of ’92.” While Rockwell’s *In the Soup* (1992) won the Grand Jury Prize at Sundance, Anders’s *Gas, Food, Lodging* (1992) and Tarantino’s *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) were received favorably enough to carry them to awards at other festivals in addition to international attention. But the “Class of ’92” seemed to have little in common. They hailed from Boston (Rockwell), Kentucky (Anders), Tennessee/Los Angeles (Tarantino), and Texas (Rodriguez). The more subdued *In the Soup* and *Gas, Food, Lodging* differed drastically from the ultraviolent, genre-oriented fare of Rodriguez and Tarantino. The filmmakers varied in their experience up to that point; while Tarantino and Rodriguez were screening their feature debuts, Anders was one of the directors on the 1987 feature *Border Radio*, while *In the Soup* was Rockwell’s third feature. The filmmakers also varied in age from Anders (b. 1954) to Rodriguez (b. 1968). Furthermore, Rodriguez was more of an honorary member anyway, since he and *El Mariachi* were not even at Sundance in 1992; as mentioned earlier, it was the subsequent year’s festival where *El Mariachi* won the Audience Award. Still, Rodriguez did note some commonality in the backgrounds:

People were saying we’re supposed to be the new blood or something....I think it was kind of strange in that in the seventies, you had filmmakers who were coming from film school. And I look at Alex and Quentin and Allison and I’m sitting there, we couldn’t afford film school. We couldn’t get into film school....And we

⁴⁹Mottram, 29.

can offer stuff that you don't usually see coming out of film schools, cause we didn't learn how to do it by listening to someone else, but by watching movies and coming up with our own plans and ideas.⁵⁰

Rockwell stated at that time, "I had the feeling that there was a new wave of us. And I've always liked the French New Wave and German cinema at its emergence, or when the Italian cinema had its neorealist movement. And I thought maybe we would be a new wave of filmmakers and collaborate the way the French all got together....It would be kind of cool if we did something together."⁵¹ Aside from Rockwell's inexplicable disassociation of his and his comrades' films from the larger American independent film movement of Jarmusch, Soderbergh, Spike Lee, et al., it does touch on the rationale for the four coming together to make *Four Rooms*.

Anders ("The Missing Ingredient"), Rockwell ("The Wrong Man"), Rodriguez ("The Misbehavers"), and Tarantino ("The Man From Hollywood") each directed one of the four "rooms," or shorts in the omnibus film. Linklater (Sundance Class of '91) was originally to direct to a "room" as well, but it was feared that five segments would be too unwieldy.⁵² Tarantino and Rockwell also wrote and directed the wrap-around portions that (loosely) ties the narrative together. According to film critic Jami Bernard, Rodriguez had a draft for his segment that would be appropriated instead for *Roadracers*. The idea finally came to him to make a kid's comedy along the lines of his award-winning short *Bedhead*.⁵³ In an interview about *Four Rooms* in *Total Film*, Rodriguez revealed, "It was a disaster movie! The whole anthology idea." Yet he disclosed his own success with the

⁵⁰Jami Bernard, *Quentin Tarantino: The Man and His Movies* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1995), 231.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 213-214.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 222.

⁵³*Ibid.*

format: “I think I got away with it because I’ve done so many short films. I knew exactly what to do: Set up the story, go to the payoff and get the hell out of there.”⁵⁴

As Rodriguez noted, *Four Rooms* was a critical “disaster movie,” with generally only his segment receiving positive reviews. Fairly representative of the critical consensus was Roger Ebert’s review: “This anthology film with four stories set in a fading hotel and one character in common is a mixed bag, with one hilarious segment, one passable, and two that don’t work at all.” Parceling out three-and-a-half stars to Rodriguez, two stars to Tarantino, and one each to Rockwell and Anders, Ebert writes that if “this film made by four friends...are still friends after finishing this film, that says a lot of their friendship.”⁵⁵ Indeed, while Rodriguez and Tarantino would maintain their friendship and working relationship (as discussed below), they would never work again with Rockwell or Anders. For Anders, blame was due to both a rushed script, as well as Tarantino (who she had recently dated for a short period) and his privileged status at Miramax: “Once it went to Miramax, it became a whole different thing, because Tarantino became a whole different thing.”⁵⁶ She and Rockwell recall Tarantino as getting preferential treatment from Harvey and Bob Weinstein, not having to substantially cut his segment as they had to when the original cut came in at two hours, forty minutes.⁵⁷ (The eventual running time was 98 minutes.)

⁵⁴*Total Film*, May 1999.

⁵⁵Roger Ebert, “‘4 Rooms’—3 Vacancies—Only 1 Worth Seeing—And It’s Grand,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, December 25, 1995, 35.

⁵⁶Peter Biskind, *Down and Dirty Pictures: Miramax, Sundance, and the Rise of Independent Film* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 218.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 219. Biskind offers further reasons for the film’s failure: “Anders (and to a lesser degree, Rockwell) was the conscience of the group, the adult, the superego, if you will. Rodriguez, who had a great eye, was, as his future films would confirm, in all other respects a delayed adolescent. He was the child, id, and Tarantino, who displayed elements of both, was in effect the object of a cultural and aesthetic tug of war

Following *Four Rooms*, Anders and Rockwell never achieved the success of their “Class of ’92” compeers. Anders directed a few more films, with *Grace of My Heart* (1996) getting almost as much attention as *Gas Food Lodging*. She has since worked primarily in television, although a later feature, *Things Behind the Sun* (2001), received three Independent Spirit Award nominations. Rockwell has struggled even more so, directly only a handful of films since 1995, none of which received nearly the attention of *In the Soup*. As Mottram posits, “Without a perpetual PR machine in motion, directors like Anders and Rockwell, who had limited commercial appeal, were quickly swept to the margins of the film industry.”⁵⁸ Still, the “Class of ’92” moniker would continue in scholarly⁵⁹ and popular⁶⁰ discourse over a decade later.

Tarantino and Rodriguez

Besides the fact they have often been linked together in popular and scholarly discourse, Rodriguez’s numerous collaborations with Tarantino (mentioned in Chapter 3) lead to a fuller examination of their relationship. While they have frequently joined forces and consider each other best friends, aesthetically their films share little in common, clearly evident when their works are juxtaposed together, as in *Four Rooms* and *Grindhouse*. Rodriguez himself notes on their work together in *Four Rooms*:

But it’s just cool seeing those segments back to back like that, because the styles are so completely different....I love being part of the actor’s performance in a way, since I edit my own films, and the timing and stuff comes off through a lot of cuts. I can make a really good soup out of just cutting it all together. Whereas Quentin will do a whole five-minute sequence in one take and use only that one

between them. *Four Rooms*, with an assist from Miramax, marginalized Anders and Rockwell, an ominous sign of things to come” (222).

⁵⁸Mottram, 36.

⁵⁹See chapter 3 in Mottram.

⁶⁰There is a “Class of ’92” special feature on the *Reservoir Dogs Special Edition* DVD released in 2003 to commemorate the film’s tenth anniversary.

take, which means some lines were better in other takes. He says he goes for the overall performance in a take. He is more dependent on the actors creating their own timing and pace and rhythm, where I manipulate that quite a bit.⁶¹

Still, they share traits such as a love for genre films and exploitation, and sometimes even common characters. Fans have commented on this Tarantino-Rodriguez shared multiverse; a “Tarantino/Rodriguez Universe” article can be found on Wikipedia, noting the characters that reappear in their films, such as Earl McGraw, who has appeared in *From Dusk Till Dawn* (film and series), *Kill Bill*, *Planet Terror*, and *Death Proof*.⁶²

Peter Hanson also included both in his study of Generation X filmmakers (defined by him as those born between 1961 and 1971) as sharing common propensities toward violence, irony, and multiple storylines.⁶³ Concerning the relationship between Tarantino and Rodriguez, he adds, “Because Rodriguez films violence so adoringly that it almost seems pornographic, it was a natural progression for him to join forces with Tarantino.”⁶⁴ In both journalistic and scholarly discourse, Tarantino, Kevin Smith, and Rodriguez were also connected to the rise of the “commercial indie,”⁶⁵ while Jeff Dawson identified them as embodying the “cinema as cool” auteur.⁶⁶ Alisa Perren delineates the qualities that marked these “cinema of cool” independent directors of the 1990s from their “cinema of quality” 1980s predecessors. Many of the “cinema of quality” filmmakers came from underrepresented minority groups, especially women, African Americans, and gays and

⁶¹Bernard, 228-229.

⁶²Accessed at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tarantino/Rodriguez_Universe. Texas Ranger Earl McGraw was played by Michael Parks in the films before being replaced by Don Johnson for the series.

⁶³Peter Hanson, *The Cinema of Generation X: A Critical Study* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2002), 5-8.

⁶⁴Ibid., 127-128.

⁶⁵Alisa Perren, *Indie, Inc.: Miramax and the Transformation of Hollywood in the 1990s* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012), 88.

⁶⁶Jeff Dawson, *Quentin Tarantino: The Cinema of Cool* (New York: Applause, 1995).

lesbians, while the apparent majority of the foremost 1990s independent filmmakers (Tarantino, Smith, David O. Russell, David Fincher, etc.) were white heterosexual males. This is not to say that there were not still “cinema of quality” films released in the 1990s or that independent cinema in the 1980s had no blockbusters or action-oriented films made for broad appeal; still, if the 1980s were marked by figures like Jarmusch and Spike Lee, then Tarantino, Rodriguez, and Smith marked the transition to the “cinema of cool.”⁶⁷

Rodriguez, Miramax, and Dimension Films

Released from his two-year contact with Columbia Pictures, Rodriguez signed with the biggest label associated with independent entertainment, Miramax (who had presented and distributed *Four Rooms*), where he was assured he would have total artistic control, plus the chance to work at home in Austin.⁶⁸ (This fulfilled a desire first expressed while shopping *El Mariachi* around in early 1992: “I think I’m going to tell my

⁶⁷Perren, 94-101. For more scholarship on the relationship between Tarantino and Rodriguez, see Henriette Maria Aschenbrenner, “Two of a Kind—Robert Rodriguez’s and Quentin Tarantino’s Culturally Intertextual Comment on Film History: The *Grindhouse* Project,” *Post Script* 33 (Sum 2014): 42-58; Caetlin Benson-Allott, *Killer Tapes and Shattered Screens: Video Spectatorship from VHS to Film Sharing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), ch. 4; William DeGenaro, “Post-Nostalgia in the Films of Quentin Tarantino and Robert Rodriguez,” *Journal of American Studies of Turkey* 6 (Fall 1997): 57-63; Kevin Esch, “The Lesser of the Attractions’: *Grindhouse* and Theatrical Nostalgia,” *Jump Cut* 54 (Fall 2012), online; Mark Irwin, “Pulp & the Pulpit: The Films of Quentin Tarantino and Robert Rodriguez,” *Literature & Theology* 12 (Mar 1998): 70-81; David Lerner, “Cinema of Regression: *Grindhouse* and the Limits of the Spectatorial Imaginary,” in *Cinema Inferno: Celluloid Explosions from the Cultural Margins*, edited by Robert G. Weiner and John Cline (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2010): 358-379; Jay McRoy, “The Kids of Today Should Defend Themselves Against the ‘70s’: Simulating Auras and Marketing Nostalgia in Robert Rodriguez and Quentin Tarantino’s *Grindhouse*,” in *American Horror Film: The Genre at the Turn of the Millennium*, edited by Steffen Hantke (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2010), 221-233; Heather J. Raines, “Auteur Direction, Collaboration and Film Music: Re-imaginings in the Cinema of Rodriguez and Tarantino,” MA thesis, University of Ottawa, 2009; and Stavans, Ilan, “Tarantino & Rodriguez: A Paradigm,” in *Critical Approaches to the Films of Robert Rodriguez*, edited by Frederick Luis Aldama (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015), 193-195.

⁶⁸Aldama, *Cinema*, 46.

agents that I'll make a deal with anybody that lets me stay in Texas. That will be the new requirement. Not the money, not the most lucrative deal, but who will work with me and let me reside in Texas. What good is money and a hefty deal if you're cursed to live in Hollywood?"⁶⁹) Miramax may have scored its biggest success yet with *Pulp Fiction*, but Rodriguez's impact on the company should not be overlooked. As Mottram pointedly states, "Miramax may be the house that Quentin built, but Robert Rodriguez was the one who paid for the repairs."⁷⁰ This section examines indie distribution and production company Miramax and its Dimension Films, as they have firmly supported Rodriguez for twenty years.

The year 1989 (the year of *Sex, Lies, and Videotape* and *My Left Foot* [1989]) was a good one for Miramax, but after the company struggled the next two years, Bob and Harvey Weinstein resolved to start up an exploitation, or genre, division under Miramax. They hoped to replicate the success of New Line Cinema's biggest moneymaker, the *Nightmare on Elm Street* series, which was able to generate income to support New Line's more artistic fare. Peter Biskind includes a colorful account of Ira Deutchman greeting the Weinsteins at a party held in his own honor in March 1991 to announce that he would helm New Line Cinema's new specialty house, Fine Line Features. Not one to mince words, Bob proclaimed that he would "bury" him, and that "Not only are we gonna kill you, but we're going to go into New Line's business and kill them in their business. We're gonna do horror movies and kid movies."⁷¹ Bob's prophecy would eventually be fulfilled, as within ten years Dimension Films was known not only for

⁶⁹Rodriguez, *Rebel*, 110.

⁷⁰Mottram, 87.

⁷¹Biskind, 111.

producing genre entertainment (especially horror films) like the *From Dusk Till Dawn* and *Scream* trilogies, but would also distribute family fare such as the *Air Bud* sequels before Rodriguez's family films became a profitable string of successes for Dimension, so much so that the division ended up "propping up the company [i.e., Miramax]" by decade's end.⁷² Miramax had earlier been acquired by Disney in 1993 and found itself (as well as its new parent company) embroiled in controversy over films like *Priest* (1994) and *Kids* (1995);⁷³ Disney's acquisition of Miramax was arguably the key factor in the infamous Southern Baptist Convention boycott of all Disney products and theme parks 1997.⁷⁴ I maintain that Dimension was not a household brand like Miramax, thus allowing Dimension to release more edgy fare without backlash from conservative groups. Bradley Schauer convincingly connects Dimension to an exploitation filmmaking model that dates to the 1950s, specifically the work of James H. Nicholson and Samuel Z. Arkoff at AIP, a model "defined by its emphasis on low budgets, its lack of expensive talent, and its appeal to niche markets."⁷⁵ With every critical or commercial hit (*The Crow* [1994], \$50 million; *Scream*, \$103 million; *Scary Movie* [2000], \$157 million), there were numerous schlocky direct-to-video sequels (for *The Children of the Corn*, *The Prophecy*, and Rodriguez/Tarantino's *From Dusk Till Dawn* series), even though Bob

⁷²Ibid., 405.

⁷³Justin Wyatt, "The Formation of the 'Major Independent': Miramax, New Line and the New Hollywood," in *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, edited by Steve Neale and Murray Smith (London: Routledge, 1998), 84-85.

⁷⁴While this boycott on June 18, 1997 received media attention as the group is the largest religious group (15 million) in the nation besides Roman Catholics, a much smaller Baptist denomination, the Baptist Missionary Association of America (less than 250,000 members), had already boycotted Disney at their annual meeting held earlier that year, where I was a messenger (delegate).

⁷⁵Bradley Schauer, "Dimension Films and the Exploitation Tradition in Contemporary Hollywood," *Quarterly Review of Film and Television* 26:5 (2009), 397.

Weinstein claimed Dimension placed the “creative impulses of the auteur above crass commercialism.”⁷⁶

If 1989 was Miramax’s *annus mirabilis*, 1996 was Dimension’s counterpart, as the year was bookended with the release of *From Dusk Till Dawn* in January and its biggest hit yet, *Scream*, in December. If one were to single out a nadir in the corpus of Rodriguez (at least for those invested in filmmaking as a personal enterprise), it would probably be *The Faculty*, indicative of the type of films Dimension succeeded with in the late 1990s. Virtually another remake of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956, itself remade in 1978 and 1993), *The Faculty* feels like Rodriguez’s least personal film. (Although in hindsight *Roadracers* was a sort of forerunner, containing numerous allusions to *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, including scenes from the film and a cameo from its star Kevin McCarthy.) Released during the demand for more teen-oriented horror fare that followed in the wake of *Scream*,⁷⁷ the screenplay was even credited to Kevin Williamson⁷⁸ who had tapped into the teen zeitgeist with *Scream*, *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (1997), and the television series *Dawson’s Creek* (WB, 1998-2003). Overall, *The Faculty* has a lot more in common with Williamson’s other films than Rodriguez’s, although the direction is stronger than the majority of sci-fi/horror films and a few nice touches remain in an otherwise lackluster endeavor.

⁷⁶Schauer, 396.

⁷⁷Perren positions *Scream* as a game changer, foreshadowing the return of pop (Britney Spears, Backstreet Boys) and the popularity of WB/UPN programs for the teen demographic: “*Scream* provided a template not only for the film industry but also for the media industries at large” (139).

⁷⁸Some have alleged that Miramax paid off the original writers David Wechter and Bruce Kimmel to take a “story by” credit in order to have Williamson attached to the project as screenwriter (Perren, 261n109).

Even though *Spy Kids* was not the first children's film Dimension had distributed (that distinction may go to *Air Bud: Golden Receiver* [1998]), it is a far remove from films like *Scream* and *The Faculty*, pointing to the Weinsteins' support of Rodriguez. Following the success of the first *Spy Kids*, Harvey reportedly offered Rodriguez a bigger budget (\$60 million) for *Spy Kids 2*, which he promptly turned down.⁷⁹ Dimension eventually distributed (and sometimes produced) *From Dusk Till Dawn*, *The Faculty*, all four *Spy Kids* films, *Sin City*, *Grindhouse*, and *Sin City: A Dame to Kill For*, while also handling theatrical distribution for *Desperado* in foreign markets. In 2005, the Weinsteins broke away from Disney, forming The Weinstein Company (TWC). They also retained Dimension Films, although Disney would be allowed to partner with them on sequels from preexisting franchises.⁸⁰ *Grindhouse* was one of their first major releases.

Perren also explains how Rodriguez and the "cinema of cool" filmmakers were able to benefit from Miramax's support, while other filmmakers (Anders, Bernardo Bertolucci, Nicole Holofcener) received little backing from the company: "This had the effect of further structuring the indie world along certain lines—lines that, as the 1990s wore on, increasingly favored the highly masculine and ultraviolent cinema of cool."⁸¹ Indeed, it would have been nigh impossible for someone like Rodriguez to grow from his mariachi style of filmmaking to a network mogul in only twenty years if he had not made the type of generic films that Miramax and Dimension were enthusiastic to support.

⁷⁹Aldama, *Cinema*, 75-76.

⁸⁰Schauer, 393.

⁸¹Perren, 102-103.

Rodriguez, Commercially Speaking: *The Black Mamba* and BlackBerry, or Is Rodriguez a Sell Out?

This section examines two recent projects by Rodriguez, both for small screens: *The Black Mamba* (2011), a six-minute Nike commercial starring Kobe Bryant; and *Two Scoops* (2013), an “exquisite corpse”-inspired promotional short for BlackBerry in which users submitted design ideas for weapons and creatures. Both point to the transformation of Rodriguez from an acclaimed filmmaker of microbudget entertainment at Sundance into a “name,” someone taking on commercial products in order to keep his Troublemaker empire afloat. Rodriguez is no stranger to television, as his second feature, *Roadracers* was made for Showtime, but he has recently shown himself more ready to engage an evolving mediascape, most prominently in his eventual immersion into the medium with the El Rey Network. The obvious commercial nature of *The Black Mamba* and *Two Scoops* are also worth discussing in light of Rodriguez’s continued position as a “rebel” and a “maverick,” intentionally anti-Hollywood. *Two Scoops* further carries on Rodriguez’s project of democratizing film as an art form in which anyone can be engaged, even with little or no money.

The Black Mamba

Rodriguez was an intriguing choice to make a film for Nike. Unlike Spike Lee, who made several commercials for Nike in the late 1980s (the “Gotta be the shoes!” campaign featuring Michael Jordan) and mid 1990s (“Little Penny” with Anfernee “Penny” Hardaway), Rodriguez has expressed no interest in sports in his interviews, nor has he even been photographed wearing any attire with sports logos. While in high school he briefly had a job filming the football games (for the edification of coaches and

players), but was fired when his camera strayed from the game film format by including shots of the marching band or of fan reactions.⁸² Still, the evidence suggests that Nike seeks name directors to helm their commercials, as Terry Gilliam, David Fincher, Michael Mann, Guy Ritchie, and John Woo have all been recruited to direct high-profile commercials for the company, which perhaps points to Rodriguez's auteur status. A few of these commercials have been one to three minutes in length, but the duration of *The Black Mamba* (six minutes) was unprecedented. *The Black Mamba* further stands out within the Rodriguez corpus in that the director stars in it, playing himself in its frame story, as he pitches his exploitation-style film of the same title to Los Angeles Lakers superstar Bryant. The "Black Mamba" takes on Danny Trejo, Bruce Willis, and in a nod to videogames, a "final boss" played by Kanye West.

Two Scoops

The popularity of crowdfunding through projects like Kickstarter has allowed many independently-funded films to be made. *Two Scoops*, however, uses a different type of crowdsourcing, in that it does not rely on funding from fans, but exploits the chance for their ideas to be incorporated into the film. What initially looks like an "exquisite corpse" type of project is not as simple. Videos were submitted in an attempt to be cast in a walk-on role, along with tweeted verbal descriptions for "Designing a

⁸²"I didn't understand how sports worked....I was just getting hero shots of my fellow classmates throwing the ball, and the camera would be tracking the ball in the air dramatically, and then the guy would catch it, and I'd edit it all to music. The players loved it, but the coaches said, 'No, no! Aim at the field and hold it so we can see the plays!'" (Carina Chocano, "King of Dreams," *Texas Monthly*, April 2014, 176). (Remember that Rodriguez went to high school in Texas, where even the mundane task of filming football games can be considered a serious endeavor.) Despite his disinterest in sports, a few sports scenes do occur in his work, from the football game in *The Faculty* to his soccer-playing protagonist in *Matador*.

Weapon,” as well as drawings for “Creating a Monster.”⁸³ The website even included five making-of featurettes for the film; an early one urges viewers to “Join Robert in Finishing His Film.” In another, Rodriguez reveals his ambitions for his film: “The manipulation of images to tell a story—that’s moviemaking, whether you use a computer or film or you use crowdsourcing.” He declares that people will point to *Two Scoops* in the future when crowdsourcing becomes more prominent in filmmaking. The poster, even with a “GX” rating for “General Excitement,” mimics the grindhouse aesthetic Rodriguez has recently favored, even if this science-fiction short is appropriate for all ages.



Rodriguez wants to share authorship with his audience as well, with his credit reading, “Directed by Robert Rodriguez and YOU.” Although he initially stated that the film would run twenty minutes, it actually runs to eleven minutes, seventeen seconds (about ten minutes sans credits). Again, as a promotion for Blackberry, a Blackberry product is prominently featured a few times in *Two Scoops*, but the unaware viewer may regard it as mere product placement, rather than any sort of commercial for Blackberry.

So do these projects for Nike and Blackberry reduce Rodriguez’s “anti-Hollywood” persona to that of a corporate sellout? Has the indie hero gone commercial?

⁸³<http://keepmoving.blackberry.com/desktop/en/us/ambassador/robert-rodriguez.html>. This website has apparently been removed and is no longer accessible.

In his discussion of Alexander Sokurov's big-budget (by European standards), state-financed, Putin-supported *Faust* (2011), Jeremi Szaniawski argues that even some of world cinema's most revered and filmmakers considered less commercial are not immune to "selling out": "It is not at all uncommon for former great mavericks to become co-opted by the systems that formerly provided the adversity of which they were able to overcome and indeed thrive."⁸⁴ It also bears remembering that several other lauded filmmakers have helmed high-profile commercials, perhaps most memorably Michael Mann's *Lucky Star* (2002), Baz Lurhmann's *No. 5: The Film* (2004), and David Lynch's *Lady Blue Shanghai* (2010), and Martin Scorsese's *The Audition* (2015).

