The Professor of Micropopularity

By Carlo Rotella

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ON A MONDAY evening in September, James Schamus and a dozen students in his graduate seminar in film theory at Columbia University were discussing the dialogues of Plato. Each participant who spoke called on the next speaker, and Schamus gave the group plenty of leeway to tussle with the text, but every once in a while he raised his hand and intervened to guide the conversation. The course was called Seeing Narrative, and the discussion centered on Plato's skepticism about the ability of any visible thing to represent ideal truth — a skepticism that, say, a bunch of beautiful images strung together in a movie could communicate the perfect, invisible idea of Beauty.

Schamus, in bow tie and jacket, his mobile face alight with intentness, said: "In Plato, the philosopher's job is to love knowledge, *logos*, but it's always corporealized, and the body fools your senses, your perceptions. The soul is invisible and doesn't change, and it wants to connect to other such invisible, unchanging things" — including Truth and Beauty in their ideal forms — "but it's trapped in a body that's always taking it to visible things that are never the same."

During a break at the midpoint of the four-hour seminar, Schamus checked his BlackBerry. There were, as usual, lots of messages pertaining to his other job: for the past nine years he has been C.E.O. of Focus Features, the specialty unit of Universal Pictures. As the head of a successful movie studio owned by a giant corporation, Schamus finances, produces and distributes movies that are "independent" to the extent that that label describes a style, a target audience, a price tag. "They make smart movies for low budgets," as Tim Gray, who oversees Variety, put it. Focus's Oscar winners include "Milk," "The Pianist" and "Lost in Translation," among others.

Schamus has also had a prolific career as a writer and producer. He has made 11 films with the director Ang Lee, including "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon" and "Brokeback Mountain." Along with two partners, Schamus ran Good Machine, a production company that between 1991 and 2002 made and distributed a series of important indie films like "Safe" and "The Brothers McMullen." Until he got too busy with Focus, Schamus, who is 51, also did uncredited rewrites on the kind of expensive popcorn movies that Focus Features doesn't make (but he wouldn't tell me which ones).

The messages that came in while Schamus taught Plato included a notice that a preview screening of "Hanna," a thriller to be released next April, had been moved from Nyack, N.Y., to

Paramus, N.J. Other messages tracked how “The American” was doing in Europe and how DVD sales of the strange-but-cute documentary “Babies” were doing at Target. The news was good.

Focus was doing remarkably well in a time when the movie industry was still in the midst of an upheaval brought about by the decline of the DVD, piracy and the general economic crisis, among other factors. After a boom in the late ’90s and early ’00s, when hedge-fund money flooded Hollywood and the indie sector was riding high, the ensuing contraction had taken out many of Focus’s competitors. Paramount Vantage, Warner Independent and other specialty units were gone, but Focus was hanging on with one of the largest shares of the indie market, exploiting its excellent relationships with distributors around the world.

“Focus has made a profit every year,” Schamus told me on another occasion. “Some years it was modest profit, and in some years we did extremely well. But modest profit is not enough. We’re part of a big corporation; our margins have to be justified. I’m not particularly a fan of late capitalism in general, but I realize our movies have to make a profit.”

With extended speculation in the air that the cable company Comcast would buy Universal from NBC, a deal that could either include Focus or lead to it being sold off as a separate entity, Schamus was under more pressure than usual to have a very good year. So far, so good. “Greenberg,” a slacker romance starring Ben

Stiller, did not do as well at the box office as it did with critics, but “Babies” did surprisingly well, and “The Kids Are All Right” and “The American” were breakout successes. With two releases still to go, 2010 was shaping up as a big winner.

There really isn’t anyone else like Schamus. There’s no precedent for a real academic — he’s a professor of professional practice in Columbia’s School of the Arts, a teacher and scholar who has served on the editorial board of Cinema Journal — to have a first-rate career as a writer, a producer and an executive in the film industry. As Tim Gray put it: “There have been a couple of film scholars who wrote scripts, but he’s the only person in the business I’ve ever seen who said, ‘I can’t go to Cannes because I’ve got to work on my doctorate.’ I liked his book about Dreyer, but I understood about a third of it.” The book, based on Schamus’s dissertation, is a study of the Danish director Carl Theodor Dreyer’s “Gertrud,” a film that Schamus has described as “the single-most obscure Scandinavian formalist failure.”

