

An Interview with Rich Heldenfels

Rich Heldenfels is an associate lecturer of English at The University of Akron. You may have had him for a composition or film appreciation course. Most notably, you might have encountered him in the Akron Beacon Journal from 1994-2016 where he served a large chunk of his forty plus year career in the newspaper business as the TV critic and general pop culture reviewer. He is also the author of Television's Greatest Year: 1954 and co-writer of multiple books, such as Ghoulardi: Inside Cleveland TV's Wildest Ride and Cleveland TV Memories.

AshBelt's Poetry Editor Dylan Morris sat down with him to talk about his background, career, the troubles with switching careers, good and bad films, how Quentin Tarantino is overrated, and how incredible Antonio Banderas was in Pain and Glory.

I wanted to get some of the basic stuff out of the way and ask what is your educational background? For the people who may not have had you for a class.

My undergrad is a B.A in English from Princeton University which I got in 1973. I have a master's from The University of Akron in English. I got the Master's in 2011.

Okay, are you from the Akron area?

No.

Okay, I was going to ask for you since you went to Princeton, and Akron is a much different area and culture. What do you think was the difference culturally for you? Especially coming back as a nontraditional student to Akron. Even with a huge time gap in between.

Keeping in mind too, when I was in undergrad, I knew nothing. I was in my late teens, early twenties. Who knows much then? I found Akron to be academically stimulating as all get out. I had great courses. I'm taking courses from teachers who I now consider my friends and colleagues, and it's been an exciting experience. I can't complain. Not from what I've seen here as a student.

When did you start your master's degree?

It was 2008.

What was it like to be in Akron during the Great Recession? Especially with going to graduate school during that time.

Well, I was going to graduate school because the business I was in (the newspaper business) was looking as if it was in fairly serious trouble, and I wanted to make sure I

was in a position that I could move into another area if I had to. And of course, yes, the economy did affect my decision to go back to school. As I said before, my change in terms of environment was simply that I was considerably older than most students in my classes. In some cases, older than the professors, but I came in with a sense of “okay, I’m going to take full advantage of this experience.” I’m going to challenge myself. I’m going to see what the standards are. I’m going to understand what the rules are, and I’m not going to mess around. I like to think that all those things happened. Like I said, it was a really good experience. I read things I had not read and studied things I had not studied. Challenged myself in a way I had not as a writer. Newspaper writing is challenging, but academic writing is a whole other set of tools. When I think about when I first started going back to school just in simple terms of style (MLA style) I did not know and had to learn all over again. Wrote a paper early on and my professor looked at me and was like “well, are you sure that’s MLA style?” I had not paid attention to the basics and remedied that quickly. Now I’m the one badgering students about writing in MLA style.

(both laugh)

That’s got to be weird, since Akron does have a lot of nontraditional students. It’s has to be an odd dynamic to be even older than some of the nontraditional students. Like, I’ve seen how the interactions with a nontraditional student who is the same age as the professor and it’s a different dynamic.

Yeah, I was a student, and I knew I was a student. I knew that you got to treat your professor with respect. You have to acknowledge that they’re the ones in charge. I always found them to be very, very gracious for this old guy as they were trying to figure out what to do.

It also was a lot different since you weren’t auditing the class. You actually were a student taking those courses.

Yeah, I was a straight up student, while working a full-time job.

I was going to ask even though we’re circling back to your undergrad and graduate studies, but what was it specifically that drew you to English in undergrad? Was there any moment where you were like “yeah, I this is what I want to do!” And what was your focus in graduate school. What was your thesis and things like that?

In undergrad, I knew I wanted to write in some way. I was always a reader, and the English Department seemed like the best way to go. I was a point where I was more on the Creative Writing track than on the you know standard English degree. I could have... I’m trying to say, I don’t really want to sound like I’m bragging about anything here. But I had been accepted and could have done my undergraduate thesis as a series of poems. Because I had taken a few poetry classes there as well, but I did not go through with it. I instead switched to a more traditional thesis, and my thesis was on detective

fiction. It was mainly from Oedipus up through Ross MacDonald at the time. So, I guess I lost track of your question.

Like what was it you enjoyed most, or what your focus was?

