

Jonathan Demme

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b. February 22, 1944, Baldwin, Long Island, New York, USA

Filmography

Select Bibliography

Web Resources

Born on Long Island in the shortest month of 1944, Jonathan Demme's trademark empathy and humanism (as filtered through an eccentric, Americana-obsessed film sense) were originally channeled into desires other than cinema. For years the future director prepared to be a veterinarian, though while studying at the University of Florida at Gainesville his inability to comprehend certain necessary sciences stifled his schoolwork and he dropped out. Turning to his passion for movies as a means of survival, Demme began writing critiques and articles for small-town newspapers (1). Soon after, Demme's father introduced him to producer Joseph E. Levine who offered the young man a press agent position at Avco Embassy. Several years of this work led Demme to Roger Corman, whom he met while publicising the famed quickie-producer/director's *Von Richthofen and Brown* (1971); the two quickly fostered a fruitful business partnership and an even longer-lasting friendship. Demme has acknowledged Corman as a significant teacher and mentor, and the sense in their relationship of strong familial bonding – of one good turn begetting another – is a key to the director's presentation of a complex, multicultural American landscape.

Is this thematic complexity evident from the start? Demme's debut – the women-in-prison flick *Caged Heat* (1974) – vaguely suggests the riches to come. Boasting a delectable performance from Barbara Steele as a sexually repressed, wheelchair-bound warden and photographed by Demme's frequent collaborator Tak Fujimoto, this is a film that, as critic Dave Kehr suggests, "looks better in retrospect" (2). Of particular note to the Demme-familiar is the director's use of Corman's exploitation film blueprint (copious amounts of action, violence and nudity) as a means of critique. The women prisoners' sexual fantasies are feminist surreal (Fellini meets Chantal Akerman by way of Maya Deren), ably emphasising the prison's oppressive patriarchy. Demme sees masculine repression as part and parcel of both genders, so he blurs characters' sex-specific lines, lifting them above simplistic stereotype. To this end, *Caged Heat's* brilliant passion play sequence showcases two female prisoners (one black, one white) performing a scathing male drag show, perhaps an early career warm-up for Demme's even more challenging delve into the sexual subconscious in *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991).

With his second film, *Crazy Mama* (1975), Demme brings out a cohesive and substantive subtext that addresses the inevitable disappointments of the American Dream. This delirious cross-country odyssey follows an endearing group of misfits (Ann Sothern and Cloris Leachman among them) as they ride and rob their way from California to Jerusalem, Arkansas. The thinly veiled reference to an idealised Mecca speaks to Demme's spiritual concerns. Not for nothing does the director have one of his characters visibly reading John Steinbeck's "To a God Unknown". Making prime use of landscape as expressive counterpoint, Demme visualises America as an impassive observer to the constantly evolving human drama. The characters' dreams are projected outwards onto their surroundings, their own mini-movie ideals playing invisibly against the southwestern backdrops. Yet Jerusalem turns out to be less than ideal, another small-town victim of urban development, and as such *Crazy Mama* climaxes in a brutal spate of physical and, finally (through a sublime freeze-frame of a one dollar bill fluttering in the wind), capitalist violence. That the characters' imaginative journey is ultimately more satisfying than their actual destination speaks to the crushing sense of cosmic balance common to Demme's work – in *Crazy Mama*'s America, hope is the means to which money is the end.

Fighting Mad (1976), the most aesthetically accomplished of the director's three Corman projects, furthers Demme's capitalist critique. Essentially a little man vs. big business revenge picture starring Peter Fonda, *Fighting Mad* nonetheless surprises with its empathy and morality, especially in its more violent passages. Certain moments of *Caged Heat* and *Crazy Mama* have a frivolous and flippant view towards death and destruction, an adolescent impulse that Demme clearly evolves from here. Again using landscape as impressive and oppressive counterpoint Demme finds the perfect character balance in Fonda whose stoic, bespectacled face lends an intertextual gravitas. It's nigh impossible to divorce the easy rider from his rough-hewn surroundings and Fonda's casting, coupled with the big daddy corporate encroachment plot, suggests complex emotional threads far beyond the movie proper. As illustration, look no further than *Fighting Mad*'s two action setpieces, both daring nighttime raids that culminate in the destruction of mechanical and material elements of patriarchy, a literal father/son apocalypse with a subtly expressive twist.