The Mercedes ad *Lucky Star* may have been the first of these uber-expensive ads attached to a major director, costing five million pounds (\$8 million), more than the entire budget of *Desperado*. Lurhmann's advertisement for Chanel No. 5 was the most expensive commercial ever made at \$42 million while running only three minutes (and closer to two without the credits), with a significant portion of its budget allocated for Nicole Kidman's salary. *No. 5: The Film* was even exhibited in theaters. Scorsese sixteen-minute ad for a Macau casino, *The Audition*, reportedly cost \$70 million, most of its budget going to the salaries of Leonardo DiCaprio, Brad Pitt, and Robert De Niro. One of four premiere ads starring Marion Cotillard in a different featured city, *Lady Blue Shanghai*, which has its own IMDb entry like *The Black Mamba* and *The Audition*, runs seventeen minutes and ostensibly was a commercial for Christian Dior, yet stands on its own (especially for those with little familiarity of Christian Dior's products). Antony

⁸⁴Jeremi Szaniawski, *The Cinema of Alexander Sokurov: Figures of Paradox, Directors' Cuts* (London: Wallflower, 2014), 265-266.

Todd points out that the film's length and the fact that the word "Dior" is absent point to its legitimacy as a film, but that if Lynch "is to be considered for bond-fide auteur status, then the auteurist will need to consider carefully its modes of exhibition, given that in order to watch the film, the viewer is first directed to a Christian Dior website."⁸⁵

Another significant precedent worth recalling is *The Hire* (2001-2002), a series of eight films of roughly ten minutes in length for BMW. The films were under the direction of Tony Scott, John Frankenheimer, Ang Lee, Alejandro González Iñárritu, Joe Carnahan (*Narc*, *Smokin' Aces*), John Woo, Guy Ritchie, and Wong Kar Wai, featuring the recurring character of the Driver, played by Clive Owen. All this to say that even before *The Black Mamba* and *Two Scoops*, a precedent had already been in place for high-profile directors helming longer commercials, with their reputation as artists receiving minimal damage.

What sets *The Black Mamba* apart from these high-profile advertisements, however, was the déclassé nature of the product. It was not a luxury product like an expensive perfume, high fashion, a casino, or a luxury automobile, but the ubiquitous Nike. The Blackberry project seems even less problematic. Again, it remains difficult to know what Rodriguez's compensation was for a project like this one, but on the final featurette on the website, he hints that crowdsourcing may play a large part in future filmmaking, as he expresses his desire that future crowdsourced films would look to *Two Scoops* as their inspiration. It seems more an extension of his desire to be that trailblazer

⁸⁵Antony Todd, *Authorship and the Films of David Lynch: Aesthetic Receptions in Contemporary Hollywood* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2012), 121.

or maverick that he continually fashions himself. As with *Lady Blue Shanghai* or *The Hire* series, neither *The Black Mamba* nor *Two Scoops* really feel like commercials, but are more akin to what is known in advertising as “branded content,” when advertising and entertainment are blurred. This may be especially true for viewers unable to distinguish luxury cars, perfume, or types of mobile devices.

In the introduction, I discussed Timothy Corrigan’s distinction between the “commercial auteur” and the “auteur of commerce.” Although Corrigan is obviously using “commercial auteur” in a vastly different manner than in the previous discussion of auteurs helming commercials, I still think his distinction one worth considering, even if I posit that Rodriguez doesn’t fit comfortably into either category. However we may label Rodriguez as an auteur, this does lead us to a formidable question: Why would Rodriguez tackle these projects? He has rarely discussed them in interviews, so only conjecture can be offered at this point. Although such figures are difficult to track down, there is certainly the financial incentive, which allows Rodriguez to continue to make his types of films. As the charts listing box-office grosses above indicate, it has been a decade since Rodriguez’s last bona fide box-office hit, *Sin City*. Most of his films since then have still been profitable (even when ignoring international markets and ancillary merchandising), but Troublemaker is far removed from the successes it had from 2001-2005. The decision to preside over El Rey (as well as forming Quick Draw Productions) suggests a filmmaker, twenty years after becoming an overnight sensation with *El Mariachi*, ready to move into other creative ventures.

“Ride with Us”: The El Rey Network

Despite releasing two highly anticipated sequels—*Machete Kills* and *Sin City: A Dame to Kill For*—much of the discourse over Rodriguez in 2013-2014 was around his newest venture—head of a new cable network, El Rey. His growing “celebrity auteur” status was confirmed in February 2012 when his proposed El Rey Network was selected as one of Comcast’s newest minority-owned networks, along with Earvin “Magic” Johnson’s Aspire and Sean Combs’s Revolt. Comcast sought more networks targeting minorities, selecting these three from over a hundred proposals.⁸⁶ Rodriguez lobbied hard for the network, even speaking to the Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute in Washington and being invited to a presidential roundtable discussion about the diversification of networks.⁸⁷ In the press materials immediately following the decision, El Rey positioned itself as the first major network for English-speaking Latinos, which was only partially true. Telemundo’s Mun2 has also catered to a younger Latino audience, but with programming in both Spanish and English. Fusion, a joint venture of Disney and Univision, is another new network, launched just before El Rey in October 2013. Catering to Latino millennials, Fusion differs from the El Rey in that it is primarily a news and lifestyle network. For this venture, Rodriguez partnered with John Fogelman and Cristina Patwa, CEOs for FactoryMade Ventures, an incubator for original content.⁸⁸ (Neither is Latino/a; Patwa grew up in the Philippines.) Rodriguez intends it to be something quite different from programming currently offered on English- and Spanish-

⁸⁶Jill Goldsmith, “New Cable Stable: Comcast Makes Good on Minority-Channel Promise,” *Daily Variety*, Feb 22, 2012: 1.

⁸⁷Chocano, 182.

⁸⁸Daniel Miller, “El Rey Looks Across Borders: Start-Up Factory Made Taps Hollywood Veterans and Hopes Its English-Language Attracts Beyond Latino Niche,” *Los Angeles Times*, Sep 10, 2013: B1.

language programming: “I think if we just looked at Spanish television and said, ‘Let’s just adapt that to English!’ we’d fail, just like if we took *CSI* and said, ‘Let’s do the Hispanic *CSI*,’ we’d fail. So it has to be completely new, and it has to feel mainstream and original, and not feel like it’s translated.”⁸⁹

Rodriguez explains his motivation for the network: “It speaks to me on a personal level....Having five kids of my own who are bilingual, they don't have anything on TV that represents their experience....I feel like I'm at a moment in my life where I can help bring in all the talent I've met over the years to create content that is really fun that will have mass-market appeal. The fact that there's such a hunger for this is very exciting.”⁹⁰ In other words, Rodriguez wanted a network to depict a sizable portion that is so often invisible in the American televisual landscape, later-generation Latinos. Another reason Rodriguez wanted to launch a new network was to offer a space for “U.S. born, mainstream-identified, Hispanic screenwriters and directors” to create that reflect their identity without having to justify casting decisions.⁹¹ He sees the network as beneficial to society, as it more accurately reflects a continually growing U.S. Latino population: “It’s bigger than a network. It’s this mythical other place where you can go and be yourself and say, ‘That’s me,’ with some pride. ‘That’s me—I do have a place in this country.’”⁹²

⁸⁹Melanie McFarland, “‘Dawn’ at El Rey: A Chat with Robert Rodriguez,” *IMDbTV Blog*, Mar11, 2014. http://www.imdb.com/tv/blog?ref_=hm_ad_t4#ELREY-14.

⁹⁰Cynthia Littleton, “El Rey Rides Growing Demo with Latino Net,” *Daily Variety*, Feb 22, 2012: 1.

⁹¹Chocano, 178.

⁹²*Ibid.*, 105. Rodriguez has seemingly become more passionate about this subject now that he has reached middle age: “When someone says, ‘Oh, they just consume like everyone else,’ they don’t understand what it’s like to feel as if you’re not reaching your potential. The feeling of not knowing who you are, that shit just rolls downhill to your kids. There’s a whole culture that is growing—we’re one in six now, we’re going to be one in three—and they don’t know who they are. It’s terrible for the country! It’s people who can never achieve their full potential because of the negative view they have of themselves. Because they don’t see themselves reflected in a media that they don’t have any say in” (*Ibid.*, 180).

One of the more played promos on the network, about a minute long, captures the network's goals. With clips from variety of media texts (*Machete*, *Dolemite*, *Desperado*, *Zoot Suit*, *Westworld*, *Duel*), figures such as John Carpenter, Guillermo del Toro, Jessica Alba, critic Harry Knowles, rapper/filmmaker the RZA, and, of course, Tarantino ("El Rey, mother[expletive bleeped], El Rey!") endorse the network. The promo highlights its tripartite emphasis on "Cinematic Television" (*X-Files*, *Miami Vice*), "Iconic Movies" (*Reservoir Dogs*, *Shaft*, *Conan the Barbarian*, *Escape from New York*, a *Godzilla* film), and "Original Programming" (*From Dusk Till Dawn*, *Matador*, *Lucha Underground*).

Of course, non-premium cable channels like El Rey rely on advertising dollars, and an announcement was made at the time of the network's launch of a major partnership between El Rey and General Motors. This may provide even more fodder for those critical of Rodriguez "going commercial," particularly in that he became a spokesperson for the deal. He reveals his interest in this synergistic relationship in a press statement: "We look forward to creating breakthrough content that elevates and strengthens GM's brand awareness, leverages our storytelling expertise and engages our audience to help GM realize their goals....This alliance will drive conversation and entice consumers to learn more about their extraordinary products through a highly visual, cinematic experience."⁹³ The "creati[on of] breakthrough content" comes from Rodriguez's plan to create thirty- to ninety-second vignettes with his "creative team" that promote GM as well as "themes from the network's various originals shows."⁹⁴ In its

⁹³Brian Steinberg, "Robert Rodriguez' El Rey Network Lures General Motors in Ad Pact," *Variety*, posted December 17, 2013 (online).

⁹⁴*Ibid.*

earliest stages, the El Rey website had a “Brand Integrations” feature, no longer accessible.

Rodriguez’s Companies

Los Hooligans Productions

Borrowed from the name of his comic strip he wrote and drew for the University of Texas *Daily Texan*, Los Hooligans Productions became the company that Rodriguez and Elizabeth Avellan established with the making of *El Mariachi*. Outside of *Roadracers*, Los Hooligans Productions was the production company for all of Rodriguez’s releases in the 1990s, including the *From Dusk Till Dawn* sequels.



Troublemaker Studios

Rodriguez renamed his company Troublemaker Studios at a critical juncture in his career. There was a three-year directing hiatus between *The Faculty* and *Spy Kids*; the making of *Spy Kids* was not only a return to his jack-of-all-trades style of filmmaking discussed in Chapter 2, but also a revival to a more personal film than *From Dusk Till Dawn* and *The Faculty*, both directed from others’ scripts. It also reaffirmed Rodriguez’s commitment to staying in Texas for the production of his films and establishing Austin as

his home base. Rodriguez has stated that the “Troublemaker” name actually comes from the type of cowboy hat he would wear as a symbol of his Texas identity while travelling to Europe,⁹⁵ but it certainly also fits his propensity for constantly posturing himself as a maverick or rebel: “I’m a troublemaker in the movie business! I don’t follow the rules at all.”⁹⁶

Troublemaker, along with Richard Linklater’s Detour Filmproduction, have become the envy of many filmmakers, studios with the accoutrements of Hollywood, but a thousand miles away. There are accounts of Francis Ford Coppola visiting Troublemaker and declaring it what he had hoped to achieve with his failed American Zoetrope.⁹⁷ Perhaps not surprisingly, Rodriguez often boasts of his facilities and crew in interviews: “They’re probably one of the most experienced crews in the world at doing stuff that’s really cutting-edge. It’s really quite the place. People come down there now and they can’t believe the set-up we’ve got with the soundstages. I don’t think there’s another filmmaker who has got dedicated stages in the States. It’s really a rare thing.”⁹⁸ (Of course, Rodriguez seems to be forgetting about Tyler Perry, among others, in his claim as the only filmmaker with “dedicated stages”). When it became more cost effective to have his own in-house effects company, Troublemaker Digital Studios emerged from the making of *Spy Kids 2*, which Rodriguez usually oversees as the visual effects supervisor. At that time, Troublemaker Digital was only Rodriguez and three

⁹⁵Nick De Semlyen, “2 Days at the World’s Coolest Studio,” *Empire*, Apr 2010, 125. Reprinted in Ingle, 147.

⁹⁶Mottram, 89.

⁹⁷Ibid., 97-98.

⁹⁸Silas Lesnick, “Exclusive: Robert Rodriguez on *Spy Kids: All the Time in the World*,” *Comingsoon.net*, Nov 22, 2011. Accessed at <http://www.comingsoon.net/news/movienews.php?id=84548>. Reprinted in Ingle, 142.

digital artists: Alex Toader, Chris Olivia, and Rodney Brunet.⁹⁹ While all three worked with Troublemaker at least through the production of *Machete* (and Toader continues to do so), the company has added many more visual artists; *Machete* alone credited 21 Troublemaker Digital personnel, including Rodriguez. (Troublemaker Digital will be discussed further in the next chapter.)

Quick Draw Productions



Rodriguez announced the formation of Quick Draw Productions at the 2011 San Diego Comic-Con, with Quick Draw Animation forming the following year. Although this animation studio has yet to release anything, early internet rumors point to their work on Rodriguez's promised *Fire and Ice* film.

Rodriguez International Pictures

The subsidiary Rodriguez International Pictures (an intentional allusion to American International Pictures) was formed in 2006 to distinguish Rodriguez's horror films (*Curandero*, *Grindhouse*). After debuting during the pre-credits sequences of



⁹⁹Jody Duncan, "Working at the Speed of Thought," *Cinefex* 92 (Jan 2003), 19. Reprinted in Ingle, 86.

the international release of *Planet Terror*, its macabre logo would not be seen again until *From Dusk Till Dawn: The Series*, where it appears after the final credits of every episode.

Tres Pistoleros Studios

Rodriguez and FactoryMade Ventures formed Tres Pistoleros Studios in 2012, primarily to create content for El Rey. None of El Rey's original programming (*From Dusk Till Dawn*, *Matador*, *The Directors Chair*, or *Lucha Underground*) mention Tres Pistoleros, so it remains unforeseen what the status and future of Tres Pistoleros is at this time.¹⁰⁰

Mercado Fantastico

Not one of his companies, but another recent venture by Rodriguez was his founding of the Mercado Fantastico (Fantastic Market) with Alamo Drafthouse CEO Tim League and Fantastic Fest. According to its website, the Mercado Fantastico

is an international co-production market for genre films. Fantastic Market highlights new genre narrative projects from across the world with a particular emphasis on filmmakers from Latin America, Spain, Portugal and Latino filmmakers in the United States. The goal of the market is to connect international film projects with potential production partners, sales agents, and distributors.¹⁰¹

The Mercado Fantastico suggests a greater interest on Rodriguez's part to connect with the broader Spanish-speaking and Lusophone world.

¹⁰⁰Littleton, 1, 13.

¹⁰¹<http://fantasticfest.com/market>

Conclusion: Or, Is Rodriguez Still an Independent Filmmaker?

Returning to the question posed in the introduction: What is independent cinema, and does Rodriguez conform to such as a label? Kevin Smith, says his definition of independent cinema is that it “has always been DIY...out of your pocket with material that’s not instantly marketable or recognized as easily as commercial.”¹⁰² He concedes that by this definition, *Clerks* has been his only independent film, even if others label *Chasing Amy* (1997) as independent,¹⁰³ which was financed entirely by Miramax. Likewise, by this stricter definition only *El Mariachi* possibly fits, as every Rodriguez release since could be recognized as “commercial,” marketable to some extent.

In only twenty years, Rodriguez transitioned from the filmmaker known for checking himself into a research hospital in order to raise the meager sum necessary to make his first feature to a mogul who now owns the means of production, establishing the fully-functioning Troublemaker Studios. His step to network head was perhaps a logical one, as he is arguably the most eminent Latino media mogul. Stephen Colbert may not have been too far off when he asked him on *The Colbert Report* (April 29, 2014), “Are you trying to be the Hispanic Oprah?” Not yet, but it is hard to project where the El Rey Network will take him. This chapter charts his trajectory from a microbudget filmmaker to a director of Nike and Blackberry commercials, culminating in heading the El Rey Network.

¹⁰²Qtd. in Rocca, 165. Elsewhere in the same source Smith states, “That’s pretty much what indie film is, it’s a series of people going, ‘If that idiot can do it, I can do it’” (325).

¹⁰³*Chasing Amy*, which cost only \$250,000, won Best Screenplay at the Independent Spirit Awards, while *Dogma* (1999) was nominated for the same award.

As Rodriguez states in an interview with Aldama, “My movie business is like a family-run restaurant in that we all contribute and work together to make innovative, inspiring movies that audiences can’t get at the big chains.”¹⁰⁴ Still, after a brief stint for Columbia Pictures, it is hard to imagine where Rodriguez and his Troublemaker Studios would be today were they not the indirect beneficiaries of the Walt Disney Company.

Koob, for one, disputes the idea of Rodriguez as a “true outsider”:

He obviously still has an established relationship to the Hollywood industry for both financing and distribution. Nothing about Rodriguez or his discourses tends to suggest that he has any desire to escape the Hollywood industry system altogether either—he makes his living this way. His notable freedoms come about at the level of production where technological and place-based resources function together to allow a convincing veneer of complete independence.¹⁰⁵

No matter how much Rodriguez postures himself as anti-Hollywood and a maverick, it is worth remembering that even in the subtitle of his most famous book he boasts himself a “Hollywood player.”

¹⁰⁴Aldama, *Cinema*, 147.

¹⁰⁵Koob, 32.

CHAPTER 6

TECHNOLOGIES

Introduction

Timothy Corrigan put a new spin on Alexandre Astruc's notion of the *caméra-stylo*, noting that as auteurs gained star status, "the auteur-star can potentially carry and redeem any sort of textual material, often to the extent of making us forget that material through the marvel of its agency. In this sense, promotional technology and production feats become the new 'camera-style'"¹ As the previous chapters have illustrated, Rodriguez's films generally have more to them than "promotional technolog[ies]" and "production feats," but still, Rodriguez's technophilia has inspired him to employ certain strategies that have been innovative and trendsetting at best, gimmicky and cut-rate at worst. In this chapter, I will first examine Rodriguez's technophilia, particularly his statements on the necessity for filmmakers to be technologically savvy. I will then scrutinize his place in several of the following related currents in twenty-first-century cinema: digital filmmaking, stereoscopy, the "digital backlot," and "4-D" technologies, while also addressing his work in visual effects. His pervasive desire for technological innovation corresponds to his increasing ambitions as a filmmaker, and further parallel his movement from microbudget filmmaker to media mogul.

¹Timothy Corrigan, *A Cinema without Walls: Movies and Culture after Vietnam* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 105-106.

“Moving at the Speed of Thought”: Rodriguez’s Technophilia

While some of cinema’s earliest commentators labeled it the “seventh art,” it was also an art borne out of the industrial revolution, reliant on technology in a way that previous arts (e.g., poetry, theatre, sculpture, etc.) were not. In his discussion of “midmodernism,” Art Berman examines photography (including filmmaking) as both a science and an art.² This is evident to anyone who has set foot in a library and noticed photography books classified under both “N” (art) and “T” (technology), according to the Library of Congress classification system. Film is classified under a similar vein, where most books on film are under “PN” (comparative literature), but books specifically about cinematography or visual effects are categorized within “T.” Art and science continue to merge in these disciplines, and if there are sciences that currently cross over into art (e.g., drug design), still photography and cinematography have always crossed over into technology. (Remember that it is called the Academy of Motion Picture *Arts and Sciences*.)

Merging the connections between art and science, creativity and technology, is a theme in Rodriguez’s work. He often cites the necessity of creative artists to immerse themselves in technology: “That’s why my bed is stacked high with technical manuals. It puts me to sleep just reading them, but you have to trudge through them. You have to learn new things, and you have to start all over, but art challenges technology, and technology challenges art.”³ His desire to be an innovator leads to his view of himself as a forerunner in the industry:

By figuring out how to do something innovative, you push the technology. In a way, you’re the one field-testing the stuff, then they would ask what you want on the next cameras and we would tell them what to modify. By being an early adopter, you’re very

²Art Berman, *Preface to Modernism* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 53-57.

³Keith Phipps, “Robert Rodriguez,” *The A.V. Club*. <http://www.avclub.com/article/robert-rodriguez-13753>. Reprinted in Ingle, 71.

much on the cutting edge of technology, and people want your feedback. You're the one out in the field using it, and you can really help them make their product better.⁴

Rodriguez's fetish for technology is on ample display in his "James Bond series for kids," the *Spy Kids* saga. As mentioned in Chapter 3, Rodriguez himself designed the gadgets for the series.⁵ Frederick Luis Aldama often points to Rodriguez's "comic-book sensibility"; the gadgets further entrench this notion in the *Spy Kids* series.⁶ Another frequent refrain in Rodriguez's comments on technology is that it "allows you to move at the speed of thought." For a filmmaker so prolific and involved in several different aspects of the filmmaking process, speed is essential, evident in how often Rodriguez boasts of the number of camera set-ups he is able to achieve in a day compared to the Hollywood norm. Even Rodriguez's desire to act as his own cinematographer, and later as visual effects supervisor, two of the most technical positions on the set, testifies to his technophilia. This chapter outlines how Rodriguez's technophilia feeds into his decisions to handle more of the technical aspects of production and postproduction, in addition to his desire to be a filmmaker known for technological innovation.

The Digital Revolution

The 2012 documentary *Side by Side* (directed by Christopher Kenneally) recounts the changes that digital filmmaking has wrought, including interviews with advocates on both sides of the photochemical film/digital debate. As the documentary opens with photochemical film's exclusivity, it includes requisite iconic images from *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), *Gone with the Wind* (1939), *Citizen Kane* (1941), *Rear Window* (1954), and *Ben-Hur* (1959). When digital

⁴Frederick Luis Aldama, *The Cinema of Robert Rodriguez* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014), 146.

⁵Phipps. Reprinted in Ingle, 73.

⁶Aldama, *Cinema*, 73.

is introduced, a clip from *Star Wars: Episode II—Attack of the Clones* (2002) is juxtaposed with one from *Sin City*. In a documentary saturated with over seventy interviewees, including notable filmmakers, cinematographers, editors (e.g., Walter Murch⁷), actors (John Malkovich, Greta Gerwig), producers, visual effects artists, color timers/digital colorists, and various technological innovators, several voices arguably stand out: Christopher Nolan and his cinematographer Wally Pfister as the most outspoken proponents of shooting on film, with Rodriguez, George Lucas, and James Cameron as the key digital activists. The documentary noticeably emphasizes Rodriguez's credentials by calling him "Director/Cinematographer" during the section on digital cinematography, while also labeling him as a "Director/Editor" when he discusses digital editing. (Only Steven Soderbergh is similarly double-billed.) Rodriguez occupies a prominent place in *Side by Side*, restating many of his comments given in previous interviews as to the benefits of digital filmmaking: that he could shoot as much as he wanted without worrying about the ten-minute limit of the film magazine; that shooting with film is "like painting with the lights off;" that digital is just a technology and that "the art form is the manipulation of moving images" just as it always was; and perhaps his favorite maxim, "technology pushes the art and art pushes technology." Nonetheless, he does contradict his earlier comments from ten years previous that digital already looked better than film, admitting to Keanu Reeves (*Side by Side*'s narrator, interviewer, and producer) that the digital image was not as good as film at that early stage.