I just love words. I love seeing a well-crafted sentence. I'm pretty happy when I manage to write one now and again. It just seemed to be the logical fit for me. I had thought a lot about math coming right out of high school. But I lost the mojo for it real quick when I got to college. English seemed like the right way to go.

What was your master's thesis on?

It was on the similarities between Mark Twain and Henry James in a series of parallels between their works.

What are the similarities between those two? Most people won't think that they're just different stylistically...

Yet in some ways thematically they were remarkably similar and in other ways there was this sense that they did not like each other much. Twain said some unkind things about one of James' novels, and James as I can recall all these years later never said much of anything about Twain. But, if you look at the Bostonians and Huck Finn, and say Daisy Miller and Innocence Abroad. You start looking at the works side by side, and see a lot of parallels thematically, and the way they approach characters. As much as we think tend to think about James as this emigre living in England and a high-toned writer versus the "primitivism" of a lot of Twain. To the world outside they were still just a couple of Americans, and the fact that neither won the Nobel for literature. In fact, Twain in particular was shrugged off by the Nobel committee to a great extent as a writer of "children's books." There are some interesting comparisons. Just in how they were received by the world outside. You can find my thesis online (Laughs).

That's really fascinating! We think of Twain always as this canonical author who you read in school, but even in college you may not necessarily read Henry James. We always think of him as this high-class writer.

That's why I wrote on it. I was getting to read James in some of my courses here. I did that with Dr. Chura. It was one of those things that got me thinking in that direction. Since I was reading Twain and James in classes here. I kind of like to do the "let's see what's being said about these things and what can I say that's different from what other people are saying." I did an essay a couple years ago looking at the Joker as a Marxist. It's in a book of Joker essays. Another book came out about supervillains. I also did in the other book an essay looking at Catwoman's roots in the Sherlock Holmes character Irene Adler. So, I try to have fun with it.

Yeah, and it's always a challenge to try to say something interesting. Especially, if it's someone like a Henry James who has a lot of scholarly criticism about him.

It's so hard to write something new. You feel like "I'm going way out there" to throw something at the wall.

But again, it was sort of interesting to look at Twain and James, who had been discussed sometime in comparable contexts, but in a number of cases were not as I like to think in the way I looked at them.

Well...

I just realized what I just said sounded incredibly arrogant and I apologize (Laughs)

No, you're good, but to be able to end on the educational background. Since Akron does have a large population of nontraditional students, or at least a noticeable one. A lot of people do go either the full-on student as you did or audit. What are some pieces of advice you would give to these students? Since, I've heard from friends who've taken something like three years off, and they feel like it's so difficult. Even for students who've taken longer off it has to feel even more difficult. What would you say to those students?

(chuckles) Oh gosh, I'd give them the same advice I give my students, show up and do the work. It sounds simple, but it's remarkable how many people don't do that. I'm not just talking about nontraditional students. I would sit in the lecture hall when I first came back, and I was somewhat high up. The instructor was working away down and had graphics up and everything else. I could see people's laptops and see how many had their emails pulled up, shopping on Amazon or whatever during their classes. Show up and do the work! I think that's the one thing that older students who come back understand. I'm not fooling around, and there's real money at play here.

Now, you worked at the *Akron Beacon Journal* for twenty-two years is that correct?

Correct. I worked there from 1994-2016.

How did you get started there working at the *Beacon Journal*?

Well that wasn't my first job. I finished undergrad in 1973. I worked at newspapers for a couple years. Taught high school for three years. Then went back to newspapering. When I came to the *Beacon* before I had been working at a newspaper in Schenectady, New York since '81. So, twenty-two years sounds like a long time, but that's a small part out of a forty plus year career. I came here because it was a job. I had been writing about television and other things for a long time in Schenectady, mainly television. There was an opening at the *Beacon* for a TV critic, and I had a friend of mine who worked there. So, I interviewed, and they looked at my material and decided to give me a shot. I stayed there for around... oh around... '06. Then the idea of the TV critic changed with the industry. So, I became a pop culture writer. Where I was watching tv, films, other things. Just did a lot of writing for twenty something years.

So, for you, I wanted to ask what changed for you especially now that you're in the academic setting. What has changed in the writing about pop culture? In just that short time span?

