



Titans as Teens

Transcript: James Gray Episode 12

The podcast is here:

<https://www.titansasteens.com/james-gray-film-director-and-screen-writer/>

[Theme music full up then down for...]

Brody: [00:00:00] Hey all, Brody here with a new episode of Titans as Teens, a podcast where I've detailed conversations with interesting people from all walks of life, about their teen experience and the knowledge they have for teens today. Today, I had the pleasure of speaking with the writer and director James Gray.

James: [00:00:23] I can mention tons of great directors, Alfred Hitchcock, and John Ford and Howard Fox and William Wyler.

All these people's names, you probably don't know. And maybe a couple of you do. But I could show you these movies today and you would be riveted. They understood story and that's in three or four years after the medium was invented. What other art form is this true about? Nothing.

Brody: [00:00:47] James Gray is one of the most unique people I've ever had the privilege to speak with. His intense passion for film, coupled with his immense store of knowledge makes for very captivating conversation.

James is best known as a prolific Hollywood director. His first film coming out in 1994, titled Little Odessa. Since then, James has had an incredibly impressive history, working frequently with actors, such as Mark Wahlberg and Joaquin Phoenix in multiple films. Most recently he's released two films to critical acclaim, The Lost City of Z, and Ad Astra.

My conversation with James was a very lively one, and I began by asking him which high school he attended and how his experience was.

James: [00:01:28] My story is a little bit weird. I was, um, I was going to public school in New York, in the 1970s, and it's very hard to describe to somebody who doesn't know what New York in the 1970s means.

You know, my, my kids and I watch movies all the time. And we've been watching all these classic films and some from the 1930s and forties, but some also from the seventies and one that we saw was the French Connection which shows that New York was a kind of really dilapidated, garbage dump of the city, you know, back then.

And it's very well, actually, sadly right now it's going through something very difficult, but even, you know, as fairly, as a fairly recent, it was a very different city than the one I grew up



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in. And I went to public school in that context. My, I remember my class had 50 kids in it. And in second grade, because of school funding, they made what they call the cross-grade of second and third grade and, you know, one teacher for 50 kids and it was nuts.

And when I was in sixth grade, my parents had, had pretty much enough. And basically, scraping up their last dime sent me to a private school called the Kew Forest School, where I went to high school. And the school meant a lot to me, you know, and I was a pretty mediocre student and certainly did my fair share of cheating on tests, which is terrible to admit to you now,

but it's true, if I'm, to be honest. And I'm ashamed of it now, but it's, it's a fact. And the truth is the school sort of saved my life. Everybody. I went to public school with up to sixth grade, you know, they're like un-Google-able, you know, I don't know what happened to any of them. And everybody that I went to school with in private school wound up doing okay, which tells you in some ways, really about the privileged position that I wound up finding myself in and how lucky I was and am.

So, my high school experience was great. I remember. I had one, you know, as usually is the case you have one or two teachers that really can change your life. You know, there'd be like a bunch of teachers are kind of mediocre or not interesting, or actually flat out bad. And the classroom's insane. But if you have one or two that are really great, that's about all you can ask for, and that's actually enough. And I had a Latin teacher, which was a subject I was - thought was boring and horrible, and I had no interest in although stupidly. And he and his wife sort of took an interest in me, I guess as kind of the weird kid and also my French teacher. And they said, well, what are your interests?

I said, well, my interests are, I really love Patrick Ewing and Knicks basketball and Don Mattingly. And yet in the Yankees baseball. And they said we can't really anything about that. And I love movies and they said, well, we'll start a film club. And my interest in the cinema grew exponentially after starting this film club.

And what we used to do is on Friday afternoons, we would take the subway to a revival house, which would show old movies and afterwards go to a dinner and, you know, at some cheap place, you know, get pizza or burgers or whatever, and discuss the movie we had just seen. Phenomenal, phenomenal, and really, really changed my life

Brody: [00:05:00] obviously. I mean.

James: [00:05:01] And by the way, I still talk to my Latin teacher, three times a week. One of my best friends, he became. It's a wonderful treasure to me, my relationship with him.

Brody: [00:05:12] That's incredible that you still talk to him like how many years ago is that now? Not to be rude.



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James: [00:05:17] Yeah. About a trillion years ago, we were talking, this is 30 years ago, now I graduated from high school in 1987. And he wasn't my teacher really after 1983. So, it's a long time ago and amazingly he's actually done the music for a few of my films. So, uh, it's become a kind of professional relationship as well. He's a remarkable guy. I mean, he has his PhD in the classics, you know, so you can, I'll call him up to this day and I'll say, you know, what is, is there a myth that has this or that.

And can you direct me to read something, you know, like just the other day, you know, I was where I'm working on a new movie and he said, yeah, why don't you check out Sophocles, uh, Philoctetes. So of course, I went off and read Philoctetes. So, it's been a very fruitful on a sort of intellectual level, a very fruitful relationship that keeps on giving.

Brody: [00:06:13] I wish I had a teacher like that, to be honest,

James: [00:06:16] You may, and by the way, if you don't have one in high school, it's okay. You may have one in college, you know, uh, it would be great if you had one in high school though. Someone that really engaged you on a sort of passionate level about, particularly in my case, it was about the humanities, you know, and it opened my eyes up to a world, filled with Homer and Virgil and Shakespeare and, uh, a whole bunch of the sort of people that form the kind of underpinnings in both good and bad ways of Western culture.

And that was a very, very helpful thing to me and something. I still draw on a lot. You know, I joked to you before about how I cheated a lot? And it's certainly true. Um, I, I shouldn't say I joke, but you know, I didn't read a lot of the books I was supposed to read in high school. For example, they assigned us Moby Dick when I was a senior. And I started reading it.

