

**MARK KERMODE**

# **HATCHET JOB**

**LOVE MOVIES, HATE CRITICS**

**PICADOR**



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*'So tell me, how did you love the picture?'*

Samuel Goldwyn

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# PROLOGUE

## SHARK SANDWICH

‘Forrest Gump on a tractor.’

Those five words are probably my favourite film review ever. More importantly, they constitute the most damaging hatchet job I ever encountered, managing to do something I had often argued was impossible – to kill a movie stone dead. I didn’t read them in a newspaper or on a blog, I didn’t hear them on the radio or television; rather, they were whispered in my ear by a trusted friend and colleague, David Cox, as the house lights went down on a screening of David Lynch’s *The Straight Story*.

I’d been really looking forward to that movie. I’ve been a huge Lynch fan ever since being blindsided by a late-night screening of *Eraserhead* at the Phoenix East Finchley in the late seventies. I’d wept buckets at *The Elephant Man*, taken several runs at *Dune* (it still doesn’t work), been both outraged and strangely exhilarated by *Blue Velvet*, swooned at *Wild at Heart* and even argued that *Mullholland Dr.* ‘makes perfect sense’. Now, there was something illicitly thrilling about the fact that the high-priest of weird had pulled the

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most audacious trick of all – he’d made a ‘straight’ movie, a film praised for its simplicity, lack of outlandish visual and aural experimentation, and almost wilful adherence to strict narrative linearity. Like Johnny Rotten turning up in a suit and tie, this was the one thing Lynch aficionados didn’t expect, a movie with a beginning, a middle and an end – and in that order. And what about that title? Initially everyone assumed it to be ironic, but reports from those who had seen *The Straight Story* were that it was anything but. This was Lynch’s masterstroke, like that line in *The Usual Suspects* about the devil’s greatest trick being to convince people that he didn’t exist. Was this Lynch as the devil in disguise? Or had he finally followed Laura Palmer to take his place amongst the angels?

All these questions were rushing through my head as we sat there in the Curzon Soho, quivering with anticipation. I was ready of spirit, willing of heart, and open of mind. I wanted only to be ravished. Instead, I was rubbished, brought low from the lofty heights of expectation by five words that sucked all the life out of the movie and left it writhing in silent space before the curtains had even opened. That poor kid hearing that Shoeless Joe Jackson’s team-mates had thrown the World Series (‘Say it ain’t so!’) couldn’t have suffered any more crushing a sense of loss and disappointment than I did when David Cox slipped that insidiously low-key invective into my loppylugs and let it crawl like a radioactive earwig into my cerebral cortex, where it sat, pustulent, eating its evil way into anything that vaguely resembled hope, admiration or generosity. Instead, I found myself possessed only of the spirit of sneering cynicism as I endured the next two hours in which an old man

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swapped homely platitudes with folksy caricatures whilst making his extremely slow way across America in the absence of a full driving licence.

Forrest Gump on a fucking tractor indeed.

What's particularly evil about the effect those words had on my state of mind is that I actually really like *Forrest Gump* (and I'm quite partial to tractors too – although what Richard Farnsworth actually drives in the movie is technically a lawnmower). While many other lazy left-leaning liberals – of which I am one – were merrily slagging off Bob Zemeckis's Oscar winner as some kind of right-wing Reaganite wet dream, celebrating old-fashioned down-home stupidity over disruptively rebellious intelligence, I always thought (as does Danny Boyle) that the outlook of any film starting with a single mother having to have sex with a headmaster in order to ensure a decent education for her special-needs son was anything but rose-tinted. For me, seeing *Forrest Gump* as some kind of neo-con tract was a perfect example of what happens when film theory gets in the way of film-viewing; when people start *reading* movies rather than watching them. If you really want to judge something by what it looks like on the page, go read a book. As for cinema, it's a slippery audio-visual medium which, at its best, is ill served by mean-spirited reductionist critiques.

