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As told to T. Cole Rachel, 3641 words.

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On maintaining control over the work you make

Filmmaker Hal Hartley on seizing the means of production, being adaptable, and taking care of your own archives.

You're working on a Kickstarter project that involves creating an archive of some of your early films. How has the experience of going back into the worlds of these movies and being able to have this thoughtful care for your own material and your own archives felt as a creative exercise?

Well, I'm very grateful to have a bunch of work that, one, I can look back on and feel good about it and all that, but also that I did what was necessary, little by little over the years of my career. to make sure that I had the rights to these things, that I *could* control them, or that I could get them back eventually. It was disappointing so many times over the years to see a distributor just not really do the right thing for the film. Fans would write in to my website and say, "Why can't I see *Flirt* or *Amateur* here in Spain?" So I would look it up in the records and I'd see that I do have a distributor and I'd write to those fans and let them know it was actually available there and give them the name of the company. Then the fans would get back to me and say, "Yeah, but they're really crummy DVDs and the artwork is terrible and it's cheaply made." So, I was always keeping a lookout for the expiration date of the various contracts I had signed when I made the different films, and it was really only around 2015 that I realized I had a lot of the films ready, that all the rights were back in my possession, but they were going to come back incrementally. This is why they haven't been released by me in the order I made them, because I had to wait until the rights had expired. I just had to wait.

For a couple of years now I've thought about putting these early films together would be a nice package. We're very much like a design firm here these days. For this project we have three movies, a bunch of shorts, some little documentaries. We put those together, and then we spend a lot of time designing the box sets and the CDs, and now we're making books and stuff like that to go with them.

It's interesting how many filmmakers, and other artists in general, are often not really very good stewards of their own archives.

Yeah. I have my inner librarian. I've always been like that since I was a kid. If I make something, I like to know where it is, protect it, have a copy of my own. I was very gratified recently to see Alex Winters' documentary on Frank Zappa. Zappa's always been somebody I'm very interested in, but I had no idea to what extent he was the same way. I mean, he archived *everything*, it's massive. He was so careful about it, and he sort of did the same thing. At a certain point in his 30s he understood that he could probably do much better with his work if he just handled it all himself—produce it himself, distribute it himself, promote it himself—and he did.

Does looking closely at your earlier work make you think about any ways in which your process has changed? Or do you notice choices you made back then that you might make differently now?

My relationship to the material doesn't necessarily change, but I do see how my way of working changed.

This archive includes three films—*Amateur*, *Flirt*, and *Meanwhile*. *Meanwhile* was made in 2012, so it was essentially a decade after *Amateur* and *Flirt*. It is what I think of as one of my “city” films, like those two, but it was made for a much smaller amount of money with a much smaller crew. It’s interesting to see how I orchestrate pictures, a motion picture, with a little bit of action, a little bit of dialogue. For instance, on the earlier films I used a dolly to move the camera, and on the smaller films I usually don’t have a dolly. That’s a distinguishing feature of a low budget film and an ultra low budget film. I’m only now seeing certain creative strategies that are based on the same basic principles of composition and keeping the frame alive and having it, if possible, move from being one type of shot into a different type of shot, and you can do that by moving the camera or moving the individuals in the frame, or both.

It’s that sort of motion picture composition grammar that you adopt, and it’s nice to see that it has been consistent, whether I’m making a tiny little video film, a five-minute video of myself on the camera, with one to two assistants, or I have a full on 30-person crew—that there’s a real consistency there in the way I tend to view and frame things.

Talking about filmmaking almost always has to do with the business of it—how people raise money and how things are funded.

That is a real part of it.

Even the idea of what is an indie movie now, as opposed to what it was in the ’90s, is a radically different thing. I’m curious how you have been able to roll with those changes or how that has affected the way you think about or have been able to make your art.

Well, I think, for me, it started out even before I knew anything about the business and before I was making “films” professionally, before I was in the business. I had always thought in a particular way, which is how I still think. I say that you should maintain as much control over the making of your piece as you can, because the work will be better if it has fewer voices and fewer outside necessities, some of which are erroneous.

Little by little, I did become a professional and I had to make decisions incrementally along the way. Perhaps a financier wants a change at the script stage, and I’d have to consider that. Most of the time I was diplomatic, but I think I did get a reputation for being a bit of a hard nose about that. I’d listen to people, but ultimately I’d make a decision based on my own taste and sensibility—and that was true of things at the editing stage and also in how I dealt with distributors and marketers, promotional people. I think I got a bit of a reputation for being difficult in a quiet kind of way, but I’m glad I did because that’s how I still have the business now. I can support myself and the company by taking care of these films. If I hadn’t done that, just on the business side, these films would just be languishing somewhere.

