“The worst thing an artist can do is repeat themselves” says writer and director Mickey Keating. It was less than a decade ago when the fifty-four minute home invasion drama, *Ultra Violence* (2011), sparked what has since been a creatively productive spell for the young filmmaker. Across a five-year span beginning with *Ritual* in 2013, Keating wrote and directed five features: *Pod* (2015), *Darling* (2015), *Carnage Park* (2016), and *Psychopaths* (2017). He is currently in pre-production on his next feature, *Crooks*.

While his filmography is one of contrasting tones of genre, violence remains a prevalent characteristic running through his work. The horror film *Ritual* begins in the aftermath of a home invasion, albeit a motel room, following a violent act of self-defence, as Lovely (Lisa Summerscales) kills a man who has attempted to kidnap her. Meanwhile, in the psychological horror *Darling*, Lauren Ashley Carter plays the caretaker of an old house, whose predecessor committed suicide by throwing herself off the balcony. Under *Darling*’s care, the house becomes the scene of a number of murders, and she becomes trapped in the fateful cycle of self-harm. *Carnage Park* and *Psychopaths* only see a continuation of violence, from the former’s protagonist caught in the cross hairs of a sniper after a bank heist goes awry, a nod to the films of Sam Peckinpah, to the latter’s tale of a group of psychopaths encountering one another in a single night.

In conversation with *MSJ*, Keating (Fig. 1) discusses cinema within our “disposable society,” the moment in cinematic storytelling, and the need to rediscover the cinema of the 1970s.
**PR:** Why filmmaking as a means of creative expression? Was there an inspirational or defining moment?

**MK:** Well, it’s funny because I never wanted to do anything else from when I was very little, and so the first thing that really hit for me was Indiana Jones, which I was obsessed with. I begged to see *The Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) when I was six years old and from that minute on I wanted to be Indiana Jones, and, as I grew up, I just loved characters, and I would also draw a lot. Then one day it just kind of clicked; I found this old video camera that hardly worked in the attic and so we started filming stuff. I remember filming my first movie and the video camera was so old it broke, and I was devastated [laughs]. And feeling that level of devastation, I just knew that I wanted to make more movies, and it has been crazy right from then on.

**PR:** Have your experiences as a filmmaker influenced the way you watch films as a spectator? And how has the practical experience of directing a feature film impacted your own appreciation of films and their filmmakers?

**MK:** I feel like making movies is its own entity, but still, in my approach to this day, I always try to watch films as a spectator. Although I know how fake blood and effects work because I have done them myself, so to view them as a spectator and then say, “Well, why don’t my films look like that?” or “This is really inspiring for me, how can I invoke that kind of emotion in my own films?” That’s always the interesting challenge and additionally, from that standpoint, I’ve always been obsessed with movies. I don’t have a back up plan or another hobby, and so I view them with the approach of saying from the get go, “If this is what I want to do and these are the emotions that I can feel while watching someone else’s film, I have to master these myself and I have to train.” And I have to think about why I think a movie like *Boogie Nights* (1997) (Fig. 2) looks so incredible – okay, I have to learn about those lenses. Why I think Hitchcock is so effective to me – okay, I will need to learn all about the cinematic language. And the thing that’s such a thrill to me is even being exposed to the filmmaking process, and the dramas that beleaguer that, whenever I can find a movie that rekindles that magic and makes me feel twenty two years later that I still love cinema: its almost like a drug. And that’s what you are always searching for, I feel [laughs].

**PR:** Looking back on the way in which we experience films when we are young compared to adulthood, there was a lack of a tendency to over-intellectualize in which we felt a movie in a way that age deprives us of. While we can reminisce and search for that feeling to attempt to reconnect with it, this defines those formative years of discovering cinema as a special period. Would you agree that our relationship with cinema evolves from a feeling and sensory experience, to one that becomes intellectualized with age?