The documentary attests to the controversies over digital filmmaking. John Belton, one of the preeminent historians of motion picture technologies, entered the foray rather early (2002) with his article "Digital Cinema: A False Revolution." As his title suggests, Belton deems digital

⁷For more Murch's early thoughts on digital cinema, see Walter Murch, "A Digital Cinema of the Mind?," *New York Times*, May 2, 1999: 2A1.

cinema as “not [as] revolutionary in the way that these other technological revolutions [sound, color, widescreen] were” and that it “does not, in any way, transform the nature of the motion-picture experience. Audiences viewing digital projection will not experience the cinema differently as those who heard sound, saw color, or experienced widescreen and stereo sound for the first time did.”⁸ Nevertheless, Belton’s strong statements concern digital *projection*; even digital’s strongest proponents might concur that digital projection alone was not a revolution equal with the diffusion of sound, color, and widescreen, but what about digital filmmaking technologies (visual effects, sound, editing, cinematography, projection) *en toto*? Besides broaching subjects that persist in the film versus digital debate (e.g., piracy, digital preservation methods), Belton concludes his argument thusly:

One obvious problem with digital cinema is that it has no novelty value, at least not for film audiences. This being the case, what will drive its future development? Meanwhile, predictions by Lucas, Murch, and others of an all-digital cinema tend to ignore the often conflicting material forces of the marketplace that regularly reshape and even reject new technology. Nor do they take into account the inevitable development of other, nonfilm technologies that might impact upon the evolution of film, altering its ultimate form. Their predictions are idealist, not materialist.⁹

Specious recourse to “novelty value” aside, Belton’s doomsday prophecy of digital cinema’s potential has gone unfulfilled. Photochemical film is certainly not dead, but because of digital cinema’s diffusion it has become more of a novelty, to the extent that major studio releases shot on film (e.g., *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* [2014], *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* [2015]) emphasize this as a major point in the publicity materials.

⁸John Belton, “Digital Cinema: A False Revolution,” *October* 100 (Spr 2002), 104.

⁹*Ibid.*, 114.

But not all theorists are as pessimistic about digital's potential. Lev Manovich conceives of digital as moving filmmaking into a subcategory of painting for it is no longer indexical.¹⁰ He further compares the transition from digital to film to the shift from tempura and fresco to oil painting in the early Renaissance:

A painter making a fresco has limited time before the paint dries, and once it has dried, no further changes to the image are possible. Similarly, a traditional filmmaker has limited means of modifying images once they are recorded on film....The switch to oils generally liberated painters by allowing them to quickly create much larger compositions...as well as to modify them as long as necessary. This change in painting technology led the Renaissance painters to create new kinds of compositions, new pictorial space, and new narratives. Similarly, by allowing a filmmaker to treat a film image as an oil painting, digital technology redefines what can be done with cinema.¹¹

Besides the increased speed, it is this ability “to modify [a film] as long as necessary”—this flexibility—that particularly attracted Rodriguez to digital filmmaking.

Lucas became the biggest influence in Rodriguez's decision to convert to digital cinematography, after being shown early footage from *Star Wars: Episode II—Attack of the Clones*. Rodriguez also ran his own tests putting footage shot on film side by side with footage shot with a high-definition (HD) camera “so [he] could see where HD fell apart, where it still needed to be fixed, where it was like video. Instead, [he] was shocked to see how bad the film was.”¹² He showed this same side-by-side comparison at festivals, convinced that anyone who saw it would come to the same conviction: “Film is dead, and HD is the future of film.”¹³ Rodriguez championed the benefits that shooting in digital offered: “It felt like the difference between cutting on film and cutting on Avid; it was that big a change in the creative process.”¹⁴

¹⁰Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 293-308.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 305.

¹²Phipps. Reprinted in Ingle, 71.

¹³*Ibid.*

¹⁴Brian McKernan and Bob Zahn, “A Digital Desperado,” *TVB Europe*, Aug 2002, 28. Reprinted in Ingle, 76.

Rodriguez became a zealous convert and an outspoken advocate for the benefits of shooting in digital, both financially and aesthetically. Transitioning to complete immersion in digital technologies also allowed Rodriguez even more control while making his films, both while shooting and in postproduction.

Although it was released in September 2003, after both *Spy Kids 2* (August 2002) and *Spy Kids 3* (July 2003), Rodriguez's first foray in shooting digitally occurred in May 2001, when he shot *Once Upon a Time in Mexico*.¹⁵ *Once Upon a Time in Mexico* and *Spy Kids 2* were both shot with the Sony HDW-F900, the first HD camera developed by the technology giant, with Fujinon and Angenieux lenses.¹⁶ (He would switch to the Sony CineAlta's next-generation camera, the HDC-F950, for *Spy Kids 3-D*.) Rodriguez had been using digital editing (networked Avid Media Composer and Unity systems) since editing *Roadracers*,¹⁷ and with his new task of composing, scored his films digitally as well, with a music keyboard connected to a computer so he could isolate the various layers of sound during postproduction, giving him even more control of the soundscapes of his work.¹⁸ Rodriguez definitely considered digital filmmaking as essential for his first 3-D production (discussed further below): "Film, to me, now seems like something from the Dark Ages. HD, by comparison, is so creative. They're like night and day! It's like, once you've used an Avid, you'd never think of going back to cutting on a Moviola."¹⁹

¹⁵The reasons for this delay of over two years have never been revealed to the public, although the demand for *Spy Kids* sequels most likely instigated the film's brief shelving.

¹⁶Aldama, *Cinema*, 48.

¹⁷Robert Rodriguez, *Roadracers: The Making of a Degenerate Hot Rod Flick* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), 82-83. From his production diary: "I still have a lot to learn with this whole computer editing thing system, but this will be the best way to learn it. It gets where you want to go quickly. I'm surprised more people in the industry aren't taking advantage of this new technology" (82-83).

¹⁸Aldama, *Cinema*, 48-49.

¹⁹Joe Fordham, "Comin' at Ya!," *Cinefex*, Oct 2003, 39.

Of course, *Spy Kids 2* and *Once Upon a Time in Mexico* were by no means the first films shot digitally. Despite the stipulations in its manifesto that films be in 35mm, the Dogme 95 films were shot digitally. Holly Willis offers a list of notable digital films by American filmmakers, including *Conceiving Ada* (Lynn Hershman-Leeson, 1997), *The Book of Life* (Hal Hartley, 1998), *The Cruise* (Bennett Miller, 1998), *The Last Broadcast* (Stefan Avalos and Lance Weiler, 1998), *Better Living Through Circuitry* (Jon Reiss, 1999), *The Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sanchez, 1999), *Julien Donkey-Boy* (Harmony Korine, 1999), *Bamboozled* (Spike Lee, 2000), *Chuck & Buck* (Miguel Arteta, 2000), *Everything Put Together* (Marc Forster, 2000), *The Anniversary Party* (Alan Cumming and Jennifer Jason Leigh, 2001), *The Center of the World* (Wayne Wang, 2001), *Series 7: The Contenders* (Daniel Minahan, 2001), and *Things Behind the Sun* (Allison Anders, 2001), as well as Richard Linklater's two films from 2001, *Tape* and *Waking Life*.²⁰ (Also, some of these films, such as *Bamboozled*, were not entirely digital, with scattered sequences still shot on film.) Still, *Spy Kids 2* was released less than three months after *Star Wars: Episode II—Attack of the Clones*, the first major feature shot in HD, as the laundry list of films above were all low-budget/independent productions.

Whereas Spike Lee may have made the first digital feature film in Hollywood with *Bamboozled*, Rodriguez and Lucas had vastly different reasons than Lee for transitioning to digital. Lee shot *Bamboozled* with consumer-grade cameras, giving the film a significantly lo-fi aesthetic, as digital cameras were still rather primitive when the film was shot in 1999. Lucas and Rodriguez shot on digital primarily because for them it would actually look *better* than film.

²⁰Holly Willis, *New Digital Cinema: Reinventing the Moving Image* (London: Wallflower, 2005), 100-112. Although Willis inexplicably deemphasizes the significance of the now forgotten *Conceiving Ada* by incorrectly listing its release date as 2000 even though it screened at the Toronto International Film Festival in 1997.

Once Upon a Time in Mexico and *Spy Kids 2* thus occupy a privileged status in the history of American film as two of the first films shot in high-definition digital.

Still, as his first foray into shooting in digital, *Once Upon a Time in Mexico* did not receive as favorable a response as the first two films in the Mexico trilogy. Aldama notes the learning curve for Rodriguez shooting this way (and in HD) as early as 2001, when digital cameras were still in their infancy:

With his subsequent films, he has a better command of HD, the technology becomes more and more a servant to his creativity and he can be more effective and more conscious of aesthetic goals and means as aesthetics, and not just as technology. This might be a case where Rodriguez makes a film to master a new technology (HD) but where the new technology has yet to become handmaiden to the shaping of the story.²¹

While I concur with Aldama that the film's writing may not be as strong as the first two entries in the series, I contend that it does achieve many of its aesthetic goals, particularly since it is awash in gorgeous cinematography. It is worth remembering that *Once Upon a Time in Mexico* was Rodriguez's first "film" shot entirely on digital; concerns that he placed this new technology over crafting a fitting conclusion to his trilogy are certainly reasonable. Still, his innovations in digital filmmaking would be better received with later efforts: *Spy Kids 2*, *Sin City*, and *Planet Terror*. Rodriguez's pioneering efforts in digital filmmaking would also be highlighted in the discourse surrounding his films, as in this statement from David Hochman in *Premiere*: "Talking to Rodriguez about his singular approach is a little like talking to the AV guy from the Flat Earth Society. His thinking is so off-the-grid that you don't know whether to call security or send out for holy water."²²

²¹Aldama, *Cinema*, 52.

²²David Hochman, "Once Upon a Time in Moviemaking," *Premiere*, Oct 2003, 70. Reprinted in Ingle, 115.

Thus, Rodriguez's technophilia has made him somewhat of a digital zealot. Although Lucas and Rodriguez are known for their friendship with, and admiration for, Steven Spielberg, Rodriguez admits to his inability to convert him to the benefits of digital filmmaking, at least in 2003: "Spielberg is like Tarantino: a vinyl record guy. He grew up loving film, and he loves it because it's imperfect. Steven admitted that digital projection is the way to go; but for himself, he would always like to shoot on film. For the rest of us mortals, I think we're doing ourselves a big disservice by wallowing in the Dark Ages."²³ Unlike Spielberg, Tarantino, and Nolan, Rodriguez has traditionally displayed no nostalgia for celluloid, noting that it is a "technology" as well, and an old one at that. Still, he grudgingly concedes to film's apparently indescribable qualities in a much more recent interview when asked about film: "Well, it still has a great feel to it. Even when I make digital stuff, I add grain and texture because it's a blank canvas. It still has to improve a lot. It looks very electronic. They're not finished. A lot of people are adopting it, but that doesn't mean it's good. It's got to get better still. You can try to match the digital stuff to film, but it doesn't happen. It's just got a magic to it."²⁴ This older Rodriguez seems more guarded than he was circa 2002-2003 when he proselytized unwaveringly to digital's superior look over film. Yet he follows this very statement with one about film's dead-end future: "Kids today are going to think the opposite. They're gonna see film and go, 'I have no emotional connection to that because I play video games every day and 48 frames looks like my video game.'"²⁵

²³Fordham, 39.

²⁴Christina Radish, "Robert Rodriguez Talks *Matador*, His Belief in Passion Projects, Looking Forward to Season 2, and More," *Collider*, Sep 2, 2014. <http://collider.com/robert-rodriguez-matador-interview/>. Retrieved Feb 9, 2015.

²⁵*Ibid.*

Troublemaker Digital and Visual Effects

As mentioned in Chapter 3, Rodriguez has been credited as visual effects supervisor and/or visual effects executive producer for all of his films (including *Predators*) since *Spy Kids*, an historical anomaly among directors. Aldama, who in addition to his work in Latino popular culture is also a cognitive theorist, considers this work essential to a proper understanding of Rodriguez's oeuvre:

[Rodriguez] has a very astute and rich sense of how audiences fill in the gaps—he knows how our visual and auditory perceptual systems will be triggered and in which direction—therefore using CGI and animation special effects..., along with his HD camera and green screen technology, to great visual effect....Knowing what to actually build and what to fill in with CGI also proves significant; Rodriguez knows well that the perceptual system needs a reality anchor in order for the mind/brain to make the rest (the CGI) feel as if real.²⁶

Whether making films for children or older audiences, Rodriguez's films have relied on various special effects, whether created mechanically (in camera) or through CGI. Not content with adding musical composition and production design duties in his turn-of-the-century creative flourish, he added visual effects supervisor to his resume. Since then, Rodriguez has been credited in various fashions for his special effects work: visual effects supervisor, digital effects executive producer, visual effects executive producer, executive producer of Troublemaker Digital, and design and previsualization executive producer. It remains difficult to ascertain which of these positions are interchangeable and which, if any, are more honorific, but Rodriguez at least promotes himself in the DVD supplemental materials as intensely involved in the CGI work of Troublemaker Digital, and his knowledge about the whole process is clearly evident in statements made in the leading special effects trade journal, *Cinefex*.²⁷ Christopher

²⁶Aldama, *Cinema*, 76.

²⁷See Fordham; Jody Duncan, "Working at the Speed of Thought," *Cinefex*, Jan 2003, 15-41 (reprinted in Ingle, 83-101).

Cram's article remains one of the few scholarly studies on the role of the visual effects supervisor, since the collective knowledge about these types of roles has more often relied on trade journals and DVD features. As Vice President of Visual Effects for Universal Pictures, Cram explains that a visual effects supervisor acts as the creative and technical lead, able to work along with a director to design a film's look, and/or with the effects company providing the finished shots.²⁸ Other tasks may include "technical adviser, creative leader, second unit director, and budgetary problem solver."²⁹ Such a versatile description suits the portrait of Rodriguez described by himself, as well as his cast and crew.

Considering that Rodriguez almost always serves as cinematographer and occasionally as production designer, special effects supervising seems appropriate, considering that special effects work in the Hollywood of the 1920s and partially into the next two decades, was handled by the art direction and cinematography departments.³⁰ Again, Rodriguez's decision to become a visual effects supervisor starting with *Spy Kids* arose organically:

On my earlier movies, there were many times I'd see how a visual effects supervisor was going about a shot and I'd think, "There's got to be an easier way and a better way to do that"—but it would involve changing my shot, which a visual effects supervisor would never ask me to do. But I could ask that of *myself* to make an effect work. It just seemed more organic a process. The more I as the director/editor/cameraman knew about effects, the more it would become part of the whole process instead of something separate....As visual effects supervisor, I didn't even have to tell anybody what I was doing....Because I knew what the shot was going to be, and I didn't have to explain it to anybody else, it made the whole thing go very fast. I knew exactly what the intent of every effects shot was and how it fit into the story: so there was no fat, and I saved a lot of time and money.³¹

²⁸Christopher Cram, "Digital Cinema: The Role of the Visual Effects Supervisor," *Film History* 24 (June 2012): 169.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 172.

³⁰Staiger, "The Division and Order of Production: The Subdivision of the Work from the First Years through the 1920s," in *Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 148-149.

³¹Duncan, 27. Reprinted in Ingle, 89.

Rodriguez also explains how he was able take on an additional chore in his filmmaking:

The technical part of any of these is really 10 percent of the process. The rest is creative. If you're creative, you can figure out how to paint, how to write a book. That's why I do all these jobs. You ask different artists from different media and they all tell you the same thing about the creative process. It's finding that creative instinct, that creative impulse, then following it through becomes the chore of filling in the blanks.³²

Troublemaker Digital handles more of the previsualization work (i.e., from early pencil sketches of designs to animatics), while the final compositing has been handled by special effects houses such as Hybride, the Canadian-based firm that has handled almost every Rodriguez film since *The Faculty*. More specific segments are farmed out to various visual effects houses. For example, below is the breakdown for *Spy Kids 3-D*'s effects, including the number of effects shots from each house:

Troublemaker Digital: animatics/virtual sets/character design

Hybride Technologies: 409 shots

ComputerCafe: 87 shots

The Orphanage: 84 shots

CIS Hollywood: 71 shots

Janimation: 52 shots³³

It remains difficult to determine how involved Rodriguez is in the visual effects process, and it may vary film to film. According to Troublemaker visual effects artist Alex Toader, "Troublemaker Digital is Robert's creative right arm, if you will, we come up with concepts and do a lot of research and development based on the ideas and comments and he relies on our

³²Leila Cobo, "'I'm Able to Write the Score as I'm Shooting the Script,'" *Billboard*, Aug 2, 2003,70. Reprinted in Ingle, 110.

³³See the chart in Fordham, 31.

expertise and talents to bring his ideas to light.”³⁴ Indeed, his team of artists reveal a working relationship with the director that differs little from that on other films, speaking of being given “a lot of freedom” and “go[ing] off the script a bit and come up with stuff,” but “everything comes from the script” and that their job is not to change anything, even if they may embellish.³⁵ While this may seem contradictory, perhaps we may describe it more succinctly: Rodriguez’s team at Troublemaker Digital is allowed some freedom, but Rodriguez steadfastly maintains control on his projects.

The 3-D Revolution

Any extended discussion of the last ten years of film history would be incomplete without mention of the “return” of 3-D. While 3-D has moved further away from “novelty” and more toward “norm,” its detractors have kept it from universal acceptance. Despite a recent uptick in scholarship on 3-D, most historians have completely omitted the significance of *Spy Kids 3-D: Game Over*, the first major theatrically-released 3-D film in almost twenty years, as a noteworthy turning point in the history of stereoscopic cinema. In this section, I address the state of 3-D before *Spy Kids 3-D*, look at how Rodriguez used 3-D for his films *Spy Kids 3-D* and *The Adventures of Sharkboy and Lavagirl*, as well as his “4-D” experiment, *Spy Kids: All the Time in the World*.

The first 3-D boom occurred in the early 1950s, as studios looked for new attractions to counter the popularity of the television. Spectacles like *Bwana Devil* (1952) and *This is Cinerama* (1952) were both positioned to draw audiences back, ushering in the stereoscopic and

³⁴Qtd. in *Grindhouse: The Sleaze-Filled Saga of an Exploitation Double Feature*, ed. Kurt Volk (New York: Weinstein Books, 2007), 82.

³⁵Ibid., 86-89

widescreen eras, respectively, but only the latter became a mainstay in cinemas worldwide. Most of the 3-D films released during this era were derided by critics as “gimmicky,” though some were fairly innovative, such as *Kiss Me Kate* (1953), one of the rare prestige pictures in 3-D. William Paul situates the film within the larger modernist theatre movement, breaking the proscenium.³⁶

Of course, 3-D’s history before the 1950s wave is less discussed, although it has a rich history, perhaps best detailed in Ray Zone’s *Stereoscopic Cinema and the Origins of 3-D Film, 1838-1952*, which examines the popularity of proto-cinematic stereoscopic devices through 3-D experiments leading up to the first wave. Film histories often forget that the Lumières, for instance, were projecting 3-D films as early as 1902. Some of cinema’s earliest theorists, such as Sergei Eisenstein and Rudolf Arnheim, devoted attention to the subject of 3-D. Eisenstein was favorable toward the possibilities of 3-D, but Arnheim, also a formalist, was less optimistic, as he was concerning most technological advances in cinema. Despite writing soon after the advent of sound and concurrently with the rise of three-strip Technicolor, he discusses stereoscopy in 1933 as though it were just as inevitable a technology and detrimental to the “seventh art,” even though his comments on stereoscopy and widescreen were based primarily on novelty experiments (the various 3-D shorts made since the turn of the century) and anomalies (*The Big Trail* [1930, shot in Fox Grandeur’s 2.10:1]).³⁷ Arnheim theorized on all of these technologies (sound, color, widescreen, and stereoscopy) together, causing an enigma for contemporary readers: if Arnheim considered all of these technologies as inevitable yet injurious to cinema,

³⁶William Paul, “Breaking the Fourth Wall: ‘Belascoism’, Modernism, and a 3-D *Kiss Me Kate*,” *Film History* 16:3 (2004): 229-242.

³⁷See Rudolf Arnheim, *Film as Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957), 11-14, 58-65.

why has stereoscopy not been accepted by audiences and studios like the other three technologies?

Zone, perhaps the foremost 3-D historian, followed his aforementioned volume with one covering 1953-2009, entitled *3-D Revolution: The History of Modern Stereoscopic Cinema*. Suffice it to say that one should consult the works of Zone (and others) for a more detailed history than space here will allow. Still, to understand Rodriguez's significance to the current stereoscopic revolution, a (very) brief history of 3-D in the 20-25 years before *Spy Kids 3-D* is in order. After the short-lived early 1950s boom (which only lasted from November 1952 to spring 1954) marked by a dual-camera system, 3-D revived again briefly with a single-camera system in the early 1980s, perhaps most memorably with films such as *Friday the 13th Part III* (1982), *Jaws 3-D* (1983), and *Amityville 3-D* (1983), all (conveniently—in terms of promotion) “threequels,” which Rodriguez mentions as part of his motivation for shooting his third *Spy Kids* film in 3-D.³⁸ This second wave of 3-D films fizzled out in 1983, leaving stereoscopy almost entirely absent in mainstream theatres until the release twenty years later of *Spy Kids 3-D*. Each of these three waves in 3-D production—the 1950s, 1980s, and the twenty-first century—was primarily as a countermeasure to a new technological challenge to Hollywood and its desire to lure patrons back into theaters: television, home video, and digital technologies/piracy, respectively. But before addressing *Spy Kids 3-D* and its impact in reviving stereoscopic film, it may be necessary to remind ourselves in today's more 3-D-saturated media environment of where 3-D was just over a decade ago.

During this moribund period—at least in regards to theatrically released 3-D films—there were several notable advances in 3-D technology, even if it was reserved for theme park rides

³⁸Fordham, 28.

and large-format (e.g., IMAX) screens.³⁹ Cameron's *T2 3:D Battle Across Time* (1996) was an example of 3-D's popularity with theme park attractions, although it came with a hefty price tag—\$60 million for the completed ride, with about half of the total for a film with a running time of only twelve minutes. Indeed, IMAX arguably primed audiences for stereoscopy's return to the multiplex. In 2003, the year of *Spy Kids 3-D*'s release, eleven of the 42 IMAX films that year were in 3-D.⁴⁰ Cameron's *Ghosts of the Abyss* (2003) was one such film that year, which utilized the Reality Camera System developed by him and his director of photography, Vincent Pace. The success of *Titanic* (1997) would allow Cameron to experiment more with 3-D, and he would not direct another feature film until *Avatar* (2009), helming another IMAX documentary in 3-D in the interim, *Aliens of the Deep* (2005). The Reality Camera System is equipped with an “active convergence,” the process which allows more flexibility with the focal point in 3-D. For Rodriguez, this development was a key turning point in improving stereoscopic films, which would have only been possible with the turn to digital filmmaking that he championed.

Exact figures of 3-D releases are difficult to determine, especially since some films are released in 3-D internationally but not in the U.S. (e.g., *Noah* [2014]), but by 2011, over fifty American films were being released theatrically in 3-D. The vast majority of features are not in 3-D, but we are closer to what Belton describes as the transition “from novelty to norm.”⁴¹ Even if this is only a cycle (which I will question later) akin to previous 3-D fads, it has certainly lasted much longer. Furthermore, what has set this revival in 3-D apart from previous eras may be its acceptance and use as a tool by internationally renowned auteurs such as Werner Herzog

³⁹See Ray Zone, *3-D Revolution: The History of Modern Stereoscopic Cinema* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2012), 143-233.

⁴⁰Zone, *3-D Revolution*, 180.

⁴¹John Belton, *Widescreen Cinema* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 34-51.

(*Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, 2010), Martin Scorsese (*Hugo*, 2011), Wim Wenders (*Pina*, 2011), Ang Lee (*Life of Pi*, 2012), Alfonso Cuarón (*Gravity*, 2013), and Jean-Luc Godard (*Goodbye to Language*, 2014). But it was Rodriguez's *Spy Kids 3-D* that deserves much of the credit for bringing stereoscopic films back into mainstream theaters.