Demme's first masterpiece, *Citizen's Band* (1977), takes Marshall McLuhan's concept of the global village and applies it to the CB-radio obsessed residents of a small American town. This microcosmic hothouse of differing political and sexual ideologies threatens to explode in technology-assisted violence, such is the profound sense of isolation that Demme brings to the film's early scenes. But technology here is finally a means of bringing people together, not tearing them apart. The ensemble cast (which includes Paul LeMat, Candy Clark, Charles Napier and Roberts Blossom) and the freewheeling *mise en scène* suggest Altman, but that great director's caustic, Buñuelian wit is nowhere evident, replaced instead by an optimism akin to Renoir. Indeed, *Citizen's Band* is in every way the equal of *The Rules of the Game* (1939), both films obsessed with class and generational conflicts that come to a destructive head. But where Renoir ends his story with a literal death, Demme concludes *Citizen's Band* with a more figurative obliteration. Assisted by their CB obsession, the township converges along a sun-drenched stretch of seemingly endless highway. Both men and their machines are backlit into silhouetted anonymity, and the very palpable sense of jubilation, rendered so simply and effortlessly by Demme and his collaborators, effectively breaks down the characters' – and, by extension, the viewers' – oppressive and hateful prejudices. This death of self-imposed human limitations is an apocalypse of a different sort, equalising people, technology and emotion through filmic spirit, an eternal heaven/hell battle resolved at 24 frames per second against a blood-red sunrise/sunset.

Demme's driest creative period came after the financial failure of *Citizen's Band*. Strapped for cash, the director found his angel of mercy in Peter Falk, who hired Demme to direct a *Columbo* telefilm (1978) (3). Afterwards, Demme reunited with Tak Fujimoto for the first time since *Caged Heat* and made the visually stunning thriller *L.A. Embrace* (1979), which – in spite of its often provocative exploration of America's dark underbelly – is suffocated by a creaky plot and a miscast Roy Scheider. *Melvin and Howard* (1980) returns Demme to the small-town Americana of *Citizen's Band*, though the film pales in comparison. Its career-boosting critical notices and awards recognition notwithstanding, the film seems a disjointed, condescending treatise on the persistent failure of the American dream (4). *Who Am I This Time?* (1982) is a minor success, a one-hour adaptation of a Kurt Vonnegut story starring Christopher Walken and Susan Sarandon as emotionally stunted small-town lovers who only come alive when performing famous theatrical and literary works. And then there's *Swing Shift* (1984).



I encourage interested readers to go to the **Storefront Demme** [[HTTP://WWW.STOREFRONTDEMME.COM/](http://www.storefrontdemme.com/)] website and peruse the *Sight and Sound* article detailing *Swing Shift*'s hellish production (5). Designed to be Demme's commercial breakthrough, it was taken out of his hands by lead actress Goldie Hawn and ruinously re-worked. Reliable sources suggest a bootleg director's cut exists on videotape: apparently a much-improved version, it can never, for the moment, be screened legally. In its current incarnation *Swing Shift* is the wreckage of a great film, an indulgent star vehicle that was once an insightful ensemble piece. As the World War II housewife who works at an airplane manufacturing plant, Hawn vacillates between impressive dramatics and whiny *mélo*: it's both her best and worst performance, lending the film a fascinating, schizoid quality. Obvious Demme scenes (particularly a profound climactic composition of Hawn and Christine Lahti dancing with their husbands) clash with the actress-supervised re-shoots and re-edits (6). Most damagingly, the complex relationship between Hawn and Kurt Russell – who plays a pre-beatnik trumpet player – is reduced to clichéd notions of fate, complete with chaste, sitcom-like love scenes and breathy “the war, woe is us” voiceovers. *Swing Shift* is the zenith of Demme's weakest run. These are films in which the director quite apparently tries to break out of constraining material, always at the expense of his unique viewpoint. It would take a radical departure from standard film narrative to get Demme back on a sensible track.