**MK:** Oh absolutely, and that’s why I think going back to that magic of when I find a movie, and when you make your own films; I feel there’s a separation that you can see all your fingerprints, brush strokes on your painting, right? And it’s magical when you can find a movie that doesn’t make you think of that in that technical way and doesn’t make you say, “Oh, well that’s a really good effect,” or “Oh, I’m completely captivated.”

When you are young watching films because you have no comprehension of how many camera set ups there are, and how much time it takes to light a scene, it’s this very pure sense. Nowadays in big budget movies we try to capture that magic and sensation, and I feel like we run the risk of movies becoming very face-value, and more shallow, in a sense, by trying to capture that magic. And I do think that there is a value in creating films that almost require you to open them up more, that require you to unpack them. A great example I just saw is Paul Thomas Anderson’s *Phantom Thread* (2017). You sit there watching that, and it just grabs you, and you realise that you need to watch this film again because there is so much to unpack.
Embracing the Cinema of Momentary Sensation

Even though it is a simple story, there are a lot of things to think about and things that you want to see again. So I feel the best case scenario for a movie is to present itself in multiple ways to even the most jaded of us film watchers, so it forces you to revisit it again. I feel that in the disposable art culture that exists today, that’s a requirement for movies to have a longer shelf life.

PR: Do you think there was that necessity in cinema forty or fifty years ago, or would you attribute that to a fairly new way of thinking?

MK: Yeah, absolutely. It all started in the 80s – at least for American cinema - the concept of creating something that is not just a film, but is also a product and a way to draw in the largest swathe of audience possible to sell your commerce. Since the 80s American cinema, and there have been great movements especially in independent cinema, but I feel cinema has been more geared towards, as [Michael] Haneke says, that it’s almost a cattle factory. You just bring the audience in and shove them out, and then that’s really it. We see that in the way I feel like social media culture can celebrate a movie doing horribly at the box office, or getting terrible Rotten Tomatoes reviews, and it has almost gone beyond cinema to become a spectator’s sport. So that’s a bummer, and, slowly but surely, we’ll get back to that world of 70s-style attempts to make sensational cinema. I just watched that documentary by Wim Wenders, Room 666 (1982) where he asks filmmakers about television versus cinema. [Rainer Werner] Fassbinder brought up a great point where it’s like there seems to not be this willingness to embrace the cinema of sensation, that kind of movement in cinema. I hope we get back to that because it is an important and interesting style of filmmaking for me, personally.

PR: The shower scene within the context of Psycho (1960) recalls the cinematic form – a frame, a scene, a camera movement at a time. Film is fundamentally a series of moments combined, and as much as cinema may often try to dramatise the every day, storytelling can be equally powerful when it honours the natural ebb and flow between drama and those mundane moments that are typical of everyday life.

MK: It definitely is, and that’s what intrigues me. I read an interview with Paul Thomas Anderson and when he thinks back about movies, he never remembers the plot of a film, but the moments that incite this emotional feeling within him. That’s an interesting way to look at it, and I totally agree with you. It’s all about moments, and my problem with a lot of cinema [is that] - they are such a slave to the overall context of the story that all of these individual things get lost. And that’s why a filmmaker like Scorsese is so interesting because you almost feel it’s like watching a boulder or a snowball rolling downhill getting bigger and bigger. You don’t know where it’s going to go or where it’s going to end up, but because that’s life and it’s comprised of individual moments where you can be making tomato sauce and also seeing helicopters, he embraces that. To just follow, like you said, those building blocks and seeing where the characters go on this journey is exciting to me, and that’s what I’ve tried to do with each one of my films. Tarantino talks about writing and how he never outlines, he just follows the character from one individual moment...
to the next, and I think that’s very appealing because then you get individual bursts of emotion and surprises from the character, as opposed to saying, “Alright, because it’s page 17 we have to have some plot.”

**PR:** Each of your films, from one to the next, has a different feel that makes you an interesting filmmaker to watch. This may be perhaps a consequence of your approach to not focus on overall plot, but to focus first and foremost on a moment that the film is then formed around.