But, you know, I got very bored, you know, a guy, call me Ishmael and all this stuff about whaling and I just didn't get it. So, I think I read half the book and then I went to what you call the CliffsNotes or Monarch Notes, I think they have a different name now.

Brody: [00:07:26] It's still CliffsNotes,

James: [00:07:27] it's still CliffsNotes, which are really, really shitty.

I mean, they don't, they summarize the thing, but that doesn't mean anything. And only when I reached my mid-thirties, did I go back and read Moby Dick. But in some ways, I'm glad because what I got out of the book, I think was so much more than anything I could have gotten out of it when I was 17 or 16 years old.

And of course, I was blown away. I thought it was incredible. So, in some ways these works find you, they have a way of finding you when you deserve to find them. Same thing is true by the way, with Tolstoy's Anna Karenina, which I read only when I was in my late twenties and thought it was the greatest thing ever.

The logo features a stylized red letter 'T' with a white outline. To its right, the words 'Titans' and 'as Teens' are stacked vertically in a bold, black, sans-serif font.

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And I never would have gotten it when I was 13, 14 or 15 and Shakespeare.

Brody: [00:08:17] Shakespeare, oh my God .My school has, um, every kid read Shakespeare once every year, one Shakespeare book a year. And I think. What they're doing is successfully making every single kid hate Shakespeare by the time they graduate. But that's just my opinion.

James: [00:08:34] Well I totally understand. I had no connection to Shakespeare. I will tell you my experience story, which is very weird. Like you in high school, I had to read Hamlet, Macbeth. I think it was Hamlet, Macbeth, Midsummer Night's Dream, and maybe Romeo and Juliet although you forget these things. But what I had to read in junior high school, and well, maybe Julius Caesar in Latin class too.

And I remember being bored and not really understanding them because, you know, it's pretty hard to understand them. They're written in a sense and it's slightly different language. And then in 2001, I was 31. I, I wasn't yet 32. I went to see a Shakespeare play Measure For Measure in Central Park in New York it was performed.

It's quite a different thing to see Shakespeare performed. Because first of all, you begin to understand much more - somehow that physical action gives you a context for what they're talking about. But also, I was older, and I started to understand why Shakespeare is as amazing as he was. Because he was the master of both external struggle for a character and internal struggle, which we can get into if you want to.

But it was much more important, Shakespeare as a dramatic idea, even the language and in school, in high school, they would focus on the beauty of the language, which of course is valid. But there's a lot more going on. And, and, and if your school is making you hate Shakespeare, which I'm sure they are, may well be because they're not really talking about it right.

Brody: [00:10:13] How would you, you propose then teachers talk about Shakespeare in class.

James: [00:10:17] Great question, I guess, to focus on the dramatic aspects of it. A little bit less on the language right now. Because at your age, the language beauty does escape you. You know what I mean? You're not going to it's no matter how beautiful the verse it's, it doesn't really matter.

It doesn't mean anything, but what does matter, I'll give you a perfect example. On Measure For Measure. So, the story of Measure For Measure is basically that a guy fathers, a child out of wedlock, And an ambitious judge, a young ambitious judge, this takes place in Venice in like 1500, is going to sentence this guy to death for doing that.



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Now nobody's put to death, even in Venice in, 1500 people, weren't put to death for fathering, a child when they're not married. So, the sister of the guy who was going to be put to death, comes to the judge and she says, please don't kill my brother. Nobody's killed for this, how could you kill him? And the judge looks at her and says, "You're awfully pretty. Okay. I won't kill your brother, but you have to have sex with me." Here's the wrinkle. She's a nun. So, does she have sex with this judge to save her brother and basically God will look down on her. Or. Does she behave herself according to her religion? And then all of a sudden, her brother is put to death.

Now that is an incredible narrative or storytelling conundrum, problem, issue, catastrophe. But if you have a test on it, where you're asked about the language, it's not really going to direct your focus, especially as a 16-year-old or whatever, on what is the dramatically more exciting idea in it. And when I took Shakespeare in high school, they would quote part of the play and say, this play, this is from a Hamlet b) Macbeth c) you know, trying to get you to cite which play it was from, which is folly .

That's not really what you're supposed to get out of it. So, I would try to focus if I were teaching Shakespeare in high school, which I'm not. I would try to focus it more on the dramatic aspects of it, which can be very exciting. They're all filled with all the things we love in movies, right. They're filled with lots of murder and sex.

So, I would focus on those dramatic aspects that Shakespeare was a master of.

Brody: [00:13:05] Yeah. I mean, it makes sense too. I mean, Shakespeare films when adopted are all, honestly back in the day were some of the most popular films when they came out. So, it makes sense as to the drama being timeless.

James: [00:13:17] Yeah. I mean, if you watch The Godfather, which is made in 1972, but still has, or 71 shot in 71 came out in 72 it still has a lot of drama to it for, even for young people, although I don't know if you've seen that movie, what you think of. It gets very dramatic, very Shakespearian. You know, it's almost, it's not quite, but it's almost like an adaptation of a Shakespeare play with, without, you know, the verse. It has the same ideas in it, you know, the same mythic ideas. So, I would sort of try to focus on the drama of it in a way. I don't know, maybe you can tell me how they teach it in school that makes kids hate it, do they focus more on the language. Is that what it is?

Brody: [00:14:03] You got it, nail on hammer pretty much directly like it's language, um, kind of verse analysis, learning about iambic pentameter and all that kind of not so interesting.

James: [00:14:18] Well, all of that has tremendous value, but as a 15 or 16 or 17-year-old, it's, it's reducing it to a kind of mechanics for you, the language. It's not helpful. It's sort of like I'll give you an example. Okay.