Historians (most notably Zone) have documented the history of 3-D, but those who have written on its recent resurgence have generally ignored Rodriguez's place in the current 3-D revival. Zone's exhaustive, chronological account of three-dimensional cinema history since 1952, *3-D Revolution: The History of Modern Stereoscopic Cinema*, at least covers Rodriguez and his first two 3-D films, yet he anachronistically examines both *Spy Kids 3-D* and *The Adventures of Sharkboy and Lavagirl in 3-D* after his chapter on *The Polar Express* (2004), thus denigrating the role of *Spy Kids 3-D*, released the year prior to *The Polar Express*. Recently, leading film scholars, such as Thomas Elsaesser⁴² and Barbara Klinger⁴³, have tackled the subject of 3-D's significance today, again overlooking Rodriguez's role. Despite the title "The 'Return' of 3-D," Elsaesser neglects to mention Rodriguez at all, while a recent 3-D themed double issue of *Film Criticism* (Spring/Fall 2013) is guilty of the same. Thus, this article intends to rectify this imbalance by examining where Rodriguez stands in this history. My research question is: has *Spy Kids 3-D: Game Over* been neglected in histories of stereoscopy? Should it be considered a milestone along with *The Polar Express* and Disney's *Chicken Little* (2005) as a film that brought 3-D back? With his four 3-D efforts to date (*Spy Kids 3-D: Game Over*, *The Adventures of Sharkboy and Lavagirl*, *Spy Kids: All the Time in the World*, and *Sin City: A Dame*

⁴²Thomas Elsaesser, "The 'Return' of 3-D: On Some of the Logics and Genealogies of the Image in the Twenty-First Century," *Critical Inquiry* 39 (Win 2013): 217-246.

⁴³Barbara Klinger, "Three-Dimensional Cinema: The New Normal," *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 19:4 (2013): 423-431.

to Kill For), I contend that only James Cameron (the IMAX films discussed below and *Avatar*) and Robert Zemeckis (*The Polar Express*, *Beowulf* [2007], and *A Christmas Carol* [2009]) can claim to the status of “3-D auteur” as much as Rodriguez, yet he rarely merits as much attention.

I would now like to address Rodriguez’s three stereoscopic films made primarily for children, addressing his motivations for making them in 3-D, the technological innovations in 3-D that he was able to implement for each film, and finally, the reflexive markers in each film. *Spy Kids 3-D: Game Over* was originally conceived not as an entry in the *Spy Kids* series, but as a sci-fi film for children simply called *Game Over*, which would also be set in a video game universe, like the eventual film. The decision to make it a *Spy Kids* film was basically due to characterization, since Rodriguez thought that using characters already developed in the two previous films would solve the problem of creating entirely new characters. In her discussion of 3-D in horror franchise sequels *Friday the 13th Part III*, *The Final Destination* (2009), and *Final Destination 5* (2011), Caetlin Benson-Allott positions such films as metacinematic. She privileges the *Friday the 13th* “threequel” over those from the aforementioned *Jaws* and *Amityville Horror* franchises “because it encourages its spectator to identify with herself as the enduring subject of the franchise” with “self-reflexive set pieces and stereoscopic gestures” that “engage the spectator as a franchise connoisseur.”⁴⁴ Yet Rodriguez’s decision to set the film within its video game world arguably feels like such a departure for its viewers that such pleasures that Benson-Allott appeals to are noticeably absent.

⁴⁴Caetlin Benson-Allott, “Old Tropes in New Dimensions: Stereoscopy and Franchise Spectatorship,” *Film Criticism* 37/38 (Spr/Fall 2013), 13.

Spy Kids 3-D: Game Over

That *Spy Kids 3-D* was shot in digital is certainly emphasized even in the opening credits, with the unorthodox opening credit “A Robert Rodriguez Digital File.” *Spy Kids 3-D* was not the first film he had considered shooting in 3-D; he envisioned shooting the second (vampire) half of *From Dusk Till Dawn* in 3-D, but the then-limited technology with its larger cameras and lower optical quality meant that he had to forego it until the technology caught up to his trademark fast-paced shooting style.⁴⁵

When asked why he wanted to bring back 3-D with this particular film, Rodriguez replied, “I thought doing a sci-fi movie for kids and setting it in a video game would be a great way to [bring stereo 3-D effect back to theaters].”⁴⁶ He saw it as an adventure, “a genre [he] could redefine.”⁴⁷ Blaming poor storytelling for 3-D’s demise in earlier epochs, he cited *House of Wax* (1953) as the best 3-D film ever made, even stating that he knew that he and his team could surpass that film and become the new “best stereo movie ever made.”⁴⁸ Digital technology and Rodriguez’s early adoption of digital filmmaking made it an easier process for him because of the HD monitors and dual HD project on the set, allowing them to see the 3-D effects while shooting,⁴⁹ and avoiding “shooting [3-D] blind” on film.⁵⁰ Rodriguez saturates his DVD commentary with 3-D terminology and concepts, revealing that Rodriguez did his stereoscopic homework (or learned on the job) while helming his 3-D debut.

⁴⁵Fordham, 28.

⁴⁶Phil LoPiccolo, “Moving in Stereo,” *Computer Graphics World*, August 2003, 56

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Fordham, 28.

Spy Kids 3-D made use of the polychromatic anaglyphic process and its accompanying red/cyan cardboard glasses that had been used since the adult film *Swingtail* (1969), but not yet for a children's film.⁵¹ The film begins with "GLASSES ON" instructions, presumably to view the 3-D opening credits and a prologue in which Fegan Floop (Alan Cumming) informs viewers to put on glasses when "a main character puts his on." Despite this, extradiegetic instructions "GLASSES ON" and "GLASSES OFF" still appear on screen. Outside of a nine-minute sequence early in the film and a three-minute sequence when Juni exits the video game world, the rest of the film is intended as a stereoscopic experience, including the final credits. The film climaxes as spy siblings Juni (Daryl Sabara), Carmen Cortez (Alexa Vega), and their larger "family" put their glasses back on as they face giant robots in front of the State Capitol building on Austin's Congress Street.

Rodriguez also used the Reality Camera System, bringing in its co-inventor Pace to assist with the demands of shooting 3-D; Pace was subsequently credited with "additional 3-D photography," even though he was present for the duration of the shoot.⁵² Pace would also develop a system for real-time viewing for the cast and crew so they could gauge the effectiveness of the stereoscopic footage. As production designer (a role he had only recently added to his long list of tasks), Rodriguez selectively reduced his color palette to those colors which worked well in anaglyph, favoring purple, yellow, and light orange over bright red, blue, and green. To fully take advantage of 3-D's potential, the film constantly exploits negative parallax, where elements seem to appear beyond the screen, generating the emergence effect for

⁵¹Zone, *3-D Revolution*, 249. Zone notes, "One could be grateful to Robert Rodriguez for rescuing the polychromatic anaglyph motion picture from the shadowy precincts of the sex and horror genres" (250). It should be remembered that films released during the 1950s 3-D boom used polarizing glasses rather than anaglyph.

⁵²Fordham, 30.

which 3-D is primarily known. Even though this is precisely why some have denigrated 3-D, Paul argues for an “aesthetics of emergence,” since “by its insistence on the emergence effect, 3-D, the process that most closely approximated the reality of our binocular vision, made us think about how that reality is constituted.”⁵³ More recently, Klinger justifies the use of negative parallax, in addition to its converse, positive parallax (when elements recede to the back of the screen), as a “constituent part of storytelling” that takes advantage of a deep focus aesthetic.⁵⁴ Zone complements the action in *Spy Kids 3-D* for being set constantly in the stereo window, avoiding the common problems of “color fringing and ghosting” in anaglyphic 3-D.⁵⁵ In his final assessment, Zone calls it a “definite step forward for anaglyphic motion pictures,”⁵⁶ a backhanded complement all the more surprising considering that Rodriguez admits in the DVD commentary to prioritizing certain visuals for the theatrical release, in case they were unable to meet the deadline set by the release date. As a “digital file,” he knew they could still make corrections to the “film” for the home release, or adapt it to any future form of 3-D.

Yet the commentary still reveals Rodriguez’s dissatisfaction with 3-D’s limitations at that time. He also expresses dissatisfaction with the popular 3-D software Maya, foreseeing a switch to Softimage XSI for its better models, rendering, and support. Furthermore, he does not neglect to mention that a polarized version of the film exists, conceding to the critics who advocated for a polarized version over the anaglyph, but that he was hindered in that there were no theaters—outside of large-format—who could release a polarized version. In this era before Blu-ray and HD DVDs, limitations in the home video also persisted. He further reminds commentary

⁵³William Paul, “The Aesthetics of Emergence,” *Film History* 5 (Sep 1993), 335-336.

⁵⁴Klinger, 426.

⁵⁵Zone, *3-D Revolution*, 249.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 248.

listeners that NTSC and MPEG-2 compression curtail DVDs from offering the high-definition experience in the home, stating that viewing it in RGB high-definition allows more of the “full experience.”

Despite (or because of?) the addition of the third dimension, the critical reception for *Spy Kids 3-D* was not as favorable as the first two *Spy Kids* films. The critical aggregator website Metacritic (www.metacritic.com) scored the film at a 57 (admittedly only three points below the “positive” benchmark and surprisingly higher than the scores both *Desperado* and *From Dusk Till Dawn* received), but disappointing when compared to *Spy Kids* (71) and *Spy Kids 2* (66). One of the most vocal critics of the film was Roger Ebert, who had given positive reviews to the “splendid” *Spy Kids* and “lesser but still entertaining” *Spy Kids 2*. He began his review, “As a way of looking at a movie, 3-D sucks, always has, maybe always will....The problems with 3-D are: (1) It is pointless except when sticking things in the audience's eyes; (2) It is distracting when not pointless; and (3) It dims the colors and makes the image indistinct.”⁵⁷ He added that the brightness of the introductory, non-stereoscopic segment degenerated once the film exploited its 3-D element, looking darker and having a “dirty window” effect. While admitting that he enjoyed certain IMAX 3-D films, he apparently saw little use for 3-D for wide-release, feature-length, theatrical films, an opinion he steadfastly maintained until the release of *Up* six years later. *Spy Kids 3-D* was arguably more successful with audiences than critics, becoming the highest-grossing 3-D film in history with \$111 domestic tally. This topped the previous entry (\$85 million), but just failing to match the \$112 million total of the first film.⁵⁸ Still, while Hollywood sequels generally increase their budgets in order to exceed whatever elements made

⁵⁷Roger Ebert, “Newest ‘Spy Kids’ Lost in the 3-D Shuffle,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, July 25, 2003: 35.

⁵⁸All box office figures taken from Box Office Mojo (www.boxofficemojo.com).

the first installment a success, the first three *Spy Kids* films stayed within the \$35-38 million budget range, proving that a 3-D film could be made with little to no additional expense.

Yet Rodriguez's decision to shoot his third *Spy Kids* film in 3-D complements its narrative in a way that it would not have for the other *Spy Kids* films, as much of the film is set within the diegetic video game "Game Over," an alternate reality that can call for another mode of vision; or, as Zone claims, Rodriguez "uses the stereoscopic parameter as a seamless part of the narrative."⁵⁹ Moreover, children could wear their glasses home after watching the film, roleplaying within the *Spy Kids* universe. This was a marked change from the way 3-D had been handled before by studios, as an "afterthought" according to Rodriguez:

It was almost as if a studio had said: "Oh, you're going to make that movie? Why don't you do it in 3D while you're at it? Kids love that 3D!" There was never any real point in the 3D, because it was never part of the story. Most people wrote off 3D in movies seeing a failure on all levels; but I thought I could make it work by doing something different, by pulling an audience into the movie with the characters.⁶⁰

Rodriguez also comments on 3-D's self-reflexivity in the film, most memorably in the aforementioned final scene, which features all of the characters wearing their 3-D glasses. A jab at 3-D should also not be missed; when Juni leaves the alternate reality of the video game world, OSS (Organization of Super Spies) Head Donnagon Giggles (Mike Judge), warns him, "Those video games are killers on the eyes, huh kid?" as Juni and his grandfather (played by Ricardo Montalban) take off their 3-D glasses and rub their eyes, referencing those detractors of 3-D who complain of discomfort with the technology.

⁵⁹Zone, *3-D Revolution*, 250.

⁶⁰Fordham, 28.

The Adventures of Sharkboy and Lavagirl

It was Bob Weinstein, head of the Dimension Films (which has released most of Rodriguez's films), who informed Rodriguez of *Spy Kids 3-D*'s success, asking him if he had another 3-D children's film in the works.⁶¹ Rodriguez then chose to make a film "based on the stories and dreams" of his seven-year-old son Racer Max. Arriving almost two whole years after *Spy Kids 3-D*, *Sharkboy and Lavagirl* was released on June 10, 2005, still before the present "boom" in 3-D films. For this film, Rodriguez opted for a slightly different anaglyphic process, using a true-color anaglyph.⁶²

"GLASSES ON" instructions are included again, but this time diegetically as the heroes enter the shark rocketship to Planet Drool, occurring at the twenty-minute mark. In his DVD commentary, Rodriguez again expresses his disappointment that theaters were not yet equipped with digital projection, meaning that the 3-D will almost always look darker than it should when projected on film. He also reprimands exhibitors and projectionists who, as they had before with *Spy Kids 3-D*, ignored his special letter of instructions for projection bulbs to be used at their intended brightness, not the lower level exhibitors typically use as a cost-saving measure. Rodriguez reminds viewers and listeners that although they were subjected to using anaglyph glasses while watching the film, that was not how the film was intended to be seen, promising the full potential of shooting with the Reality Camera System when viewing the polarized version.

Advances in digital filmmaking and the proliferation of visual effects houses resulted in a simpler, more streamlined experience for Rodriguez and his crew shooting in 3-D. For instance,

⁶¹Judy Sloane, "Inside Hollywood," *Film Review*, July 2005, 26.

⁶²Zone, *3-D Revolution*, 254-255.

colors were less of a concern during production, as color correction was done on the original 2-D version of the film to avoid a “color correction nightmare,” according to the film’s visual effects producer, Keefe Boerner. This was essential when colors like cyan and red were already thematic colors for the film’s heroes,⁶³ while Rodriguez felt that he no longer had to “sacrific[e] color.”⁶⁴ Rodriguez claims to have also used the first SRPC-1 HD Video Processor available in the U.S. from Sony, allowing them to freeze frames while viewing while watching 3-D playback, a tool unavailable to them two years previous.⁶⁵ Armed with the new Sony HDC-950 camera, he could also place performers in more extreme space, exploiting 3-D’s potential to greater effect.⁶⁶

Despite these advancements in Rodriguez’s early 3-D efforts, it would be presumptuous to insist that Rodriguez singlehandedly brought back 3-D, as both films were generally criticized as clumsy experiments aimed primarily for children. If anything, more successful films like *The Polar Express* and *Chicken Little* arguably brought 3-D to a greater public awareness. Yet these films were not as intentional in their desire to see a revival in 3-D. *The Polar Express* notably played as a “flat” film in 3,000 theaters and in 3-D in only seventy IMAX theaters,⁶⁷ while the decision to make *Chicken Little* into a 3-D film was made late in production, only fourteen weeks before its release date of November 4 (almost five months after *Sharkboy and Lavagirl*’s release).⁶⁸ It is not unreasonable to assume that the success of Rodriguez’s 3-D films (especially when compared to their relatively small budgets), along with *The Polar Express*, may have inspired Disney to jump on the new 3-D bandwagon. But this is not to belittle *Chicken Little*’s

⁶³Michael Goldman, “Rodriguez and 3D Post: Better Anaglyphs and Revised Workflow,” *Millimeter* 33 (June 2005), 34.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, 29.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 30.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, 29-30.

⁶⁷Zone, *3-D Revolution*, 262.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, 266.

significance as the film that brought digital 3-D as a more permanent stereoscopic filmmaking mode. Disney heavily promoted the film and it eclipsed *Spy Kids 3-D*'s box office record, signally a clarion call to the industry that 3-D could be a viable and lucrative addition to certain films.

This period also saw the rise of RealD, with its polarized, non-cardboard, yet still disposable glasses, as another significant breakthrough for 3-D's resurgence, eventually becoming the most popular 3-D technology. But the format was initially relegated to animation (e.g., *Monster House* [2006], *Meet the Robinsons* [2007]), which dominated the 3-D resurgence in the wake of *Spy Kids 3-D* and *Sharkboy and Lavagirl* to such an extent that *Journey to the Center of the Earth* (2008) billed itself as the "first digital live-action 3-D movie" despite being five years late to the party.⁶⁹ Theaters still hesitant to install enough 3-D screens to meet audience demand (and this would continue until the blue monster that was *Avatar*) insured that *Journey to the Center of the Earth* was still released primarily in its 2-D version.

During this time, Rodriguez became a spokesperson for 3-D, while also serving as a whipping boy for everything negative with how 3-D was then being used. Both he and Cameron heralded the coming of 3-D digital cinema at the 2005 ShoWest convention (the largest trade convention for theatre owners, now CinemaCon), but Cameron would later disparage his chief 3-D rival and his anaglyphic films for "horrendous image quality" and that they "contributed to the 'ghetto-ization' of 3-D."⁷⁰

⁶⁹Ibid., *3-D Revolution*, 299.

⁷⁰Ibid., *3-D Revolution*, 258. Cameron has often been critical of "cheapening the 3-D medium," despite the opening of this statement on recent 3-D horror films such as *Piranha 3D* (2010): "I tend almost never to throw other films under the bus, but that is exactly an example of what we should not be doing in 3-D. Because it just cheapens the medium and reminds you of the bad 3-D horror films from the 70s and 80s, like *Friday the 13th 3D*. When movies go to the bottom of the barrel of their creativity and at the last gasp of their financial lifespan, they did a 3-D version to get the last few drops of blood out of the turnip" (quoted in Benson-Allott, 12). Cameron's dubious opinion toward the *Friday the 13th* franchise aside (hardly the "last gasp" of the franchise *Friday the 13th Part III* would be

Rodriguez's association with 3-D even appears in his *Machete Kills*, which includes a fun bit spoofing 3-D's exploitation era. As "Miss San Antonio" (Amber Head) straddles Machete (Danny Trejo), "PUT ON YOUR 3-D GLASSES" flashes on the screen, increasing in rapidity as she takes off her pageantry sash and starts to disrobe. The scene then merges into a blurry cyan/red image that recalls anaglyph 3-D as the viewer can subtly detect they are engaged in a sexual act. Rodriguez has been more candid in interviews in recent years, taking credit for 3-D's resurgence, and as this article has demonstrated, he indeed deserves more attention from scholars of stereoscopy. While Rodriguez was certainly not as instrumental in the development of current 3-D technologies as is the case with Cameron, Rodriguez still deserves to be mentioned alongside Cameron for helping revive 3-D in mainstream American cinemas.

As outlined above, the added dimension of stereoscopy has certainly peaked at various stages in cinema's history. Writing in the early 1990s, William Paul called it an "aberration for mainstream moviemaking" albeit one "that the mainstream turns to in almost periodic fashion."⁷¹ But I argue that this "*failed* technology of the past" (per Paul, emphasis his⁷²) is no longer that; while the number of 3-D productions admittedly peaked in 2011,⁷³ it has finally moved from "novelty to norm," especially with the growth of 3-D in international markets and in the home (courtesy of 3-D televisions and Blu-ray discs). Furthermore, as Elsaesser points out, in the

followed by seven more official sequels between 1984-2001), he does seem eager to criticize films whose 3-D is apparently not up to his standards, perhaps because these films do not have the astronomical budgets of Cameron's films.

⁷¹Paul, "Aesthetics," 321.

⁷²Paul, "Aesthetics," 332.

⁷³For various charts tracing 3-D's rise (and wane), see Katey Rich, "Does This Graph Prove That 3-D Movies Are Over?," on *Cinema Blend*, <http://www.cinemablend.com/new/Does-Graph-Prove-3D-Movies-Over-39322.html>, accessed March 27, 2014. One graph on the site, posted by a Redditt contributor, includes over one hundred years of stereo films, vividly depicting the three "boom" periods in 3-D production.

military, scientific, medical, and security realms, 3-D technologies never actually went away.⁷⁴

He adds,

If one thinks of 3-D not as part of a cinema of attractions, not as startling you or throwing things at you from the depth of space, but as the vanguard of a new cinema of narrative integration, introducing the malleability, scalability, fluidity, or curvature of digital images into audiovisual space—doing away with horizons, suspending vanishing points, seamlessly varying distance, *unchaining* the camera and transporting the observer—then the aesthetic possibilities are by no means limited to telling a silly story, suitable only for kids hungry for superheroes, action toys, or sci-fi fantasies.⁷⁵

Even if Rodriguez's 3-D efforts have thus far been "limited to telling a silly story," would films like *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* and *Pina* have arisen if not for Rodriguez?

While Harry Warner's pronouncement in 1953 that all films in two years would be in 3-D⁷⁶ (a prophecy that may never come to fruition), this third wave of 3-D filmmaking is not the fad of the early 1950s or early 1980s. Stereoscopic motion pictures are finally here to stay, and for that, Rodriguez deserves partial credit (or blame, depending on your perspective).

The Digital Backlot in the *Sin City* Films

Following his involvement with reviving 3-D in mainstream theaters with *Spy Kids 3-D*, Rodriguez's next major technological progression came with the making of *Sin City*, an adaptation of Frank Miller's titular award-winning comics series. Rodriguez has insisted that a film like *Sin City* was only possible with digital filmmaking, more specifically the use of a "digital backlot." A digital backlot film is one that is shot entirely (or almost entirely) with actors in front of a greenscreen, thus creating virtual "sets" through the use of CGI. (To see how such

⁷⁴Elsaesser, 241-243.

⁷⁵Ibid., 237.

⁷⁶Abel Green, "Tri-Dimension Hectic Race: Don't Want to Get Left at the Post," *Variety*, Jan 28, 1953, 3, 18

films look without CGI, see the “Green-Screen Version” on the *Sin City* and *Sin City: A Dame to Kill For* Blu-Ray releases.)

Sin City was not the first film shot this way, as a few notable digital backlot films were released in 2004: Graham Robertson’s microbudget film *Able Edwards*, the big-budgeted *Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow* (Kerry Conran, based on his 1998 short *The World of Tomorrow*), the French film *Immortel* (directed by Enki Bilal), and the Japanese film *Casshern* (Kazuaki Kiriya). Still, *Sin City* was in production before these films were released and is thus viewed as one of the first such films in this taxonomy. The Rodriguez-Miller film was also more financially successful than the previous digital backlot films (making almost three times as much internationally as the Angelina Jolie-Jude Law-Gwyneth Paltrow-Laurence Olivier’s ghost starring vehicle *Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow*), while also receiving a better critical reception overall. On IMDb, *Sin City* has a very high rating of 8.1 (on a 10-point scale), high enough to make it #189 on its list of the “Top 250 Films of All Time” (as of April 9, 2015),⁷⁷ making it the highest-rated Rodriguez film on the site. The film also won several major awards, including the Technical Grand Prize at Cannes (where it was also nominated for the Palme d’Or), and awards for its cinematography, editing, production design, as well as acting for Mickey Rourke, from awards organizations and major critical societies in the U.S. and even worldwide.⁷⁸

⁷⁷According to IMDb, their top 250 ratings are based on a true Bayesian estimate, a formula where the weighted rating $(WR) = (v \div (v+m)) \times R + (m \div (v+m)) \times C$ where: R = average for the movie (mean) = (Rating), v = number of votes for the movie = (votes), m = minimum votes required to be listed in the Top 250 (currently 25000), C = the mean vote across the whole report (currently 7.0)

⁷⁸Other awards include Saturn Awards for Best Action/Adventure/Thriller Film and Best Supporting Actor (Rourke); Best Formal Design and one of the year’s Ten Best Films from the Central Ohio Film Critics Association; Best Supporting Actor for Rourke from the Chicago Film Critics Association; Best Editing and Best Makeup from the Phoenix Film Critics Society; Best Production Design from the San Diego Film Critics Society; and perhaps most notably, Best Cinematography, Best Editing, and Best Supporting Actor (Rourke) from the Online Film Critics Society. Major nominations include three ALMA (American Latino Media Arts) in the Director, Actor (Benicio del Toro), and Supporting Actress (Jessica Alba) categories; Saturn nominations for make-up and supporting actress

Ten years later, *Sin City* remains a film praised by critics and scholars for its aesthetic. Connecting to my earlier reference to Manovich and digital cinema as more like painting than an indexical medium, Patrick Colm Hogan praises the three-minute opening sequence, “The Customer Is Always Right”: “It manifest the allusiveness, modeling, and painterly sensibility that we associate with works that have sources in the traditional fine arts, though it draws on graphic fiction rather than painting....The consequences for artifact emotion—here bound up with mannerism and thus foregrounding of style—are perhaps the most significant, stressing as they do the operation of dishabituating in painterly cinema.”⁷⁹ The digital backlot allowed Rodriguez the ability to shoot his actors without a fill light, which more fully replicates Miller’s black-and-white comics. He could also add shadows wherever he liked in postproduction, even defying the laws of physics.⁸⁰

Digital backlot films generally blur the demarcation between production and postproduction, since with a film like *Sin City*, the artists for Troublemaker Digital essentially serve as the film’s art department. In fact, all stages of production blend together, as Rodriguez and his Troublemaker Digital previsualization crew were able to create animatics for the entire film (standard for animation features, less so with live-action films), serving as both a cost-saving measure during shooting and expediting the whole shooting process with scenes pre-

(Alba); Best Ensemble Cast nominations from both the Washington D.C. Area Film Critics Association and Broadcast Film Critics Awards Association; a Black Reel Supporting Actress nomination for Rosario Dawson; UK’s Empire Award nominations for Best Film and Best Thriller; an Imagen (focused on Latinos in entertainment) Best Director nomination; a MTV Awards nomination for Best Movie; a Czech Lion nomination for Best Foreign-Language Film (*Nejlepší zahraniční film*); and nine Satellite Award nominations for its cinematography, editing, score, visual effects, art direction and production design, sound mixing and editing, and for Rourke, as well as two additional nominations for the DVD release.

