Part 5:
Conversations

Simon Spiegel

"It's like an allergic reaction." A Conversation with Joshua Astrachan

Joshua Astrachan may not be a household name, but he has been working in the film industry for several decades. Among other things, he has acted as producer for two icons of US independent cinema. He produced Robert Altman's last three films, Gosford Park (IT/UK/US 2001), The Company (US 2003), and A Prairie Home Companion (US 2006), and through his company Animal Kingdom produced Jim Jarmusch's two most recent films, Paterson (US/DE/FR 2016) and The Dead Don't Die (US 2019).

In addition to classic independent films like those of Altman and Jarmusch, and the critically acclaimed Short Term 12 (US 2013, Director: Destin Daniel Cretton), Astrachan has also produced genuine genre pieces. It Follows (US 2014, Director: David Robert Mitchell), which cleverly plays with established horror tropes, earned many times its tiny budget of $1.3 million and has already been called a modern horror classic. Another horror film, albeit of a rather different kind, is Goodnight Mommy (US 2022, Director: Matt Sobel), a remake of the highly acclaimed Austrian film Ich seh, ich seh (Goodnight Mommy, AU 2014, Director: Veronika Franz and Severin Fiala), produced for Amazon.

There is a general feeling that people have become much more sensitive to spoilers. Do you share this impression?

I guess in general, I would agree with that. And I have to think that it's related to the flood of information that we are now all endlessly subjected to. It has become so difficult to do anything discreetly, without a thousand reports along the way. We are all being marketed to without pause, even if that marketing is just the endless tap-tap-tapping for our attention. This makes it very hard to have anything happen quietly, and it makes it very hard to experience a real surprise. I have to think that's at least part of the reason why we may have become so spoiler-averse. In short: we live in a world where the spoilers never stop, where every possibly intriguing hiccup of culture and news is ceaselessly being dangled to grab our attention—click here, click here, click here.

The overdose of information leads to an aversion to too much information.

I think so. It's like an allergic reaction. Like you'd rather just have no exposure to peanuts, so your allergy is not inflamed. We don't want spoilers, because we're exhausted by information overload.

You have been in the film industry for more than three decades, working as an executive producer and a producer, among other things. How much has the changing attitude toward spoilers influenced the way you work?

To be honest, I think it's relatively minor. Our sensitivities to spoilers have indeed perhaps been heightened, but I think to a degree, like everything in film, much of this depends on the director. Everything comes from that person and their personality: the outlook, desires, and background of that human being. That's a cliché, I fear, but it's true.

So, for instance, I had the incredibly good fortune to be part of Robert Altman's world for the last ten years or so of Bob's wild, loop-the-loop career. I think it's fair to say that Bob reinvented film in a number of ways—particularly in the way that we hear films—and in the braided, multiple storylines that he was so celebrated for, as in Nashville (US 1975) or Short Cuts (US 1993). But Bob was not very much concerned about keeping things close to his chest.

Jim Jarmusch, on the other hand, with whom I've also had the incredibly good fortune to work, cares very much about keeping the work private as he is making it.

Altman did not care as much about that and was a lot less careful in general. I don't mean that in a derogatory way. They are just very different people, and their character is also expressed in their films. Bob's films, I think it's fair to say, have a great deal of chaos in them—and that's part of the fun, if you enjoy it. It's also how his imagination worked. And Bob's films were, to many, up-and-down affairs that are perhaps of a piece with this chaos. David Thomson wrote of Altman in the 2003 edition of *Biographical Dictionary of Film* that "no one else alive is as capable of a dud, or a masterpiece." I love Thomson, and in Bob's office, it became our tradition to give that book to interns as a thank-you at the end of their time with us. In the summer of 2006, that book was on the table at the end of a lunch observing an intern's last day with us. Bob came into the office before that lunch had finished, sat down at the table, and I just thought, "Please don't open that book, please don't open that book." But of course, Bob did. And he read that line aloud, smiled, closed the book, and said, "Yup."

You said that Jim Jarmusch is very protective of his films. Which is surprising in a way, because, at least on the level of the story, there is very little to spoil in his films. They are not really based on exciting plots with unexpected twists. The whole point of a film like The Limits of Control *(US 2009) is that genre expectations are not met, that nothing much happens. And* Paterson *is all about repetition and variation. It is much more concerned with rhythm and mood than with plot.*

As a rule, Jim's films are indeed not about plot. At least not in the traditional sense. They're much more concerned—apologies for over-simplifying them—with *being*. With a Jarmusch film, you have to be there and experience time in Jim's very particular way, and spend time with the singular characters that Jim and his casts create. Again, Jim is careful, precise, and caring—and he wants himself and all of the artists that he invites to join him, to work outside of the public glare as much as possible.