It really kind of breaks my heart, for example, that one of my films, *No Such Thing*, I made for a studio. That is the one time I was talked into it. The reality is that they’re going to pay you a bunch of money and you’ll never have control over this film, but I trusted the various organizations involved. In the end, they didn’t do anything and this movie just sits on the shelf somewhere. I think it is out on DVD somewhere, but they did a really shitty job of it. So, to bring it back to Zappa, I grew up really listening to not just his music but what he was saying about running his business and all that, and taking care of his archive. So that sort of mentality was always close to me.

The business model for everything now changes at such an amazing rate from year to year, so it does seem like with any kind of art, the more you can really own all parts of the process and the output is to your benefit.

Yeah. There are short term setbacks. You might miss out on a lot of where the real moneymaking part of the business is. It’s hard for me right now to convince these corporations that make TV programming or streaming programming to take me seriously, because they’re young enough and have always been focused on mainstream entertainment and I don’t fall into that category. They’re talking to my agents or my managers, and they’re saying things like, “And he’s who? What did he do? He was a bigshot in the ’90s?” It’s hard to get them excited about me, even though they might be excited about the story idea I’ve pitched. They work in a really corporatized way.

For example, I told them, "I've written the entire series already." They read the pilot and loved it and they loved the whole idea, and then they suggested, "We'd set you up with a whole team of writers." I'm like, "I don't need a team of writers. It's all written. It's all done. It's ready to go." They're like, "Oh, no. We don't work that way. That's not how we work." I'm like, "Okay."

Every art form has its own specific challenges and difficulties. I know musicians who deal with these sorts of issues, as well as visual artists. A pretty common bit of advice for everyone these days is just do it yourself. If you can make a movie with your iPhone, just go do that. Just go do it yourself, which is true in some respects but also easier said than done.

Yeah, well also, is it going to be a good film? It's also about simply defining good by what you want, and even a kid with an iPhone might really, in his head or his heart have an idea of a film they he just can't manage it with a phone. Maybe they need a crew and maybe more experienced camera people, and so, yeah, it's a balance. It's true though, whenever you are a creative person, you have to look at your resources and your aims and you have to adjust both. I did this very same thing just a couple years ago. I raised about \$300,000 to make a film called *Where to Land*, just before the pandemic. Ultimately we had to give everyone back the money, just because I couldn't make it during the pandemic. I could have made that film pretty excellently for the \$300,000, but, working within the safety protocols, I'd really need closer to a million to do it, and I didn't have a million and I didn't think I could raise a million on my own, so I decided, I won't make that right now.

That's very hard. When it's something like, I could do this but maybe it wouldn't be truly what I wanted it to be and it would always feel compromised to me and maybe it's better to not do it at all. When you made that decision, did you put that idea on the back burner as something that maybe I'll circle back around to, or is it just sort of like, that ship has sailed and I should think of something else now?

Well, no. I'll keep it on the back burner because that was a script that I thought was very, very good, and I've been doing this for, like, whatever, 35 years now? I think I'm pretty good at it. I just wanted to do it the right way. I didn't want to be cutting every corner to make it work and wind up with a student film kind of mentality behind the production, but this sort of thing goes all the way back in my career. I remember with *Simple Men* in 1992, talking to the financiers companies in England that were very excited about the script. However, they wanted certain kinds of changes in the script. I felt I heard in their conversation that they were simply exercising their corporate muscle, that they had to show their higher-ups that they made notes and the filmmaker took them, and then, I just couldn't. They were dumb notes. They were otherwise nice and smart people but these were stupid notes, so I said, "All right, well, we're talking about \$2.5 million for the film. How about, if I do not make those changes and you only give me \$2 million? A savings of \$500,000," and they went for that. They said, "Sure. Yes. Fine."

I guess that is something that exists also in every business, every art form—there exist people who want to arbitrarily change things just so they can say that they've justified the existence of their job in some way.

Yes, but It's not always just that. Sometimes it's just a totally different kind of taste and sensibility and a misunderstanding of the piece of work that's on the table.

You've used Kickstarter to fund a variety of things. Sometimes there's this kind of snobbery about crowdfunding, but I don't get it. For example, I was talking to a filmmaker once who was considering doing a Kickstarter for his film. His concern was that he wouldn't be taken as seriously if he crowdfunded his work.

I had to put up with a lot of that at the beginning. Snobbery might not even be the right kind of word, but it's a kind of mentality that's truly, fundamentally capitalist, where they do not respect you if you haven't gotten the money in what they would call a legitimate manner, meaning some thugs have stolen money from some outrageous business kind of thing, and they're investing it in your movie. That's somehow legitimate business. Also, plenty of real capitalists would happily go see, say, the Mark Morris Dance Company or something like that, which is largely funded by corporations, mostly, but also by government subsidies. I don't know a filmmaker in Europe who could actually work these days if there weren't great EU and national government subsidies for the arts.

We don't have that in the United States, so you have to think differently. I had been trying to think differently for years before Kickstarter came to my notice, and once I understood it, I said, "Yeah. This is exactly what I've been thinking about." I made a film called *The Girl from Monday* in 2004, and the idea there was me and my gang of creative people, saying, "Let's make a tiny little movie entirely on our own, and then create a website, and then that's where people will go see the movie. They'll pay, like, 99 cents and they can see this movie."