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Why is a superhero movie, which can be by the way very entertaining. But why is a superhero movie ultimately, ultimately really limited in what it can do. Well, mostly they're limited, not always, but mostly they're limited. And I say not always, because the main character is a super hero, not a hero. And a hero can be very conflicted. A hero can be very wounded inside. A human can sometimes achieve things that aren't so great. A hero is a product of a complicated and complex world. The superhero has special powers. The superhero is usually not conflicted.

The superhero usually knows exactly what he or she, usually he, has to do. The world is filled with good people and bad people. And it's very simple in that way. So, the level of story is not as sophisticated. Shakespeare brings a sophisticated sense of story. And so, if we focus on, iambic pentameter as opposed to story, it's why you see, you know, 50-year olds reading Harry Potter, or dressing up as captain America.

And that's very charming that they still are in touch with their childhood or adolescence, but life is a little bit more complicated than that. And I think at the time, age of 50, it's important that we focus on the things that make, life dare I say complex, and sometimes uncomfortable for us. That's what being an adult is.

And so, I sense that in the world at large, we might've lost a little bit of that. And maybe it's because we focused on iambic pentameter in high school, as opposed to the story.

Brody: [00:16:41] Hmm,

James: [00:16:42] Story matters.

Brody: [00:16:43] We're losing the larger meaning for the small details.

James: [00:16:47] Maybe, you know, it's hard for me to say really definitively, of course, because I'm not out there in high school right now.

I'm not teaching in colleges or high school. But knowing and seeing what people respond to and seeing the level of analysis and the amount of focus, I can only speak as someone who is involved in the movies. You know, people take Wonder Woman very, very seriously. And Wonder Woman's terrific for my daughter.

You know, who at the time was nine or 10 years old when she saw it. And she was thrilled that there was a super heroine or Black Panther was thrilling, you know, because it showed a new take on a superhero. That's great. I'm not, I'm not saying that that's not of value. But when you start reading adults, talk about this stuff, I'm troubled because there's more to life than having super powers.

It's sort of like, the analogy I would use is, you know...Popeye's chicken sandwich is really delicious. It really is. But you couldn't really make an argument, I don't think that Popeye's



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chicken sandwiches, are either better for you or more delicious than a home cooked meal with the best ingredients you could possibly get. So, I'm troubled when I see adults try to make the argument that the Popeye's chicken sandwich cultural equivalent, is as good as any home cooked meal could ever be, because it just isn't. There are other nutrients involved in a home cooked meal that you can't get. So again, not saying the Popeye's chicken sandwich, isn't delicious.

It is. But it's my way of trying to explain that these are really popular cultural elements. Does this make any sense at all?

Brody: [00:18:47] Yeah, I totally, I, I think I totally get it. But my kind of theory for why you're explaining what you're explaining is true, is kind of just like the way the average person perceives movies is they like to have it an easy experience, right?

You're going to have a much easier time understanding the Avengers as you watch it. It's pretty much explained to you as you watch it, versus trying to think of the Godfather and who who's moral and who's not.

James: [00:19:17] Right. Oh, a hundred percent. Well, you know, a lot of that has to do with the fact that the movies have not really, in some sense, they, they're not, they haven't evolved past where they started. You know, movies started as a thing where you, at what they called the Nickelodeon, you'd put a coin in and you'd watch this screen, this little light box with cards that flipped to create motion. Really around 1900, 1905, 1910, somewhere in there. And they, they never really evolved past that.

We don't, we don't really treat them as a serious art form still. Here's an example. If I said to you, I give the Avengers three stars out of four, four stars out of five on my scale of five stars. You don't think twice. What if I said to you, I give Pablo Picasso's Guernica, four paint brushes out of five. You would sound like a complete fool. So that tells you that the movies are still open for this kind of like easily digestible, fast food process, then painting is. You would never assess a Beatles album. Well, I guess Rolling Stone does. And you know, I guess they get away with it, but to me you would never say about, uh, you know, a Bach recording, uh, that it gets eight batons out of 10, you know. It's demeaning to the art.

And you're quite right. It's easier to eat a Popeye's chicken sandwich, which is again delicious. And I have them every now and then, cause they're delicious, even though, you know, I'm not supposed to eat them or whatever for a variety of reasons, but we, you know, we eat them. They're great. But it's easier to eat that than it is to make something where I can pick the things out of my little garden. It's tiny. I don't have much space for it, but I'll pick, a tomato that I've grown, and I have some basil or whatever, and I make my dinner. That has more nutrients in it, but it's harder. It's harder to eat organically. It's more expensive. Agribusiness has made eating organic chicken, organic apples, really hard. In some neighborhoods, they have no access to groceries with organic produce. So, it's the



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same analogy. It's very hard sometimes to like a great movie. It's work. And this idea that you just go in and you have a great time. Guernica by Picasso is hard to look at. It's uncomfortable. It's the violence of the Franco, uh, the Spanish, civil war and Franco, and what he meant to that country.

And that's unpleasant for us. But that's what art does, art purpose to express the things that are actually sometimes hard, sometimes uncomfortable, because that's how we can confront them and make the world better. If you just sit there and you say, yeah, I just want something easy that goes in and out, and it's very easy and I can digest it like that. And I don't have to think it's like a drug. There's a momentary high, but in the long run, it doesn't make you a better person. And I think it's important to accept that the part of life is not so easy. You know, I have young children and when they were even younger, I would read them Dr. Seuss, who I recognize now, apparently my children have told me I'm not woke enough to know that Dr. Seuss has had some very uncomfortable and unpleasant political thing, a political aspects to him when he was younger. All of which I'm sure are validly awful. But if I extricate myself, myself from knowing about Dr. Seuss's sort of more illiberal, uh, positions, I can recognize that all the places you'll go has great beauty in it.

And he warns us in it. He wants the young child in it, that sometimes life will be not so easy. Sometimes it will be hard. Look at the world we live in with COVID. Look at the economically hard times that we are in that will maybe get worse. Life is hard. And art allows us to prepare for that and allows us to cope with how life can be hard.