Oh, there was just so much more. There was a story I was told about a colleague of mine. He had a nice career in the newspaper business, and he was getting later in his career. So, they decided oh, he's been writing a long time let's make him the TV critic at a different publication. It would be a nice way to settle into the remaining years of his career. He was good at it. But then, suddenly, there's the Fox Network. Suddenly, cable has exploded. Suddenly, video cassettes are ever more prominent. The idea of what was television and how much you had to write about it increased geometrically. The poor guy just fell apart because of it. Now, I come in at the *Beacon* in '94, and I believe that's around the time before the Fox Entertainment Network, Fox News is coming in. Now you got cable, satellite, DVDs, streaming, there's just a tremendous amount of material to cover from everywhere. So, even as the number of people doing/covering things is diminishing, the stuff to cover is increasing exponentially. That was a huge difference.

Of course, the idea of writing for online was not real common when I started at the *Beacon* and became much more so as time went on. You know the idea of responding on twitter, trying to respond on various social platforms that you didn't wait till something was in the paper. That you put it online were all new demands that came along while I was at the *Beacon* and it made a huge difference. For instance, with the Oscars you're not just watching it and writing something for the next day's paper. You're real time tweeting about the ceremony as it's happening. Dealing with different efficiencies of space. Having to decide whether to blog or not. I did blog a lot at least for a time there. Just the simple idea of how you process information and what information you got out there just changed dramatically.

Also, on that same point about just to think about how much more there is out there. It's making harder for smaller newspapers since they're losing so many things. The bigger newspapers probably had multiple people to do different things to help take off that workload. While smaller papers just don't.

Well, the *Beacon* and don't forget when I went there it was part of the Knight-Ridder chain, and it was a pretty big and successful paper. We had a separate TV critic and movie critic. We had a classical music writer and a pop music writer. There was a fairly sizable workforce that you were looking at and that steadily shrank over time. Even if there was more to cover. So, then the idea of what you covered changed significantly. There's a piece in yesterday's (February 9th) by the top guy there saying how they cover things has to change because their deadlines and everything else has changed.

To go back to smaller papers, I know the *Beacon* is a pretty big journal.

Pulitzer prize winner and all that.

I know given that the *Youngstown Vindicator* closed recently. You've worked at smaller papers before working at the *Beacon*. How has that affected these small places with getting news or even pop culture?

Of course, anytime you lose a news outlet the public suffers, whether they recognize it or not. Coverage shrinks the public suffers, whether it's immediate or not. So, y' know the loss of the *Vindicator* was a big blow to the Youngstown area. The *Beacon* has some wonderful people working for it. It used to have more wonderful people working for it. But the economic realities at least as the ownership sees it changed that. Unfortunately, I don't think they've made the wisest decisions. I know some people who worked that and no longer work there but should still be there. So, there are problems, but I've been out of the daily journalism game for years now about three and a half. It's sad to see sometimes what's going on there.

What made you decide to leave there? You've been there a long time or as you alluded to earlier there were some changes you weren't happy with.

Well, I was sixty-five years old you know. It was time. It was time to move on. I was at an age where my wife and I could both afford to retire. We looked at what was going on in the world and decided it was time to retire. Of course, I kept teaching here, so it hasn't exactly been retirement. But it was time to get out of the daily newspaper game.

Yeah, it's a different pace and a different kind of stress than trying to reach a certain deadline and get a bunch of stuff out.

There are still deadlines, but if I see a bunch of drafts from students for a Monday/Wednesday class. I want those done by Wednesday. There are still deadlines. There is still that kind of stress.

What do you think about these places like *The Devil Strip* or the revived *Vindicator* trying Co-Ops or different economic models?

It's interesting, but I haven't kept up with it. It's not an area I'm involved in.

Since you teach both composition and film appreciation, what was the experience like first coming in to teach since you wrote about pop culture for a mass audience? What I mean is you're writing and talking about pop culture there, but it's a different arena where you're trying to teach students and talking about film and some of those things. What was that like?