Yet as wrong-headed as they may be, mean-spirited reductionist critiques can be really funny, particularly if served up in a pithy one-liner that pierces the heart of the movie and bursts its shimmering creative bubble, like 'Forrest Gump on a tractor' – the best/worst film review I ever heard. Today, David Cox says he wishes he'd never uttered the five words I have carried around with me ever



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since. He insists he didn't mean anything by them, that it was just a silly joke, not to be taken seriously, and certainly not to be held up as a reason to hate Lynch's low-gear road-movie. Hey, according to David, he really likes *The Straight Story* and if he can get over that damned phrase, why the hell can't I?

The answer is simple: no matter how much you love a film and how many good notices it gets, it's the bad reviews that stick. Always. I have first-hand experience of this phenomenon. I am a film critic, and for all the movies I love and praise and try to get other people to be enthusiastic about, it's the ones I hate that people remember. Take a look at my reviews on the Kermode and Mayo YouTube channel, where the numbers speak for themselves. No matter how upbeat and excitable I may be about any number of films, the reviews to which people are drawn are my bilious rants – *Pirates of the Caribbean*, *Sex and the City 2*, the complete works of Michael Bay – the angrier the better, apparently. Sometimes, listeners to the BBC Radio 5 live *Film Review* show actually get disappointed if I don't get angry enough, feeling let down by the expectation of hearing a movie get a really good spittle-spewing kicking only to be fobbed off with an uninterested dismissal or (more disappointing still) a few words of measured praise. For better or worse, those who read or listen to film reviews have a fondness for vitriol, a sobering truth not lost on critics themselves; no wonder Dorothy Parker's theatrical assessment of Katharine Hepburn running 'the gamut of emotions from A to B' remains perhaps the most oft-quoted review in vicious critical circles – a killer line we all wish we had written, even if few of us agree with its sentiment.

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I once asked viewers of my BBC video-blog, Kermode Uncut, to let me know their own favourite celluloid massacres, the pithier, funnier and nastier the better. The response was typically overwhelming – in under forty-eight hours I received well over a hundred suggestions of succinctly splenetic put-downs, which provided hours of sour-spirited delight. In the blog, I had cited the now infamous reviews of *Psycho* ('Sicko') and *I Am A Camera* ('Me No Leica'), both of which adorn the front cover of popular film critic Chris Tookey's compendium of film writing savagery through the ages, both being notable for their economy of wordage, if not their critical judgement. Inspired, blog commenters proffered a number of one- or two-words, such as Leonard Maltin's verdict on *Isn't it Romantic?* ('No'), *Empire* magazine's punning assessment of *Battleship* ('Miss'), and the advice offered severally regarding the live-action *Flintstones* movie ('Yabbadabba-Don't'). After three hours of watching *Exodus*, Mort Sahl delivered the succinct critical *cri de coeur* 'Let my people go!', which is good, but isn't quite as funny as his summation of *Ben-Hur* – 'Loved him, hated Hur'. *Telegraph* writer Robbie Collin proved that his years at the *News of the World* had made him the master of the pithy tabloid pun (an underrated art form) when he tweeted a preview of his review of Clint Eastwood's latest which read simply: 'J. EDGAR? J. Arthur.' Titular putdowns proved popular, with special mention due to Nev Pierce who brilliantly dubbed Mel Gibson's torture-porn-inflected biblical epic *The Passion of the Christ* 'Jesus Christ: Splatterstar'. Over at *Rolling Stone*, Peter Travers was one of many to review the unfunny *Twilight* spoof *Vampires Suck* with variations

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on the words ‘this movie sucks more’, while umpteen sources are credited as being the first to write of Alex Proyas’s *Knowing* that ‘You’re better off not’. The best titular pun I ever encountered was coined by John Naughton, with whom I first worked back in the days of Manchester’s *City Life* magazine, and who would later become the film editor of *Q*, where he memorably dubbed Kevin Costner’s disastrous end-of-civilization epic *The Postman* ‘Post-Apocalyptic Pat’.