And even if you're super rich, if somebody gave me tomorrow a hundred million dollars or whatever, my life would still be hard, and your life would still be hard. And how do we deal with that? That's what art does.

So, the superhero tells us that we have extra powers. It's not always going to be that way.

And to me as growing up as a kid in Queens, New York, where there were aspects of my life, that weren't great, and the city was not in great shape. Art allowed me to contextualize that, understand that cope with that. And live a more enriched life. To me, it's just everything, you know, I've dedicated my life now to making films and a certain kind of movie, you know, and not just trying to make something that goes down easy.

My job, I think, is to kind of try to sugarcoat the pill a little bit. To me in the long run that has a richer, a richer effect.

Brody: [00:25:20] Hmm. What I've kind of noticed. And I would like your opinion on this, because this is my kind of as an outsider perspective. It seems to me that slowly movies or films are getting more artistic in their meaning and their style, or at least some of them. Obviously not Avengers and the, um, Trolls, or whatever, but like recently Joker was one of the most beautiful movies I personally have seen. And I thought that kind of embodied what



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you were talking about. And I'm curious to know, if you think in the future movies will embody that kind of artistic style that you're imagining, or will it stay more Avengers-esque?

James: [00:26:03] You're asking, you know, what they say is the sort of \$64,000 question. I mean, you're asking me a question, which is a matter of enormous debate, both publicly on in show business circles.

You know, it's interesting. If I have to think about it and I do, actually, you have to look at how movies have weirdly evolved. They've evolved, in a way, which mirrors the demands of the audience and of technology. So, for example, why is it now that we see movies that are two hours long? That's kind of what we accept as the length, right?

You say, if a movie is three hours, that's a long movie and we use 80 minutes. You say that's a short movie. Well, they arrived at a length of two hours, very, very quickly. Really, in a matter of about four years before your period, I'm going to give you if I hope this doesn't bore you. And if it does, by the way, you can stop me, a minor history lesson, in a sense about this.

When you look at movies, they are different from any other art form that has ever been invented. Because in some sense, the human race, human beings needed movies before we knew we needed movies.

What do I mean? Okay. The earliest cave paintings, between the earliest cave paintings, and when we started to talk about things like perspective in paintings, when we started to learn about light and shading, when we start... you look at early cave painting, it's very primitive, right? It's a kind of a paint, unlike the cave paintings of Lascaux, which I guess are 40,000 years old. They're just a, kind of a one-dimensional stick figure. And, uh, you know, a painting of like, uh, of like a horse or a bull or something. 40,000 years later perspective came in. Well, let's say 39,000 years later perspective came in. And sculpting with light. And a creation of an attempt to create the illusion of depth 39,000 years.

Movies were invented, sound for movies was invented somewhere around 1927, 1928, 1929, we got the first sound, feature, length films. They say it's *The Jazz Singer*, but that has a lot of silent parts. And within three years, four years, two hours is the settled format and an explosion of masterpieces. All these great directors, all this huge industry sprouts up the studio system in Hollywood. This incredible explosion of great movies from the 1930s over and over and over again. I can mention tons of great directors, Alfred Hitchcock, and John Ford and Howard Hawks and William Wyler. All these people's names. You probably don't know. And maybe a couple of you do, but I could show you these movies today and you would be riveted.

They understood story. And that's in three or four years after the medium was invented. What other art form is this true about? Nothing. So why is this?



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It's because the movies are combining composition of painting. There's obviously music. There's dance and the way that the actors move in the frame. Obviously, theater in how actors act. It's combining all of the art forms that had, photography, all the art forms that had existed before it, combined into one. And it became like your dream. You sat in a movie theater and the projection there's my projector up there, the light came from behind your head onto a screen, and it became like an extension of the dreams you have.

So, there was an explosion of masterpieces. Now, what does this mean? You have a bad dream. You don't like it, right? You have a nightmare. A nightmare can tell you a lot about who you are, what you're thinking of, what you're afraid of, but you don't like it. You don't want a nightmare. So that's why the happy ending came into play. People wanted the good dream, not the bad. Now. What happened with movies? Why all of a sudden in the 1960s and 1970s, you watch movies, they're very different than the ones in the thirties. All of a sudden you saw Bonnie and Clyde, and I hope I'm not ruining that movie for anybody, but you should definitely see it, if you haven't. They get riddled with machine gun fire at the end. Or, The Godfather, where Michael Corleone basically goes to hell. What happened?

Well, you had a bunch of college students who were either going to continue going to college or get drafted and fight in Vietnam and die. So, their actual survival was at stake with the draft. All of a sudden, the bad dream they needed to see it. They needed to get to confront that bad dream. Today, college students don't have that threat. So, they don't need movies to address that feeling. Now, what does this mean?

This means that movies mirror, very much where we are. If we should be unlucky enough to see a kind of economic depression, that lasts for a long time, and young people's lives become at stake. I think it will be very hard to just keep watching movies that are good dreams. Because they won't feel like they're connected to our lives in any way. I think that what this means is after this, the immediate pandemic is over, that day will come, I don't know whether it's in six months or two years from now. When that comes, will the economic depression that it leaves behind last, and will the movies need to talk about that?

I think they might. And not only that, I think that if movie theaters can survive this pandemic, I think there'll be very popular. What's the worst thing I can tell you right now? You have to stay at home some more, sit on your couch and watch another movie. You, I think you're going to want to get out. The idea that I'm going to have to still stay at home I want to strangle somebody, if I have to still stay at home six months from now.

So, people are going to want, I think people are going to want to go to movies. And I think they're going to have to address what is a reality in our lives. That this pandemic was devastating and that it has economic ramifications.