Well, in 2004, the internet technology wasn't there yet, so we had a more traditional distribution of that film and stuff like that, but we were always trying to think of a way to go directly to the fans and bypass all the corporate apparatus, the distributors and sales agents and all this. 2011 was the first time I did a Kickstarter with a new film. It worked out really well and I understood it. Once that first project went through, I did some hard thinking and started to come up with a plan to build an audience base, expand the audience base I already had, but help produce the work *while* you're promoting the work, which is essentially pre-sales.

Book publishers, for instance, have been doing this for 150 years. Mark Twain's books were all pre-sold, so that's how I think about it. So yes, you put up with a lot of snide shit at the beginning, but little by little, the films are out there again and it's an actual business. I've been using Kickstarter once a year to do one of these since 2016 or so, and it's been the foundation of the business we do in distributing my stuff.

With a lot of filmmakers that I know, there are these pronounced bursts of work where you're actually really, literally making a film and getting to be behind a camera and then long stretches of time where you're not—or maybe you're doing other kinds of work related to the film or you're doing work related to a future film you might make—but for those periods in between, do you find it's important to have other kinds of creative work to do? Something that sort of fortifies you in those times when you're not literally getting to do the thing that you do?

I'm lucky to have different interests and I've always been able to keep myself occupied and excited about work. I was very lucky at the beginning of my career that it all happened so fast. I had been making short films and working different kinds of jobs, and then I made this first film, *The Unbelievable Truth*, and it got picked up. That was in 1989. Essentially, for 10 years, it was nonstop. People were giving me money like crazy. It was a particular thing going on in the business at that time, this independent thing, which took me by surprise. I had never heard the term "independent film" until I was on the road with my first film, but I worked nonstop for 10 years, and then I wanted to dial it down.

I had gotten married and I had done okay financially, so I just wanted to dial it down and still work, but I wanted to work in different ways. It just so happened that moment coincided with the end of the very profitable indie business. It was harder, a few years later, when I wanted to do something new. It was harder to get people's attention and to get them behind work that was not explicitly mainstream. I sort of kicked myself a little bit then, like, "Oh, I should have kept a foot in. I shouldn't have stepped away like that for a couple years," but, anyway, I had other things to do.

I was interested in making theater and I did. I staged an opera and I made a lot more music than I had before, and built that part of my business up, the music stuff, while also still writing. I also recently started a publishing company, so I spend a lot of my time doing that.

Every creator has different ways of working and not all people are the same, but I always feel like it's healthy and also psychologically valuable to be able to have different kind of outlets, so when you can't do this one thing, then you can pivot and do this other thing for a while. You find that they all inform each other in some way, usually ways you don't even realize.

Yeah. It must be terribly frustrating for people who are just very good at one thing. I mean, I've met a lot of them, just, in the film business. They're really talented people who sometimes go for three, four, five years without being able to make anything because no one's interested in their particular thing at the time, even though they've proven themselves to be good filmmakers, good writers, or whatever. There's a look. There's a body language they all get. They're fidgety.

You see people who are consumed with bitterness about the state of things, or other people who are just

sort of like, "Okay, well, it's not the same world as it was in 1995, so I just have to figure out how to do what I do in 2021." The circumstances are different.

I always look to the musicians. It's easier to find examples of this in musicians somehow. Like, David Bowie was amazing. Now, there's totally new thing going on, trip hop music or something, and he'd say, "Okay, so, I'm a 45 year old guy and now I have to make music like this," and he'd figure out a way to make his own kind of music that spoke to that new trend. He must have done that 10 to 12 times in his career, until, in his later years, he just said, "I'm going to make the kind of music I want to make and it's got nothing to do with any kind of trend."

I try to follow examples of other artists and how they have grown older and changed, and let the change in themselves live, rather than squash it. You've got to be creative in a lot of other ways, too, not just in your work, but you've got to be creative thinking about how you're going to get your work out there. How are you going to get it made, first of all, and then, how it's going to appeal to the current zeitgeist. There's nothing wrong with thinking like that. You're not being an opportunist or anything like that.

Still, a lot of the folks who have always impressed me—from Zappa and Bowie to the hundreds of other filmmakers and musicians I've admired—have always looked for ways to operate outside of the corporatized entertainment world. You don't have the security of a big paycheck or promises of a huge distribution for your work, but you do have more creative freedom and you don't have to be so pissed off about the state of things, you know?

The feature films of Hal Hartley:

The Unbelievable Truth (1989)

Trust (1990)

Surviving Desire (1991)

Simple Men (1992)

Amateur (1994)

Flirt (1995)

Henry Fool (1997)

The Book of Life (1998)

No Such Thing (2001)

The Girl from Monday (2005)

Fay Grim (2006)

Meanwhile (2011)

Ned Rifle (2014)

Name

Hal Hartley

Vocation

Filmmaker

Fact

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