I am not certain of this, but I think that Jim has likely always felt this way, even before we lived in the digital age. Jim just—very reasonably—doesn't want to share a film until it's ready. His sensitivities along these lines have perhaps been heightened in the current era, because of how easy it is now for anything to spill into the public sphere—i.e., where your work can be placed into the open before you're ready to put it there.

Bob, again, was very different. His films, as a rule, are much plottier: multiple narratives necessarily have multiple stories. But Bob's mindset seemed to be: "Look at my amazing cast, look at my amazing movie. I don't care what you think you know about it, it's gonna surprise you anyway."

Which is interesting, because a film like Gosford Park*, which you produced, is a classic whodunit and thus eminently spoilable, at least on a superficial level.*

It is, but at the same time, it isn't. In a way, the question about the identity of the murderer isn't really that interesting. I took my then thirteen-year-old goddaughter to see Gosford Park and she said, "Not much happens." When I told Bob that, he said, "She's on to us." Because Gosford Park is much more about the characters and the tensions between upstairs and downstairs. The murder—and solving the murder—are there to motor us along, but the film's real concerns are elsewhere (**fig. 1**).

Fig. 1: Robert Altman's Gosford Park

There is a wonderful story about the way Gosford Park came into being. Bob Balaban. who also produced and starred in the film, was at a cocktail party with Bob Altman, and Balaban said, "Would you ever wanna make an Agatha Christie story?" And Altman, in a very Altman-y way, said, "Only if we follow the servants out of the room." Because, of course, in a classic whodunit, that rarely if ever happened; in the classics of the genre, the servants feel more like part of the furnishing. It was so perfectly like Bob to think about that other dimension.

Besides typical independent films like those of Altman and Jarmusch, you have also produced horror movies such as It Follows and Goodnight Mommy, which rely much more on surprise twists and are therefore more susceptible to spoilers. Are spoilers more of an issue when you work on a film like that?

Perhaps. Something that is true of almost all films now is the mandate that there can be no photos taken on set and—especially—no images posted on social media. That's not necessarily about spoiling the plot. That comes, perhaps first, from the concern of wanting the film to be made in private, i.e., please let us all be creative people working together, we'll take the film to the world when we're ready to. But I think it's also about spoilers: let's please not have the *world* of this film glimpsed before we want it to be, and let's not have the rest of the world grow tired of us, before we've even had a chance to finish the film.

To speak about It Follows: you could indeed argue that it is possible to spoil that film, but what is so beautiful about that movie is its vision and the way it sees the world. Part of that vision is of course expressed in the story—how *it* is coming for you, how you get *it*, how you acquire *it*. But ultimately,

the movie is much more about the wild, impossible-to-dial-down dread and worry that the story evokes than it is about the way the plot turns. It's about the spell the movie casts—and you can only experience that by watching the film.

Goodnight Mommy, which is a remake of the Austrian movie Ich seh, ich seh, works differently though.

That's right. It's connected to The Sixth Sense (US 1999, Director: M. Night Shyamalan) in that you're not aware that one of the main characters is not alive—and, in the case of Goodnight Mommy, that he only exists in his twin brother's imagination and fantasy. We produced this movie for Amazon, and when we did test screenings, one of our primary interests was to hear from people who didn't know the original and had no idea what the story was, to see how the film played for them. We had to assume that the vast majority of our audience would not know the brilliant original, so the plot would not be spoiled for them, and it was critical for us as filmmakers to know how the film played for that population.

At the same time, we also wanted to know if the movie still worked when you indeed knew the twist. If you know the film's conceit, then you likely begin to notice that when Mother speaks, she only ever speaks to *one* of her sons, and that the brother who is not alive always "speaks" by prompting his brother to say things that he wants said (**fig. 2**).

Fig. 2: The mother only speaks to one of her sons in Goodnight Mommy

We had the unusual spoiler concern with this film of not wanting *those* very things—that you might only notice if you knew the twist—to be *too* conspicuous, i.e., we didn't want to tip our own story too early.