**MK:** I think that’s a good thing, and the worst thing an artist can do is repeat themselves. There are things that have always intrigued me and exist throughout my movies, but I love cinema so much that there are a lot of different films and stories that I want to tell that are completely different from one another. When I look at a character or actor from one film to the next, they are almost unidentifiable. They blend in, and that’s exciting because it’s like saying, “Oh my God, that’s the same man or woman that is playing all these different crazy characters.” That can also apply to the work of a filmmaker too, and for me, first and foremost, the art should speak for itself more than the filmmaker.

Growing up with a generation of, particularly, horror filmmakers, I feel like horror got into this bad habit of directors being bigger than their movies, and talking up their movies way more than their movies were delivering. The idea of becoming a celebrity director, not just in horror, became a big notion in general in the 90s and 00s. At the end of the day, that’s why I don’t do directors’ commentaries and “behind the scenes” because, when I die, my movies will still hopefully be in the ether, and they are the ones that should do the talking — not so much me.

**PR:** With *Darling* (2015) being the only film you have shot in black and white, how does this change how you consider telling the story, if at all?

**MK:** What was so interesting was when I wrote *Darling* (Fig. 3), I could only see the film in black and white, and I feel like it was never a world that was going to be in colour.

Fig. 3 | *Darling*, 1:07:51. Glass Eye Pix, 2015.
because that’s not how I saw it; that’s not how I wrote it. All the movies that I was inspired by weren’t in colour except for Robert Altman’s *Images* (1972) and *That Cold Day in the Park* (1969). But beyond those films, that’s how I wanted to tell that story.

I feel like a lot of filmmaking is prepped, but a lot of it is *that instinct*. And to go against your gut instinct, or to compromise and not film it the way you see it in your mind’s eye, then it is really not worth it. So the only way it dictated the aesthetic was that if I didn’t do it, then the movie probably wouldn’t have been made [laughs]. But with each film, it’s the way that I see it, and I create these scripts, and when I go through the storyboards, first and foremost, I storyboard everything, and the movie tells me how it is supposed to be. I never think about the storyboards before the end and it unfolds in front of me. Whether it is inspired by what I’m watching at the time or what I want to do, or things that I have never been able to do before that I’ve always wanted to, filmmaking for me is a very organic process in that regard; you go with your gut and hopefully people like it [laughs].

**PR:** Would you describe the filmmaking process as a journey of discovery in which you discover the film in the final cut? But, specifically, moving from *Darling* to *Psychopaths* (2017), I’d describe the latter as a psychedelic film that has a chaotic feel. Even if you try to apply some form of order to it, the film will continually try to defy you, and, if there is order, it is order not out of, but within the chaos.

**MK:** First and foremost that’s what we wanted *Psychopaths* (Fig. 4) to be, and I think that’s why people are either really onboard with it, or they are infuriated by it [laughs]. So I feel it’s a two part thing. All of the movies that I have made, I’ve had a strong idea of what I wanted going in. So I storyboard, we pick out the music, but then what happens and that is so exciting for me is just to be able to let the actors have all these ideas, and have as much preparation as possible to then be able to find them with the actors as we are making it. Then, when we go into editing, I definitely have an idea, and my editor from the minute I have an inception of an idea for the film, she’s the first to know about it, and so that way when we start cutting, we say the film tells us when it’s done.

A great example is *Darling*, which we found a lot of in the edit. What I learned is you can write a script with the best intentions, but when you are shooting the movie, happy accidents occur. Some bad accidents occur, and you cut them out, but happy accidents too. We embrace that, so going in with a battle plan, we also do something very unusual — we cut out of order. That way we cut the scenes we are very excited about first and then find ways to build up to that, and so the way a film builds up to itself in a script can differ from the edit. We could just have an assembly cut of exactly how it is written within three days of the movie being wrapped, but what we have fun with is letting the film tell us how it is supposed to be. We then screen it for people, and we don’t necessarily ask for too many notes on how to change things, but, when you watch a film with other people, you really get a sense of where they’re squirming and where they’re not paying attention. You feel in your own self where the movie is lagging, and so yeah, that embrace of letting the movie tell you it’s done is something we abide by.