So, I think the movies will have to reflect that. Now the flip side is, superhero movies. Which again, I'm not denouncing completely, they can be very fun. And some of them have



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achieved the status of some beautiful art. For some reason, the character of The Joker seems to speak to some kind of artfulness in these movies, because I felt that Heath Ledger in Dark Night, I felt the Christopher Nolan really got at something beautiful there. There's something very sad, very upsetting. And for some reason, The Joker, maybe it's that the character is really great. That seems to be able to allow us to access something dark in us and there's enough distance in the fact that he has makeup, that we can sort of accept it. I don't know. But you know, what Joaquin was able to do in that movie, was show us something truly awful, but we can accept it because he's a comic book character. I don't know. It's a very strange thing, but there's something very dark at the root of that movie. I mean really upsetting at the root of that movie.

Now the flip side is the superhero movie is very translatable to audiences in China, audiences in Europe, audiences in, Africa, you know, because you don't need the specifics, the cultural specifics, it speaks to a very broad audience.

So, it's like. McDonald's in that you can basically have a big Mac in Berlin taste exactly the way it tastes and wherever else you might, you know, in Italy, you can have a big Mac, you can have a big Mac in Beijing or Hong Kong, you know, it's always tasting the same. So, in that sense, I have a little pessimism. So, I come from both places. They fight me. I didn't answer your question.

Brody: [00:35:02] It's close enough. The reason I brought up The Joker though in the first place was the first time I saw that movie, I've only seen it once, however, it deeply disturbed me. The first, this, the first time I saw like that scene, where he shoots the people on the train. Because it's very abrupt and the way the music and like the lighting changes in that kind of place just puts you in a mindset of what the fuck is going on kind of thing. And I think the movie just is brilliant portrayal of mental illness and. All that kind of stuff that are actually, as you said, kind of prevalent right now, but that movie just kind of stuck out to me as a good example of something popular yet also artistic.

James: [00:35:44] Right? Well, I mean, that is achievable. The question really is very clearly the question really is, is that a rarity or do... You know, look. Here's the other way to put it. It's my job to try and make the audience understand something I'm trying to express. So, it's not the audience's fault if they don't like something I did, it's not the audience's fault if they don't get it, it's my fault. So, if framing it just through a comic book character, can allow you to express these things. You know, the more power to us. I think that there will be that opportunity, maybe. Maybe Joker will actually open that up a little bit. Cause you know, Warner Brothers, the studio that made Joker was very nervous about the film. They were very reluctant to make it all that. And it wasn't an expensive movie.

And I think that they were thrilled by how it did. And I think that, you know, it may be maybe it will open up the opportunity for some kind of film like that.



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Brody: [00:36:54] I just, I really hope they don't make a sequel. That's all I'm going to say.

James: [00:36:57] Well, I'm sure they will. They do. They always do right. I mean, that's like that's part of the business model.

Brody: [00:37:04] Yeah, I guess. You know, actually now that I think of it, Joker really reminds me, and you might not have heard of this, of this story Watchmen. The, uh, early graphic novel.

James: [00:37:13] The graphic novel is a masterpiece. Alan Moore is brilliant. The guy, the guy who, is the sort of genius behind Watchmen the graphic novel is, is absolutely fantastic. I read that, uh, I'm dating myself here maybe 20 years ago now, maybe more. And I was blown away, but Alan Moore, if you were, you know, I'm sure Alan Moore viewed the sort of comic book takeover with great skepticism. I think he has a very sophisticated idea of what it means to do a comic book and to use that medium, to express actually rather profound ideas. The Watchmen The Watchmen's brilliant, the guy's name is Alan Moore. Totally brilliant.

Brody: [00:38:01] The same guy who did V for Vendetta.

James: [00:38:03] That's right.

Brody: [00:38:04] Yeah. The reason it just reminds me of Rorschach. I believe I'm pronouncing that right. The main character resembles yeah, The Joker.

James: [00:38:10] Yeah, very much so..

Brody: [00:38:11] In different ways,

James: [00:38:12] I haven't seen the show. Have you?

Brody: [00:38:14] I have seen the show. It's very good. Although albeit different from the book.

James: [00:38:20] Yeah. I, I kind of still feel like that's there to be mined. Isn't it? I mean, yeah. The movie kind of didn't tap into what Moore did completely, I think. But again, I only saw the movie once and when it came out and I was such a fan of the book and in some ways that's not fair because the movie becomes its own thing and you have to forget it. But I do really, like I said, I do remember reading that graphic novel and I, you know, and you can't forget that opening, you know, the blood splotch on the smiley face, as it pulls back, it's, it's so memorable, you know?

And, but like I said, it's, it's been a long time for me when. When you make me 50 years old, you know, you can say, geez, I read that 30 years ago. I don't really remember. And it's sadly



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true. And what do you mean you don't remember that? How can you not remember that? So, like my dad or something, and now I'm in exactly that same place.

You know, it's funny too, because also I see a ton of old movies with my kids and I'll say, Oh, let's see that movie. I've never seen that. About halfway through. I said, this is terrible. I can predict everything that's happening. And then I realized I saw the movie already. I just had forgotten.

Brody: [00:39:28] That's funny. Speaking of forgetting, I've a little quote from you that I think kind of ties into what we were talking about earlier, and you probably forgot it. That's why I said, forget this. Here we go. Quote, James. "The idea of needing that validation is a pretty new last 20 years thing. People now want to make a lot of money or win prizes. The Oscars in the seventies were a joke. I don't think Stanley Kubrick wanted to win prizes". And my question with that is, if you don't want money, prizes or validation, what are you aiming for? Do you want those things?