Schamus makes his home in one of the academy’s most cloistered corners, where film theorists, cultural critics and philosophers formulate critiques of cinema and capitalism from the detachment afforded by an elite discourse that’s often impenetrable to nonspecialists. They’re usually as far removed from the actual sausage-making of the film industry as they can get, and mostly prefer it that way. But the combination of intellectual enthusiasm,

eclectic taste, extremely high executive function and a roaring appetite for solving complex problems in stimulating company can take a thinking person to strange places.

When the seminar reconvened after the break, Schamus said, “Let’s dive into the Meno,” a dialogue in which Plato and Socrates consider virtue. “The heart of it is the mathematical proof.” He rose from his seat and went to the whiteboard, where he drew figures and scribbled numbers as he worked through the geometry. “You can only get the proof visually,” he concluded, stepping back and gazing at it. Plato may be skeptical about the category of the visual, he said, but “you are confronted with a visual proof that gets you back to the idea embedded in visuality.”

Hands went up all around. A woman said, “So you can’t get to that higher plane without a nudge from daily existence” — and off they went into the Meno, each speaker calling on the next in turn. They got so involved in the discussion that they ended up skipping the film they were scheduled to watch, Ingmar Bergman’s “Persona.”

I’m in this weird corner of the business,” Schamus told me, “where the capital’s just low enough that the only way to succeed is to throw out the focus groups and make a compelling case that our stuff is different.”

He rides the subway from his apartment near Columbia to the offices of Focus Features, which occupy multiple floors in a building on Bleecker Street. Focus has branches in Los Angeles

and London, but most of its 110 employees are in New York. In Schamus's sunny, high-ceilinged office there are family pictures — he is married to the novelist Nancy Kricorian, and they have two teenage children — and souvenirs from his movies: a "Brokeback Mountain" throw pillow inscribed with "Love Is a Force of Nature"; a green plastic Hulk fist.

Focus Features is known as a director's studio. By controlling budgets and preselling international distribution rights to finance productions, Schamus can position artists to make the movies they really want to make, as long as they want to make movies that don't cost too much and that he can sell. "What we strive for is a genuine alternative voice, but one that speaks *to* people," he told me. "We want to get people who are turned away from the mainstream to turn a bit toward it, and those turned toward it to turn a little away."

In practice, turning a movie toward the mainstream might mean just a small adjustment to the soundtrack. When I was hanging around his office in April, he said on the phone: "They need something to make it smoother. How about a viola, dude?" Or it can mean cutting to conform more tightly to the demands of a genre. Ang Lee told me that after screening an early cut of "Brokeback Mountain," he ran into Schamus in the theater's bathroom. "It was still too long," Lee said. "James said: 'Ang, that was great, but it was three hankies and two bladders. My goal is four hankies and one bladder.' " Schamus, whose personal tastes

tend toward the forbiddingly arty — no hankies and five bladders, à la Jean Eustache's post-*nouvelle vague* navel-gazer "The Mother and the Whore," would be fine by him — sometimes finds himself working hard to ensure that a Focus production doesn't turn out to be the kind of film he loves best.

A SCHAMUS REEL Clockwise from top left: "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon"; "The Kids Are All Right"; "Milk"; "Babies"; "Brokeback Mountain"; "Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind." Top left: Sony Pictures Classics/Everett Collection. All others: Focus Features/Everett Collection.

But he also nudges filmmakers the other way, a little further from the mainstream. Even the indie-est directors, he said, may internalize the demands of the industry and find themselves

trying to make the movie they think a studio would want them to make. “There’s so much pressure now, and they get to a point in the process where they start playing defense, worrying too much about trying to be commercial,” he said. “So I find I’m constantly telling our filmmakers that it’s my pressure, not theirs. Relax, play offense and go make your movie. I have my notes and ideas, and yes, we need movies we can sell, but we need good movies to sell, and fear isn’t conducive to good filmmaking.”

Playing offense artistically often means letting a film violate some Hollywood expectations, letting it be a little slower or more abstract or bookish or otherwise alien-seeming than what’s in the multiplex — in short, weirder. “Weird” is one of his keywords, a crucial element of his business model.

Of course, Focus movies aren’t high-art provocations like “Gertrud” or the kind of avant-garde films that Schamus shows in class: Ernie Gehr’s “Serene Velocity,” Stan Brakhage’s “Window Water Baby Moving.” The indie formula, which can be as narrow as the action-movie formula, calls for just enough weirdness to distinguish a movie from standard Hollywood fare but not so much that it slides out of the realm of commercial cinema and into the margins shared by the art film and mutant bottom-feeding forms of pulp cinema too bizarre to reach a mass audience.