I've only been teaching film classes over the past couple of years. So, most of my teaching has been in composition. I taught a newspaper feature writing course one semester and a couple independent film courses. Most of what I've taught is composition. It's a matter of getting people to look at a text in a certain way. In that

respect it's not hugely far removed from what I did before. Insofar as, when you're writing about film, or writing about television, or writing about books, you're saying here is something I've seen in it. Let me explain about why I think it's worth talking about. Let me explain why it's good or bad. So, you're framing argument and you're basically writing essays. A good friend of mind has pointed out that when you're in the newspaper game and you go talk to a student class, you say okay we're going to write four essays this term. My other job was I need to write four essays this week. It's not an enormous leap from what I did before in terms of structure and argument. And certainly, when I was in the newspaper game, I was fortunate to have some really good editors who you could talk ideas through. Had colleagues to talk ideas through. That was mostly to test your argument. How you're trying to say what you're going to say, and do you think you're being clear here. And that's a lot of what I'm doing now. It's the same thing as what is the idea you're trying to express and how you're going to go about expressing it. I don't think it was as big of a leap as it might have been. It was certainly, a different kind of reading and it wasn't as random as it could sometimes be in the newspaper. Like, it's Monday and oh what do I feel like writing about? What's going on in the world? But there's a certain thing about it. Did I answer your question?

Absolutely! That's what I was kind of getting at. Also, how do I want to word this. Now, that you're teaching what do you love about teaching?

It's the students. I just like them. I hope I make them better writers and thinkers. I think that everyone has a different story that is interesting. Some are sad and some are joyous, but I just like being around the young people to talk about these things. It's not always easy for me or them to talk at 7:15 in the morning.

I'm guessing you also love getting all these different perspectives. You're meeting all these people from different walks of life. You get interesting readings of texts and so many other things.

It's always fun when a student goes in a direction you hadn't thought about. Or you watch them notice something and build on it. They may be doing something you've already seen, but they discovered it in a cool and interesting way. It also happens in film as well. They're looking at a film and see this idea at work you hadn't thought about, and that's fun too.

To go off of that people really do love film, but they don't have the opportunity to take a film criticism course. They can go to YouTube, but the quality of the film criticism varies. What are some things that someone who may not necessarily have that opportunity to take a class with you or Professor Wasserman could do?

You mean in appreciating film?

Yeah, I remember when after I had asked my friend who had done his undergrad in Cinema Studies and he told me to see some German Expressionist films. What are some things like that could help those people, since you teach film?

Well, what's happening in my classes so far, you have this film and you have a strong visceral reaction to it. Why do you have a strong reaction to it? What can we look at it in it, and see the way it's playing with this? For instance, we were looking at *Crazy Rich Asians* not too long ago in film appreciation. We go ok, what do we make of the music? Why are some of the songs in English and why are some of the others in Chinese even if they're known to a general pop audience? Why is it and why are we getting an Elvis song at this point and others? We're looking at this movie and it is trafficking in romantic comedy clichés. Up to the couple meeting in the airplane with it about to take off, but what has the movie done to make that interesting for us? How is it done in terms of visuals? Thinking about the glossiness of it and how it looks, but also what it's doing to be different with those clichés. Then we compared it to *When Harry Met Sally* and ask it some more questions and go from there. Not only that, but going on *When Harry Met Sally*, Nora Ephron has an essay about writing the script for *When Harry Met Sally* that's really interesting. She talks about the place of the writer and the director in a piece. It's not necessarily getting heavy into film criticism, but we can see "oh that's how it is." How the movie is. Or in the case of *Parasite* we can look at that. Or if we go back to say *Vertigo* or *Citizen Kane*, how is the story being told and how are the characters being illuminated and what do we take from that.

To add to that, let's imagine a "starter pack" for a budding film student. What would say are a couple of films that you should really see? In talking about film, we always go back and talk about the greatest films...

Going to last semester we watched both *Vertigo* and *Citizen Kane*. The two films have topped the BFI's list of greatest films of all-time list. *Vertigo* being a relative newcomer, but *Kane* being there for a long time. The problem is people look at films differently than they did forty years ago or sixty or seventy. We expect a different tempo, different technology. When I say we, I mean the current audience. Sometimes they can get over that and sometimes they can't. The way we view characters has changed. I had to teach the *Maltese Falcon* and boy did students not like that movie.