⁷⁹Patrick Colm Hogan, “Painterly Cinema: Three Minutes of *Sin City*,” in *Critical Approaches to the Films of Robert Rodriguez*, edited by Frederick Luis Aldama (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015), 79.

⁸⁰Emily R. Anderson, “*Sin City*, Style, and the Status of Noir,” in *Critical Approaches to the Films of Robert Rodriguez*, edited by Frederick Luis Aldama (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015), 84-85.

choreographed.⁸¹ Elizabeth Avellan has expressed pride that Troublemaker's penurious outlook toward filmmaking means that *Sin City*'s budget of \$40 million was much less than what *300* (2007, \$65 million) and *The Spirit* (2008, \$60 million) both cost.⁸² (Not to mention the \$110 million *300: Rise of an Empire* [2014].) Live-action and animation also blur; Aldama rightly connects *Sin City* to one of Rodriguez's favorite films (and one that he plans to remake), Ralph Bakshi's rotoscoped animation *Fire and Ice* (1983).⁸³ Furthermore, this emphasis on postproduction epitomizes Jon Lewis's diatribe against Lucas, Spielberg, and other "almost exclusively postproduction directors" in his elegy for 1970s the auteur renaissance in light of the blockbuster era.⁸⁴

Rodriguez would return to the digital backlot with *Sin City: A Dame to Kill For*, this time also shooting in 3-D. Despite drawing tepid reviews, it is perhaps Rodriguez's most admirable 3-D effort thus far from an aesthetic viewpoint, with its creative use of the stereo window. Unfortunately for Rodriguez (and the potential for more sequels), the film was a failure financially, especially compared to its predecessor. Despite inflation and 3-D surcharges, the film opened to \$6.3 million, less than a fourth of *Sin City*'s opening weekend in 2005.

Aroma-Scope in *Spy Kids: All the Time in the World*

With Rodriguez's penchant for trilogies (the "Mariachi" trilogy, *From Dusk Till Dawn*, and proposed for *Machete* and *Sin City*), *Spy Kids: All the Time in the World* was bit of a break,

⁸¹Aldama, *Cinema*, 107-108.

⁸²Nick De Semlyen, "2 Days at the World's Coolest Studio," *Empire*, Apr 2010, 125. Reprinted in Ingle, 147.

⁸³Aldama, *Cinema*, 107.

⁸⁴Jon Lewis, "The Perfect Money Machine(s): George Lucas, Steven Spielberg, and Auteurism in the New Hollywood," in *Looking Past the Screen: Case Studies in American Film History and Method*, eds. Lewis and Eric Smoodin (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 61-86.

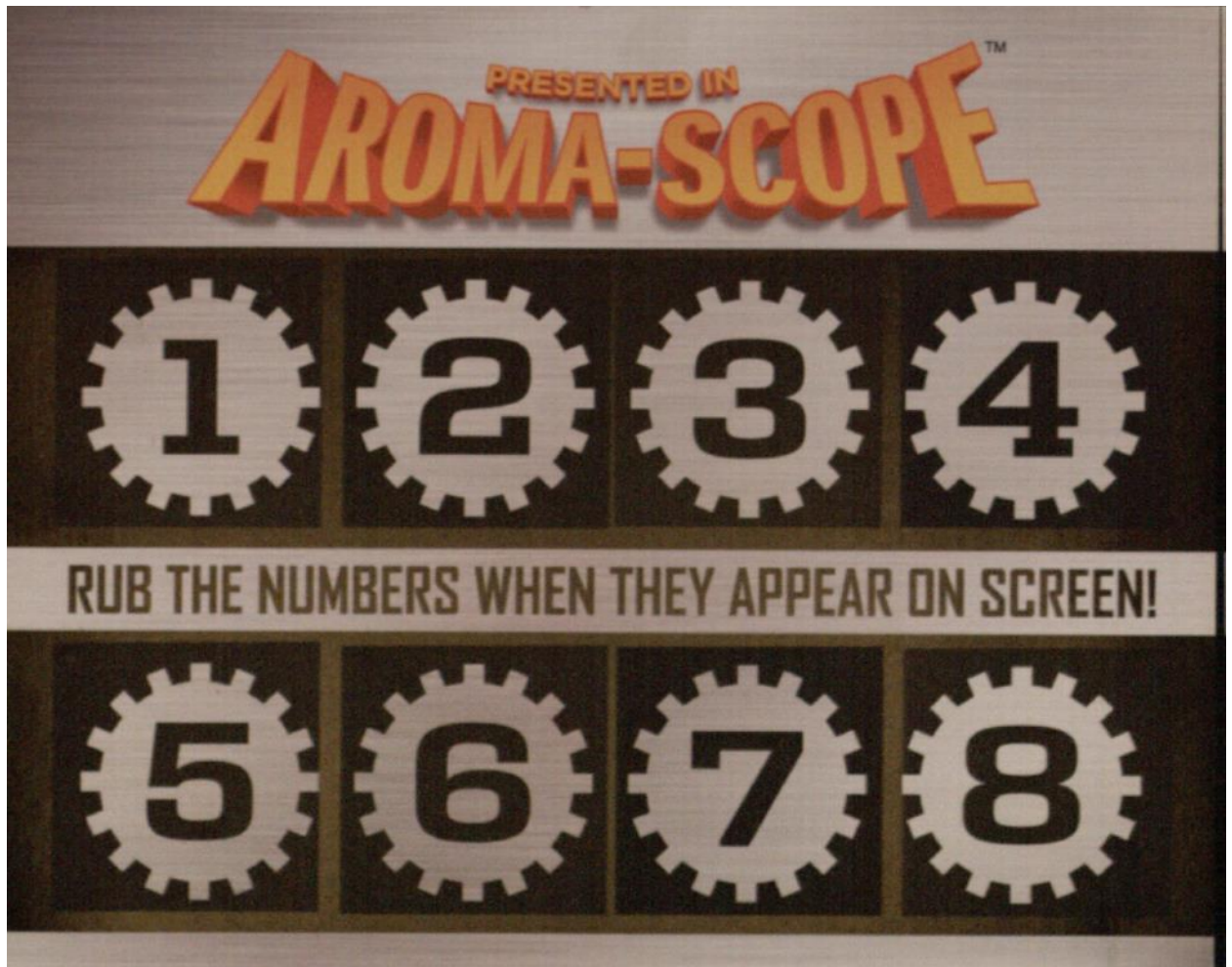
the fourth film in a series. Notwithstanding Rodriguez's "Welcome back to the *final* Spy Kids movie" as he opens the DVD commentary for *Spy Kids 3-D*, he had earlier expressed interest in making another *Spy Kids* sequel, but probably direct-to-DVD or as an animated release.⁸⁵ For this fourth film, Rodriguez wanted to add another dimension, billing the film as in "4-D" with "Aroma-Scope."

"4-D" was not a term invented by Rodriguez, as ride films at theme parks have often used the designation since the 1990s. The fourth dimension can be any extrasensory experience (such as vibrating seats, puffs of smoke, etc.), perhaps first memorably employed in mainstream theaters with Sensurround for *Earthquake* (1974) and its imitators, Sound 360 and Megasound. But it can also refer to the addition of some form of smelling technologies, which has intermittently appeared in the latter half of cinema's history. Perhaps the most notable attempt to incorporate smelling as an added attraction was John Waters's *Polyester* (1981), for which patrons were given "Odorama" scratch-and-sniff cards with their tickets so that they could smell the skunk, flatulence, gasoline, and dirty shoes of the diegesis. *Rugrats Go Wild* (2003), the final film in the Rugrats trilogy (1998-2003) had also used a scratch-and-sniff card similar to *Polyester*, an attempt that seems to have been forgotten by reviewers of *Spy Kids: All the Time in the World*. Yet endeavors to appeal to the olfactory perception go back decades; Walt Disney had considered integrating smells into *Fantasia* before nixing the idea, while Michael Todd Jr.'s "Smell-O-Vision" released scents through the theater's ventilation system for *Scent of Mystery* (1960).⁸⁶ In a similar vein, William Castle became known for his various theatrical gimmicks,

⁸⁵Anonymous, "Fantasy Filmmaker," *Daily Variety*, Sep 13, 2005, 30.

⁸⁶Roger Ebert, "It moves! It speaks! It smells!," *Roger Ebert's Journal*, Aug 11, 2011.
http://blogs.suntimes.com/ebert/2011/08/it_moves_it_speaks_it_smells.html

including “Percepto” (the buzzers installed in seats for *The Tingler* [1959]), a “fright break” included in *Homicidal* (1961), or the “Punishment Poll” for his two possible endings of *Mr. Sardonicus* (1961). Attempting to follow his revival of 3-D, Rodriguez proved himself the filmmaker closest to Castle today, wanting to add a new attraction to his next *Spy Kids* sequel.



Original “Aroma-Scope” card for *Spy Kids: All the Time in the World* (2011). Author’s collection.

Rodriguez recycled the scratch-and-sniff cards of *Polyester* and *Rugrats Go Wild* as well, perhaps because of its minimal costs. As in those films, numbers appear sporadically throughout *Spy Kids: All the Time in the World* that correspond to the number that the viewer is to scratch on

the card, in order to catch a whiff of bacon, candy, dog flatulence, dirty diapers, or mucus, presumably to appeal to the olfactory sense.⁸⁷ But this ploy was perhaps a failed experiment, as *Spy Kids: All the Time in the World* arguably drew the worst reviews of any film in Rodriguez's corpus. A few critics labeled it as equivalent to a direct-to-DVD release, while even a mixed review like Mark Olsen's for *Los Angeles Times* notes that "Rodriguez never gets too adventurous with the [Aroma-Scope] concept—food and bodily functions are the staples—and even seems to eventually give up on it, throwing three of the eight smells into a single moment."⁸⁸ More common were pejorative reviews of the Aroma-Scope as ineffective and gimmicky. *Entertainment Weekly's* Keith Staskiewicz called it a "hokey element" and that all the scents mixed together to smell like a "blueberry Yankee Candle."⁸⁹

Like *Sharkboy and Lavagirl* before it, *Spy Kids: All the Time in the World* was markedly less successful than Rodriguez's previous films, both with audiences and with critics. *Sharkboy and Lavagirl* and *Spy Kids: All the Time in the World* have the lowest Metacritic metascores of any of his films (38 and 37, respectively). This box office totals mirrored the negative critical reception, as *Sharkboy and Lavagirl* barely topped \$39 million, *Spy Kids: All the Time in the World* \$38.5 million (although its tally was less than a million dollars short of besting *Rugrats Go Wild* to become the highest-grossing "smelling" film ever). Fortunately for Rodriguez and Dimension Films, the fourth *Spy Kids* entry's budget was the smallest yet at \$28 million, so the film turned a profit, especially since its foreign gross surpassed its lackluster domestic take.

⁸⁷From this viewer's experience, part of the film's failure may be on exhibitors. When I purchased my ticket, I specifically asked for an Aroma-Scope card. I noticed that other patrons coming into the theater did not have their cards, so I let them know about the "4-D" experience and that they should return to the box office to receive their cards.

⁸⁸Mark Olsen, "All Smelly 'Spy Kids' Steals Is One's Time," *Los Angeles Times*, Aug 22, 2011: D3.

⁸⁹Keith Staskiewicz, "Spy Kids: All the Time in the World in 4D," *Entertainment Weekly*, Aug 21, 2011. <http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,20521734,00.html>.

Rodriguez thought a new element was necessary since *Spy Kids 2* and *3-D* had their own innovations (digital and 3-D, respectively), which meant the fourth film *had* to go for 4-D. Wanting to revive Waters's "Odorama" for a family audience (also apparently forgetting *Rugrats Go Wild*), he was reassured that the "technology" had improved in 25 years and that it would not "smell like batteries" anymore and that the smells would no longer collide,⁹⁰ a claim that some critics would apparently dispute. According to Rodriguez, the card manufacturers make the cards further in advance (allowing the smells to "sit longer") and that the inclusion of more "activators" made the technology more advanced.⁹¹ He also viewed it as essential to an increased desire for interactivity with today's audiences accustomed to gaming: "That's what you want from an extra dimension. You want to be brought even closer to the movie. The *Spy Kids* movies are very empowering to children, and they feel very close to the characters and dream about being spies. Anything that draws them closer to that, as an experience, makes that identification bond more."⁹² Hence the need to smell selected diegetic elements. Yet Aldama hints at why smelling innovations, at least when they are used so sporadically, essentially fail:

To make smells *make sense* in the experience of a film that privileges sight and sound is very difficult at best. If present, it likely serves either as an appendage that distracts or no contribution to the aesthetic means that will further the aesthetic goals in the film; it distracts because it leads the viewer to believe that the smell *will* be a part of the global aesthetic of the film, but because it can't contribute in such a way, it creates a frustration on the part of the viewer.⁹³

⁹⁰Nell Minow, "Interview: Robert Rodriguez of 'Spy Kids: All the Time in the World in 4D,'" <http://www.beliefnet.com/columnists/moviemom/2011/08/interview-robert-rodriguez-of-spy-kids-4d-all-the-time-in-the-world.html>

⁹¹Christine Radish, "Director Robert Rodriguez Talks *Spy Kids: All the Time in the World* and *Sin City 2*," *Collider*, <http://collider.com/robert-rodriguez-spy-kids-4-sin-city-2-interview>

⁹²Ibid.

⁹³Aldama, 85.

Despite Rodriguez's criticism at the time of *Spy Kids 3-D* of studios incorporating 3-D as an afterthought, he was arguably just as guilty of this with *Spy Kids: All the Time in the World*. Actors were unaware that the film would revive a smelling "technology," though he asserts it was always his intention and had clues to that effect written into the script: "The whole movie, they didn't know why they were smelling stuff so much till they got the announcement just before the movie came out that it would be in 4D. That was funny."⁹⁴ (The news broke a little less than two months before the film's release.) Both the third and fourth dimensions were absent for the DVD release, while the Blu-ray release did include both 2-D and 3-D versions, with the use of "Aroma-Scope" entirely absent.⁹⁵ Indeed, the film itself seemed to have discarded 3-D's potential, as emergence effects rarely appear after the first act. Aldama, on the other hand, views this as to film's benefit: "The 3-D effects do not call attention to themselves. Rather, they give a sense of depth to the storyworld, allowing the audience to perceive simultaneously a sharp sense of foreground and background. The 3-D effects are used to give an added visual thickness to the film."⁹⁶

Unlike Rodriguez's two previous 3-D films, glasses were to be worn for the film's entirety, further evidence that 3-D was no longer the novelty it had been in 2003 and 2005. Yet Zone favorably compares such films that include short 2-D sequences to contrast the stereoscopy (or, conversely, include a 3-D sequence within a mostly 2-D film such as *Superman Returns* [2006]) as akin to the use of volume by composers and musicians:

⁹⁴Silas Lesnick, "Exclusive: Robert Rodriguez on *Spy Kids: All the Time in the World*," *Comingsoon.net*, Nov 22, 2011, <http://www.comingsoon.net/news/movienews.php?id=84548>

⁹⁵Benson-Allott mentions that the video version of *Friday the 13th Part III* "bears traces of the platform its movie no longer occupies" and "encourages the spectator to imagine what its emergence effects might have looked and felt like, inspiring fantasies of a lost stereoscopic idyll" (21). Will future viewers of *Spy Kids: All the Time in the World* "inspire fantasies of a lost *aromatic* idyll?"

⁹⁶Aldama, *Cinema*, 84-85.

Just as silence is a parameter of sound, flatness, or 2-D, is a parameter of depth. To fully exploit the expanded digital tool set for stereoscopic storytelling, the digital 3-D director can use this visual silence, flatness, contrapuntally over the course of the narrative. Then, when stereopsis begins to flower within the story, it can do so with the greatest possible dramatic impact.⁹⁷

Spy Kids 3-D, on the other hand, was unlike later films that have been released in both 2-D and 3-D formats, as it was always intended to be seen in 3-D. Zone specifically references as proof that stereoscopic films dictate a “new grammar of cinematic storytelling” since such films that “incorporat[e] z-axis information within and in front of the screen can only work artistically in stereo.”⁹⁸ Still, while many critics have derided those films who convert to stereo in post (e.g., *Clash of the Titans* and *Alice in Wonderland*, both 2010,) Zone offers a contrarian voice as he apparently advocates stereo conversion as a valid option, as advanced retrofitting technology leaves most viewers unaware of the differences between those films originally shot in 3-D and those shot in 2-D that converted in post. Indeed, *Spy Kids: All the Time in the World* was one such post-converted film.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Rodriguez has not received as much attention for his innovative contributions within the shifting technological landscape in the post-*Star Wars* American cinematic landscape as Lucas, Cameron, or Spielberg. One might speculate that this is due to smaller box-office returns, but he arguably deserves as much credit for the technological advances since 2000: digital filmmaking, the increasing reliance on CGI visual effects, the revival of 3-D, and the digital backlot. Aroma-Scope may have been a failed experiment and

⁹⁷Zone, *3-D Revolution*, 294-296.

⁹⁸*Ibid.*, 262-263.

films shot on digital backlots have only been sporadic, but Rodriguez's place in the vanguard of digital filmmaking and the resurgence of stereoscopy merits more scholarly consideration from film historians. Of course, Rodriguez was able to be on the forefront of many of these innovations because he runs his own studio. Without owning the means of production as Rodriguez does, indie filmmakers like Jon Jost, Julie Dash, Hal Hartley, Victor Nuñez, and Jim Jarmusch, among numerous others, are unable to own the expensive technologies in order to make mid-sized budget films.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION: RODRIGUEZ, A MAN OF CONTRADICTIONS

In this study, I have attempted to offer the most comprehensive overview yet delineated of Robert Rodriguez's significance to the contemporary media industries, most critically in how he redefines what it means to be an independent filmmaker. I have further demonstrated that authorship approaches maintain a certain theoretical purchase within the academy, and that they have evolved considerably since the heyday of *Cahiers du cinema* and Andrew Sarris.

I would like to close this investigation with some of the paradoxes and contradictions in Rodriguez's life and work, many of which problematize the notion of a monolithic Rodriguez discourse. Rodriguez can rightly be criticized as relying on existing properties, be they sequels, spinoffs, remakes, reboots, or adaptations. In fact, of the films he has directed or produced since the release of *Spy Kids*, there exist six sequels (*Spy Kids 2*, *Spy Kids 3-D*, *Once Upon a Time in Mexico*, *Spy Kids: All the Time in the World*, *Machete Kills*, and *Sin City: A Dame to Kill For*), one reboot (*Predators*), one spinoff of a trailer (*Machete*), and one adaptation (*Sin City*). This leaves only *Planet Terror*, *The Adventures of Sharkboy and Lavagirl*, and *Shorts* as original works, with neither of the last two finding much favor with audiences nor critics. He privileged *From the Dusk Till Dawn*, rather than the more original *Matador*, as the first series on his new network, and one could contend that this is the reason why the former continued on for another season while the latter was prematurely cancelled. Projects in development include *Fire and Ice* (remake), *Madman* (adaptation of a comic), *Alita: Battle Angel* (adaptation of a manga), *Johnny Quest* (adaptation of the popular television show), and *Machete Kills in Space* (yet another sequel). He has confessed to his fondness for returning to familiar storyworlds, but justifies it by

saying that he enjoys characterization, particularly fleshing out his characters, more than anything else in storytelling. For instance, when asked why he felt the need for a television series based on *From Dusk Till Dawn* (which itself had already spawned two direct-to-DVD sequels), he used literary terms, explaining that the original film was akin to a short story, the series to a novel, thus allowing greater depth to Tarantino's original characters.

Rodriguez has constantly projected a persona of being fiercely independent, despite the commercial nature of his films. He may be the director who famously directed *El Mariachi* for a scant \$7,000, but all of his features after *Desperado* have had budgets of at least \$10 million. Surely the director who championed his ability to bring in a film on such a low budget can still make the genre entertainments on smaller budgets—if he genuinely wanted to. Perhaps this has spurred his recent declaration that he would soon make another film with a set budget of \$7,000 in order to prove that newer technologies have made shooting a feature even cheaper than it was 25 years ago.

Family and *familismo* has been central to Rodriguez's life and work, but Rodriguez divorced his working partner and wife of eighteen years, Elizabeth Avellan, in 2008. This was allegedly due to a relationship with Rose McGowan, his *Planet Terror* starlet. (After that short-lived relationship, he has since been dating Marci Madison, who is over twenty years his junior. Madison has cameos in his recent film and television work.) The details are murky as to whether the marriage between Rodriguez and Avellan was already on unstable ground, but I found no evidence in public discourse about any marital difficulties before this brief fling with McGowan. While gossip has little to no place in a study such as this one, this scandal (if I can even call it that) has, in the eyes of some, tarnished Rodriguez's persona as a family man.

Rodriguez stated in a 2003 interview that, thanks to digital, he would be able to make three to four films a year.¹ Not only has Rodriguez never attempted something so ambitious, he has only directed eight features since that bold claim was made (even if he remains prolific by most standards), the same number of features released between 1994 and 2003, an even shorter period of time. Furthermore, numerous unrealized projects remain exactly that, including his third screenplay *Till Death Do Us Part* (“a comical action/thriller about a Mexican soap-opera star and an obituary writer”);² an adaptation of Mike Allred’s *Madman* comics of the 1990s; a biopic of fellow Austinite Stevie Ray Vaughn; a silver-screen adaptation of *The Jetsons* (1962-1963); a remake of *Red Sonja* with McGowan in the titular role; and, from his *Roadracers* production diary, a TV pilot script alluded to that he was set to shoot that never materialized. Perhaps most frustrating for Rodriguez’s fans is his long-gestating *Nerverackers*, an original science-fiction film in the mold of *Blade Runner* that he first conceived in in the late 1990s. Whether these projects were aborted to due to budgetary concerns, factors beyond Rodriguez’s control, simple disinterest, or a combination of all three, remains to be seen.

To his credit, Rodriguez has also turned down many of the scripts he has been offered. After his early successes, he received the scripts for many films that would eventually be made: *Superman Returns*, *Wild Wild West*, and *X-Men*. Directing any of these would have been an enormous payday for Rodriguez, but he claims to have rejected all of them because of the poor shape the scripts were in at that time, rather than some sort of artistic integrity of only shooting from his own scripts.³ Of course, Rodriguez did pursue some major projects, most memorably

¹Mel Rodriguez, “Robert Rodriguez’s New Toy,” *MovieMaker*, Sum 2003, 48. Reprinted in Zachary Ingle, *Robert Rodriguez: Interviews* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 2012), 106.