James: [00:39:57] Well, I think I, now that's fairly recent quote of mine. Um, here's what I meant by that. Of course, you want validation. Of course, you want your movie to make 500 million dollars or whatever domestically, you want everyone to love it. But you can't, you can't go into any creative enterprise. Well, I mean, I guess you can, some people do, but I don't think you can go into any creative enterprise, wanting that as your primary focus. I think your primary focus always has to be, how can I express myself, as clearly and as elegantly and as sincerely as possible. And then if the rest comes, if awards come, if money comes, that's fantastic. That's great. There's nothing wrong with that. That's excellent. But you can't expect it. You can't want that first in line. It has to come second or else the work itself is insincere. And insincere is telling an untruth. And our job as artists, if I may use that dirty word, is to express ourselves sincerely.

Now. I also happen to think that when you win awards, it tends to cloud your perspective a little bit. In, in some sense, you almost have to live like a monk. You know, you have to pursue the work you're doing with a certain kind of clarity towards expressing your insight. And the minute you start taking , your mind, like this is what my audience wants and all of that, that's when you get screwed up or a little bit off base. But even the most commercial filmmakers, I'm sure... there's a sincerity to Steven Spielberg's work.

And that's part of what makes it beautiful. You know, he's not doing it as some kind of, I mean, obviously I'm sure he wants his movies to be a success usually and all that, but there's an emotional sincerity to Spielberg's work without question. And., I think without it, it would be a very empty experience to watch his work, which now it isn't.

So that's, I think what I meant. I don't think there's anything wrong with we're morally repugnant about wanting success. That's not what I mean. I think it's fantastic if you get it, but I don't think that that's the, that should be the reason that you do what you do.



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Brody: [00:42:38] Mmm.

James: [00:42:38] Look, you're getting at something in a big, which is a big issue.

I've come to believe that a large amount of our problems, societally, culturally, and I'm not talking about random problems, like, you know, someone's so-and-so has cancer or something, you know, that's like a, that's like a scientific genetic thing we have, we can't control that. But a lot of our societal, the way we've organized our society, really has one central problem. And we haven't been able to figure out an answer for it. And that is, we don't yet know how to monetize integrity. We don't yet know how to reward people on the basis of integrity. We can reward people on the basis of their idea about how important it is to make money. But to be true to yourself, we don't know how to reward that.

So, what we do have is we have a lot of people out there in the world that we recognize are kind of awful. I'm not going to say any names. But people in very high positions who are very, how are completely transactional, right. They just doing it for the money or they're doing it for power. And frankly, the society rewards them for that.

We don't have a way of saying to people, pursue what you love. Pursue what moves you. Pursue what is beautiful. That's we don't have a way to reward that idea, monetarily. So, you got some guy or woman who's wants to go to a poor area of Appalachia and teach, teach math. That's their talent. We pay them nothing. You hear it all the time, right? We pay them nothing. But the guy who sells you toilet paper online, is worth a hundred billion dollars.

I don't have an answer about how to solve this riddle, about why we don't reward the person who wants to give of him or herself, something beautiful. To me, this is the central issue of our time. You know, communism tried to fix that. It was a broken system and never worked really. And it devolved into a dictatorship. Today, what do we have that will answer that? What, what do we have that will enable your fellow people in high school to pursue their dream and to make sure it doesn't destroy them? To make sure that the system says you pursued your dream, you pursued what you thought was beautiful. You pursued what was close to you. And you got rewarded for that. I don't know the answer.

Neither do I. It's a very, very difficult question.

Brody: [00:45:48] You're going to read to me another quote of mine, I bet. I always sound like an idiot, you know, and at one time to talk about Stanley Kubrick, somebody said, why don't you give a lot of interviews? And he said, "because there's always the fear that I'm not quoted correctly or even worse that I'm quoted correctly". You know the idea that if you hear your own words back, sometimes it's really awful. I say a lot of stupid things. I'll give a perfect example. You know, I, when I started working on my last film, uh, which was a movie called Ad Astra. I was writing the science fiction part of it, I was really obsessed with getting the science fiction accurate and all that. But pretty soon into the process, I realized that that



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was fool's gold. And I sort of abandoned the realistic science fiction movie and started to pursue what I thought was a kind of mythic idea, the son pursuing the father.

And so, I abandoned this idea of an accurate science fiction movie. But when I was at the beginning of the process, very beginning, I gave interviews saying, I want to make a most accurate movie. And then my process evolved, and I decided to abandon that idea and make a kind of a myth. Um, I cannot tell you how many people have said to me, "I thought you were trying to make the most accurate movie, but they're walking around on the moon and there's 1/6th gravity on the moon and they're walking around..." And you're like, Oh my God. I said this thing two years ago, and now it's come back to haunt me. Well, that's not how the artistic process works. It evolves and all that. So, a lot of times I say stupid things and it gets thrown back at you.

I believe it was Neil DeGrasse Tyson who did that, right.

James: [00:47:23] Well, Neil DeGrasse Tyson is, you know, a great American and it's serving a great purpose, which is to sort of educate his listeners, you know, about the science of it, all. Which I think I screwed up, you know, a lot of the science, but I stopped caring about that because I, I started to view the purpose of the film very differently. You know, in some sense, I wonder if we're not doing the humanities a sort of a level of disrespect when we talk about the accuracy or not accuracy of not just science fiction, but you know, you'll say in about a bio biography, you know, it doesn't look like the person, you know, or, you know. In a sense it's all kind of Fantasia on a person's life when you're doing a biography. We're not doing documentaries, you know. There's a very different purpose. They work, supposedly if they work at all, they're trying to work as a metaphor. So, you get yourself in a pickle.

By the way, every criticism is valid, right. Everybody has a right to say, you know, your movie is bad, uh, for this reason, in my view. So, you, you know, you're lucky to get to do it. And the price you pay. If you want to call it that, is that everybody is valid in saying your movie sucks or is great or whatever. That's, it's sort of no longer yours. Once you do it, it's out there in the world and everybody can and should weigh in,

Brody: [00:48:55] Mmm. Especially, um, and it's not yours. It's like some of the producers and, uh, other people kind of have to edit and change your movie before you are able to release it. I know that happens a lot with everyone really, but you as well.