**PR:** *Darling* and *Psychopaths* are films that are made in the edit, whereas *Pod* (2015) took shape more during the writing and shooting phases. *Carnage Park* (2016) may lie somewhere in the middle, taking shape in each phase. How accurate is this interpretation?

**MK:** Well, it’s always case-by-case. I feel like *Darling* and *Psychopaths* are very interesting in terms of the edit because with *Darling*, and a little bit but more so with *Psychopaths*, you know that eventually she’s going to throw herself off the balcony, or these psychopaths are all going to come together or not. So that creates a lot of freedom.
in the context to jump back and forth and tell the story that way: to be a little bit looser with the narrative and to just follow this journey; whereas, it’s actually interesting with *Carnage Park* because that movie was the film that narrative-wise, you knew that they were going to come to a head, and it was going to be a cat-and-mouse game. But that was the one that changed the most from edit to script because the script was written in a very non-linear fashion, and then, when we started editing, scenes started moving up, and ideas in the script that were non-linear, looped back on itself or were cut, or readjusted.

So yeah, it’s usually a case by case, but *Psychopaths*, particularly with the edit, was a long cut because it was all about finding the pacing and jumping back and forth between all these characters. I wish I had a set guidelines to all the films, but the crazy thing about art is that it’s always different [laughs], and that’s part of the reason I think it’s so exhilarating: because every movie is a different experience. Every movie has its highs and its lows, and sometimes you feel beat up and sometimes you feel ecstatic, but it’s always that journey that is the most exciting to me.

**PR:** Is the fascination with the creative process, whether it be film, art or music, the fact that it is learning a language which will never fully reveal its secrets to us, but one which we can’t help but pursue?

**MK:** Absolutely, and it is always chasing that muse because why do some of the masters of filmmaking, Brian De Palma, or even Hitchcock, to an extent, or Billy Wilder, how do they clearly master the art form throughout their career, of how to tell a great movie, and then why do they sometimes have their *Raising Cain* (1992) or something like that? And so it is like chasing that drug of making the perfect movie, of knowing how to speak the language, but also finding the happy accidents, catching the lightning in the bottle and allowing your life to not interfere with the very organic process. It’s a traumatic experience and I’m probably going to drop dead at sixty [laughs] because it’s very difficult, and Altman said it was like making a sandcastle. You build up a sandcastle and then the ocean comes and knocks it down, but for some reason you keep building sandcastles. That excitement and that exhilaration of *when it’s right* and *when it works* is everything, and it’s the greatest feeling in the world. And that’s the endless pursuit of the muse — I feel that is art in general.

**PR:** I recall interviewing Terence Davies who spoke about every artist’s need for a reaction, which can be a painful experience because, as Martin Scorsese has spoken about, you can never predict their response.

**MK:** There are two ways to look at it because if you make a movie exactly for every single audience member, you are fucked. I’m sorry, excuse me for my language, but you know you’ll never please everybody, and I feel my inclination and sensibility as a storyteller and artist is that I am convinced that they don’t know what they want. They know that they’ve seen a poster and a trailer and a title, but they don’t know what to get out of the film until the film shows itself to them. So I think my sensibilities are very inclined to say, “Well I’m going to present this very strong concise vision to you and then we are going to talk about it. Whether you love it or whether you hate it, that doesn’t matter, the fact that you’ve seen it, that’s the most important part. And your interpretation of the conversation I’m trying to present, that’s the most exhilarating thing for me.” So that’s why I think it goes back to the idea that the worst thing a director can do is to go into a film without having a vision or for the wrong reasons, whether it’s for money, or whether it’s because this will win the audience or be a blockbuster, box office hit. That’s the wrong intention. If you go into a film just to be able to say that you are going to make this because this is something you have to say to an audience and show people: that’s when effective filmmaking comes through. Now sometimes the thing that you want to say, or the way you are feeling in terms of this part of your life, it doesn’t gear up with what people are feeling. Maybe it’s too cynical; maybe it’s too experimental. It can be any number of reasons why. But to go in with that pure intention like David Lynch said when *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me* (1992) tanked, “Yeah, people didn’t like it, but I’m very proud of it. This was my vision and hopefully people will revisit it.” And what happened? Now everyone is claiming it is a masterpiece [laughs].
**PR:** When I interviewed British filmmaker Carol Morley for *The Falling* (2014), she explained, “You take it 90 percent of the way, and it is the audience that finishes it. So the audience by bringing themselves: their experiences, opinions and everything else to a film is what completes it.” If the audience are the ones that complete it, does it follow that there is a transfer in ownership?