Really? They didn't like that one (*Maltese Falcon*)?

Yeah, it has to do with the characters. The way that film does characters is not what we're accustomed to now these days. But as a starter pack? Oh Gosh.

Sorry to put you on the spot here.

I would start with *Vertigo* and *Kane* because they're so acclaimed, but to look at why they are so acclaimed and what it does. Of course, now you've seen nine thousand films that have stolen things from those two. But let's see what these guys are doing there. I would throw in Spike Lee. I think *BlackKklansman* is a real interesting work. I would put in... I might try *Hurt Locker*. Just for them to get a sense of Kathryn Bigelow. But that's the kind of list that would change day to day. Right now, I'd put *Parasite* in there. Again, it would change tomorrow. I taught *Taxi Driver* last term, partly because

Joker was in the air so much at the time. *King Comedy* and *Taxi Driver* serve as the template for it, but now that the buzz has died down maybe I would use a different Scorsese. *Taxi Driver* is still an epically disturbing movie.

I haven't seen that yet, but it's on my list and I know it'll bother me in a different way

You should take a look at it.

Yeah, I also remember talking about *A Woman Under the Influence*. That was hard for me to watch. I remember having to stop the film at least once before I could return to it.

I wept when I saw it.

Oh, I wept too.

Yeah, I remember seeing it the first time in theaters when it came out.

Now, to round these out to round these aren't exactly simple questions, but who are your top seven directors?

Gah, I saw that on the list of questions. That's killing me here

(both laugh)

I mean you can just list the "definites" now...

Capra.

Frank Capra?

Yeah, absolutely. One of these days I want to teach a course on fake news in the movies. Capra is an interesting case in that regard. Films like *Meet John Doe* and *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. There are several of his movies that traffic in the idea of fake news. Probably, Ford.

John Ford?

Yeah, I just watched *The Searchers* a couple weeks ago. Coppola, Scorsese,

You got all the big hitters there.

Spike Lee would be up there. Uh, Ava Duvernay has done some interesting stuff. She may not be in top 7, but she is definitely honorable mention and someone you should pay attention to. *Selma*, *Middle of Nowhere* and there's a lot of cool and interesting stuff

there. Uh, I'm mentally going through all my DVD stands at home. The Coen Brothers, although they're hot and cold. They have some good stuff, but there is some bad stuff there too. But there's a lot of extraordinary stuff there. Same thing with Paul Thomas Anderson. When he's good he is really good, but when he's bad he's horrid. Uh, couple of his works I don't need to see ever again.

(Both Laugh)

Any in Particular? Cause I haven't...

Oh, that one with Joaquin Phoenix that was adapted from the Pynchon novel...

Wasn't it that one that came out a couple years ago?

Yeah, it was fairly recent.

Wasn't it *Inherent Vice*?

Yes, *Inherent Vice*. Unbearable movie. On the other hand, he's got movies like *The Master* and *Boogie Nights*.

I've never seen those, but I've heard *Punch Drunk Love* is significant too.

It's significant. *The Phantom Thread* I wasn't wild about that one, but...(sighing).

You got at least six and an honorable mention there.

But it's such a predictable list (laughing). I mean you look at Spielberg and what he's done. You got to give him attention.

Yeah, I feel like if they're giving disrespect, they're being disingenuous.

Again, you've got Kathryn Bigelow and you've got the director of *The Farewell* out there right now. I want to see what she does next. You've got *Parasite* and *Snowpiercer* which was real interesting.

Yeah, I remember seeing that it's an interesting science fiction film.

Both of those are movies that you think you're in one genre but watch what we do with this. So, there is a lot of cool stuff out there to see. Eric (Wasserman) would of course be irked that I didn't mention Cassavetes.

(Laughing) Yeah, I love Cassavetes. He's become one of my favorites.

I love him also. I showed Cassavetes when I taught independent film last time, but you gotta be willing to commit.

I've seen seven of his films at this point, and I do think if you love indie films you need to go see his films.

Yes, but anyway, you'll also notice that Tarantino is not on that list. Deliberately.