David Bordwell, the distinguished film scholar, says of Schamus: “He’s very good at figuring out the sweet spot, that middle range where independent cinema has to be. Ideally you have some stars, strong content, often from good books, and it needs to be offbeat enough to seem fresh, but it has to be still recognizably part of a familiar cinematic tradition, something challenging but not too challenging.”

The moderate weirdness that puts a Focus movie in the sweet spot bespeaks an ethos as well as a bottom-line strategy. “There’s a certain subversiveness at work in Schamus,” Eugene Hernandez, a founder of Indiewire.com, says. “With ‘Brokeback’ and ‘Milk,’ for instance, there’s more to it than an acclaimed film that has Oscar potential.” In each case, Focus got the most out of a committed gay audience while marketing the film as a widely accessible story with a universal theme. While scrupulously avoiding displays of righteousness, Schamus clearly enjoyed doing great box office and winning awards while putting homosexual characters center stage in otherwise traditional renditions of the Western and the biopic.

Schamus, who is forthright about his lefty politics, discounts any crude ideological intent in making queer movies, or in, say, distributing a road movie about the young Che Guevara (“The Motorcycle Diaries”). Rather, he says, he is drawn — and audiences who think of themselves as outside the mainstream are drawn — to stories of outsiders. “The story of America, of Western culture, is often the story of queer culture, of being Jewish” —

Schamus is Jewish — "of being outsiders and refugees who find a place that is the not-place." His personal experience, he says, reinforces his taste for such stories. "I grew up basically covered with psoriasis," he said, "and I skipped grades, so I do tend to gravitate to the kid in the corner, who, incidentally, is most likely to grow up to be one of our directors."

But, he insisted, "if I tried to run a studio on the principle of making movies that had certain gender politics, or any politics, that I approved of, we'd go out of business fast. When I'm here," as C.E.O., "I'm solving problems in the culture business, cutting trailers and doing promotions and figuring out audiences. I put things together all day. Then, when I go home at night, I can take them apart" as an academic.

There is a middle way; think of it as the moment of perfect overlap at twilight. He said, "If we can make it profitable to use the common language of film, a language that addresses a public, to say something worth saying that was previously unsaid or unsayable, then those things get said." That such movies have to turn a profit in order to exist, a condition of truly public utterance in a capitalist society, just adds another element to the puzzle, one more rule to the game.

THE SON OF lawyers, Schamus grew up in Southern California and attended Hollywood High School and a couple of colleges before graduating from the University of California, Berkeley and

going on to graduate school in English there. While working on his dissertation, he moved to New York City and drifted into the movie business, starting out, he said, as “the oldest production assistant on earth.”

The dissertation fell by the wayside as he teamed up with Ted Hope to form Good Machine. They billed themselves as the no-budget kings of New York; their motto was “The budget is the aesthetic.” Hope, an advocate of radically decentralized media democracy, was the revolutionary; David Linde, who came over in 1997 from Miramax International (and eventually went on to be co-chairman of Universal Pictures), was the business guy; and Schamus was supposed to be the avant-gardist, the intellectual, but his love of solving multifactor problems awakened the manager within.

During his Good Machine period, Schamus also began solving problems for Ang Lee — helping him stretch a grant from the government of Taiwan to make the Chinese-American family drama “Pushing Hands,” fixing lines of dialogue. Schamus was soon producing and writing Lee’s movies. “I know he thinks a lot about what’s the best for me to do,” Lee told me, “and I keep that in mind, even when we disagree. He only acts as much or as little as I need him to.”

Lee also began to rely on Schamus for fresh inspirations. “After ‘Eat Drink Man Woman,’ I was out of stories to tell,” Lee said. “With ‘Sense and Sensibility’ and ‘The Ice Storm,’ we started taking chances on new things.” Schamus told me: “I have to write a script that scares him enough to make trying to make it worthwhile. They’re very underwritten, and he has to figure them out as he goes along. So he spends the whole time asking me: ‘Why? Why are we making this movie?’ ”

Schamus also steers his partner through the eternal dance of turning toward and away from the mainstream. Lee recalled, “I was cutting the bamboo sequence,” a celebrated fight scene in “Crouching Tiger.” “One night I pick up the phone to talk to James; I was thinking a lot about ‘Hamlet,’ and I was very excited. He said: ‘Remember you’re doing a movie in the same genre as “Drunken Master.” You’re not doing Drunken Hamlet.’ ”

There was another writing problem, in an even more formally constrained genre, that Schamus set himself to solve. When Berkeley invited him to give a commencement address eight years ago, he decided that it would be a good opportunity to finish his incomplete Ph.D. Dusting off his dissertation, he carved out extra research and writing time from his schedule, pulling all-nighters when he had to. “My dissertation committee was really selfless with their time, but they were tough,” Schamus said. He panicked, briefly, when they rejected an entire chapter. “They were right, it was tangential, but my rear end was hanging out. I

had set it up so failure was not an option. I had to give the address. My parents were coming. My kids were coming." He got it done in the end and marched with the other graduates in 2003.

