Death is the Curator: An Interview with Guillermo del Toro

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Guillermo del Toro is perhaps best known as a builder of worlds—his films grow from the sketchbooks that he fills with ideas for fantastical creatures and places. Del Toro's work is sometimes big and bright and fun, like *Hellboy*, *Pacific Rim,* or his latest release for Netflix, the animated series *Trollhunters*. Other times, he tells quieter stories about ghosts and loss, like *The Devil's Backbone*, *Pan's Labyrinth*, or *Crimson Peak*. But no matter what kind of film he's making, he works from a place of devotion to his craft and pure love for his characters.

On the heels of Donald Trump's inauguration, del Toro was generous enough to have a lengthy discussion with us. It may seem an unusual choice to include an interview with a fantasy director in our "True Stories" issue, but I think that much of our talk turned out to be about what truth is—and how stories can help us find it. We covered a lot of ground: art as politics, *Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome*, eye candy versus "eye protein," the speed of contemporary discourse, and what the last three minutes of your life might look like.

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It's hard not to talk about Trump right now. You've been active on Twitter about your feelings about the election. Since November 9, do you—and maybe other artists you know—feel a kind of pressure to make more explicitly political work now than you used to?

Well, look, the first thing I will say is that I have believed since I was a teenager, I've always believed that every single act of creation is political on some level.

The madness would be to think that it isn’t. A cartoon for kids, or an action movie, they all line up politically on one side or the other. Even when you study narratives as basic as a fairy tale, there’s always a type of fairy tale that is repressive—the type that tells you ‘don’t go in the woods alone,' 'obey your parents,' 'be a good kid'— and the other fairy tale that is anarchic, that puts you in touch with a little bit of madness, a little bit of freedom.

I think that we show who we are more clearly through our fiction than most anything else in our lives. Because in fiction—and particularly genre fiction—you have the license of the mask, to really present yourself as you are. I think that when we go to all the genres in every era, I think the genres that are closer to the fantastic most of the time are reflecting—if not anticipating—things that are going to happen socially. It’s a well-worn topic to discuss the fact that during the Cold War there was a type of science fiction and horror that was paranoic, and during the Vietnam era, horror reflected the disintegration of the American society and family.

But think about it, the undercurrent in a sub-genre like the zombie genre: we saw it change from the anarchic, iconoclastic thread that George Romero had, and turn into an almost post-apocalyptic redneck fantasy world, you know? That genre alone was anticipating what we’re living right now. It turned into a red state subgenre. When I did, for example, *Devil’s Backbone*, I thought, 'Ok, I’ve said a piece about war and about childhood and so forth,' and then 9/11 happened and I had the need to do *Pan’s Labyrinth*. Each of the genre works that I do is informed by how I feel the world is being shaped. But it’s not 100% a conscious decision. You can put your utmost effort into organizing all the symbols in your work, but you have blinders on about what other possible implications those symbols can have.

The way you just talked about anarchic versus pro-establishment, it made me think of the concepts of the Dionysian vs the Apollonian. It seems like you want to make work that taps into the Dionysian aspect of your humanity.

Well, I think every work is fifty-fifty. [laughs]

I think that part of the iceberg is submerged and part of the iceberg is rationalized. Even something as emotional and expressive as a Jackson Pollack painting, there's still a choice of colors, you know?

Right, nothing can be purely random or purely from the id. Choice is involved.

I think that art is always, and storytelling is always, the struggle between impulse and organization, because you have to structure your story. Even if you go non-narrative, it's going to start at one point, it's going to reach a middle at one point, and it's going to conclude at one point. You cannot keep a movie running 24/7. You choose your ending, and your beginning.

Maybe that's part of the difference between pure visual art and film, which does involve a narrative.

There is a part of film that is like song. That exists in a place that is responsive and emotional and that defies rationalization, analysis, or categorization. You know, you can take any song; for example, 'Let It Be,' and the lyrics separate from the music or the music separate from the lyrics are one thing, and when you listen to it together, it provokes an emotion unique to each person. Some people are going to love it, some people are going to cry, some people are going to turn it off. But there's a lyrical, almost musical side to cinema that speaks very profoundly to each of us. That's why we can see the same movie, and you hate it and I love it. It's the same movie. It's our soul that is different.