²Robert Rodriguez, *Roadracers: The Making of a Degenerate Hot Rod Flick* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), 3.

³Frederick Luis Aldama, *The Cinema of Robert Rodriguez* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014), 143.

The Mask of Zorro, but he also desired to direct the adaptation of Edgar Rice Burroughs's novel *A Princess of Mars*, which was eventually made by Disney (and directed by Pixar director Andrew Stanton) and released as *John Carter* in 2012. Rodriguez left the former project because of a tussle between Amblin (before it became Dreamworks) and TriStar;⁴ for the latter project, Paramount (who was then planning the film) replaced him because he had dropped his DGA membership.

There remain still more contradictions in Rodriguez. For one, as mentioned in Chapter 3, he stated in 1995 that “the day I don’t edit my own movie is the day I’m just doing it for the money.” While holding someone to such an audacious statement so early in a career may be unfair, it is possible that his decision to not edit *Spy Kids: All the Time in the World* will point to a later trend, or it could only be an exception. Furthermore, it relates to a broader tendency toward more collaboration (co-directing *Machete* and the *Sin City* films), which some may see as a break from his earlier mariachi style of filmmaking.

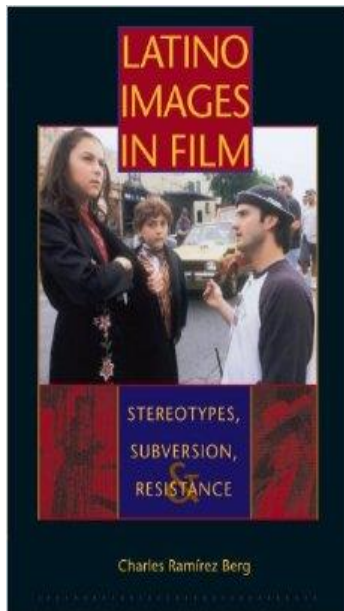
As for further avenues for research, there are several topics I would like to explore. I am currently exploring Rodriguez's role in establishing Austin as a filmmaking hotbed and well as the place of the city (and Texas in general) within his cinema. He is as much a regional filmmaker as John Waters (Baltimore), Gus Van Sant (Portland), or Alexander Payne (Omaha) are, and perhaps more so, since even Van Sant (*Milk*, 2008) and Payne (*Sideways*, 2004) occasionally film elsewhere. I also want to conduct further research into the reception of Rodriguez's films in Mexico.

⁴Charles Ramírez Berg, *Latino Images in Film: Stereotypes, Subversion, and Resistance* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 253-254.

This study has examined the historical trajectory of a culturally significant filmmaker and media figure, without resorting to tired textual analyses. Chapter 2 tackled the subject of the discourse surrounding Rodriguez's ethnicity, an identity that may be perceived as vexing to some, since Rodriguez has emphasized his Latino heritage more when it offered a clear advantage, such as when he was signed by Columbia, or in the publicity for and the promotions on the El Rey Network. In the next chapter, concerning labor, the findings revealed Rodriguez's place within film history as it regards the typical tasks he assigns to himself on the set and in postproduction, and how he aligns with the "cameraman" system of production of cinema's earliest years. Rodriguez still takes on most of the tasks that he did on his first feature, even adding some as his career has progressed, but has also opted to co-direct some features and only produced *Predators*. Furthermore, as Rodriguez has chosen to work outside of Hollywood, his troubling labor practices remain in the background, rarely challenged. In Chapter 4, which serves a microcosm for the central thesis, I examined the drastic changes in the economics of Rodriguez's films, as he has moved from *El Mariachi* to El Rey. While Rodriguez will probably always be remembered as the director of a \$7,000 film, in truth he has never (as yet) made another film anywhere near this range, as his budgets have increased a whopping 928,471%. Even though lauded filmmakers making television commercials goes back as far as Ingmar Bergman and Orson Welles, some may also question Rodriguez's integrity as a "maverick" and "rebel" in the two cases mentioned in that chapter. Finally, in the technologies chapter I concluded that owning the means of production, Troublemaker Studios, allows this technophile the freedom to experiment with new technologies (digital cameras) or reviving old ones (3-D, Aroma-Scope). While the change in his attitudes and practices is discernible, he has also steadfastly retained his adherence to his Mexican-American identity, his penchant for taking on

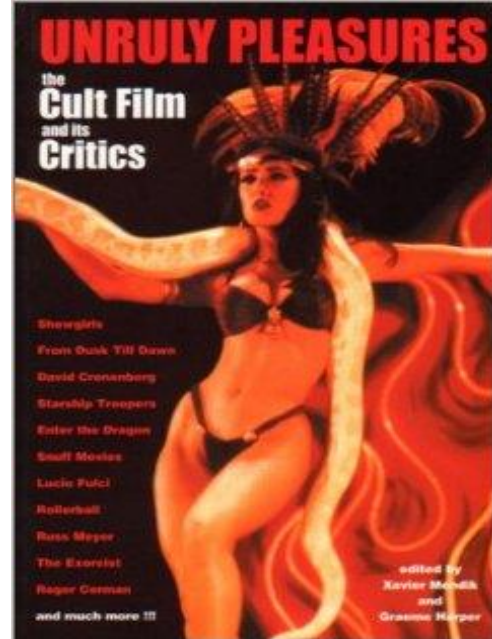
many of the tasks of filmmaking (cinematography, editing, composing, etc.) despite having larger budgets, his parsimonious approach to budgets, and his technophilia. I hope this work will add to that chorus of voices as this work disseminates among those interested in Rodriguez's transformation as a filmmaker, contemporary American independent filmmaking, Latino images and filmmakers, and twenty-first century motion picture technologies.

APPENDIX 1



(Spy Kids)

Charles Ramírez Berg,
*Latino Images in Film:
Stereotypes, Subversion,
and Resistance*,
University of Texas
Press, 2002



(From Dusk to Dawn)

Edited by Xavier Mendik and
Graeme Harper, *Unruly Pleasures:
The Cult Film and Its Critics*, FAB
Press, 2000.



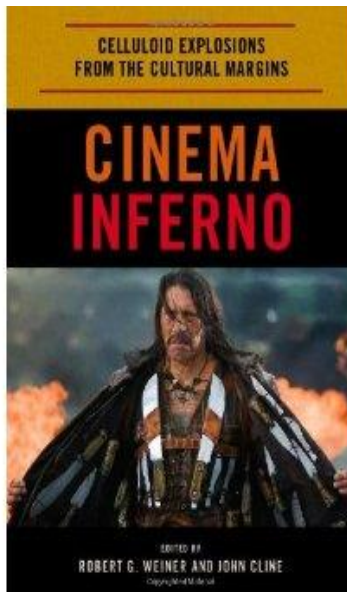
(Sin City)

Edited by Mary Beltrán
and Camilla Fojas, *Mixed
Race Hollywood*, NYU
Press, 2008



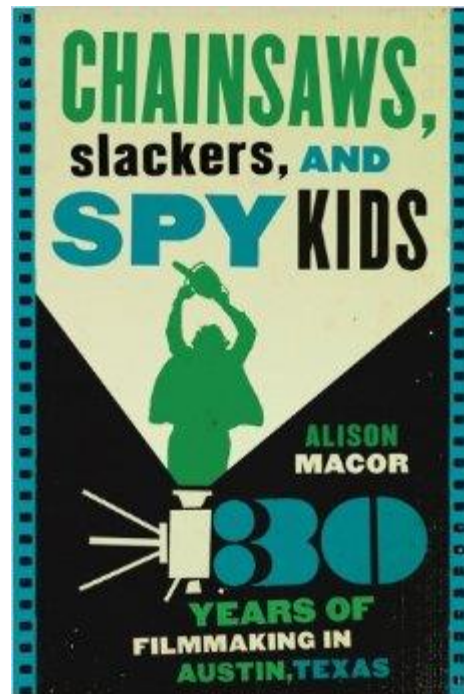
(Sin City)

Peter Lehman and
William Luhr, *Thinking
About Movies: Watching,
Questioning, Enjoying*, 3rd
ed., Wiley-Blackwell,
2008



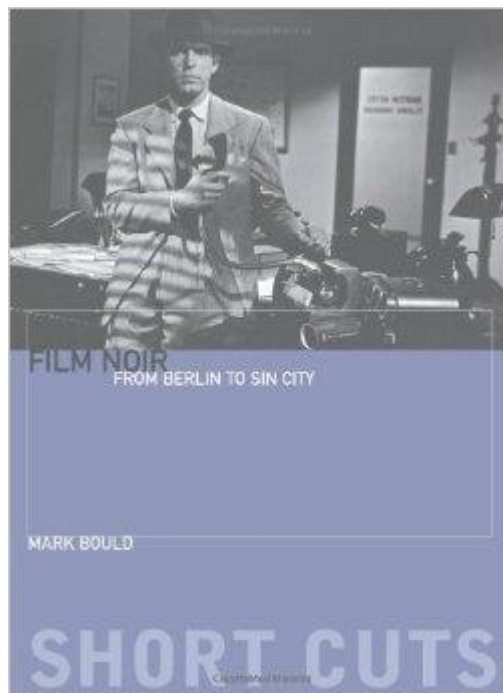
(Machete)

Edited by Robert G. Weiner and John Cline,
Cinema Inferno: Celluloid Explosions from the Cultural Margins,
Scarecrow, 2010



(Spy Kids)

Alison Macor, *Chainsaws, Slackers, and Spy Kids: 30 Years of Filmmaking in Austin, Texas*,
University of Texas Press, 2010



(Sin City)

Mark Bould, *From Berlin to Sin City*,
Wallflower, 2005.

APPENDIX 2

Directors

Director	D*	Nationality	Years Active
Abel/Gordon	N/A	Belgium	1994-present
Abrams, J. J.	U	US	1999-present
Adlon, Percy	U	Germany	1978-present
Ahmad, Yasmin	DW	Malaysia	2003-2009
Ahwesh, Peggy	S	US	1986-present
Akerman, Chantal	DW	Belgium	1968-2015
Akin, Fatih	DW	Germany	1995-present
Aldrich, Robert	D	US	1952-1981
Alea, Thomas Gutierrez	DW	Cuba	1955-1995
Aleksandrov, Grigori	U	Russia	1928-1974
Alfredson, Tomas	D	Sweden	1988-present
Allegret, Marc	D	France	1927-1970
Allegret, Yves	D	France	1932-1981
Allen, Woody	DWA	US	1966-present
Almereyda, Michael	DW	US	1985-present
Almodovar, Pedro	DW	Spain	1974-present
Alonso, Lisandro	U	Argentina	1995-present
Altman, Robert	DP	US	1951-present
Alvarez, Santiago	D	Cuba	1960-1998
Amenabar, Alejandro	DWM	Spain	1992-present
Anders, Allison	DW	US	1987-present
Anderson, Brad	U	US	1995-present
Anderson, Lindsay	D	UK	1948-1994
Anderson, Paul Thomas	DWP	US	1993-present
Anderson, Wes	DWP	US	1994-present
Andersson, Roy	U	Sweden	1967-present
Angelopolous, Theo	DWP	Greece	1968-2012
Anger, Kenneth	S	US	1947-present
Antonioni, Michelangelo	DW	Italy	1947-2004
Aoyama, Shinji	DW	Japan	1996-present
Apatow, Judd	DWP	US	1998-present
Apted, Michael	D	UK	1966-present
Araki, Gregg	DWPE	US	1987-present
Arcand, Denys	DW	Canada	1964-present
Argento, Dario	DW	Italy	1970-present
Armstrong, Gillian	D	Australia	1976-present

Arnold, Jack	D	US	1948-1984
Aronofsky, Darren	U	US	1998-present
Arteta, Miguel	D	US	1997-present
Arzner, Dorothy	D	US	1927-1943
Ashby, Hal	D	US	1970-1987
Asquith, Anthony	D	UK	1928-1964
Assayas, Olivier	DW	France	1979-present
Astruc, Alexandre	D	France	1948-1993
Atanes, Carlos	U	Spain	1989-present
Attenborough, Richard	DP	UK	1969-2007
Audry, Jacqueline	D	France	1946-1967
August, Bille	D	Denmark	1978-present
Autant-Lara, Claude	D	France	1923-1977
Avery, Tex	S	US	1935-1957
Avildsen, John	DE	US	1969-present
Axel, Gabriel	U	Denmark	1951-2001
Babenco, Hector	U	Brazil	1973-present
Bacon, Lloyd	D	US	1922-1954
Badham, John	D	US	1971-present
Bahrani, Ramin	DWPE	US	2000-present
Baillie, Bruce	D	US	1961-present
Baker, Roy Ward	D	UK	1945-1992
Bakshi, Ralph	DW	US	1964-present
Balabanov, Aleksey	DW	Russia	1989-2012
Baldwin, Craig	DWP	US	1978-present
Barclay, Barry	D	New Zealand	1972-2000
Bardem, Juan Antonio	DW	Spain	1953-1998
Barnet, Boris	D	Russia	1926-1963
Bartel, Paul	D	US	1968-1996
Bauer, Yevgeni	D	Russia	1913-1917
Baumbach, Noah	DW	US	1995-present
Bava, Mario	DW	Italy	1946-1977
Bay, Michael	D	US	1990-present
Beaudine, William	D	US	1915-1968
Beauvois, Xavier	DW	France	1986-present
Becker, Jacques	DW	France	1935-1960
Beineix, Jean-Jacques	U	France	1977-present
Bell, Monta	D	US	1924-1945
Bellocchio, Marco	DW	Italy	1961-present
Bemberg, Maria Luisa	DW	Argentina	1981-1993

Benacerraf, Margot	DW	Venezuela	1952-1959
Benedek, Laslo	D	US	1948-1977
Benegal, Shyam	D	India	1962-present
Benigni, Roberto	DWA	Italy	1983-present
Benning, James	U	US	1971-present
Benning, Sadie	S	US	1989-1999
Benton, Robert	DW	US	1972-present
Beresford, Bruce	D	Australia	1963-present
Bergman, Ingmar	DW	Sweden	1946-2003
Berkeley, Busby	D	US	1933-1955
Berlanga, Luis Garcia	DW	Spain	1948-2002
Bernard, Raymond	DW	France	1917-1958
Berri, Claude	DWP	France	1964-2009
Bertolucci, Bernardo	DW	Italy	1962-present
Besson, Luc	DWP	France	1981-present
Bigelow, Kathryn	D	US	1978-present
Bird, Brad	DW	US	1987-present
Birri, Fernando	DW	Argentina	1959-present
Blackton, J. Stuart	DP	US	1898-1933
Blank, Les	U	US	1960-2010
Blasetti, Alessandro	DW	Italy	1929-1981
Blier, Bertrand	DW	France	1963-present
Blom, August	D	Denmark	1910-1925
Bluth, Don	DP	US	1978-2000
Boetticher, Budd	D	US	1944-1985
Bogdanovich, Peter	D	US	1967-present
Boleslawski, Richard	D	Poland	1915-1937
Boll, Uwe	DWP	Germany	1992-present
Bollain, Iciar	DW	Spain	1992-present
Bolognini, Mauro	D	Italy	1953-1995
Bondarchuk, Sergei	DWA	Russia	1959-1986
Bong, Joon-ho	DW	Korea	1994-present
Boorman, John	DWP	UK	1963-present
Borden, Lizzie	U	US	1983-1996
Borowczyk, Walerian	DW	Poland	1954-1991
Borzage, Frank	D	US	1913-1961
Botes, Costa	DPCinE	New Zealand	1989-present
Boulting Brothers	N/A	UK	1937-1985
Bouzid, Nouri	DW	Tunisia	1986-present
Boyle, Danny	D	UK	1987-present

Brakhage, Stan	S	US	1952-2003
Branagh, Kenneth	DWA	UK	1989-present
Bray, John Randolph	S	US	1913-1943
Breer, Robert	S	US	1952-2003
Breillat, Catherine	DW	France	1976-present
Brenon, Herbert	D	UK	1912-1940
Bressane, Julio	DWP	Brazil	1966-present
Bresson, Robert	DW	France	1934-1983
Brest, Martin	U	US	1972-present
Bridges, James	DW	US	1970-1988
Brocka, Lino	D	Philippines	1970-1991
Brooks, Albert	DWA	US	1975-present
Brooks, James L.	DWP	US	1983-present
Brooks, Mel	DWPA	US	1968-1995
Brooks, Richard	DW	US	1950-1985
Broomfield, Nick	DPA	UK	1971-present
Brosens/Woodworth	N/A	Belgium	1994-present
Brown, Clarence	D	US	1920-1952
Browning, Tod	D	US	1915-1939
Brownlow, Kevin	U	UK	1962-present
Buchet, Jean-Marie	U	Belgium	1974-present
Bucquoy, Jan	U	Belgium	1994-2005
Bujalski, Andrew	DWE	US	2002-present
Bunuel, Luis	DW	Spain/Mexico	1929-1977
Burnett, Charles	DW	US	1969-present
Burns, Ken	U	US	1981-present
Burton, Tim	D	US	1982-present
Calparsoro, Daniel	DW	Spain	1995-present
Camerini, Mario	DW	Italy	1923-1972
Cameron, James	DWP	US	1978-present
Cammell, Donald	DW	UK	1970-1995
Campion, Jane	DW	Australia	1982-present
Camus, Marcel	DW	France	1947-1982
Cantet, Laurent	DW	France	1994-present
Cantrill, Arthur and Corinne	N/A	Australia	1966-1981
Capellani, Albert	U	France	1904-1922`
Capra, Frank	DWP	US	1922-1964
Carax, Leos	DW	France	1980-present
Carewe, Edwin	D	US	1914-1934
Carlsen, Henning	U	Denmark	1950-2011

Carne, Marcel	DW	France	1929-1977
Carpenter, John	DWM	US	1974-present
Cassavetes, John	DW	US	1959-1986
Castellani, Renato	DW	Italy	1942-1982
Castle, William	D	US	1943-1974
Cavalcanti, Alberto	D	UK	1926-1977
Cavani, Liliana	DW	Italy	1961-present
Cayatte, Andre	DW	France	1942-1983
Ceylan, Nuri Bilge	U	Turkey	1995-present
Chabrol, Claude	DW	France	1958-2010
Chadha, Gurinder	DWP	UK	1990-present
Chahine, Youssef	DW	Egypt	1950-2007
Chalbaud, Roman	D	Venezuela	1959-present
Chambers, Jack	S	Canada	1965-1970
Chan, Fruit	U	Hong Kong	1991-present
Chan, Jackie	DWA	Hong Kong	1979-present
Chan, Peter	DP	Hong Kong	1988-present
Chang, Cheh	DW	Hong Kong	1958-1993
Chaplin, Charlie	DWAM	US	1914-1967
Chauvel, Charles	DWP	Australia	1926-1959
Chen, Kaige	DW	China	1985-present
Chopra, Yash	DP	India	1959-2012
Christensen, Benjamin	DW	Denmark	1914-1942
Christian-Jaque	DW	France	1932-1985
Chu, Yen-ping	D	Taiwan	1980-present
Chukhray, Grigoriy	U	Russia	1956-1984
Chytilova, Vera	DW	Czech	1960-2006
Cimino, Michael	DW	US	1974-present
Cisse, Souleymane	DW	Mali	1973-present
Clair, Rene	DW	France	1924-1965
Clampett, Bob	S	US	1937-1959
Clarke, Alan	U	UK	1967-1990
Clarke, Shirley	S	US	1953-1985
Clement, Rene	DW	France	1935-1975
Clementi, Pierre	DA	France	1967-1988
Clooney, George	U	US	2002-present
Clouzot, Henri-Georges	DW	France	1931-1968
Cocteau, Jean	DW	France	1925-1962
Coen Brothers	N/A	US	1984-present
Cohen, Larry	DWP	US	1972-2006

Cohl, Emile	S	France	1908-1921
Collins, Kathleen	U	US	1980-1982
Columbus, Chris	U	US	1987-present
Comfort, Lance	D	UK	1942-1965
Conner, Bruce	S	US	1958-2008
Connolly, Robert	DW	Australia	1997-present
Coolidge, Martha	D	US	1972-present
Cooper/Schoedsack	N/A	US	1925-1952
Coppola, Francis Ford	DW	US	1962-present
Coppola, Sofia	DWP	US	1996-present
Corbiau, Gerard	DW	Belgium	1982-present
Corman, Roger	DP	US	1955-1990
Costa, Pedro	U	Portugal	1989-present
Costa-Gavras	DW	France	1958-present
Cox, Alex	DW	US	1980-present
Cox, Paul	DWP	Australia	1972-present
Craven, Wes	D	US	1972-2011
Crichton, Charles	D	UK	1944-1988
Crichton, Michael	DW	US	1972-1989
Cromwell, John	D	US	1929-1961
Cronenberg, David	DW	Canada	1966-present
Crosland, Alan	D	US	1917-1935
Crowe, Cameron	DWP	US	1989-present
Cruze, James	D	US	1914-1938
Cuaron, Alfonso	DWE	Mexico	1983-present
Cukor, George	D	US	1930-1981
Curtiz, Michael	D	Hungary	1912-1961
Dahl, John	D	US	1989-present
Daldry, Stephen	D	UK	1998-present
Dante, Joe	D	US	1976-present
Daquin, Louis	D	France	1938-1969
Dardenne Brothers	N/A	Belgium	1978-present
Darling, Joan	D	US	1975-1992
d'Arrast, Harry	D	US	1927-1935
Dash, Julie	D	US	1982-present
Dassin, Jules	D	US	1941-1981
Davenport, Dorothy	D	US	1925-1934
Daves, Delmer	D	US	1943-1965
Davies, Terence	DW	UK	1976-present
Davis, Ossie	D	US	1970-1976

Davis, Tamra	D	US	1986-present
de Andrade, Joaquim Pedro	DWP	Brazil	1959-1987
de Antonio, Emile	DP	US	1964-1989
de Broca, Philippe	DW	France	1953-2004
de Fuentes, Fernando	DWP	Mexico	1933-1954
de Gregorio, Eduardo	DW	France	1976-2002
de Heer, Rolf	DWP	Australia	1984-present
de la Iglesia, Alex	DW	Spain	1991-present
de Leon, Gerardo	D	Philippines	1938-1976
De Leon, Mike	DW	Philippines	1977-2000
de Mille, William	U	US	1914-1932
de Oliveira, Manoel	DWE	Portugal	1931-2014
De Palma, Brian	DW	US	1966-present
De Santis, Giuseppe	DW	Italy	1945-1971
De Sica, Vittorio	DW	Italy	1940-1974
De Toth, Andre	D	Hungary	1939-1987
Dearden, Basil	D	UK	1939-1971
Debord, Guy	U	France	1952-1978
Dekeukeleire, Charles	D	Belgium	1927-1958
del Toro, Guillermo	DW	Mexico	1985-present
Delannoy, Jean	DW	France	1934-1995
Delvaux, Andre	DW	Belgium	1955-1989
DeMille, Cecil B.	DP	US	1914-1956
Demme, Jonathan	U	US	1974-present
Demy, Jacques	DW	France	1951-1988
Denis, Claire	DW	France	1988-present
Deren, Maya	U	US	1943-1958
Deruddere, Dominique	DW	Belgium	1982-present
Desplechin, Arnaud	DW	France	1991-present
Deville, Michel	DW	France	1958-2005
DiCillo, Tom	DW	US	1991-present
Dickerson, Ernest	D	US	1992-present
Dickinson, Thorold	D	UK	1932-1955
Diegues, Carlos	DW	Brazil	1963-present
Dieterle, William	D	Germany	1923-1968
Disney, Walt	S	US	1921-1935
Dmytryk, Edward	D	US	1935-1979
Doillon, Jacques	DW	France	1969-present
Dolan, Xavier	U	Canada	2009-present
Donaldson, Roger	D	Australia	1971-present