As for ‘Eyes Wide Shit’, that poignant pun appears to have occurred simultaneously to everyone who saw Stanley Kubrick’s piss-poor final film, becoming as ubiquitous as ‘a film by, for, and about dummies’, which adorned more than one review of *Mannequin* and, more recently, the living-doll slasher remake *Maniac*. Of the latest drubbings, my favourites include Kate Muir of *The Times* describing Madonna’s execrable *W.E.* as ‘Mills and Boon meets *Homes and Gardens* with offcuts from the History Channel’ and Larushka Ivan-Zedah of *Metro* likening *A Good Day to Die Hard* to ‘an explosion in a stupidity factory’. Less aggressive, but no less elegant, is Tim Robey’s delicately damning *Telegraph* verdict on Joe Wright’s stagey adaptation of *Anna Karenina* which included the delicious phrase ‘Wright [has] this unashamed love of the proscenium, but did it need to be so arch?’

Several writers turned up time and time again, such as Vincent Canby, who observed that watching *Heaven’s Gate* is like taking a ‘forced four-hour walking tour of one’s own living room’ and suggested that the price of the success of *The Deer Hunter* had been for director Michael Cimino to sell his soul to the devil, who had now come to collect.

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Judith Crist memorably dubbed the sixties drama *The Agony and the Ecstasy* as ‘all agony, no ecstasy’; the *Village Voice* dismissed the seventies Streisand–Kristofferson remake of *A Star is Born* under the headline ‘A Bore is Starred’; and Pauline Kael elegantly trashed the 1990 Oscar winner *Dances with Wolves* with the phrase ‘Kevin Costner has feathers in his hair and feathers in his head; the Indians should have called him “Plays with Camera”.’ Here in the UK, the *Guardian*’s Peter Bradshaw was hailed as the ‘Shakespeare of film criticism’ for his scathing reviews of stinkers such as *Sex Lives of the Potato Men*, a Lottery-funded national embarrassment which raised the question for the British film industry of ‘whether to put the gun barrel to our temples, or in our mouths for a cleaner kill’. Of the undiverting rom-com *Leap Year*, Bradshaw wrote: ‘The only “leap” I felt like making was off the motorway gantry into the fast lane of the M25.’ This made me chuckle, which was more than the movie managed, although I must confess that my real unexpected guffaw moment came when reading John Patterson describing Disney’s animated *Treasure Planet* as being ‘Like watching Robert Louis Stevenson being sodomised by Michael Eisner in front of a class of 10-year-olds’. Ha!

Of the somewhat wordier favourites, the great American critic Roger Ebert naturally scored high, with several people citing his untrammelled loathing of Rob Reiner’s *North* as a particularly splendid example of comedy through repetition. ‘I hated this movie,’ wrote Ebert. ‘Hated, hated, hated, hated, hated this movie. I hated it. Hated every simpering stupid vacant audience-insulting moment of it. Hated the sensibility that thought anyone would like it. Hated the implied insult to the audience by its belief that

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anyone would be entertained by it.’ While this is all well and good, personally I’d opt for Ebert’s withering assessments of Vincent Gallo’s abominable road movie *The Brown Bunny* (‘I had a colonoscopy once, and they let me watch it on TV. It was more entertaining’) and John Travolta’s Scientology-based sci-fi debacle *Battlefield Earth* (‘like taking a bus trip with someone who has needed a bath for a long time’) as funnier and therefore better. Ebert had a nice line in anti-analogies (*The Spirit* – ‘To call the characters cardboard is to insult a useful packing material’; *The Village* – ‘To call it an anti-climax would be an insult not only to climaxes but to prefixes’) and a special talent for absurdist hyperbole (*Freddie Got Fingered* – ‘doesn’t scrape the bottom of the barrel. This movie isn’t the bottom of the barrel. This movie isn’t below the bottom of the barrel. This movie doesn’t deserve to be mentioned in the same sentence with barrels.’). But my own Ebert favourite came from his review of Michael Bay’s catastrophically poor World War II barf-fest *Pearl Harbor*, the film which (along with *Gigli*) helped put Ben Affleck’s career so deep in the dumper that he would later have to thank Hollywood for giving him ‘a second chance’ when accepting an Oscar for *Argo*. *Pearl Harbor* was horrible, but may have been worth it for giving Ebert the opportunity to describe it as ‘A two-hour movie squeezed into three hours, about how, on Dec. 7, 1941, the Japanese staged a surprise attack on an American love triangle.’ Pure genius!