You once said that you could compare a film to a Gauguin painting, where you have to analyze the brush strokes and the vigor of the color palette. Do you think viewers may be a little hung up on the narrative aspect of movies?

I think that that's a gigantic area of discussion. Sometimes that is defined by some people, they'll say this or that filmmaker is a 'filmmaker's filmmaker.' You know, I can tell you a transformative moment in my life—a couple of them—have happened in George Miller movies [laughs].

Is he a filmmaker's filmmaker?

I think George Miller is a filmmaker's filmmaker, but he's also a filmmaker for everyone.

That's a guy who works at every level. He's firing on all cylinders. To me, Miller exists in the Olympian category; he's a cinema god for me. I remember being a teenager and seeing Max Rockatansky step out of his patrol and walk towards the camera and the camera was doing a push-in and a jib-up at the same time, you know? It was a dolly and a jib, a little crane up to him as he removes his glasses, and it's purely camera, purely the choice of lens, the choice of angle, the movement—it's a ballet. His portion of *Mad Max 3* in the Thunderdome is pure ballet.

That sequence! I think about the Thunderdome all the time. [laughs]

Yeah! That's the sequence for which you own the movie, basically. And I think, *that* choice with a different lens, *that* choice with a different camera move… because you have only a limited menu in the vocabulary of cinema.

Every ten or fifteen years year a new words gets invented. I remember watching with Alfonso [Cuaron] one of the first, still incomplete, one-shot sequences in *Children of Men*, and I had a clear sense that a new word had been invented [laughs].

'Cuaron-esque,' you mean?

Yes! Not that no one had done one-take shots, one-take scenes, you know? You have *Goodfellas*, you have De Palma doing it over and over again, you have *Russian Ark*, *I Am Cuba*, many others. But that scene in the car, when the camera was absolutely invisible, and it was just a moment of virtuoso invention, and I felt 'Dear Lord, my youth pal just invented a new word.' [laughs] I felt enormously moved. And that is an example in which you have to discuss film in terms that are beyond the narrative. There is a vigor to the brushstroke. There is a choice of color palette. There is a musicality to it. I think that you can discuss a movie that is percussive in its interpretation, which has to do with the rhythm of the editing.

***Mad Max: Fury Road* is a percussive film, I think.**

Yeah, exactly, and then you find a melodic film. For example, Spielberg: he is constantly dispensing three minute, one-shot sequences in all of his movies that are amazing. That's why my favorite film of his in the last couple of decades is *Catch Me If You Can*.

That movie is so wonderful. People don't talk about it.

That movie to me is like a musical. You cannot choreograph a movie with more precision than that movie is choreographed. Every shot is a little masterclass about how to do internal montage, by which I mean the montage of the camera and actor's ballet, you know? Most of the time you find discussions start and stop at content, at dramaturgy: what is it about, what the characters do, what does the story mean, politically and then, you know—

And if people talk about any craft aspect, they'll talk about the actors.

They talk about the actors, or they talk about the cinematography, but the reality is, when you orchestrate a movie, you're orchestrating *everything*—and only about a third of it is often discussed.

One thing that I've noticed is that when people talk about cinematography, they'll say that something is 'beautifully shot'. But a lot of what they're perceiving as beautiful is actually design.

I watch movies perhaps in a different way, because I try to get absorbed the first time. I'm not analyzing it the first time. If I find myself analyzing the first time, it's not a good movie.

I carry my iPad and my computer. In them, I carry about 2,500 movies, which I often consult, like you would read a book. I often turn it on and just watch a passage. I watch it from a purely formal point of view, and I go: can I dissect it? Can I dissect what lens they're using, can I dissect which one of the shots is the master and which ones are coverage? This is something I've been doing since I was a teenager, because some

people are just masters at blocking a scene. John Schlesinger is just superb—he's always doing these nifty little things with choreography. Polanski is masterful at a minimalism of extreme precision in choreographing. There are many, many people that I love to discuss in those terms because we are talking the film's *language*.

I think film, as a medium, sometimes succeeds below the radar of people's perception. The four legs of a movie, visually, to me are: cinematography, set design, wardrobe design, and camera moves. They are all orchestrated, in the best circumstances, by the director. They need to be, basically, a single department. When you say, 'What a beautiful work of cinematography,' nine out of ten times, you're praising the set design and wardrobe design. But you don't consciously know it. For a movie to be beautiful, it needs to be sustained by those four legs. They can be in harmony or in contrast, but they need to be orchestrated.