Donen, Stanley	DP	US	1949-1999
Doniol-Valcroze, Jacques	DW	France	1957-1989
Donner, Clive	D	UK	1957-1993
Donner, Jorn	D	Finland	1954-present
Donner, Richard	D	US	1960-present
Donskoy, Mark	D	Russia	1927-1978
Dorrie, Doris	DW	Germany	1976-present
dos Santos, Nelson Pereira	DWP	Brazil	1955-present
Douglas, Bill	DW	UK	1972-1986
Dovzhenko, Alesksandr	DW	Russia	1926-1949
Downey, Robert Sr.	DW	US	1961-present
Drew, Robert	D	US	1960-2008
Dreyer, Carl	DW	Denmark	1919-1964
Dudow, Slatan	DW	Germany	1930-1963
Duke, Bill	D	US	1982-present
Dulac, Germaine	S	France	1915-1934
Dunye, Cheryl	U	US	1990-present
Duplass Brothers	U	US	2004-present
Dupont, E. A.	DW	Germany	1918-1954
Duras, Marguerite	DW	France	1967-1985
Dutt, Guru	DA	India	1951-1959
DuVernay, Ava	DWP	US	2006-present
Duvivier, Julien	DW	France	1919-1967
Dwan, Allan	D	US	1911-1961
Eastwood, Clint	DPA	US	1971-present
Edwards, Blake	DW	US	1953-1993
Edzard, Christine	DW	UK	1979-present
Egoyan, Atom	DWP	Canada	1979-present
Eisenstein, Sergei	DW	Russia	1923-1948
Emmerich, Roland	DW	Germany	1979-present
Endfield, Cy	DW	UK	1942-1971
Ephron, Nora	DWP	US	1992-present
Epstein, Jean	DW	France	1922-1948
Erice, Victor	U	Spain	1973-present
Ermler, Fridrikh	D	Russia	1924-1965
Etaix, Pierre	DWA	France	1961-1989
Eustache, Jean	DW	France	1963-1981
Eyre, Chris	U	US	1998-present
Fabri, Zoltan	DW	Hungary	1952-1983
Fanck, Arnold	DWE	Germany	1920-1944

Fares, Josef	DW	Sweden	2000-present
Farhadi, Asghar	DW	Iran	2000-present
Farrelly Brothers	N/A	US	1994-present
Fassbinder, Rainer Werner	DWA	Germany	1966-1982
Favio, Leonardo	DW	Argentina	1958-2010
Faye, Safi	D	Senegal	1972-1996
Fejos, Paul	D	Hungary	1920-1941
Fellini, Federico	DW	Italy	1950-1990
Fernandez, Emilio	DW	Mexico	1942-1979
Ferrara, Abel	U	US	1972-present
Ferreri, Marco	DW	Italy	1959-1996
Feuillade, Louis	DW	France	1906-1924
Feyder, Jacques	D	France	1916-1947
Field, Connie	DP	US	1980-present
Figgis, Mike	DWM	UK	1984-present
Fincher, David	D	US	1985-present
Fischinger, Oskar	S	Germany	1926-1952
Fisher, Terence	D	UK	1948-1974
Fitzmaurice, George	D	US	1914-1940
Flaherty, Robert	DWCin	US	1922-1950
Fleck/Boden	N/A	US	2003-present
Fleischer Brothers	N/A	US	1918-1948
Fleischer, Richard	D	US	1944-1989
Fleming, Victor	D	US	1919-1948
Florey, Robert	D	US	1927-1964
Fong, Allen	D	Hong Kong	1981-1998
Forbes, Bryan	DW	UK	1961-1989
Ford, Aleksander	U	Poland	1929-1975
Ford, John	D	US	1917-1966
Forman, Milos	U	Czech	1960-present
Forst, Willi	DWP	Germany	1933-1957
Forsyth, Bill	DW	UK	1972-1999
Fosse, Bob	DChor	US	1959-1983
Foster, Jodie	DA	US	1988-present
Francis, Freddie	D	UK	1962-1996
Franco, Jess	DW	Spain	1957-2013
Franju, Georges	U	France	1934-1979
Frankenheimer, John	D	US	1954-2002
Franklin, Carl	D	US	1989-present
Franklin, Richard	DP	Australia	1970-2003

Franklin, Sidney	D	US	1915-1957
Frears, Stephen	D	UK	1968-present
Freda, Riccardo	DW	Italy	1942-1981
Freleng, Friz	S	US	1928-1981
Fric, Martin	DW	Czech	1929-1968
Fridriksson, Fridrick Thor	DWP	Iceland	1982-present
Friedkin, William	D	US	1962-present
Friedrich, Su	DWCinE	US	1978-present
Fukasaku, Kinji	D	Japan	1961-2003
Fulci, Lucio	DW	Italy	1959-1991
Fuller, Samuel	DW	US	1949-1990
Fuqua, Antoine	D	US	1992-present
Furie, Sidney	D	Canada	1957-present
Gaal, Istvan	DWE	Hungary	1957-1996
Galeen, Henrik	DW	Germany	1915-1933
Gallo, Vincent	DWPEAM	US	1998-present
Gance, Abel	DW	France	1911-1972
Garnett, Tay	D	US	1924-1975
Garrel, Philippe	DWE	France	1964-present
Genina, Augusto	D	Italy	1912-1955
Gerasimov, Sergei	DW	Russia	1930-1984
Gerima, Haile	DWPE	Ethiopia	1971-present
Germi, Pietro	DW	Italy	1946-1972
Getino, Octavio	U	Argentina	1968-1975
Ghai, Subhash	DWP	India	1976-present
Ghatak, Ritwik	DW	India	1951-1975
Gibney, Alex	DWP	US	1980-present
Gibson, Mel	U	US	1991-present
Gilliam, Terry	DW	US	1968-present
Gitai, Amos	DWP	Israel	1974-present
Godard, Jean-Luc	DW	France	1955-present
Goldson, Annie	D	New Zealand	1999-present
Golestan, Ebrahim	U	Iran	1961-1974
Gomez, Fernando Fernan	DWA	Spain	1954-2001
Gomez, Sara	U	Cuba	1966-1974
Gondry, Michel	U	France	1988-present
Gopalakrishnan, Adoor	DW	India	1968-present
Gordon, Keith	D	US	1988-present
Gordon, Stuart	D	US	1979-present
Goren, Serif	D	Turkey	1970-present

Goretta, Claude	DW	Switzerland	1957-2006
Gorin, Jean-Pierre	U	France	1968-1992
Gorris, Marleen	U	Netherlands	1982-present
Gosha, Hideo	D	Japan	1964-1992
Gosho, Heinosuke	D	Japan	1925-1968
Goulding, Edmund	D	US	1925-1958
Govorukhin, Stanislav	DW	Russia	1967-present
Gray, F. Gary	D	US	1992-present
Green, David Gordon	U	US	1997-present
Greenaway, Peter	DW	UK	1969-present
Greengrass, Paul	D	UK	1985-present
Greenwald, Maggie	DW	US	1987-present
Gremillon, Jean	D	France	1923-1958
Grierson, John	S	UK	1929-1934
Griffith, D. W.	DWP	US	1908-1931
Grigor, Murray	U	UK	1974-present
Grinde, Nick	D	US	1928-1945
Gross, Yoram	DWP	Australia	1962-present
Guediguian, Robert	DWP	France	1981-present
Guerra, Ruy	DW	Brazil	1962-2005
Guest, Christopher	DWA	US	1986-present
Guitry, Sacha	DWA	France	1915-1957
Gulager, John	D	US	2005-present
Guney, Yilmaz	DWP	Turkey	1966-1983
Guy, Alice	DP	France	1896-1920
Guzman, Patricio	U	Chile	1973-present
Haanstra, Bert	DWPE	Netherlands	1948-1988
Haas, Hugo	DWP	Czech	1933-1962
Haines, Randa	D	US	1979-present
Hall, Ken G.	DP	Australia	1928-1957
Hallstrom, Lasse	D	Sweden	1973-present
Hamano, Sachi	D	Japan	1972-present
Hamer, Robert	DW	UK	1945-1960
Haneda, Sumiko	D	Japan	1960-present
Haneke, Michael	DW	Austria	1974-present
Hani, Susumu	DW	Japan	1954-1983
Hanna/Barbera	N/A	US	1938-2005
Hanson, Curtis	DP	US	1972-present
Hara, Kazuo	DCin	Japan	1972-present
Harada, Masato	DW	Japan	1979-present

Harrington, Curtis	D	US	1942-2000
Harris, Leslie	U	US	1992-present
Harron, Mary	DW	US	1994-present
Hart, William S.	DA	US	1914-1920
Hartley, Hal	DWPM	US	1984-present
Has, Wojciech	D	Poland	1947-1988
Hasebe, Yasuharu	D	Japan	1966-2009
Hashiguchi, Ryosuke	U	Japan	1989-present
Hathaway, Henry	D	US	1932-1974
Hawks, Howard	D	US	1926-1970
Hayashi, Kaizo	DW	Japan	1986-present
Haynes, Todd	DW	US	1985-present
Heckerling, Amy	DW	US	1978-present
Hellman, Monte	D	US	1959-present
Henning-Jensen, Astrid and Bjarne	N/A	Denmark	1941-1996
Henson, Jim	DA	US	1963-1988
Hepworth, Cecil	D	UK	1896-1927
Herzog, Werner	DW	Germany	1962-present
Hill, George Roy	D	US	1954-1988
Hill, Jack	DW	US	1960-1982
Hill, Walter	U	US	1975-present
Hiller, Arthur	D	US	1955-2006
Hiroki, Ryuichi	D	Japan	1982-present
Hitchcock, Alfred	D	UK	1925-1976
Hodges, Mike	D	UK	1964-2004
Holger-Madsen	D	Denmark	1912-1936
Holland, Agnieszka	D	Poland	1976-present
Holmes, Cecil	D	Australia	1953-1976
Holofcener, Nicole	DW	US	1996-present
Honda, Ishiro	D	Japan	1949-1977
Hondo, Med	DW	Mauritania	1967-2004
Hong, Sang-soo	DW	Korea	1996-present
Honkasalo, Pirjo	U	Finland	1975-present
Hoogesteijn, Solveig	DW	Venezuela	1975-present
Hooper, Tobe	D	US	1969-present
Hopper, Dennis	DA	US	1969-2008
Horne, James	D	US	1915-1942
Horrocks, Shirley	U	New Zealand	2004-present
Hosoda, Mamoru	DW	Japan	1999-present
Hou, Hsaio-hsien	D	Taiwan	1980-present

Hou/Wan	N/A	Hong Kong	1927-1940
Howard, Ron	D	US	1977-present
Howard, William K.	D	US	1921-1946
Hu, King	DW	Hong Kong	1964-1993
Hughes Brothers	N/A	US	1993-present
Hughes, John	DWP	US	1984-1991
Hui, Ann	D	Hong Kong	1979-present
Huston, John	D	US	1941-1987
Ichikawa, Jun	DW	Japan	1987-2008
Ichikawa, Kon	DW	Japan	1946-2006
Iimura, Takahiro	S	Japan	1962-2000
Im, Kwon-taek	D	Korea	1962-present
Im, Sang-soo	DW	Korea	1998-present
Imai, Tadashi	D	Japan	1939-1991
Imamura, Shohei	DW	Japan	1958-2002
Imaoka, Shinji	DW	Japan	1995-present
Inagaki, Hiroshi	DW	Japan	1928-1972
Inarritu, Alejandro Gonzalez	DP	Mexico	1995-present
Ince, Ralph	D	US	1911-1937
Ince, Thomas	DP	US	1910-1918
Ingram, Rex	DW	US	1914-1930
Iosseliani, Otar	DWE	Russia	1958-present
Ishii, Katsuhito	DW	Japan	1998-present
Ishii, Sogo	DW	Japan	1978-present
Ishii, Teruo	DW	Japan	1957-2001
Itami, Juzo	DW	Japan	1984-1997
Ivens, Joris	D	Netherlands	1928-1988
Ivory, James	D	UK	1957-present
Iwai, Shunji	U	Japan	1992-present
Iwerks, Ub	S	US	1928-1940
Jackson, Peter	DWP	New Zealand	1987-present
Jacobs, Ken	DPE	US	1955-present
James, Steve	DPE	US	1991-present
Jancso, Miklos	D	Hungary	1950-2012
Jang, Sun-woo	DW	Korea	1986-2002
Jarecki, Andrew	U	US	2003-present
Jarman, Derek	DW	UK	1970-1994
Jarmusch, Jim	DW	US	1980-present
Jarva, Risto	DWE	Finland	1959-1977
Jasny, Vojtech	DW	Czech	1950-2002

Jeffs, Christine	D	New Zealand	1993-present
Jennings, Humphrey	D	UK	1934-1950
Jeunet, Jean-Pierre	DW	France	1978-present
Jewison, Norman	DP	US	1950-2003
Jia, Zhangke	DW	China	1995-present
Jires, Jaromil	DW	Czech	1958-1999
Jissoji, Akio	D	Japan	1966-2006
Jodorowsky, Alejandro	DW	Mexico	1957-present
Joffe, Roland	D	UK	1973-present
Johnson, Rian	DW	US	1996-present
Jones, Chuck	S	US	1938-2001
Jonze, Spike	U	US	1991-present
Jordan, Gregor	U	Australia	1995-present
Jordan, Neil	DW	UK	1982-present
Jost, Jon	DWPCinE	US	1970-present
Judge, Mike	U	US	1991-present
July, Miranda	DWA	US	1996-present
Jutra, Claude	DW	Canada	1956-1985
Kabore, Gaston	DW	Burkina Faso	1983-1997
Kachyna, Karel	DW	Czech	1950-2003
Kadar, Jan	D	Czech	1945-1979
Kakogiannis, Mihalīs	U	Greece	1955-1999
Kalatozov, Mikhail	D	Russia	1927-1969
Kalin, Tom	U	US	1992-present
Kang, Woo-suk	D	Korea	1989-present
Kaplan, Nelly	D	France	1956-1991
Kapoor, Raj	DPEA	India	1948-1985
Karlson, Phil	D	US	1944-1975
Karu, Erkki	DWPE	Finland	1920-1935
Kasdan, Lawrence	DWP	US	1981-present
Kassila, Matti	DW	Finland	1947-1994
Kassovitz, Mathieu	DW	France	1990-present
Kaufman, Philip	DW	US	1964-present
Kaul, Mani	D	India	1970-1999
Kaurismäki, Aki	DWP	Finland	1981-present
Kaurismäki, Mika	DWP	Finland	1981-present
Kautner, Helmut	DW	Germany	1939-1977
Kawalerowicz, Jerzy	DW	Poland	1952-2001
Kawase, Naomi	U	Japan	1992-present
Kazan, Elia	D	US	1937-1976

Keaton, Buster	DA	US	1917-1938
Keighley, William	D	US	1932-1953
Kelly, Gene	U	US	1945-1976
Kelly, Richard	DW	US	1996-present
Kennedy, Burt	DW	US	1961-2000
Kerrigan, Lodge	DW	US	1993-present
Kershner, Irvin	D	US	1953-1993
Khan, Mehboob	D	India	1935-1962
Kheifits, Iosif	DW	Russia	1928-1989
Khitruk, Fyodor	S	Russia	1962-2002
Khleifi, Michel	U	Palestine	1980-present
Kiarostami, Abbas	DWE	Iran	1970-present
Kieslowski, Kryzstof	DW	Poland	1966-1994
Kim, Dong-won	U	Korea	2006-present
Kim, Jee-woon	DW	Korea	1998-present
Kim, Ki-Duk	U	Korea	1996-present
Kim, Ki-Young	D	Korea	1955-1995
King, Allan	DP	Canada	1956-2006
King, Henry	D	US	1915-1962
King, Zalman	DW	US	1988-present
Kinoshita, Keisuke	DW	Japan	1943-1988
Kinugasa, Teinosuke	D	Japan	1922-1966
Kitamura, Ryuhei	U	Japan	1996-present
Kitano, Takeshi	DWEA	Japan	1989-present
Klein, William	D	France	1958-1999
Klimov, Elem	D	Russia	1959-1985
Kluge, Alexander	DW	Germany	1961-present
Kobayashi, Masaski	D	Japan	1952-1985
Kokkinos, Ana	DW	Australia	1994-present
Kolm-Fleck, Louise	D	Germany	1911-1941
Kon, Satoshi	DWChDes	Japan	1997-2006
Konchalovsky, Andrei	DW	Russia	1961-present
Konuma, Masaru	D	Japan	1971-2000
Kopple, Barbara	U	US	1976-present
Korda, Alexander	D	Hungary/UK	1914-1948
Korda, Zoltan	D	UK	1918-1955
Koreeda, Hirokazu	DWE	Japan	1989-present
Korine, Harmony	DW	US	1997-present
Kormakur, Balthasar	U	Iceland	2000-present
Koster, Henry	D	Germany	1932-1966

Kovacs, Andras	DW	Hungary	1961-1996
Kozintsev, Grigori	DW	Russia	1924-1971
Kramer, Stanley	DP	US	1955-1979
Kruger, Peter	DP	Belgium	1997-present
Kubrick, Stanley	DWP	US	1951-1999
Kuleshov, Lev	D	Russia	1918-1943
Kumashiro, Tatsumi	DW	Japan	1968-1994
Kumel, Harry	D	Belgium	1960-2003
Kurahara, Koreyoshi	D	Japan	1956-1995
Kurosawa, Akira	DW	Japan	1943-1993
Kurosawa, Kiyoshi	DW	Japan	1975-present
Kurys, Diane	U	France	1977-present
Kusturica, Emir	DW	Yugoslavia	1978-present
Kwan, Stanley	D	Hong Kong	1985-present
La Cava, Gregory	D	US	1916-1947
Labute, Neil	DW	US	1997-present
Lafosse, Joachim	DW	Belgium	2001-present
Lamorisse, Albert	S	France	1951-1970
Landis, John	D	US	1973-present
Lang, Fritz	DW	Germany	1919-1960
Lanzmann, Claude	U	France	1973-present
Lasseter, John	DW	US	1979-present
Lattuada, Alberto	DW	Italy	1943-1989
Lauder/Gilliat	N/A	UK	1932-1980
Law, Clara	D	Hong Kong	1988-present
Le Borg, Reginald	D	US	1936-1974
Leacock, Richard	D	US	1954-2000
Lean, David	U	UK	1942-1984
Leconte, Patrice	DW	France	1969-present
Leder, Mimi	D	US	1987-present
Leduc, Paul	DW	Mexico	1973-present
Lee, Ang	U	Taiwan	1992-present
Lee, Chang-dong	DW	Korea	1997-present
Lee, Doo-yong	D	Korea	1970-present
Lee, Jang-ho	D	Korea	1970-present
Lee, Myung-se	DW	Korea	1989-present
Lee, Spike	U	US	1983-present
Leenhardt, Roger	DW	France	1948-1977
Lefebvre, Jean Pierre	DW	Canada	1965-2004
Leigh, Mike	DW	UK	1971-present

Leisen, Mitchell	D	US	1933-1967
Lelouch, Claude	DWP	France	1957-present
Lemmons, Kasi	D	US	1996-present
Leni, Paul	D	Germany	1916-1929
Leone, Sergio	DW	Italy	1961-1984
Lepage, Robert	DW	Canada	1995-present
LeRoy, Mervyn	D	US	1927-1965
Lester, Richard	D	UK	1954-1991
Levine, Jonathan	U	US	2004-present
Levinson, Barry	DP	US	1978-present
Lewin, Albert	DW	US	1942-1957
Lewis, Herschell Gordon	DP	US	1961-present
Lewis, Jerry	DWPA	US	1949-1992
Lewis, Joseph H.	D	US	1937-1966
L'Herbier, Marcel	DW	France	1917-1975
Linder, Max	DWA	France	1908-1925
Linklater, Richard	U	US	1985-present
Lipsett, Arthur	S	Canada	1960-1970
Littin, Miguel	DW	Chile	1965-present
Litvak, Anatole	D	US	1930-1970
Llosa, Claudia	U	Peru	2006-present
Lloyd, Frank	D	US	1914-1955
Loach, Ken	D	UK	1964-present
Loden, Barbara	U	US	1970-1975
Logan, Joshua	D	US	1938-1969
Lorentz, Pare	S	US	1936-1947
Losey, Joseph	D	UK	1939-1985
Lou, Ye	U	China	1994-present
Lowenstein, Richard	DWP	Australia	1984-present
Lu, Chuan	DW	China	2002-present
Lubitsch, Ernst	D	Germany	1914-1948
Lucas, George	DW	US	1971-present
Luhrmann, Baz	DWP	Australia	1992-present
Lumet, Sidney	D	US	1952-2007
Lumiere, Louis	S	France	1895-1900
Lungin, Pavel	U	Russia	1990-present
Lupino, Ida	U	US	1949-1968
Lustig, William	D	US	1980-present
Lye, Len	S	UK	1929-1966
Lynch, David	DW	US	1966-present

Lyne, Adrian	D	US	1973-present
MacFarlane, Seth	U	US	1996-present
Machin, Alfred	D	Belgium	1908-1929
Mackay, Yvonne	D	New Zealand	1981-present
Mackendrick, Alexander	D	UK	1949-1967
Mackenzie, David	D	UK	1995-present
Maddin, Guy	DW	Canada	1985-present
Makavejev, Dusan	DW	Yugoslavia	1955-1986
Makhmalbaf, Mohsen	DWE	Iran	1983-present
Malick, Terrence	DW	US	1969-present
Malle, Louis	U	France	1953-1994
Malmros, Nils	DW	Denmark	1968-present
Mambety, Djibril Diop	DW	Senegal	1968-1998
Mamet, David	DW	US	1987-present
Mamoulian, Rouben	D	US	1929-1957
Mankiewicz, Joseph	D	US	1946-1972
Mann, Anthony	D	US	1939-1967
Mann, Delbert	D	US	1949-1994
Mann, Michael	DWP	US	1971-present
Margheriti, Antonio	D	Italy	1958-1997
Marins, Jose Mojica	DWA	Brazil	1958-present
Marion, Frances	DW	US	1921-1923
Marker, Chris	U	France	1952-2012
Markopolous, Gregory	D	US	1948-1971
Markovic, Goran	DW	Yugoslavia	1969-present
Marshall, Garry	D	US	1967-present
Marshall, George	D	US	1916-1972
Marshall, Penny	D	US	1979-present
Martel, Lucrecia	DW	Argentina	1995-present
Martin, Darnell	D	US	1991-present
Marton, Andrew	D	US	1929-1967
Masumura, Yasuzo	D	Japan	1957-1984
Matarazzo, Raffaello	DW	Italy	1933-1964
Matsumoto, Hitoshi	DWA	Japan	2007-present
Matsumoto, Toshio	DW	Japan	1955-1988
Mauro, Humberto	U	Brazil	1925-1964
May, Elaine	DW	US	1971-1987
Maysles Brothers	N/A	US	1955-2015
Mazursky, Paul	DWP	US	1969-2006
McBride, Jim	DW	US	1967-present

McCarey, Leo	DW	US	1921-1962
McCay, Winsor	S	US	1911-1922
McElwee, Ross	DWCinEA	US	1979-present
McKimson, Robert	S	US	1945-1976
McLaglen, Andrew	D	US	1956-1991
McLaren, Norman	S	Canada	1933-1983
McLeod, Norman	D	US	1928-1963
McTiernan, John	D	US	1986-present
Meadows, Shane	DW	UK	1996-present
Medem, Julio	DW	Spain	1985-present
Medvedkin, Aleksandr	D	Russia	1929-1956
Mehrjui, Dariush	DWP	Iran	1966-present
Meirelles, Fernando	D	Brazil	1989-present
Mekas, Jonas	U	US	1961-present
Melendez, Bill	DP	US	1965-2006
Melies, Georges	S	France	1896-1913
Melville, Jean-Pierre	DW	France	1946-1972
Mendes, Sam	D	US	1993-present
Menzel, Jiri	DW	Czech	1960-present
Menzies, William Cameron	D	US	1931-1955
Meszaros, Marta	D	Hungary	1954-present
Metzger, Radley	D	US	1961-1984
Meyer, Nicholas	U	US	1979-present
Meyer, Russ	DWPCinE	US	1954-1979
Meyers, Nancy	DWP	US	1998-present
Micheaux, Oscar	DWP	US	1919-1948
Miike, Takashi	D	Japan	1991-present
Mikels, Ted	DWPE	US	1963-present
Mikhalkov, Nikita	DWA	Russia	1967-present
Miki, Satoshi	DW	Japan	2005-present
Milestone, Lewis	D	US	1918-1964
Miller, Claude	DW	France	1967-present
Miller, George	DWP	Australia	1971-present
Milligan, Andy	U	US	1965-1989
Minghella, Anthony	DW	UK	1978-2008
Minh-ha, Trinh T.	DWE	US	1980-present
Minnelli, Vincente	D	US	1943-1976
Misumi, Kenji	D	Japan	1956-1974
Mita, Merata	DWP	New Zealand	1980-present
Miyazaki, Goro	U	Japan	2006-present