Yeah, that's very painful because what happens is everybody assumes that every creative choice is always yours. And they'll say the screenwriters didn't understand or the director, but that's the price you pay for doing work that is really very special. You know, I had had final cut on a bunch of movies of mine. So, for example, if I made a film called Two Lovers, another movie called The Immigrant, another film called Lost City of Z, where whatever flaws are presents or whatever good things are present in that work, they are mine a hundred percent mine.



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What you find is that the budget, as it grows, you sort of lose control of parts of the process a little bit. But that's the, again, like I say, that's the kind of occupational hazard and you have to learn to accept that if it's 60 or 70% yours, you sort of, it's, it's sort of like, that's what you have to cherish, you know. I'm not very good at that, by the way.

Uh, yeah, it's got to feel terrible. It's like, I mean, you also write the script for most of your films.

James: [00:50:23] All of them.

Brody: [00:50:25] So having, having pretty much your child changed without your will, it must feel sickening to say the least.

James: [00:50:33] Yeah, it's a bad feeling, but I will tell you this. It would be a mistake to say: I have a vision, and nobody is going to screw with my vision. To me, that's a recipe for artistic catastrophe, because it's not like you're making a painting where it's you with the brush and the canvas and that's it. With movies it's a collaborative process and you need other people to weigh in. And in a sense, what you're always counting on, is that the film will become bigger than what you had in mind. Now, if you have complete, here's the funny part. If you have final cut, what that really means is not that every decision you make is yours and only yours, and that you only accept your own ideas. What it means is really, or it should mean, is that you are the final decision maker. After you hear everybody else's ideas and input. Now, if you use final cut in that way, where you absorb all these beautiful ideas that are bigger than your initial notion, then it's quite a fluid and beautiful process.

So that's an important part of it. Now what is upsetting is when you're forced to absorb something in the work that you think gets in the way that others think doesn't, and then it goes out into the world and it's not yours. That can be extraordinarily painful. Because it's a form becomes a form of sort of public humiliation.

But like I said, these are what they call the occupational hazards of making films. And there is not a director, no matter how great or famous, who didn't go through this. You know, even Stanley Kubrick, you know, who I, you mentioned like quoted before, you know, when he made Spartacus, he had a very difficult time with Kirk Douglas who took over the movie and so forth. And, you know, Stanley Kubrick, wound up disowning the film. Wound up saying it's not my movie and, and all of that. And wound up moving to England permanently, to really maintain maximum control over the work that he was doing. Very interesting case study on, on, on how he treated them. Federico Fellini, you know, Dino de Laurentis, his producer, cut a huge chunk out of the movie Nights Of Cabiria, which is a masterpiece. And only until, , that was 1957, and only in 1996 or seven, did we finally get to see the whole film and all of its beauty. So, the, the cinema has always been a place for very, very difficult negotiation. It's a kind of occupational hazard and yes, it's filled with anguish, but you know, great highs as a creative person. So, you have to go and accept the lows with the highs.



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Brody: [00:53:45] Yeah. I mean, it's also not just producers, actors as well. I mean, you generally have say over the actors, but have you ever had not trouble per se, but a disagreement with an actor that either ends up making movie better or worse as a product?

James: [00:54:04] Have I ever had disagreements with an actor? Of course. I mean, you that's what happens. I mean, you're different people. If you thought the same way, a hundred percent of the time, it probably wouldn't be a very interesting process.

The actor is very vulnerable. You know, the actor is the person, his or her face is on the screen and it's financial success or failure of the film, a lot of times we'll be judged about whether they themselves are appealing. So, there's a lot of pressure on the actor. But I've certainly, you know, I've had, not many, uh, usually I get along great with actors. But there been one or two times where yes, the relationship wasn't great, and the product was, I thought limited by that relationship. And you're not going to get me to tell you which projects they are.

Brody: [00:55:02] I don't need to. The reason I asked was just because you've worked with so many amazing people in the business, like Joaquin Phoenix, Mark Wahlberg, Jeremy Renner. So many more that I'm curious how you interact with these people to make them want to come back for more, I believe you've done four movies with Joaquin Phoenix now, maybe three. And it's, it's clear they enjoy working with you. So, what's, what's your, how do you deal with actors?

James: [00:55:30] Well, I love Joaquin, I have a very special relationship with him, you know, I, uh, I think he's brilliant and, uh, I think he's the best actor there is out there right now and his age range. And, uh, I shouldn't say that there's so many brilliant people working. It's a stupid way to put it, but, uh... because you know, each person you, you couldn't ask Joaquin to do what Mark Wahlberg does. It's the different people. And actually, you know, Mark Wahlberg, for example, who I've made two films with. Mark Wahlberg is a shockingly accomplished actor. You would be blown away by how much thought he actually does put into what he's doing. And Mark is capable of tremendous things. Now, in some ways we've put him in a box, you know. Or the audiences put them in a box. To want him in sort of comedies. And so, he's a very intelligent guy and has demons, which he's dealt with. And, you know, if Mark... and we're victims, sometimes of timing. If Mark had grown up, uh, in the 1940s, would probably have a career that resembles an actor named John Garfield, you know, very kind of serious would be in film noir, you know, that kind of person.

So, I shouldn't say that about Joaquin and I've worked obviously with Mark twice and Joaquin four times. And I just, my flaw, I think is that I really like actors. I think what they bring is extremely important. The emotional depth. So, I think if you like actors and you give them the space and the room to create, I think they'll respond to that in a very positive way.