Does it frustrate you that people don't notice design and costume as much as you wish they would?

No, it doesn't frustrate me. What I think is important for me is that they should be discussed as a single piece. Rarely do they succeed without one another. When you see a movie that doesn't quite gel visibly, that's a huge failure of communication between those departments.

And treating them as separate departments, rather than pieces of the whole.

It's exceedingly important that cinematography talks to wardrobe, designs talks to production design. It's exceedingly important in the way I see the craft, that the director chooses the lens and the camera moves, discusses it with the cinematographer, yes, but also discusses it with the production designer.

From a purely practical point of view, the production designer needs to include in the way he or she designs the set, what walls move, so you can put your camera there. You need to know what lens you're going to use for the 'hero angle' on a set, because let's say you are working with a wide angle. The distance—there's a small 'blind point' between the lens and what is going to start being included in the rectangle of your composition. You need a certain distance built into the set for that blind spot that is not going to be on film.

You need to maybe move a wall or two and, in order to light it, you need to have windows, pieces of ceiling that can fly. It's a constant dialogue.

One of the greatest myths you're going to hear from some people, they'll say, 'Well, you shouldn't choose a black wardrobe if you're going to do a lot of night scenes.' Not true. You can choose a silky black, a Teflon black, a shiny black, and a patterned black, all in the same costume, to have different degrees of reflectiveness that can detach it from the background, and so on.

There's not a single decision visually that should be casual, I think.

How many of those decisions are coming from you? Do you delegate very much to your department heads, or is it your design that they're enacting?

Well, I think it's a partnership—an incredibly intense, sometimes burdensome partnership. I don't think any production designer has an easy time working on a movie of mine, but it's a worthy time. We both come out of the experience, either incredibly frustrated with each other, or incredibly nurtured by each other.

What's a relationship that was nurturing?

If you see my filmography, I don't repeat a lot. Tom Sanders, for example, in *Crimson Peak*, we started design with a very small crew, before Tom showed up. Then Tom showed up and he took what we were designing and he put his own spin on it. So it was not territorial, he didn't come and say, 'I'm going to start from scratch.' That's very nurturing, because he didn't say, 'I'm going to follow exactly what you guys have designed.'

I don't think the dictatorial style produces the best results—I think a demanding style produces the best results. The dictatorial style frustrates people's impulses. The moment an artist is afraid is the moment an artist ceases to function. The only thing that is healthy is to be afraid of *failure*—not afraid of your instincts. It should a

relationship between adults. It's not a vertical relationship. I don't think vertical relationships in any walk of life are for the better.

In the advertising for your work, they often call you a 'visionary director'—they'll say, 'From the mind of visionary director Guillermo del Toro.' I think they're right; you do have a vision. And I'm wondering what you think that's about—whether you would use that word to describe yourself, or what it means to be visionary?

That's a very scary term.

I'm sure.

90% of the time, it means they don't know how to market the movie. The only thing they can say is, if you like the other shit this guy has done, this shit you're going to like, it's for you. It's like that famous phrase, which I'm sure I'm misquoting: 'For the people who like this type of thing, this is the type of thing they're going to like.'

[Laughs] I think that there's something more to it, though, because you just talked about how you don't repeat yourself—but your stamp is always on the things that you make. It seems that you usually work on things that are truly passion projects—movies you've visualized before you actually get there. Is that true?

Well, if you know the world that you're creating, and if you're looking for the common good of the storytelling—then that is going to harmonize and balance all the departments. You come in with certain rules. You say, look, this world is gonna be this way and that way, and along the adventure, along the journey, those rules may change. Rules don't make good people, but people can make good rules. We make them—but they serve us, we don't serve them, you know?

I always start with a color palette and a shape and texture palette that are serving storytelling—I never say 'How would this movie look good?' I derive the look of the movie from the storytelling of the movie. I say, I want the movie to look like this *because* of this. It's telling me this. It's telling me that the fascist world of the captain [in *Pan's Labyrinth*] is a cool world. And fantasy is sort of this uterine gold and red. It's life. So then, we should make the rebels in the mountains also be warm, because they are these characters that are maintaining life against the dictator.