Miyazaki, Hayao	DW	Japan	1971-present
Mizoguchi, Kenji	D	Japan	1923-1956
Mocky, Jean-Pierre	DWPE	France	1959-present
Molander, Gustaf	DW	Sweden	1920-1967
Mollberg, Rauni	DWP	Finland	1962-2004
Monicelli, Mario	DW	Italy	1935-2008
Monteiro, Joao Cesar	DWA	Portugal	1969-2003
Moodysson, Lukas	DW	Sweden	1995-present
Moore, Michael	DWPA	US	1989-present
Moretti, Nanni	DWPA	Italy	1973-present
Morita, Yoshimitsu	DW	Japan	1978-2011
Morris, Errol	DP	US	1978-present
Morrissey, Paul	DW	US	1964-present
Moulet, Luc	DWA	France	1960-present
Mukai, Kan	D	Japan	1962-2004
Mulcahy, Russell	D	Australia	1979-present
Mullan, Peter	DWA	UK	1993-present
Mulligan, Robert	D	US	1952-1991
Munk, Andrzej	DW	Poland	1949-1961
Muratova, Kira	DW	Russia	1962-present
Murnau, F. W.	D	Germany	1919-1931
Murphy, Dudley	D	US	1921-1944
Murphy, Geoff	D	Australia	1977-present
Nair, Mira	U	India	1979-present
Nakahima, Tetsuya	DW	Japan	1997-present
Nakamura, Yoshihiro	DW	Japan	1999-present
Nakata, Hideo	D	Japan	1992-present
Naruse, Mikio	D	Japan	1930-1967
Naschy, Paul	DWA	Spain	1976-2009
Nava, Gregory	DW	US	1976-present
Negulesco, Jean	D	US	1936-1970
Neilan, Marshall	D	US	1913-1937
Nelson, Jessie	DWP	US	1991-present
Nemec, Jan	DW	Czech	1960-present
Neville, Edgar	DW	Spain	1931-1960
Niblo, Fred	D	US	1916-1932
Nichols, Jeff	DW	US	2007-present
Nichols, Mike	DP	US	1966-2007
Nilsson, Leopoldo Torre	DWP	Argentina	1947-1976
Nishikawa, Miwa	DW	Japan	2003-present

Nishimura, Yoshihiro	U	Japan	1987-present
Niskanen, Mikko	DW	Finland	1956-1988
Noe, Gaspar	DWPE	France	1985-present
Nolan, Christopher	DWP	US	1997-present
Novaro, Maria	U	Mexico	1989-present
Noyce, Phillip	D	Australia	1971-present
Nunez, Victor	DWPE	US	1970-present
Nykvist, Sven	DCin	Sweden	1952-1991
Oboler, Arch	DWP	US	1945-1972
Obomsawin, Alanis	DWP	Canada	1971-present
Ogigami, Naoko	DW	Japan	1999-present
Okamoto, Kihachi	D	Japan	1958-2001
Olcott, Sidney	D	US	1907-1927
Olivier, Laurence	DPA	UK	1944-1976
Olmi, Ermanno	DW	Italy	1953-present
Ophuls, Marcel	DW	France	1958-present
Ophuls, Max	D	France	1931-1955
Oplev, Niels Arden	U	Denmark	1992-present
Oshii, Mamoru	U	Japan	1977-present
Oshima, Nagisa	DW	Japan	1959-1999
Ostlund, Ruben	DW	Sweden	2001-present
Otomo, Katsuhiko	DW	Japan	1982-present
Ottinger, Ulrike	DWCin	Germany	1973-present
Ouedraogo, Idrissa	DW	Burkina Faso	1983-present
Oury, Gerard	DW	France	1960-1999
Oz, Frank	D	US	1982-present
Ozon, Francois	DW	France	1988-present
Ozpetek, Ferzan	DW	Italy	1997-present
Ozu, Yasujiro	DW	Japan	1927-1962
Pabst, G. W.	D	Germany	1923-1956
Pagnol, Marcel	DWP	France	1933-1968
Pakula, Alan J.	DP	US	1969-1997
Palcy, Euzhan	DW	Martinique	1975-present
Panahi, Jafar	DWPE	Iran	1988-present
Panfilov, Gleb	DW	Russia	1962-present
Pang, Ho-Cheung	DWP	Hong Kong	2001-present
Parajanov, Sergei	U	Russia	1951-1988
Park, Chan-wook	DW	Korea	1992-present
Park, Ida May	DW	US	1917-1920
Park, Nick	U	UK	1989-present

Parker, Alan	D	UK	1974-2003
Parks, Gordon	D	US	1964-1987
Parsa, Reza	U	Sweden	1995-present
Pasolini, Pier Paolo	DW	Italy	1961-1975
Passer, Ivan	D	Czech	1964-2005
Payne, Alexander	DW	US	1985-present
Peckinpah, Sam	U	US	1958-1994
Peleshian, Artavazd	U	Russia	1964-1994
Penn, Arthur	D	US	1953-2001
Pennebaker, D. A.	DCin	US	1953-2001
Peries, Lester James	D	Sri Lanka	1949-2006
Perkins, Rachel	D	Australia	1998-present
Perry, Tyler	DWPA	US	2006-present
Petersen, Wolfgang	U	Germany	1965-present
Petri, Elio	DW	Italy	1954-1979
Petrie, Daniel	D	US	1949-2001
Petrovic, Aleksandar	DW	Yugoslavia	1955-1989
Petzold, Christian	DW	Germany	1992-present
Phalke, Dadasaheb	D	India	1911-1937
Philibert, Nicolas	DWE	France	1978-present
Pialat, Maurice	DW	France	1951-1995
Pichel, Irving	D	US	1932-1954
Pineyro, Marcelo	DW	Argentina	1993-present
Pintilie, Lucian	DW	Romania	1965-2006
Poe, Amos	U	US	1975-present
Poitier, Sidney	DA	US	1972-1990
Polanski, Roman	DW	Poland	1955-present
Pollack, Sydney	DP	US	1961-2008
Polley, Sarah	U	Canada	1999-present
Polonsky, Abraham	DW	US	1948-1971
Pontecorvo, Gillo	D	Italy	1953-1997
Porter, Edwin	D	US	1898-1915
Portillo, Lourdes	DP	Mexico	1979-present
Potter, Sally	DWM	UK	1979-present
Powell/Pressburger	N/A	UK	1931-1978
Preminger, Otto	DP	US	1931-1979
Protazanov, Yakov	D	Russia	1909-1943
Proyas, Alex	U	US	1987-present
Pudovkin, Vsevolod	D	Russia	1921-1953
Pyryev, Ivan	D	Russia	1929-1968

Quay Brothers	U	UK	1979-present
Quine, Richard	D	US	1948-1979
Radford, Michael	DW	UK	1980-present
Rafelson, Bob	U	US	1966-2002
Raimi, Sam	U	US	1977-present
Rainer, Yvonne	DWEA	US	1972-1996
Raizman, Yuli	D	Russia	1927-1984
Ramis, Harold	D	US	1980-2010
Ramsay, Lynne	DW	UK	1996-present
Rappeneau, Jean-Paul	DW	France	1958-2003
Rapper, Irving	D	US	1941-1978
Ray, Man	S	France	1923-1940
Ray, Nicholas	D	US	1948-1979
Ray, Satyajit	DWM	India	1955-1991
Redford, Robert	D	US	1980-present
Reed, Carol	D	UK	1935-1972
Refn, Nicolas Winding	DW	Denmark	1996-present
Reggio, Godfrey	DWP	US	1983-present
Reichardt, Kelly	DWE	US	1994-present
Reiner, Carl	D	US	1967-1997
Reiner, Rob	DP	US	1974-present
Reiniger, Lotte	D	Germany	1919-1979
Reisz, Karel	D	UK	1955-2000
Reitman, Ivan	DP	US	1968-present
Reitman, Jason	DWP	US	1998-present
Reitz, Edgar	U	Germany	1958-present
Renoir, Jean	DW	France	1924-1970
Resnais, Alain	D	France	1946-2014
Reygadas, Carlos	DWP	Mexico	1999-present
Richardson, Tony	D	UK	1952-1991
Richter, Hans	U	Germany	1923-1961
Riefenstahl, Leni	DWPE	Germany	1932-2003
Riggs, Marlon	U	US	1986-1994
Rintaro	D	Japan	1963-present
Ripstein, Arturo	D	Mexico	1966-present
Risi, Dino	DW	Italy	1946-2002
Ritchie, Michael	D	US	1965-1999
Ritt, Martin	D	US	1950-1990
Rivette, Jacques	DW	France	1949-2009
Roach, Hal	DP	US	1915-1948

Robbe-Grillet, Alain	DW	France	1963-2006
Rocha, Glauber	DWP	Brazil	1959-1980
Rodriguez, Robert	DWPCinEM	US	1991-present
Roeg, Nicolas	D	UK	1970-2007
Rogosin, Lionel	DP	US	1956-1974
Rogozhkin, Aleksandr	DW	Russia	1981-present
Rohmer, Eric	DW	France	1950-2007
Rollin, Jean	DW	France	1958-2010
Romero, George	DWE	US	1968-present
Romm, Mikhail	DW	Russia	1934-1971
Room, Abram	D	Russia	1926-1971
Roos, Jorgen	DCin	Denmark	1942-1984
Rosenberg, Stuart	D	US	1949-1991
Rosenblatt, Jay	U	US	1981-present
Rosi, Francesco	DW	Italy	1952-1997
Ross, Herbert	D	US	1958-1995
Rossellini, Roberto	DW	Italy	1935-1977
Rossen, Robert	DW	US	1947-1964
Roth, Eli	DWP	US	1999-present
Rotha, Paul	U	UK	1931-1962
Rothman, Stephanie	DW	US	1966-1974
Rouch, Jean	DCin	France	1947-2002
Rouquier, Georges	DW	France	1942-1983
Roy, Bimal	DP	India	1941-1966
Rudolph, Alan	DW	US	1972-present
Ruiz, Raoul	DW	Chile	1963-2011
Russell, David O.	DW	US	1987-present
Russell, Ken	U	UK	1956-2009
Ruttmann, Walter	D	Germany	1921-1940
Ryazanov, Eldar	DW	Russia	1953-present
Ryoo, Seung-wan	DW	Korea	1998-present
Saks, Gene	D	US	1967-1995
Salles, Walter	U	Brazil	1987-present
Sanders, Terry	U	US	1951-present
Sanders-Brahms, Helma	U	Germany	1971-2012
Sandrich, Mark	D	US	1926-1944
Sanjines, Jorge	DWE	Bolivia	1963-present
Sarkka, Toivo	DWP	Finland	1936-1962
Saura, Carlos	DW	Spain	1956-present
Sautet, Claude	DW	France	1951-1995

Savoca, Nancy	DW	US	1989-present
Sayles, John	DWE	US	1979-present
Schaffner, Franklin	D	US	1949-1989
Schepisi, Fred	U	Australia	1973-present
Schlesinger, John	D	UK	1956-2000
Schlondorff, Volker	U	Germany	1960-present
Schorm, Evald	DW	Czech	1959-1988
Schoukens, Gaston	DP	Belgium	1921-1959
Schrader, Paul	DW	US	1978-present
Schroeter, Werner	DW	Germany	1967-2008
Schultz, Michael	D	US	1972-present
Schumacher, Joel	D	US	1974-present
Scola, Ettore	DW	Italy	1964-present
Scorsese, Martin	D	US	1964-present
Scott, Ridley	DP	US	1965-present
Scott, Tony	D	US	1969-2010
Seaton, George	DW	US	1945-1973
Seidelman, Susan	U	US	1982-present
Sembene, Ousmane	DW	Senegal	1964-2004
Sen, Mrinal	DW	India	1956-2002
Sennett, Mack	U	US	1911-1935
Serreau, Coline	DW	France	1977-present
Servais, Raoul	S	Belgium	1959-2003
Shahani, Kumar	D	India	1969-1997
Sharpsteen, Ben	D	US	1920-1957
Shepitko, Larisa	U	Russia	1963-1977
Sheridan, Jim	U	UK	1989-present
Shimizu, Hiroshi	U	Japan	1924-1959
Shin, Sang-ok	DP	Korea	1952-1995
Shindo, Kaneto	DW	Japan	1951-2010
Shinkai, Makoto	DWPCinE	Japan	1999-present
Shinoda, Masahiro	D	Japan	1960-2003
Shinozaki, Makoto	U	Japan	1981-present
Shiota, Akihiko	DW	Japan	1982-present
Shipman, Nell	DWA	Canada	1920-1926
Shukshin, Vasilii	U	Russia	1960-1974
Shyamalan, M. Night	DWP	US	1992-present
Sidney, George	D	US	1936-1967
Siegel, Don	D	US	1945-1982
Silver, Joan Micklin	D	US	1972-2003

Singer, Bryan	DP	US	1988-present
Singleton, John	DW	US	1991-present
Siodmak, Robert	D	Germany	1930-1969
Sirk, Douglas	D	Germany	1934-1959
Sjoberg, Alf	DW	Sweden	1929-1969
Sjostrom, Victor	D	Sweden	1912-1937
Skladanowsky Brothers	S	Germany	1895-1905
Skolimowski, Jerzy	DW	Poland	1960-present
Smith, Harry	D	US	1939-1987
Smith, Jack	D	US	1963-1967
Smith, Kevin	DWEA	US	1994-present
Smolders, Olivier	S	Belgium	1984-present
Snow, Michael	D	Canada	1956-present
Soderbergh, Steven	DCin	US	1985-present
Sokurov, Aleksandr	U	Russia	1974-present
Solanas, Fernando	DWPCin	Argentina	1968-present
Solas, Humberto	D	Cuba	1959-2005
Soldati, Mario	DW	Italy	1938-1989
Solondz, Todd	DW	US	1984-present
Solovev, Sergey	DW	Russia	1969-present
Sono, Shion	DW	Japan	1986-present
Sorin, Carlos	DW	Argentina	1986-present
Spheeris, Penelope	D	US	1972-present
Spielberg, Steven	DP	US	1964-present
St. Clair, Malcolm	D	US	1919-1948
Stahl, John	DP	US	1914-1949
Stallone, Sylvester	DWA	US	1978-present
Stanton, Andrew	DW	US	1987-present
Starewicz, Wladyslaw	DWCinPD	Russia	1910-1958
Staudte, Wolfgang	D	Germany	1933-1984
Stenholm, Katherine	D	US	1955-1983
Stevens, George	U	US	1930-1970
Stevenson, Robert	D	US	1932-1976
Stiller, Mauritz	DW	Sweden	1912-1928
Stillman, Whit	DWP	US	1990-present
Stone, Oliver	DWP	US	1971-present
Storck, Henri	D	Belgium	1929-1985
Straub/Huillet	N/A	Germany	1963-present
Streisand, Barbra	DPA	US	1983-present
Strick, Joseph	DP	US	1953-1997

Sturges, John	D	US	1946-1976
Sturges, Preston	DW	US	1940-1955
Sucksdorff, Arne	U	Sweden	1941-1965
Suzuki, Noribumi	DW	Japan	1965-1990
Suzuki, Seijun	D	Japan	1956-2005
Svankmajer, Jan	DWPD	Czech	1964-present
Syberberg, Hans-Jurgen	DWP	Germany	1965-1997
Szabo, Istvan	DW	Hungary	1959-present
Tait, Margaret	S	UK	1952-1998
Takahata, Isao	DW	Japan	1968-present
Tam, Patrick	DW	Hong Kong	1980-2006
Tanada, Yuki	U	Japan	2004-present
Tanaka, Hiroyuki "Sabu"	DW	Japan	1996-present
Tanaka, Noboru	D	Japan	1972-2002
Tanner, Alain	DWP	Switzerland	1957-2004
Tarantino, Quentin	U	US	1987-present
Tarkovsky, Andrei	DW	Russia	1962-1986
Tarr, Bela	DW	Hungary	1978-present
Tashlin, Frank	DW	US	1933-1968
Tati, Jacques	DWA	France	1935-1972
Taurog, Norman	D	US	1920-1968
Tavernier, Bertrand	DW	France	1964-present
Taviani Brothers	N/A	Italy	1960-present
Taylor, William Desmond	D	US	1914-1922
Taymor, Julie	DW	US	1992-present
Techine, Andre	DW	France	1965-present
Terayama, Shuji	DW	Japan	1964-1983
Teshigahara, Hiroshi	D	Japan	1953-1992
Tezuka, Osamu	D	Japan	1963-1989
Thompson, J. Lee	D	UK	1950-1989
Thornton, Leslie	S	US	1974-present
Tian, Zhuangzhuang	D	China	1982-present
To, Johnnie	DP	Hong Kong	1980-present
Toback, James	DW	US	1978-present
Tornatore, Guiseppe	DW	Italy	1981-present
Tourneur, Jacques	D	US	1931-1966
Tourneur, Maurice	D	France	1913-1948
Townsend, Robert	D	US	1987-present
Trenchard-Smith, Brian	D	Australia	1972-present
Trevino, Jesus Salvador	D	US	1972-present

Trnka, Jiri	DWArtD	Czech	1945-1966
Troche, Rose	U	US	1994-present
Troell, Jan	DWCinE	Sweden	1961-present
Truffaut, Francois	DW	France	1955-1983
Tsai, Ming-liang	DW	Taiwan	1989-present
Tscherkassky, Peter	S	Austria	1981-present
Tsuchimoto, Noriaki	D	Japan	1964-2005
Tsuchiya, Yutaka	DWE	Japan	1999-present
Tsui, Hark	DWP	Hong Kong	1979-present
Tsukamoto, Shinya	DWPCinEA	Japan	1986-present
Tulio, Teuvo	DPE	Finland	1936-1973
Tuttle, Frank	D	US	1922-1959
Tykwer, Tom	DWM	Germany	1986-present
Uchida, Tomu	D	Japan	1922-1970
Ullmann, Liv	DW	Sweden	1992-present
Ulmer, Edgar	D	US	1930-1964
Ustaoglu, Yesim	DW	Turkey	1984-present
Vaala, Valentin	DE	Finland	1929-1972
Vadim, Roger	DW	France	1956-1997
Valdez, Luis	DW	US	1969-1994
Van Dormael, Jaco	DW	Belgium	1980-present
Van Dyke, W. S.	D	US	1917-1942
Van Peebles, Mario	DA	US	1988-present
Van Peebles, Melvin	U	US	1957-present
Van Sant, Gus	U	US	1982-present
Vanderbeek, Stan	S	US	1957-1972
Varda, Agnes	DW	France	1955-present
Varma, Ram Gopal	DP	India	1989-present
Vasilyev Brothers	N/A	Russia	1930-1958
Veber, Francis	DW	France	1976-present
Verbinski, Gore	D	US	1996-present
Verhoeven, Paul	D	Netherlands	1960-present
Vertov, Dziga	D	Russia	1918-1954
Vidor, Charles	D	US	1929-1959
Vidor, King	D	US	1913-1980
Vigo, Jean	U	France	1930-1934
Vinterberg, Thomas	DW	Denmark	1993-present
Vischer, Phil	S	US	1993-present
Visconti, Luchino	DW	Italy	1943-1976
Vlacil, Frantisek	DW	Czech	1950-1988

von Sternberg, Josef	D	US	1925-1957
von Stroheim, Erich	DWA	US	1919-1933
Von Trier, Lars	DW	Denmark	1980-present
von Trotta, Margarethe	DW	Germany	1975-present
Vorkapich, Slavko	S	US	1928-1955
Voulgaris, Pantelis	U	Greece	1965-present
The Wachowskis	N/A	US	1996-present
Wajda, Andrzej	DW	Poland	1950-present
Wakamatsu, Koji	D	Japan	1965-2012
Walsh, Raoul	D	US	1913-1964
Walters, Charles	D	US	1945-1976
Wan, James	D	Australia	2000-present
Wang, Wayne	D	US	1975-present
Wang, Xiaoshuai	DW	China	1993-present
Ward, Vincent	DW	New Zealand	1978-present
Warhol, Andy	D	US	1963-1973
Waters, John	DWP	US	1964-2004
Watkins, Peter	DW	UK	1959-2000
Watt, Harry	DW	UK	1934-1961
Wayans, Keenen Ivory	U	US	1988-present
Weber, Lois	DWP	US	1911-1934
Weerasethakul, Apichatpong	DW	Thailand	1994-present
Wegener, Paul	DWA	Germany	1913-1937
Weill, Claudia	D	US	1975-present
Weir, Peter	U	Australia	1968-present
Weiss, Jiri	DW	Czech	1935-1990
Welles, Orson	DWA	US	1938-1973
Wellman, William	D	US	1923-1958
Wenders, Wim	DW	Germany	1967-present
Wertmuller, Lina	DW	Germany	1963-present
West, Roland	DW	US	1916-1931
West, Ti	DWE	US	2005-present
Whale, James	D	US	1930-1949
Wheatley, Ben	DE	UK	2007-present
Whedon, Joss	U	US	2002-present
Whitaker, Forest	D	US	1993-present
Widerberg, Bo	DWE	Sweden	1962-1995
Wiene, Robert	DW	Germany	1913-1938
Wilder, Billy	DWP	US	1934-1981
Williams, Spencer	DWA	US	1941-1947

Winterbottom, Michael	D	UK	1989-present
Wise, Robert	D	US	1944-2000
Wiseman, Frederick	DPE	US	1967-present
Wishman, Doris	DWP	US	1960-2002
Wong, Kar-Wai	DWP	Hong Kong	1988-present
Woo, John	D	Hong Kong	1968-present
Wood, Andres	U	Chile	1997-present
Wood, Ed	DWP	US	1951-1971
Wood, Sam	D	US	1920-1949
Wright, Edgar	DW	UK	1995-present
Wyler, William	D	US	1925-1970
Xie, Jin	D	China	1957-2001
Yamada, Yoji	DW	Japan	1961-present
Yamanaka, Sadao	DW	Japan	1932-1937
Yanagimachi, Mitsuo	U	Japan	1976-present
Yang, Edward	DW	Taiwan	1982-2000
Yates, Peter	D	UK	1963-2004
Yonfan	DW	Hong Kong	1984-present
Yorkin, Bud	D	US	1954-1990
Yoshimura, Kozaburo	D	Japan	1934-1974
Young, Robert M.	D	US	1956-2011
Young, Terence	D	UK	1948-1988
Yu, Hyun-mok	D	Korea	1956-1995
Yutkevich, Sergei	D	Russia	1928-1981
Zaim, Dervis	DWP	Turkey	1996-present
Zanussi, Krzysztof	DW	Poland	1958-present
Zeffirelli, Franco	DW	Italy	1957-present
Zeman, Karel	DW	Czech	1964-1980
Zemeckis, Robert	U	US	1972-present
Zeno, Thierry	DWCinE	Belgium	1975-1987
Zetterling, Mai	DW	Sweden	1963-1990
Zeze, Takahisa	DW	Japan	1989-present
Zhang, Yimou	D	China	1987-present
Zhang, Yuan	DW	China	1993-present
Zinnemann, Fred	D	US	1930-1982
Zombie, Rob	DWP	US	2003-present
Zucker, Jerry	D	US	1980-present
Zulawski, Andrzej	DW	Poland	1967-2000
Zwick, Edward	U	US	1976-present

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