With *Stop Making Sense* (1984) – a filmed record of a Talking Heads concert held at California’s Pantages Theatre – Demme redefines how we look at musical performance. Much has been made of the director’s decision to focus strictly on the band (fronted by that spastic scarecrow of a genius, David Byrne). No backstage interviews or other extraneous commentary here; indeed, the concert audience remains on the filmic periphery until the band’s encore. Demme, cinematographer Jordan Cronenweth (who also shot *Citizen’s Band*) and editor Lisa Day are the central behind-the-scenes triumvirate, giving each of the film’s 16 numbers a different look and feel. Note, for example, the chiaroscuro close-ups on “What a Day That Was”, which isolate each of the musicians in their own space, the song’s ever-burgeoning rhythm driving the frenetically edited images towards a crashing blackout. Or bathe in the almost single-take glory of “Once in a Lifetime”, which focuses primarily on Byrne as he preaches about deceptive American illusions (“This is not my beautiful house/This is not my beautiful wife”). Each song tells a story, and the multiracial artists impart their varied influences and heritages through a transcendent narrative sound. Through the healing power of music, Demme and his subjects break down detrimental dichotomies (between audience/artist, black/white, etc.) and, as such, *Stop Making Sense* possesses a driving momentum and a clear purpose – the film’s creative mechanics make “sense” in order to portray the implied nonsense of the title.



Something Wild (1986) plays very much like a Talking Heads song and is, in a way, the second part of an unofficial Demme trilogy that includes *Stop Making Sense* and *Married to the Mob* (7). The film's tonally dissonant narrative – morphing from sex farce to love story to psychodrama – still plays radically, in part for being so effortless. The seeds of Tarantino postmodernism are here, but Demme's triumph is in not calling attention to the structural shifts. Instead, he focuses on sketching in the urban, suburban and rural milieus that are the stopovers for yuppie Charlie Driggs (Jeff Daniels) and his freewheeling companion Audrey Hankel (Melanie Griffith). It is amazing to observe the tiniest details of Demme's American vision: an Asian convenience store owner whom one feels morally beholden to in a moment of superbly orchestrated violence, a young rap group providing peripheral humour and commentary during a particularly tense stalking scene, the black patrons of a rural church who go about their background business until one of them breaks the fourth wall with a simple, empathetic query. These are the kind of scenic and behavioural moments that many directors would neglect, choosing to focus only on their main storyline. But plot never trivialises the surroundings in Demme's best work; indeed, it is the acknowledgement of life beyond the story that gives *Something Wild* both its wholly unique flavour and its profound morality.

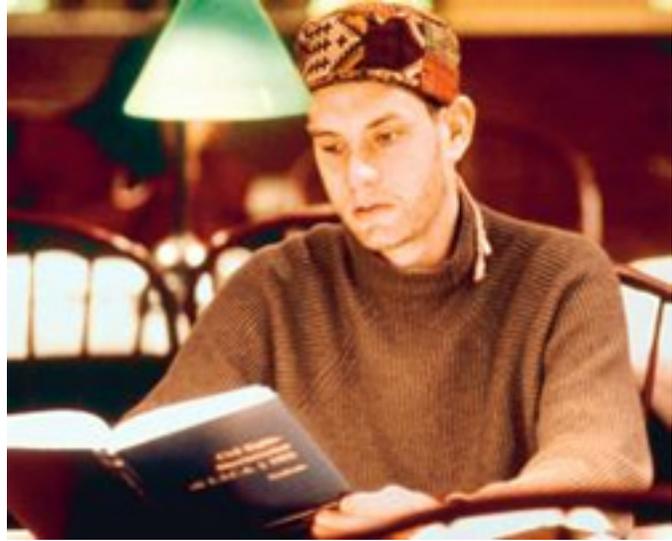
Something Wild becomes Demme's central work – the one film out of which all the others grow from and towards – in the climactic fight scene between Charlie and the psychotic Ray Sinclair (Ray Liotta) who, after tracking Charlie and Audrey to the former's swank Long Island home, proceeds to subdue and torture them. Charlie breaks free from his bonds and, in an awkward moment of violence, stabs Ray with a knife. Demme makes certain to emphasise the clumsiness of the killing act; what's more important are the shared glances between the two men, which the director renders using two “direct eyeline” compositions. At once a reversal and a subversion of the standard point-of-view shot, this Demme-constant motif (which originated in the satirical last scene of *Crazy Mama*) is best described as a multilayered visualisation of Andre Bazin's “Holy Moment” (8): Demme's camera assumes the physical and emotional placement of a specific character by standing *outside* of them, gazing directly into their eyes as if into their souls. If we accept that the act of seeing is a crucial part of the cinema experience – with the initially blank, white screen offering itself up as a viewer's limitless abyss – then Demme makes sure to balance the moral scales with this signature image, giving equal voice to Friedrich Nietzsche's proclamation that “the Abyss also gazes into you” (9). In this case, Demme's very specific “direct eyeline” compositions make us privy to both Ray and Charlie's shared humanity so that they cease to be representational ciphers of light and dark, right and wrong. Violence provides the means to emotional transubstantiation between the characters and their audience, an event, simultaneously tragic and cathartic, that informs all of Demme's work before and since.