And that's what I always say is the difference between eye candy and eye *protein*. Eye candy is just done with a fashion kind of sense, like an advert for a shampoo or a perfume. When you are telling the story, it's eye protein because it's intrinsic. If you think of somebody as formalistic as Wes Anderson, every shape, wardrobe, color decision is a storytelling decision. The same can be told about Paul Thomas Anderson.

People confuse casual with serendipitous. According to his legend, Chaplin arrived at the look of the Tramp in a few minutes, rummaging through a props and wardrobe area. He didn't take years for the perfection of the Little Tramp. But that doesn't mean it was casual. It was serendipitous. The things were there, but it is the choosing of those things that is the art of the director and the storyteller.

Right, it doesn't matter how it happened as long as it's meaningful once it does happen.

Once the choice is made, it's a meaningful choice. That's why the discussion in art is that the moment Duchamp signed that urinal, he declared it a work of art because his gaze made it art. He said, if I look at it the right way, this is art. Which in a different, pop way is Andy Warhol transforming the Campbell's soup can by making it a work of art, or Lichtenstein blowing up comic book panels. Because I think that the moment you look at it as art, and you treat it as art, it is art. There's a willingness, there's a faith, there's a very, very magical alchemy that happens when somebody looks at something with enormous love and enormous passion—and it doesn't matter what that material is. It can be a comic book page, it can be a silly story, and you don't change it, but the way you look at it transforms it. Which is a very different exercise than postmodernism. Postmodernism or kitsch is me winking at you, saying ‘I know it's silly, but I'm being ironic. I'm above the material.’ And for me, the transformative power of art is you are *not* above the material.

And I think we see that in the stuff you make like the *Hellboy* movies or *Pacific Rim*. You're not making those as a director for hire—you actually love those stories.

It's very telling that in almost every movie I make, I end up deferring my salary, or parts of my salary, to fight for what I think is right. And that was *Pacific Rim*, that was *Crimson Peak*, that is *The Shape of Water*. It's not only in one type of movie that I do it. I put my money where my mouth is because I believe it's important to do it that way. Another director could have taken *Pacific Rim* and done it with a lot more postmodern complexity, in a beautiful way. But I thought: I want to evoke exactly what I felt when I saw giant things punching each other in Tokusatsu TV series when I was a kid.

But at the same time, before diversity was being widely discussed in action movies, *Pacific Rim* was humanistically designed to not be about a single race and a single country saving the world.

There are so many kinds of people in that movie working together for one goal.

Freaks and geeks working together to save the world. And I think that is important because I think we are all equally important. I think that at the end of the day, you may *think* you're not involved, but you are involved. That was the idea in *Devil's Backbone*—you don't see many war scenes in the movie. There are no big battles of the Civil War. But the Civil War infects that orphanage just as well, even if it's miles and miles away from the battle zones.

Look at us right now. I think there is an incredible, invisible divide across the world now between the humanistic left impulse of how society should behave, and the right wing pro-corporation, pro-military industrial complex. And we see that right now is a crucial moment for who we are and who we're gonna be. To a degree—not to be an alarmist, but I do think we are playing with the biggest stakes in the modern era since the Industrial Revolution. Until now, there has never been so much at stake.

And as you said, we're all involved. There's no way to get out of it.

No, because even if you don't knock on doors, somebody will knock on your door. If you don't shape the world, the world will shape itself and come knock on your door sooner or later. And it's far more scary to hear that knock on your door than it is to get active.

Now when I say active, I mean—the Greeks used to believe that we don't need great governments, we need great citizens. That's the basis of a truly great country. You can have mediocre government, but you cannot do with mediocre citizenship. And I think there is a part of what we do that is for socio-political means, but there is also the fact that we need to be good citizens, good *humans*, in what we do. If you are a bank manager, you have to be a bank manager that works for the good. If you operate a laundromat, you have to operate it for the good of all. If you make movies, you have to make movies that really speak to the best side of yourself, and that helps, you know? That makes us a little more human.

You've talked about *Trollhunters*, your new Netflix show, as you wanting to send out a flare of joy into the world right now.