As for myself, I received a few honourable mentions (of course I did; after all, it’s my bloody blog) for describing *Movie 43* as ‘the cinematic equivalent of herpes’ and *Marley & Me* as ‘less fun than having a real dog put down’. There

were also nods for the phrase ‘Eat, Pray, Love, Vomit’ (of which, I confess, I am pathetically proud) and the inevitable resurrection of the spectre of my reviews of *Sex and the City 2* (‘consumerist pornography’) and *Pirates of the Caribbean: At World’s End* (‘The IMDb says they started without a completed script – no, they *finished* without one’), for which I am now far better known than for anything nice I ever said about a film. Ironically, I was also reminded that in berating David Fincher’s self-regarding, life-lived-backwards boreathon *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, I had airily dismissed the movie as ‘*Forrest Gump* with A-levels’.

Occasionally, words have failed me, leaving only violent self-harm to do the job. My online review of Michael Bay’s *Transformers 2: Revenge of the Fallen*, for example, consisted entirely of a short film of me banging my head against a number of hard objects, including a concrete post, a metal table, and an iron railing, before hurling myself enthusiastically at a wall. Recent news of the green-lighting of yet another *Transformers* flick would be met with a video of me breaking a laptop with my face. I also whacked myself hard across the bridge of my nose (for real) with a large hard-bound copy of the *Oxford English Dictionary* to see if doing so was actually more fun than watching *Keith Lemon: The Film*. It was – and a lot shorter. At some point, I’m probably going to have to shut my hand in a car door or cut off my thumb in a waste disposal unit to prove that such everyday domestic accidents really do have more entertainment value than sitting through *Pimp* or enduring *Little Man*, as I have often claimed. And I’m sure if I do, the YouTube viewing figures will go through the roof.

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Whether or not you agree with any of these value judgments matters not a jot; what matters is that you remember them. I may love Hal Ashby's sublime black comedy *Harold and Maude*, but the only review of it I can remember is the one in which the critic from *Variety* described it as containing 'all the fun and gaiety of a burning orphanage'. Why? Because it's nasty – and funny. The best hatchet jobs are not only amusing, but lasting, and the more amusing they are the longer they last. No surprise, then, that when Roger Ebert died in early 2013, it was his scathing put-downs rather than his ebullient praise of movies which were quoted *in memoriam*.

It's not only critics who like to deliver the killer blows; filmmakers themselves have long appreciated the art of being spectacularly nasty about their fellow craftspeople with a splendid disregard for any sense of 'community'. Despite being hailed by Woody Allen and Steven Spielberg et al. as perhaps the world's greatest living director (Spielberg said 'his love for cinema almost gives me a guilty conscience'), Swedish maestro Ingmar Bergman proved that he could be fulsomely mouthy when it came to damning the work of his canonical contemporaries. In an interview with the Swedish daily *Sydsvenska Dagbladet*, for example, he told journalist Jan Aghed that Orson Welles was 'just a hoax . . . an infinitely overrated film-maker' whose greatest work, *Citizen Kane*, is 'a total bore. Above all, the performances are worthless. The amount of respect that movie's got is absolutely unbelievable.' He was even more damning of Antonioni, a couple of whose pictures he admired, but

who was ultimately ‘suffocated by his own tediousness’. (Kim Newman points out that since Antonioni outlived Bergman by eighteen hours, he was ‘indisputably the world’s greatest living director for less than a day’.) On the subject of Jean-Luc Godard, Bergman merrily admitted that ‘I’ve never got anything out of his movies. They have felt constructed, faux intellectual, and completely dead. Cinematographically uninteresting and infinitely boring. Godard is a fucking bore. He’s made his films for the critics. One of his movies, *Masculin féminin*, was shot here in Sweden. It was mind-numbingly boring . . .’