Inevitable, perhaps, that the colourful and entertaining *Married to the Mob* (1988) feels a slight regression. Michelle Pfeiffer's paranoid mafia housewife and Matthew Modine's uptight FBI agent play out many of the same charming romantic notes of *Something Wild*, but it is in service of a rather glib view of both violence and spousal jealousy, too much of a degeneration to Demme's pre-*Fighting Mad* adolescence. The film's garish set design removes any hint of reality – we're placed solely in a movie-obsessed, archetypal realm – and this is the key problem, as these elements clash and never cohere. Demme's swipes at sexist patriarchies (especially in a hilarious scene where Pfeiffer faces off with a lecherous Tracey Walter) feel removed from the film's casual scenes of aggression that, unlike *Something Wild*'s complex horrors, are here little more than childish macho fantasies. *Married to the Mob*'s best sequence is, appropriately, its last: an end credits roll of deleted scenes that play as a music movie that might have been. It restores the sense of profound playfulness that the film proper rarely achieves. Perhaps *Something Wild*'s perfection could only be followed by *Married to the Mob*'s uncertainty? No matter, for with his next feature Demme deals us a multifaceted and polarising trump card.



The Silence of the Lambs is a directorial culmination, a subversive pulp-thriller that posits an unlikely trinity fighting for the soul of a mortal. The abyss gazes back through Hannibal Lecter (Anthony Hopkins), a devilish father-figure to the near-androgynous son/daughter Clarice Starling (Jodie Foster). The (un)holy ghost is the pre-operative transsexual serial killer Jame Gumb (Ted Levine), while the “victim” of the trio’s attentions is Catherine Martin (Brooke Smith), a daughter of a prominent senator whom Demme introduces singing along to Tom Petty’s “American Girl”. The director atypically begins at the end of the character arc, positing Catherine as the American ideal that must be preserved, before breaking down her fallacious bourgeois illusions (i.e. even the ideal has teeth and claws when the situation warrants) (10). Indeed, one gets the sense that Demme wants his characters’ repressions to come to the fore, though it never plays as condescending critique. Rather, it is the director’s hope that, by exposing their inner demons, the characters will move past both societal and self-imposed limitations. With such hope exists an equally reverse-angle futility and, to this end, the film’s climax is a literally illuminating catharsis/resolution: Clarice shoots and kills Jame Gumb in a pitch-black basement, the bullets breaking a window and letting in a flood of sunlight. A quick insert shot of the broken window (the inanimate eye, ever watchful) reveals heartbreakingly complex detail – a tiny American flag, fallen from the blast and bathed in otherworldly luminescence.