Well, I really am as proud of *Trollhunters* as I could be of anything I've ever been involved in. We tried to really—we were going counter to many, many, many things that are hip and in vogue right now. We were not postmodern ironic—we were completely, completely un-ironic.

The hero in *Trollhunters* such a sweet person!

Well, that was one of the first things that I had to battle with. One of the notes I kept getting on the beginning of the project many years ago was, 'We need to make Jim a more complex hero.' And I said, 'No, I want a *really good guy* that goes through this'—and you will see as the series goes on, his choices become harder and harder.

A lot of the animated shows I love as an adult are very postmodern and have a bit of a cynical humor. But the shows that I most admire, that I adore—things in animation like *Gravity Falls*, which I think is superb—have just the right amount of heart, of sincerity. You felt it was a show crafted by love. And I think that, in the times

we're living, emotion is the new punk. We are so afraid of being emotional. That is why a lot of teenage audiences find that they can only express their emotions through the story of Mormon vampires or things like that. Because if you approach them straight on, you're sappy.

Another thing I'm picking up on as you're talking is the idea that drama, that tension, that conflict, can come from all kinds of places—that conflict happens to good people, too.

Oh, yes! Listen, we are only good people statistically. I think that we—that everybody is an asshole! Many times in the day.

When I used to talk to my kids when they were very young, I used to say, 'Well, if you are a murderer and you murder five people and you go to prison, and then a fire breaks in prison and you save three guards, what are you: a murderer, or a hero?' I think you're a little bit of both.

That's a good fable. That's a good thing to tell kids! [laughs]

Well, it's true. Or if you're an incredibly responsible accountant at your parish, and you're an upstanding citizen all your life, but you murder your wife, what are you? You know, it's statistical. You know, the way Anthony Perkins used to say in *Psycho*: 'We all go a little crazy sometimes.' I think that what you need to understand is we are creatures of impulse, and if we tend statistically to give in to the better impulses of our nature, then we are, I think, statistically good people. But what happens now for me is that we are trapped in a world where the discourse can be constrictive if you don't present yourself as an absolutely perfect person. And I think perfection is a completely suffocating, destructive principle. My movies, and the work I do, cry for the need of imperfection to be embraced.

Like the way that you talk about monsters.

Yes, because it's liberating. And that in itself is political. I don't think political means that you talk the way people think you should talk. I think that you need to behave in a way that is not destructive to others, and is

not destructive to you, you know? Because what you hate in others, necessarily, inevitably, is a thing that you hate in you. Inevitably. There's no such thing as hatred that doesn't start with self. There is not such a thing, period.

So if you allow yourself to be imperfect, if you say 'Look, I'm not perfect; I do this, I do that. I have my biases, I have my darkness, but I'm at peace with that,'—very likely you will be at peace with everybody's darkness.

I like that phrase that you use, 'at peace with the darkness.'

That's the beauty of genre for me. I don't use genre in the way that most people like to use genre, which is to spook, and scare, and demonize the idea of the other. I think that I demonize human attitude, but I embrace the otherness. I really am in love with the idea that the true monsters in our lives are human, always.

In *Pan's Labyrinth*, the monster in that film is obviously the captain. But there are all kinds of creatures in that movie that are ambiguous. And some of them are good.

The Tao says something like rigidity is the essence of death, and suppleness is the essence of life. That which bends never will break. That which doesn't bend will break.

I find the people in my life I find the scariest are the people that are most certain. [Laughs] You can be certain; of course you can—I am, a lot of the time in my work—but not all the time, you know? If you talk and don't listen, you are a fucking monster, period. It's truly scary to find someone that says, 'This is the way it's going to be.' Because the beauty of the essence of life is variety; we are all different. There is all kinds of good. There is all kinds of bad. There is all kinds of evil. And there's all kinds of benign. And if you don't make an effort to understand that, I think it's very scary.

And right now I think we are policed by the most minute, syntactic error in our social discourse. Or we are policed on the opposite side by the most remote, benign attitude. This is a very tense time, because we pursue the humanistic as if it's bland, and we pursue any human failing as a demonic thing.

I think filmmakers today are putting things out in a critical climate where everything is under this very intense scrutiny—a film's message has to be perfectly legible and socially conscious; it has to say the right thing the right way. And I wish that we could receive films, and filmmakers, with a little more generosity and good faith.