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I haven't met an actor, put it this way. I haven't been an actor yet who hasn't really been willing to play when there's a level of freedom on the set, and then the way that it's shot, hasn't enjoyed that. You know, even in times when I've disagreed with actors, uh, which is like I say, quite rare, now that I'm thinking about it, I mean, it's, it's been very, very rare that I've sort of, especially on set, disagreed with actors. You know, because you try everything, you know, it's a very open and fluid process.

You know, I'll give you an example, Charlie Hunnam, who is a wonderful actor. I did a movie with him called The Lost City of Z. Or 'Zed' as the British would say.

He was fantastic, and he was so dedicated, you know, and lost all this weight for me. And I wouldn't say that we had disagreements. We didn't, but you know, at times he could get snappy at me because we would be in the middle of the Amazon jungle and I would be perseverating about something or I wouldn't be decisive about something. And I don't blame him at all. In retrospect, especially in this horrible climate and we're in the jungle and snakes crawling up his legs and I can't figure out precisely what I need. He was starving himself of food. I mean the guy ate virtually nothing for months. And the sacrifices he made. But I gave him, I think the freedom to play when push came to shove. And I would work again with him in a second and our relationship is great. Because I think that even though he was exasperated with me at times in the jungle, I think we both recognized how difficult the circumstances were.

So, I think once you give the actor that kind of freedom and you know that in the end, you love what they do. I think that that's all the need really.

Brody: [00:59:31] So not trying to force the actor into a little tiny box of saying you have to perform this way, because it is a film, you have multiple cuts, you can take as virtually as many as you want.

James: [00:59:43] Yes,

Brody: [00:59:43] Making sure they get to express themselves, but as well.

James: [00:59:46] Well, I'll give you an example on Ad Astra, I set up two cameras and I had Brad talking about himself, a kind of psychological evaluation. And, um, you know, there was what was scripted, but the way I shot it, I wanted to give him freedom. And what he gave you was beautiful. And I believe we did nine takes, where he went in very different directions. But that was great that, you know, he gave me a lot of rich stuff and I had in a sense, a lot of footage that I could have done anything with. And the work was great and very revelatory, I mean, very generous in that way. So, there's an example, you know, where you set up a couple of different cameras and you give the actor freedom to roam. Very rewarding process.



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Brody: [01:00:39] Interesting. I think I want the last thing I want to talk about is your new film coming out or not coming out that you're working on Armageddon Time, I believe it's called

James: [01:00:49] Yes, that's right.

Brody: [01:00:50] What inspired it

James: [01:00:51] It's a riff on a Clash song. The Clash did a song called Armagideon Time, which is sort of, it was a cover they did of a reggae song. Um, you know, after this last movie I did where I was in this big space epic, and all this visual effects and the technical aspect was very difficult, and it was an arduous process. I had wanted to go do something as personal, intimate, and as close to me as I possibly could.

And I went off after the movie was done. I went off to direct an opera in Paris, Marriage of Figaro by Mozart. It was my first opera and it was a fantastic experience. But a very different, I didn't know what I was doing, which was probably abundantly clear to all the singers. And then recharge my batteries a little bit. And while I was in Paris, you know, my family had not yet joined me for the first four weeks of rehearsal. So, I would, I would find myself sort of during the day in rehearsal, then in the evening after dinner, I would go home and by myself, I would start working on the script. And I wanted to tell a personal story that was autobiographical as well, personal and mortal biographical, not the same thing. But in this case, they were, and I told the story about my childhood and wrote it rather quickly, surprisingly so. And I got the actors and the studio behind it very quickly.

Now of course, then COVID hit. But, like I said, when you have the actors involved and the studio and everybody's in line to do it, but you've got this virus out there, it's not really up to humans anymore. It's up to science and it's up to the evolution of this bug. So, when it goes is a sort of open question, but it's my attempt to get back to my roots in a sense. To do a New York story that is intimate and personal and that I connect with as emotionally as I can, and to make it as warm as possible. To go on the opposite direction of Ad Astra, you know, a guy by himself going through the universe. This, this was about my family, you know. And to make it as expressive and directly emotional and open as I possibly could. So, we'll see what that means. And we'll see when everything starts up again.

Brody: [01:03:33] In a state of limbo in a way.

James: [01:03:35] Yeah, very much so. And of course, I'm not alone. You know, it's not a, it's not a good feeling for any of us. I've got it better than most I'm sure. So, I should count myself lucky. So, when this ends and it will end, we're going to have to clean up a lot of the emotional wreckage, not just the scientific wreckage, not just the deaths, but the spiritual deaths.



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Now the good version of this is that we're going to be aware of that. The good version of that is that I think we're going to have to have things created that, speak to this need, you know, before we had the opiate crisis, people dying of heartbreak in the middle of the country, this is just the heartbreak of the opiate crisis on steroids. This is it writ large across the country, across the world. And science is going to have to get us out of this mess. I hate to end on this note, but I really believe I'm optimistic because I believe that when it ends, we are going to have to speak to a positivity and a beauty in that human connection. In a way, this is going to remind us of that.

Brody: [01:04:59] I don't know. I feel like that should applaud. That was somberly beautiful in a way. It felt like a speech prepared.

James: Well. I didn't. I'm sitting here and riffing about how I feel and it's a, it's a very difficult moment, but... you know, all we have is hope. If you dropped a nuclear bomb tomorrow. And you were the only human alive, you know. You would still have hope that you could find, you know, a bent up can of sardines that you could eat, or maybe there's a dog that's alive or maybe, you know, hope is the one thing that human beings maintain as long as they have consciousness.

So, I'm going to keep that hope.

Brody: James Gray. Thank you so much for listening to this episode of Titans As Teens. If you want to learn more about the podcast or other episodes, visit TitansAsTeens.com for tons of information and further reading. And don't forget to follow on whatever platform you're listening on.

[MUSIC UP AND ENDS COLD]