**MK:** Absolutely. I always equate it to pushing a baby bird out of the nest. The baby bird flies and it lives in the world on its own, and, so yeah, I really do feel that way. I also feel in terms of this art form, making a film is a hugely collaborative process from the very beginning, so you also have to collaborate with the audience and the film you make doesn’t always have to make everyone feel good, but, ideally, you are supposed to incite some sort of emotion to your film, whether it’s good or it makes you feel bummered out. But, at the end of the day, it is such an expensive art form, and it requires so many people that anyone who says that they don’t make a film for an audience is a liar because, otherwise, you’d just make your film, and then put it in a draw and forget about it. So you have to be able to make a movie with that intention, that goal, and that desire. And, as a filmmaker, I want my movies to play in a movie theatre. I want people to sit and watch them, as many as possible, and so that’s why I make them. Can my movies infuriate people? Sure, but I think that’s also the contract you have with an audience — this might not turn out the way you think it is going to, but we are going to have a dialogue.

**PR:** Filmmaker Christoph Behl remarked to me, “You are evolving, and, after the film, you are not the same person as you were before.” Do you perceive there to be a transformative aspect to the creative process for you, personally?

**MK:** In a sense, going into a film, I have this arsenal of music, film references and shots that you want and hope you can get. But at the other end of it, you come out seeing what all of this mass of inspiration has funnelled down into. What is so fascinating to me is that whenever I make a movie and we start cutting — like the first days of shooting when we get a shot we love and it’s like this is the best shot I’ve ever shot, but by the time we are ready to deliver to the distributor, I never want to see those shots ever again. All I want to do is make a new movie with better shots, with more striking imagery because you find you’ve grown in the process. The things that you were very proud about on day three, now you want to make a new movie, to make that film I just made look like a postage stamp in comparison [laughs].

**PR:** Is that desire a necessity to propel you forward and counter the danger of becoming stagnant, in which you make films because it has become a natural function, as opposed to a deeper motivation?

**MK:** Absolutely, and that’s going back to what I said that the worst thing a filmmaker can do is repeat themselves. I know a lot of filmmakers that have one film that is a kind of moderate success, and they’re like the guys who hang out at the high school football games after they’ve graduated talking about the glory days. If you truly love cinema, there’s an endless well of inspiration from cinema around the world, and you start to realise very early on, “Oh my God, if this is what I think is good how will I ever become like John Ford, or how can I ever become willing to embrace the cinematheque like what Jean-Luc Godard or François Truffaut did?”

I think there is a big difference between a filmmaker who just wants to make as many things as possible and is always onto the next project and doesn’t give the current project enough care, and then there are the filmmakers that once they’ve made the film that they’ve fought... It’s like a game of golf; you always want to improve yourself. There’s always the way your craft can be better, and the way you can incite an even stronger reaction from the audience. Will you ever be perfect? Will you ever be the greatest filmmaker of all time? No, of course it’s impossible, and for me that’s the fun of it — what can I do to better my craft and my art form? You don’t stop at one painting; you try to make your next one look like a vast improvement, and that’s what’s so fascinating having made five films now — because it’s not a linear progression. I don’t think some people love my second film more than my fourth film, and some people love my third film the most. So it’s fascinating to keep trying to catch that dragon, I guess.
WORKS CITED