The scary thing for me is younger generations, that have artistic or storytelling desires, are constantly analyzing and policing themselves to be correct. There's a paralyzing fear of, 'Is it going to be read this way, or is it going to be read that way?' And that doesn't really succeed in creating more humanistic or liberal works. It's the difference between sincerity and hypocrisy.

I think [with] sincerity, you never think about it, you're simply sincere; you are who you are. And hypocrisy is the most dangerous thing, because you can present yourself as one thing, and be another in your art. And I think art needs to come straight from the soul. To regard yourself in a way that would be pleasing to others is hypocrisy.

That hits close to home, actually. On Twitter, we're always taking great pains to make sure that everyone said the right thing about something—and I think I probably put more effort into making sure I'm perceived as having the right beliefs, rather than actually, you know, living the right way, or believing those things in my heart.

Well, that is the time we're living in. I mean, I think if irony was dangerous in print, irony is even more dangerous in 140 characters. No matter what answer you give, in those few characters, it's likely to be received as wrong.

But I think, look, if we all got together in a global plaza—which doesn't exist—and we all got together and said, 'Let's agree, that we're all imperfect. Let's agree that we're going to give each other a break, a fucking break; that we're all human,' I think we would all exhale, with great relief.

Because the essential instruments of communication right now are a cell phone, an iPad, and a pitchfork. And I think we can do without one of them. If we give each other the license that we are humans, and that it is our divine right to be imperfect, and that we are creatures that have ingrained in us, as mammals, these aggressive, territorial principles—ingrained in us, in our DNA, in the way our synapses were formed—this you cannot do anything about. You're going to be territorial, you're going to be foraging, you're going to look for a fight, and you're going to look for procreation, ok? So those instincts are there. And then on top of that you superimpose your humanity, your thoughts, your intellect; yes. But you're going to be made of that Yin and that Yang. So we cannot present ourselves as only Mr. Yin or Mr. Yang. [laughs]

And once you acknowledge those inclinations, that imperfection, then you can move forward; then you can actually start talking about what you want to be, as opposed to just what you are.

And that's why I say there's no such thing as a guilty pleasure. If you have pleasure, and you're not affecting anyone by watching—and rewatching—Ridley Scott's *The Counselor*, over and over again, then it's a pleasure. It shouldn't be guilty. You love it. I think it's a perfect movie; I don't have to prove it.

You're right, you don't need to talk about it on that level. You can just love it.

And I can actually defend a lot of it because it's not made by two guys that just walked in. The words are made by one of the best wordsmiths in our times, Cormac McCarthy, and the images are constructed by one of the most superb image-craftsmen of our time, Ridley Scott. So, I can argue the movie is what it wants to be. You may not like it, but it *is* what it wants to be; it's not an accident or a miscalculation.

And I think that we can be too quick to say that something is a 'miscalculation,' or a 'misfire,' or an 'accident.' These are professionals! Most of the time, anyway.

But that is because the speed of our cultural discussion is faster than our cultural discussion itself. Media has accelerated the consumption of facts to the degree where we cannot process them. And I think that's why

we're doing this interview, and that's why I like your website and many other websites, because you can pause and talk.

The fact is we are jammed at a speed where devices can process the data. That does not mean that *we* can. Because information without emotion is useless. It's an extremely dangerous time to be a human.

I certainly feel like I am receiving information at a much higher speed than I can process it, or form good opinions about it, or even know exactly how I feel.

It's not an accident that the industrial revolution gave birth to the science of sociology. You know? We were marching at a certain pace, and the industrial revolution came upon us, and we found the imperative need to find a new way to discuss ourselves as a social group. Now it's the pedal to the metal, in terms of data; knowledge; and information—

And analyzing that data, sociologically.

But we can't! We very rarely can. Because the moment we are getting out of discourse—an election moment—a horrible massacre occurs somewhere else, or a great actor dies. And we find ourselves almost jumping from one subject to another, trying to muster the necessary and appropriate emotional response. And the fact is we cannot.

We're just not built for that; to really know about all the tragedies in the world. I feel like we're evolutionarily built to only really be able to react to just the tragedies in our own small communities.