Finally, though, in a way, it's impossible to spoil a good movie anyway, because good movies need a second viewing or at least reward a second viewing. When you're watching for the first time, you are wowed by story turns or things like the cinematography, by performances, by mood, tone and feeling. But when you're re-watching a film, you are, with luck, more sensitive to nuances that you didn't catch the first time you watched—or that you *couldn't* have understood (even if you perhaps *felt* them) the first time.

You worked in theater before you started in films. What role do spoilers play onstage?

I'm not really in that world anymore, but I would guess that for the stage, it's even more about the experience than about a story that can be spoiled. There are certainly plays where a plot twist is important. But although you could theoretically spoil a theatrical piece, I think it is much more about the live event, which you can't tread on. Either it works or it doesn't. And if it does work, there's nothing better. To be in the same room with the actors when they're flourishing is just phenomenal. And, of course, when it's bad, there's nothing worse, then you're all trapped in the room together. It's like being at a bad party that you can't *wait* to leave.

What role do potential spoilers play when you are developing a screenplay together with a screenwriter or filmmaker? Do you think about how to come up with a twist and protect it?

For me, that comes much later. The first worry—and ambition—is always: can we make something good? Can we make something worthwhile? What's the best version of this, and how do we realize it? And you worry much later about how it might spill into public view or get spoiled or be given away. It's just so hard to make a movie, period. And it's even harder to make a good movie. It takes every ounce of your attention and effort; the concern about how the film meets the world comes later.

Is there a difference in this regard between producing an independent film or working for a streaming giant like Amazon?

In my experience, there isn't much of a difference. The streamer I've mainly worked with is Amazon. They are really smart people who are very knowledgeable about film. Obviously, they have an imperative to make films that

meet the mandates of that incredible—and incredibly large—organization. And that informs their priorities. But that's their job—as it has been, I have to think, at all studios over the years. But what we actually talk about with them is the movie. Again, how do we get the film to be the best version of itself? Those questions come both from the filmmaking team and the studio. Does the film work, does it hold us, where does it take us?

What roles do spoilers play in the marketing of a film?

The job of marketing a film is always tricky because you are giving part of the film away in order to entice the viewer. This is, necessarily, the subject of many, many conversations between filmmakers and distributors—with, among other things, particular emphasis on the trailer. As filmmakers, you are sometimes involved in a dialectic with the studio. They want to show the film *this* way, and you really want them to show it *that* way. And you work it out to, hopefully, arrive at a happy solution. I remember one Altman film where we had 17 different cuts of the trailer. It felt like a lot of different expressions of the film before we were finally able to say: great, this both works on its own and feels like our film.

There are of course trailers that are sometimes famously—or notoriously—very good at selling a product, where the product being sold is very different from the actual film. That's a whole different kind of spoiling, I guess. Distributors may do this deliberately—and sometimes shrewdly in terms of box office—to attract an audience that can be lured by a particular promise. But if that promise is one that the film itself won't actually fulfill, there is usually a price to be paid. The film *may* do well at the box office, at least initially, because a particular fan base goes to see it, but those very fans can then end up disappointed and unhappy by what they feel they were bait-and-switched into watching.

Have trailers changed then?

I don't know if trailers on the whole have changed, but the attitude towards them has certainly changed. There once was a time when watching a good trailer in a movie theater was an experience unto itself. It was once arguably part of what was great about "going to the movies." But that isn't true anymore. Before you are sitting in the theater, you've likely seen any trailer that will be shown to you a hundred times. Or, at least, you could have if you had wanted to—in this age where an infinite number of digital prompts tap endlessly for our attention. In an analogue era, when things were not so easily available, I think that trailers were more precious because they were rarer.

Filmography

The Company. Director: Robert Altman. US 2003.

The Dead Don't Die. Director: Jim Jarmusch. US 2019.

Goodnight Mommy. Director: Matt Sobel. US 2022.

Ich seh, ich seh (Goodnight Mommy). Director: Veronika Franz and Severin Fiala. AU 2014.

It Follows. Director: David Robert Mitchell. US 2014.

Gosford Park. Director: Robert Altman. IT/UK/US 2001.

Nashville. Director: Robert Altman. US 1975.

Paterson. Director: Jim Jarmusch. US/DE/FR 2016.

A Prairie Home Companion. Director: Robert Altman. US 2006.

Short Cuts. Director: Robert Altman. US 1993.

Short Term 12. Director: Destin Daniel Cretton. US 2013.

The Sixth Sense. Director: M. Night Shyamalan. US 1999.

Works Cited

Thomson, David. *The New Biographical Dictionary of Film*. Little, Brown, 2003.