Orson Welles, for whom Bergman had such contempt, was similarly snippy about Godard. ‘I just can’t take him very seriously as a thinker,’ he said wryly, ‘and that’s where we differ. Because he does.’ Even Werner Herzog has got in on the act, famously declaring in his trademark Bavarian deadpan drawl that ‘someone like Jean-Luc Godard is for me intellectual counterfeit money when compared to a good kung-fu film’. Godard seems to have taken all this on the chin, if anything going out of his way to make even more terrible movies just to annoy his detractors. Certainly, no one who managed to stay awake through the interminable sludge of *Film socialisme* should have been in any doubt that the director was taking the piss – hence my own verdict when the film premiered at Cannes that ‘it’s not just a case of the emperor having no clothes, but of the emperor running naked down the street waving his *nouvelle vagues* in your face’. Indeed, the most remarkable thing about that movie (for which Godard opted to provide gnomic ‘Navajo’ subtitles to make it even more wilfully incomprehensible) is that a lot of it was filmed on the *Costa Concordia*, a vast



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and imposing cruise liner that would go on to make horrifying real life headlines when it became shipwrecked off the western coast of Italy in January 2012.

Godard himself has made a habit of badmouthing everyone who isn't Godard, particularly if they are American, and especially if they've had hits. On the subject of Quentin Tarantino, whose 'Band Apart' production company appears to have been named in homage to Godard's *Bande à part* (boom, boom), he moaned that 'he named his production company after one of my films. He'd have done better to give me some money'. Having trashed Spielberg's *Schindler's List* with the three-word put-down 'du Max Factor', Godard preened (without the slightest hint of professional jealousy): 'I don't know him personally. I don't think his films are very good.' (Alejandro Jodorowsky was funnier, describing Spielberg as 'the son of when Walt Disney fucked Minnie Mouse'.) As for fellow art house darling Jacques Rivette, he said of *Titanic*: 'It's garbage. Cameron isn't evil, he's not an asshole like Spielberg. He wants to be the new DeMille. Unfortunately, he can't direct his way out of a paper bag' – which is a bit rich coming from Rivette.

And then there are the feuds. After Spike Lee complained that Clint Eastwood had whitewashed the role played by African Americans in World War II with *Flags of Our Fathers*, Eastwood growled that 'a guy like him should shut his face', causing Lee to reply, 'First of all, the man is not my father, and we're not on a plantation either.' Lee, who has picked fights with almost everyone in the business, has also taken multiple pops at Tarantino for his

love of the ‘N’ word, causing Quentin to bleat that Lee ‘would have to stand on a chair to kiss my ass’. Classy.

When *Clerks* director (and notorious critic-hater) Kevin Smith suggested that Tim Burton had lifted a scene in his *Planet of the Apes* reboot from one of his comic books, Burton demurred that ‘anybody who knows me knows I would never read a comic book, and I would certainly never read anything written by Kevin Smith’, to which Smith snarked back, ‘Which, I guess, explains *Batman*.’ Meanwhile, one-time critics’ darling David Gordon Green had this to say about Smith: ‘He kind of created a Special Olympics for film. They just kind of lowered the standard. I’m sure their parents are proud, it’s just nothing I care to buy a ticket for.’ Which, as UK blogger Stuart Barr brilliantly points out, is ironic because DGG said that ‘just before he turned into Kevin Smith’.

Werner Herzog took the high road after Abel Ferrara cursed him for agreeing to helm a New Orleans-set remake of his raw-as-hell New York fable *Bad Lieutenant*, simply telling the press, ‘I have no idea who Abel Ferrara is. Is he Italian? Is he French? Who is he? I have never seen a film by him.’ Those who did know Ferrara weren’t much kinder. ‘He was on so much crack when I did *The Funeral* he was never on set,’ remembered actor-turned-worst-director-in-the-world Vincent Gallo, who has pretty much burned all his bridges over the years, earning himself an enviable reputation as cinema’s most cantankerous big mouth. ‘I wouldn’t work for Martin Scorsese for ten million dollars,’ he boasted, at a time when the chance of being offered work for ten dollars was slim-to-none. ‘He hasn’t made a good film in twenty-five years. I would never work with an

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egomaniac has-been' – a statement which, presumably, means that if Vincent Gallo asked himself to star in one of his own movies, he'd be morally obliged to say no. And it continues. 'He's the biggest fraud out there,' Gallo opined of Spike Jonze, who appeared to have committed the unforgivable crime of partnering up with Sofia Coppola. 'She's a parasite, just like her fat pig father was.' At which point, it seems appropriate to remind ourselves that whilst Sofia directed *The Virgin Suicides* and *Lost in Translation*, and Francis helmed *The Godfather* and *Apocalypse Now*, Vincent Gallo remains best known for making the film Roger Ebert memorably described as less fun than taking a guided tour around the inside of his own asshole. (Gallo later recut the movie, causing Ebert to revise his opinion. I think he was right the first time . . .)