Well, I wouldn't know exactly the measure, but all I know is that to me many of the losses this year were monumental. I'm gonna fixate on one, which was Bowie—because it hit me really, really, really deadcenter. I think that if I had read about it in the papers, in 1985, I would've mourned for a couple of years, you know? Even if other people died three months later or two months later or a week later—

You could have been allowed to sit with that.

Yeah! I would have sit shiva a little longer. The fact that with movies that's what is happening. And because we are consuming culture at that rate, two words have come into the cultural discourse that are profoundly scary. And we use them, I catch myself using them—but they are scary. One is *pipeline*, and the other is *content*. Because that's the speed of consumption now; it goes by. It goes by like oil, like water, like sewage. It's pipeline and content.

It's pretty gross.

It is extremely gross, and you have storytelling companies (like studios, TV, media) discussing everything in those terms.

But I think we go by so fast that many times our judgment is wrong about the immediate thing we're watching. A lot of times I find that the movies I like the most, year after year, are the movies that a lot of the people don't talk about.

And that's the curse of being in the age that we are, where we have a greater access to things. And it's great that we have streaming services and online publishing! But that also means there just isn't enough room in our heads to be able to give everything the proper weight that it deserves.

And then we come to one conclusion that is useful: it is up to us to pace ourselves. It is not up to the media.

Having this media is close to a miracle. I think it is amazing that I can travel with my iPad with thousands of movies. I think it is amazing that I can streamline thousands more. I think it is amazing that I can know what happened in far-flung countries, in one second. But it is up to us, as humans—one of our ethical tasks is to say, how am I going to pace myself? What am I focusing on? Because otherwise we live life in a blur. We're texting and driving. So it is—media is not evil. The speed of media is not evil. What is toxic is that we don't

pace ourselves. That we’re not having dinner without texting; that we’re not capable of paying full attention to the moment we’re living. And that is true also of the cinematic discourse.

Many movies that affected me this year, they can range from *Hell or High Water*—which is a great little movie that moved me and grabbed my attention—or it can be *Manchester by the Sea*, or it can be *Train to Busan*. And I can actually pace myself and say I’m gonna enjoy this one, I’m gonna not go to the next one. I may watch it two times. You know? I watched *Train to Busan* twice, once alone and once with the family.

But you worry that if you choose to focus on a few things you are going to miss something, along the way.

Oh yeah, but you know what? That’s the essence of life. And that’s exactly the point: we have to pace ourselves to allow ourselves to 'miss out.' Because if we don’t miss out, we don’t focus in. So I’d rather focus in and miss out than the other way. I’m talking to you, we’ve been talking for, I don’t know—

A while—[laughs] thank you very much!

A while. I could be eating, or having a coffee. But the essence of life is choice, and that has been essential—thematically—for me in the movies I make.

So any time you do anything, you’re missing out on everything else that’s not that thing.

Well, listen, it is essential to who we are. The concept that most resonated with me when I was not a lapsed Catholic, when I was an active Catholic, was the idea that we were created with free choice. That the seat of the soul, the thing that makes us human, is choice. That is the single thing that elevates us above anything else. We choose to be, and we choose to kill. We choose to save. We choose to not look the other way. We choose to look at the sunset or we choose to look at the eyes of the person next to us.

That's what makes our life experience. Those are the notes of the symphony that we're going to be. A choice is not to miss, a choice is to *embrace*; a choice is to enshrine what you want to be. What you want to leave behind.

We all live for the last three minutes of our life. We all live our entire life for the three, agonizing, last three minutes in which you are going to die. And you very fast realize—at a speed beyond anything we know—you realize what you did, and what you didn't. And as your life force fades, you quickly realize who you were, and what you did. And you're summed in brackets between your birthday and your death day. And, if in those three minutes you know you didn't do and you didn't choose what was best for you and those around you, those last few seconds are pure hell. But if you made the right choices, the last few seconds are release. And I think you have to live your life and do your art that seriously—no matter how silly it may look to others. To me, genre monsters and fantasy and all that is dead serious. So I can be light about it and I can be joyful about it, and sometimes people will like it and sometimes people will not. But I'm never casual about it, because I have two families. I have the family I was born into and gave birth to, and the other family I have is a family of monsters.