And God(ard) spake: “A great film becomes popular when it is misunderstood” (11). *The Silence of the Lambs* caused uproars on several fronts, sweeping the Academy Awards while being decried for its supposed gay stereotyping (12). Yet this is Demme’s gay-friendliest film, evidenced, in particular, by the transsexual Gumb. “You don’t know what pain is!” he screams to the captive Catherine, vividly suggesting myriad external and internal struggles, and encapsulating this societal outcast’s personal tortures. The character also figures in the film’s most daring sequence, a haunting, full-frontal musical interlude where Demme captures the movie’s monster in a moment of reverie and dares his audience to see the beauty within the beast. Certainly *The Silence of the Lambs*’ numerous extreme close-ups (most often direct-eyeline compositions) force our challengingly spiritual identification with its varied band of outsiders. Look no further than Clarice’s subtly sensual exchanges with black colleague Ardelia (Kasi Lemmons), a subplot friendship that plays as a comprehensive breakdown of sex, gender and racial norms. To then accuse Demme of such heartless and insensitive misanthropy seems the dubious product of American literalism, of an inability to grapple with a film’s numerous layers of experience, falling back on easy prejudices and dichotomies as a way of stopping discussion and disagreement cold. *Philadelphia* (1993), unfortunately shows that Demme is not immune to this particular brand of Western myopia.



It should be stated outright that *Philadelphia* contains some of the director's best work. The opening credit sequence shows a clear and thoughtful artistic progression: the camera roams the city streets like an omniscient observer, only this time the multiracial extras break the fourth wall, acknowledging those of us beyond the screen with heartfelt greetings. Equally remarkable is the epiphanic opera moment between AIDS-stricken lawyer Andrew Beckett (Tom Hanks) and homophobic ambulance chaser Joe Miller (Denzel Washington) – this and the climactic single-shot wake scene anticipate the power Patrice Chéreau would bring to the closing moments of *Those Who Love Me Can Take the Train* (1998). But *Philadelphia* is damagingly reticent in its portrayal of a gay man's lifestyle. Instead of going for broke, as was the case in *The Silence of the Lambs*, Demme walks on eggshells not to offend, portraying Beckett and his lover Miguel (Antonio Banderas) as ethereal, asexual creatures. This works to a point – as *The Silence of the Lambs*, *Philadelphia* and *Beloved* (1998) prove, Demme photographs faces with the profundity of Dreyer – yet it is unacceptable here in light of the film's evasions (chaste kisses planted on clumsily obscured lips, the unintentional exploitation of actual AIDS patients as ill-fitting documentary counterpoint, not one scene of the two gay lovers in bed). What we get in place of Demme's typically challenging view of human behaviour is a dull courtroom drama, treading (God forbid) Stanley Kramer's regressive brand of cinematic progressiveness. Demme's finally too talented a filmmaker for *Philadelphia* to slip and splat on the guilty-liberal banana peel and, considering the times and events surrounding the film, it's tempting to view the proceedings as a shaky bridge over troubled waters (13). To whatever extent we should excuse Demme's city-of-brotherly-love *faux pas* – without a doubt his worst movie – is a subject up for constant re-evaluation and debate.

Where *Philadelphia* is a morass of compromises, Demme's adaptation of Toni Morrison's much-lauded novel *Beloved* is willfully obdurate, a fierce, at times inexplicable, magical-realist masterpiece. Demme challenges audience precepts from frame one: in a conceit both literary and cinematic the director tracks his camera through a wintry graveyard, settling on a tombstone bearing the film's title. From this evocative opening onwards, Demme's *mise en scène* attains an audacious clarity in its symbolic depiction of former slave Sethe's (Oprah Winfrey) tortured psyche. Like *The Color Purple* (Steven Spielberg) (1985) or *The Ninth Gate* (Roman Polanski) (1999), *Beloved*'s images have the feel of literature, the musty smell of painful personal histories released with each successive scene as if turning a page in the Book of Life. The film demands to be read intellectually as much as experienced emotionally – a spiritual compromise of conflicting moviegoer ideologies. Indeed, when the titular ghost (Thandie Newton), mentally stunted at infancy, comes across a pair of copulating turtles, *Beloved* achieves the level of adult fairy tale, at once mythological, pagan, and Biblical. That the film inspired such a loud cry of critical confusion reveals a modern-day majority's rejection of visual parables. Literalism is the new religion to which *Beloved* was offered as a sacrificial lamb, the pain and poetry of the loss reflected in each of Demme's silent-film profound close-ups. The director's rhetorical subtext: have we lost the ability to engage with cinema and the other arts as simple spiritual expression? *Beloved* is that query's timeless, challenging, and necessary answer.