IN EARLY SEPTEMBER, Schamus spent a weekend at the Toronto Film Festival, where a Focus Features release, "It's Kind of a Funny Story," had its world premiere. "What I want to do while I'm here is go see all the films that almost everybody else despises," he told me. "But that's not what my business is." What he did in Toronto, mostly, was sit for two days in a plush hotel suite and receive small groups of executives in the indie trade, many with European accents.

The meetings were occasions for familiar trading partners to renew connections and extend feelers. They all gushed relentlessly about how brilliant and moving their films were and about the genius of the talent in their employ. This can be hard to take after a while, but the indie-movie sector is an enthusiast's business, and Schamus is a natural enthusiast. He can get excited about all sorts of things: the aesthetic theory of the French philosopher Jacques Rancière, "E.T.," Scandinavian art cinema (in June he gave a talk in Oslo at a symposium on Liv Ullmann and was relieved when Ullmann laughed at the funny parts), the ultra-green house in upstate New York he built in 2000, good food and fine wine and his studio's movies.

Schamus let his visitors crow about their recent successes and current projects, and he took his turn to tout his slate of coming releases, among them Sofia Coppola's "Somewhere"; Cary Fukunaga's "Jane Eyre"; Lone Scherfig's "One Day," a romantic drama starring Anne Hathaway; Kevin Macdonald's "Eagle," a Roman frontier adventure starring Channing Tatum; and Joe Wright's "Hanna."

LATEST HIT "The American" didn't fare well in some audience exit polls but still brought in $20 million in its first week. Focus Features/Everett Collection

Schamus also talked up a film about Fela Kuti, the Nigerian afrobeat king, that he has in long-term development. "It's not a biopic," he said. "It's experimental in form," with long movements based on Fela's rambling songs. "I don't do passion projects, but this could be a 'Battle of Algiers,' on that level." He had lined up the British video artist and director Steve McQueen to direct it, and the Nigerian poet Chris Abani was writing the script while Schamus tried to make the budget work. Filming in Nigeria would give the right look, but Ghana might be easier, and perhaps they could shoot interiors in South Africa. "It's too expensive," he said, "but we'll figure it out."

Schamus accepted a lot of compliments from fellow executives and filmmakers in Toronto. Focus had come to town on a roll, at a high point of its very good year. Creative promotion of "Babies" had paid off, and "The Kids Are All Right," which Schamus described to his staff as "the third of three sperm-donor movies out there," had just crossed the $20 million mark, the industry's most successful limited-platform release of the year. (A platform release, the opposite of a wide release, opens first in a few selected theaters and then gradually expands to more on the strength of word of mouth, reviews and judiciously adjusted marketing.)

And “The American,” a coolly meditative spy film directed by the Dutch photographer and music video auteur Anton Corbijn, and starring George Clooney, was No. 1 at the domestic box office. “It’s a big deal for us,” Schamus said. “As of today we broke $20 million, going into its second weekend. Even if the film fell off a cliff into an abyss we’d be way ahead, and it’s not doing that.”

Schamus was perversely proud that CinemaScore, which predicts how a film will do at the box office on the basis of exit polls of moviegoers, had given “The American” a D-minus. “On our wide releases there’s an almost inverse relationship between audience polls and success,” he said. “CinemaScore polls at outlying theaters, and it works very well for movies made for the broadest mainstream audience, but it’s been proven again and again that the metrics become nearly useless if you make something weird. We take the metrics as no more than a hermeneutic puzzle.”

For Schamus, the key to the puzzle was that “The American,” a rigorously formulaic genre movie composed and paced like an art film, was weird enough to provoke strong reactions. While an A from CinemaScore was always welcome, he said, “a B or B-minus is ‘eh.’ I’d rather have a C-minus or D, knowing that people have strong reactions. It’s O.K. if a lot of people don’t like it, as long as the people who love it are spreading word of mouth with passion, getting others excited.” Focus can aim to pique the interest of the

minority of moviegoers who think of themselves as independent types; big studios like Universal have to please most of the rest or go broke.