What you just said, about the way you think about your life and death—it reminded me of this quote from Pier Paolo Pasolini that, to me, is one of the most important things I've ever read. He's talking about how the meaning of the footage only happens when you cut it into the film, and he describes it as being kind of like the meaning of life only coming into focus in death. And I just want to read this to you:

> ***It is thus absolutely necessary to die, because while living we lack meaning, and the language of our lives [...] is untranslatable: a chaos of possibilities, a search for relations among the discontinuous meanings. Death performs a lightning-quick montage on our lives; that is, it chooses our truly significant moments [...] and places them in sequence, converting our present, which is infinite, unstable, and uncertain, and thus linguistically indescribable, into a clear, stable, certain, and thus linguistically describable past. […] It is thanks to death that our lives become expressive. Montage thus***

accomplishes for the material of film (constituted of fragments, the longest or the shortest, of as many long takes as there are subjectivities) what death accomplishes for life.

It is absolutely true. While we're alive, we're painting. And when we die, death is the curator of our exhibit. We are not curated until we're dead. So in the meantime we're just painting; it's just a frenzied energy.

Every artistic act is an act of consumption, in the same way that you cannot enjoy your fruit without destroying it. You don't contemplate an apple and say 'Oh, Apple, how beautiful are thee,' you know? You eat the apple, you crush the apple, you consume it and there—for a moment—you have the apple in you. And it's the same with art. It's an act of consumption, an act of arrangement, and you are posing an object that is a pinned butterfly. But it is the only moment where you can absorb the butterfly, you know? Otherwise it is life. And I think life and art meet in that little moment, in that moment of consumption.

Francis Coppola said 'Never as good as the dailies, never as bad as the first cut.' Because when you're seeing the dailies—the dailies of a movie have a beauty of their own. They are like a sketch. And I always find sketches more moving than finished paintings.

When I go through a museum and I see the sketches, I always find them so evocative. There's something about them. A tension.

Yes! Life as we try to capture it is a flying butterfly. And after we mount it and preserve it, it's unfortunately not quite moving.

You've said that you make one movie in your life—that you make a lot of movies, but you really make one movie.

Renoir said that. And I think it's true. I think if you're a gun for hire you make many movies. But look, you may like one movie or *no* movie I've ever done. But the one thing I can say—if it's a movie of a giant robot or a little movie about a ghost in an orphanage, there is something of me in there, in all of them. And at age 52, I

have yet to embark on a movie that I don't intend to die for, you know? If I croak on the set of the movie I'm making, it's because I'd rather be on that set than anywhere else.

We've managed to talk about death a lot here. [laughs]

[laughs] Well, it is in fact the only thing that gives sense to life, and Eastern culture understands this. Whether it is in the concept of wabi-sabi, which the Japanese treasure at the heart of the artistic endeavor, and which says if everything were perfect and permanent it wouldn't be beautiful—there is something moving about death and decay. But for the Western world, death is a negative. And to me it isn't! It's actually the very essence of life.

Well, I'll let you make other choices in your day now, but I am really grateful that you made this one, to sit down and talk to us. I think that a lot of what you ended up saying, inadvertently, is a lot like what we try to do at *Bright Wall/Dark Room*, insofar as we want to slow down and really look at things—to take the time to engage with a piece of art. And I'm really glad that you're out advocating for that in the world, and that you're making stuff for us to focus in on, and being true to yourself.

It is true. In Mexico we have a saying: 'The way you dance is the way you sleep, the way you sleep is the way you fuck.'

We're all of a piece. If some people represent themselves differently socially, at the end of the day, you are found out. You are revealed. To conclude what we started, it's much more conducive to reveal yourself from the beginning, and then, you know, you are who you are; people take what they want from you. You are a type of thing to eat, to be appreciated or not. If you are a pineapple, no one should be upset at you for not tasting like a watermelon. You are what you are. You present yourself and you're in the watermelon section, or you are in the pineapple section, and you deliver a certain taste and a certain view of the world people want to eat, and then marketing can say, *'From the visionary director!'*

[laughs] But you know, thank God we have watermelons, and thank God we have pineapples and—

And we’re all necessary to make a fruit salad! [laughs]

(This interview has been edited for clarity and length.)

Lauren Wilford is a senior editor at *Bright Wall/Dark Room*.