Yeah, I understand. The last time I saw a Tarantino film was... like, I saw *Django Unchained* opening night in high school. That was like seven or eight years ago, almost a decade for me.

Tarantino speaks to a certain audience. I know I'm not that audience, but he speaks to them especially a young audience. A lot of those people love him, and I see it in my film courses. There are Big Tarantino fans.

Yeah, for me I'm not going to say he's a bad filmmaker. He's at least competent, and no one can say the dude doesn't know anything about films.

Oh no, my issue with him in many cases is he's so intent on showing how much he knows about certain things that he takes us out of experiencing the movie. In some vague intellectual exercise that I don't need to partake in.

Now, we can do top seven films, but you don't have to since we did top seven directors.

I used to have a list on my blog called "Movies I've Seen More than Once." And that was what I went from. Another qualifier is movies you have to stop and watch them. You can't go on about your life when these come on. That would be things like *The Godfather*, *My Darling Clementine*, now that's a tough question to think about on a Monday morning.

Now, I have one last question. I think this is going to be an easier and more interesting one at least for the readers. What are some films or directors that are overrated/underrated?

(laughing) I think Tarantino is wildly overrated. I'm pretty straightforward about it. Now I have no idea where Billy Wilder stands these days. But he is one of my favorites up there. Particularly because he worked in black and white... I think he should be up there. If you look at a film like *The Apartment* which is an incredible work, and you look at *Sunset Boulevard*.

Oh, I hear *Sunset Boulevard* is incredible.

There are some Wilder films that end up in the canon, but that doesn't necessarily mean he does. Ok, underrated...

Not just directors you can do films.

Nothing is coming to me right now.

Well, you can send me a list, but you can also just say favorites.

Well favorites are hard because what may be your favorite is not necessarily the best. But they're the ones that we love.

Yeah, like I don't know how people will feel if I say that Dario Argento's *Suspiria* while a good film, is massively overrated. I don't think it's his best overall film, I'd say *Profondo Rosso* is.

Now, that's a director I unfortunately don't know.

Yeah, *Suspiria* is considered one of the best horror films of the seventies. It's gorgeous to look at, but it has no plot...

Plot is pretty important.

Yeah, and the characters are twenty-year olds who act twelve because it was originally written that they were twelve. But if they kept them that age the film would have gotten banned in 1978 Italy with all the violence. So, there is that weird disconnect with characters.

Yeah, like I don't get the love for *Uncut Gems*. It's an incredibly flawed film.

Sometimes those films are the best.

It's got a good Adam Sandler performance in the middle of it. But it's still so flawed. It's one of those things like *Woman Under the Influence* will always be in my head, but that's because I had such an incredibly strong reaction to it when I first saw it. I know it's something you have to commit to. It's not something you expect from someone like Gena Rowlands or a character. Some people have to get used to how a character goes. There are Hitchcock films I love more probably because I went to the theaters to see them in the seventies. You know they're not the best, and they're not major Hitchcocks. But there are scenes in *Frenzy* that are horrifying. Problem is when I go back and look at the movie as a whole now, it's like well that's not major Hitchcock. But there is stuff in there that sticks.

Yeah, and even then, sometimes bad films end up being influential. The example I would use is, I saw Herschell Gordon Lewis' *Two Thousand Maniacs*. That film is horrible, but it's so entertaining.

Absolutely.

And without that film we don't get things like John Waters doing *Multiple Maniacs*. You don't have Tobe Hooper doing *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. Or even the developments in those horror genres/subgenres. But it's such a bad film

Yeah, it is. But also take a film like *Plan 9 from Outer Space*.

(Laughing) Yeah that is so bad.

Yeah, but that's the deal. It's not the worst movie ever made, but there is a critic out there who argues that what draws people to that film, is what does he call it? The utter sincerity of it. That (Ed)Wood was really trying to make a great movie. He's not going out there just to make a bad movie because he can. *Plan 9* and *The Room* are the best that they can do. That makes a huge difference.

Yeah, and especially since it came out in the fifties. Like, back then you needed to have some more technical knowledge even to make a bad film. It's ridiculous, you need to be able to slice the film in particular way and you feel so bad because they're trying so hard.