And on it goes. W. C. Fields once described Mae West as 'a plumber's idea of Cleopatra'. Tony Curtis said that kissing Marilyn Monroe was 'like kissing Hitler'. Alex Cox said Spielberg wasn't a film-maker but 'a confectioner'. Megan Fox likened Michael Bay to a fascist dictator (although she may have meant it as a compliment). Burt Lancaster said, 'Kirk Douglas would be the first to tell you that he is a very difficult man. And I would be the second.' Upon hearing that Joan Crawford had called him 'a man who loves evil, horrendous, vile things', Robert Aldrich replied, 'I am very fond of Miss Crawford.' And Bette Davis once drawled, 'You should never say bad things about the dead, only good. Joan Crawford is dead. Good.'

It's not just individuals; entire nations have been on the receiving end of the wit and wisdom of embittered film-makers, with Truffaut snottily mooring that there is an

incompatibility between the words ‘British’ and ‘cinema’, while Akira Kurosawa once dismissed Japanese cinema in general as ‘rather bland in flavour, like green tea over rice’, a barely veiled dig at the title of a much-loved film by Yasujiro Ozu. Closer to home, the always entertainingly garrulous Alan Parker called the work of acclaimed British auteur Peter Greenaway ‘a load of posturing poo-poo’, while Ken Russell (who was constantly on the receiving end of stick from his fellow countrymen) concluded that on the evidence of Greenaway’s movies ‘he’s more interested in shit than soul’.

All this meanness is entertaining and memorable, but what does it prove? First, that being entertainingly negative can help a critic build their career and make a name for themselves in what remains a cut-throat profession. Second, that there is no honour among thieves in the so-called film-making fraternity, a fact that film-makers would do well to remember the next time they feel like complaining about how nasty critics can be about their work. When it comes to being eye-wateringly bitchy and backstabbing about movies, those who make them should remove the planks from their own eyes before whining about the ocular slivers which afflict those who write about them. For all their carping and whingeing about the vindictive nature of negative reviews, the film-making profession as a whole has very little to be proud of when it comes to treating one another with dignity and respect. I once interviewed an A-list British actor who had played a major part in an on-going Hollywood sci-fi franchise, whose comments about his leading lady were so candidly unguarded that I actually stopped the tape and advised him to reconsider his words,

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since I could not in good conscience broadcast what he had just said – not for her sake, but for his. This was an actor whom I liked very much, and who had agreed to do the interview as a favour to me due to a labyrinthine personal connection which I felt duty bound not to exploit. I still think it was the right thing to do, although there's no denying that the unexpurgated version would have got more coverage. Similarly, when we were editing the Channel 4 documentary *Burnt Offering: The Cult of the Wicker Man* in 2001, film-maker Andrew Abbott and I chose to omit some of the more scabrous comments made about director Robin Hardy by certain members of the cast and crew. After all, whatever anyone said, Hardy had helmed one of the most important British movies of the seventies, hailed by *Cinefantastique* magazine as 'the *Citizen Kane* of horror'. Sometime later, I read an interview with Hardy in which he offhandedly dismissed our documentary as failing to appreciate the true merits of *The Wicker Man* and complained about how awful it was to have his masterpiece dismissed as a mere 'horror film' (perhaps we should have left the scabrous stuff in after all).

Like it or not, negativity is noteworthy, and – to invert a popular adage – 'good news is no news'. Everyone who has ever worked in film journalism knows that there's far more chance of grabbing a headline by getting an actor to admit how much they disliked a particular director or hated working on a certain film than there is if they simply tell you how marvellous the whole experience was, and how much they'd love to be given the chance to do it all again as soon

as possible. In general, anyone involved in the promotion of a film is contractually required to be positive about it, hence the incessant repetition of all those ‘it was wonderful’ mantras trotted out by stars and directors discussing any movie during its initial release window. Sometimes, the stars will flatly refuse to promote a movie, which tells you everything you need to know about their view of the finished product. Daniel Craig, Rachel Weisz, and director Jim Sheridan, for example, were all unavailable to talk up the release of the psychological thriller *Dream House* in 2011 after the studio Morgan Creek (who have a reputation for butchering their own movies) took the film away from the director and re-cut it against his wishes. ‘The movie didn’t turn out great,’ Craig later admitted, ‘but I met my wife. Fair trade.’