The artistic cherry atop the ice cream sundae of happy business news during Schamus's stay in Toronto came when he got word from Italy that "Somewhere," which opens in December as Focus Features' final release of the year, had won the prestigious Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival — an honor also won by two Lee-Schamus films, "Brokeback Mountain" and "Lust, Caution."

The only shadow on the otherwise glorious weekend was that "It's Kind of a Funny Story," an understated tale of a suicidal teenager's transformative stay in an adult mental ward, seemed too slight to prosper. The premiere was well received, and reviews were kind, but it went on to disappoint at the box office.

IN TORONTO, I asked Schamus, as I had been asking periodically for months, about the relationship between running a studio and being a scholar. As usual, he resisted combining his vocations into one overarching project. He said: "I don't want to be saying, 'My interest in property and privacy informs my work at Focus, and vice versa.' When I'm at the office, I do the job." We were in a car at the time, passing bus-stop posters for "The American" that featured a dark-suited Clooney running with a tasteful little gun in his hand. "The job has to be done under certain conditions, and they're dynamic, and I have to adjust."

It's true, though, that a main element of the dynamic conditions in which he does business is the relationship between art and commerce, which is also a principal focus of his academic interests. "It is all about intellectual property," he conceded: he's all about how ideas circulate in markets. He's interested in the conditions of possibility in which creative people work — from the mechanics of making a living to the philosophical questions raised by setting aside a category of commodities called Art to the prospects for saying the previously unsaid by using the common vocabulary of word and image (which is where Plato comes in).

Usually Schamus shifts from making culture for profit to analyzing the results of process, but there are times when the two roles flow together. One was when Good Machine pitched Todd Solondz's black comedy "Happiness" to studios. As Schamus described the experience: "I would go in there and say: 'It's about subjectivity in late capitalism, the overproduction of desire. We spend about one-third of our G.D.P. convincing ourselves to buy what we make. What Todd's talking about is desire when it's unmanageable within the system, unattached to something you can buy.' It was bought by October Films, which had been bought by Universal, which had been bought by Seagram. They ended up freaking out and giving the movie back to us."

Schamus also employs high theory as equipment for living in a book he is writing, "My Wife Is a Terrorist: Lessons in Storytelling From the Department of Homeland Security," which will be

published by Harvard University Press. There is a government surveillance file on Nancy Kricorian because she is active in Code Pink, a women's antiwar group. Using as his primary text a copy of her file, secured after an A.C.L.U. suit, Schamus employs speech-act theory, narratology and other interpretive frameworks to plumb the meanings of an opaque document consisting mostly of blacked-out pages. Along the way he considers how the culture industry and intellectuals might respond to the state's role as "the most prolific and influential producer of popular narrative."

He did a trial run of this project as an "anti-keynote address" at the London International Film Festival in 2009. Some in attendance were thrilled, some put off, many perplexed. An ironic *explication de texte* that would have fit right in at an academic conference seemed weird in that context, and elicited strong reactions.

BETWEEN CLASSES AT Columbia on a lovely September afternoon, Schamus found a spot in the sun behind Dodge Hall to smoke a cigar. "For me," he said, "the happiest place on earth is a well-run school. If I have a false nostalgia, it's for an ongoing conversation in which anyone can say anything interesting, a conversation you have in public, and that includes people who are dead. To the extent that I have a management style, I try to replicate that environment."

His conversations with students and filmmakers have in common a desire to get them to stop trying to please an imaginary internalized Professor or Studio Head and free themselves to say something original, fresh and useful — something constructively weird.

He realizes that his current arrangement, with one foot in the movie business and the other in the academy, is not necessarily permanent. “I would be happy to run Focus for the next 20 years,” he told me in an early conversation, “but I have to be ready for that not to happen.” His role model, he told me half-jokingly, is the poet Su Tung-p’o, an 11th-century Chinese bureaucrat who served faithfully until he fell out of favor and was twice sent into exile. “Some of it is the translation,” Schamus said, “but you read him and it feels so weirdly modern, as if he were talking to you today.” (Here, for example, is a portion of “On First Arriving at Huang-Chou”: “Funny — I never could keep my mouth shut;/it gets worse the older I grow/ . . . An exile, why mind being a supernumerary?/Other poets have worked for the Water Bureau.”)

As we sat in the sunny quadrangle amid the eternal rhythms of the university, I asked, “If that happens to you, if your run in the movie industry comes to an end, do you come back here?”

He said: “This isn’t exile. This is *work*. I don’t see the university as a retreat from anything.”

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