But we have movies that we love and they may not be good films, but we have a connection to them. When you're my age that connection has a lot to do with when you see them in theaters. Like, I'm a Netflix guy. Netflix, Hulu, Disney Plus, Prime Video guy...

I hope you're supporting your library with Kanopy (chuckling)

No, Kanopy is one I ask my students about every term too. Just to say hey this thing is out there.

Yeah, they also have a great selection of films out there.

Yeah, I've found some nifty stuff on there as well. But there's still that sitting in the theater in the dark. That's a lot so different.

I agree, for I just saw *Pain and Glory* over the weekend.

I did too.

I think my experience was enhanced in some way. I talked to the guy doing tickets and he was wearing a Kate Bush t-shirt. I like her music and we talked about her stuff and Lou Reed and other conversations. Like, I found he was a NEOMFA student here. When I went into the theater, I was in there with just three people, an older couple and their adult son. During the introduction, the person doing so said "I thought this was a more interesting film that *Parasite* was." I was like woah, I'm in there and there is going to be an experience that I love that I wouldn't have.

And what did you think?

See, I can't make that assessment. I really liked the film, but I haven't seen *Parasite*.

Ahh...

Well, every time I've tried to go see it in theaters it's sold out there and etc.

Well, it's digital now. It's Downloadable.

I just really wanted to see it in the theaters, and that's the thing and I just wanted to see it in theaters. I will say Antonio Banderas' performance was incredible.

He was really good. I would still rank Phoenix ahead of him, but he was still amazing and really touching.

Yeah, with that movie I always think as a creative writer and poet about what obligations I have, and other things about my work. I also especially like how he used color in the film with the set design, cinematography. Since I had not seen an Almodovar film. I also loved how I felt like I really knew this character. I also liked that they treated his sexuality as just a minor part of him.

Yeah, and again there is that section in the beginning where he is explaining all those things that's wrong with him. Using the anatomical stuff with all the colors was a pretty compelling way to cover that ground. So, when he talks about stuff later on it's not just an artistic component.

And there's also a mental component.

Yes!

It's not just that he's struggling to engage with his creativity in the way he wants. He's also depressed among all the other things. It's not just that he can't physically do it. There are so many reasons why he can't do it.

Also, there is that nice shot at the end where the young boy and mother are there on the bench. Then, it ever so slightly changes to the person with the boom mic overhead. It was just beautifully done.

Oh yeah. That was just... I was just really surprised. It was so good. I was going into it not knowing anything. I just decided oh I'm going to see this movie, since I can't see *Parasite*. It was the best accident.

Yeah, I try to get to and see all the major Oscar nominated stuff, and this year I failed. I didn't see *Two Popes*, but I saw just about everything else.

It was just incredible to see. Especially, since I had seen *Andrei Rublev* not too long ago, and I love Tarkovsky's work. To see a film like that, that is a huge epic about the artist's obligation to society and about creativity. But, making and scaling this film down to just the personal level was incredible and interesting to see.

Yeah.

I think we should be good here! Thank you for your time.

No problem.

After a couple days Heldenfels sent me a list of his favorite directors and films. Here is his response.

Well, this is impossible.

The problem with choosing favorite directors is that there are many directors I love but who have made movies I don't love. And that I keep thinking of directors whom I love based on a movie or two, but who are so good in those few that I do not want to leave them off a favorites list. So, in a complete cop-out, I am offering a list of directors who to some degree make me pay attention.

It is a list that is heavily tilted toward commercial American film, but then so am I. In no real order:

Preston Sturges, John Ford, Kathryn Bigelow, Frank Capra, Billy Wilder, Ava DuVernay, Spike Lee, Woody Allen (in the 60s/70s), Robert Altman, the Coen brothers, Wes

Anderson, Walter Hill, Alfred Hitchcock, Francis Coppola, John Huston, Greta Gerwig, Melina Matsoukas, Bong Joon-ho, Jordan Peele, Steven Spielberg.

So, some favorite movies, and I could barely stop with these:

It's a Wonderful Life

The Godfather

The Searchers

Love Actually

The Great Escape

Network

All That Jazz

Schindler's List

Saving Private Ryan

The Lady Eve

Near Dark

Blade Runner

The Maltese Falcon