The great get-out for actors when asked about films of which they are not proud is the phrase ‘I haven’t seen the movie’. This is generally accepted code-speak for ‘I saw it and hated it but I’m not allowed to say that . . . yet’, and is usually accompanied by the caveat ‘I’ve just been too busy’, which lets everyone else in the industry know that you’ve put the stinker behind you and moved on. Thus when asked ‘Why?’ in relation to his starring role in that festering cinematic sore *Movie 43*, Richard Gere was able to tell Simon Mayo on Radio 5 live that he ‘didn’t see it’, and to act as if he had no knowledge of scenes in which he places his fingertips into the vagina of a life-sized iPod doll (and no, I’m NOT making this up) only to have them snagged by a swiftly rotating fan. ‘Now I understand . . .’ says Gere on screen, whilst pretending off screen to do no such thing. Similarly, Gary Oldman disavowed any knowledge

## HATCHET JOB

of *Tiptoes* when I asked about the film in which he plays Matthew McConaughey's dwarf brother – on his knees. Directed by Matthew Bright, who made the splendidly outré revisionist Red Riding Hood romp *Freeway*, *Tiptoes* disappeared from trace immediately upon completion, with everyone involved in the project apparently feeling as embarrassed about it as Jerry Lewis does about his as-yet-unreleased Holocaust tragi-comedy *The Day the Clown Cried*. *Tiptoes* has since re-surfaced on video where unsuspecting viewers fancying a romantic comedy starring Gary Oldman and Kate Beckinsale (which is how the cover sells it) have been left gobsmacked by its ill-judged existence. I can't speak for Oldman, but if you'd spent a number of months doing an impression of José Ferrer playing Toulouse-Lautrec and the end result was now cluttering up supermarket shelves, you'd probably stump up £4.99 out of sheer curiosity, wouldn't you? So when Oldman told me he had 'never seen' *Tiptoes*, what I actually heard was: 'Oh, please don't bring that up, it was a bad time and I still don't want to talk about it, even after all these years . . .'

If actors and directors will often demur when it comes to slagging off movies for fear of damaging their careers, the opposite applies to critics, for whom it is often more expedient to dish out a few blood-splattered hatchet jobs rather than waste time attempting to explain why they really liked a movie. And while there is (as we have seen) genuine beauty, grace and craft involved in the fine tuning of a properly poisonous one-star review, most of us know there's a

lot more at stake when you stand up for a movie than when you knock one down.

Take, for example, the case of the *Twilight* movies, which are widely regarded within the critical community as fair game for the literary equivalent of hunting with dogs. For the most part, very few reputable critics have dared to put their head above the parapet and admit to tolerating, let alone actually liking, this massively popular teen-orientated franchise. Nor is this scorn limited to critics – on the contrary, it has become popular currency amongst a wide range of naysayers, including film-makers themselves. Back in 2008, director David Slade, the rising star behind the edgy horror-thrillers *Hard Candy* and *30 Days of Night*, made some casually disparaging remarks (*‘Twilight drunk? No, not even drunk. Twilight at gunpoint? Just shoot me . . .’*) about what he called the ‘repressed hormone teen vampire’ series. He would later retract those comments (*‘I think I’ve eaten more than enough humble pie,’* he told me), stating that they were made before he’d ever read Stephenie Meyer’s novels about a young woman whose affections are divided between a vampire and a werewolf, or seen the blockbusting movies they spawned, all of which turned out to be far more interesting, intelligent and inspiring than he had ever imagined. Cynics dismissed this retraction as a contractual *mea culpa* by Slade who had ironically just signed on to direct the third *Twilight* film, *Eclipse*, but it has about it the ring of truth. The world is full of people (many of them middle-aged men) who feel duty bound to be sniffy about *Twilight* without having seen the films, read the books, or attempted to understand why they mean so much to so many.