From the spiritual collective to the spirited individual: Demme's frequent side-projects to his fiction features are various single-person documentaries that reflect the director's worldly and thematic concerns. *Swimming to Cambodia* (1987) captures a Spalding Gray monologue, intercutting the vivid storyteller's performance with select sequences of his acting turn in *The Killing Fields* (Roland Joffé) (1984). While Gray juxtaposes his sheltered life as an American actor with the war-torn troubles of Cambodia, Demme films the performance space like an abstract *Dr. Strangelove* war room, a confused and bemused peacenik at its centre. Contrast *Swimming to Cambodia*'s claustrophobic interiors with the contradictory urban/rural exteriors of *Cousin Bobby* (1992), Demme's portrait of a beloved cousin and activist minister. Recalling the thematics of the director's early Corman projects, the varied settings in *Cousin Bobby* seem to mock the subject with their impassiveness and violent history, a fatalist mood leant support by the film's rap-scored epilogue of civil-rights era stock footage. *Storefront Hitchcock* (1998) is the minimalist *Stop Making Sense*, sublimely detailing a Robyn Hitchcock concert staged in a Manhattan window display. As in *Something Wild*, Demme uses a bustling locale to remind us that life goes on beyond the performance. And in *The Agronomist* (2003), Demme turns his focus to the radio personality Jean Dominique, a crusader for peace and equal rights in his war-torn home country of Haiti. Culled from many years of video interviews, *The Agronomist* uses the power of cinema to resurrect the assassinated Dominique's spirit and re-contextualise his message – thus do the metaphysics of filmed memory provide much needed hope for the future. In each of these cinematic personal essays, Demme captures numerous individual truths (a variety of wondrous holy moments) that, while not ranking with his major works, still form essential connective tissue, explicating an artist's far-reaching interests.



Include Paris among Demme's primary interests, specifically the Paris of the *nouvelle vague*. For his next fiction feature, the director remade the famed Audrey Hepburn/Cary Grant vehicle *Charade* (Stanley Donen) (1963). Now called *The Truth About Charlie* (2002), this is a progressive throwback to the pre-*Something Wild* Demme, a breathless romantic travelogue with incidental thriller elements. Demme's loosest film emulates the *Cahiers du cinéma* collective with its on-the-fly, handheld visuals, whip-snap tonal changes, and cameos by such *nouvelle vague* luminaries as Agnès Varda and Anna Karina. One moment Regina Lambert (Thandie Newton) is being chased through a hotel by some unknown villain, the next she tenderly dances with man-of-many-faces Joshua Peters (Mark Wahlberg) to a live Charles Aznavour serenade. One could argue that the original *Charade* had a firmer grasp on its plot mechanics and that its central iconic pairing of Grant and Hepburn is untouchable, but one of the many reasons I prefer *The Truth About Charlie* is because it stretches its Kino-eye to capture a more literally colourful ensemble. It's an astonishing example of how far movies – and society – have come that Regina and Joshua's interracial love affair goes unmentioned. Likewise, the central trio of thieves (one Black, one White, one Asian) has a refreshing camaraderie that informs their initially one-dimensional greed. It's no longer a simple black/white dichotomy. Everyone has their reasons in *Charlie*, and Demme makes sure to portray all involved as complex people and not merely pieces in a solve-the-mystery board game. And speaking of the film's secondary stamp-and-spy plot, Demme defuses it in a brilliant rain-drenched back-alley climax, characters offering up one long-winded explanation after another. This is the scene that really loses people – we've been taught, wrongly, that exposition is *always* a bad thing. Here it serves a purpose as philosophical dialogue that refutes *Charade*'s pull-out-the-guns finale, replacing violent action with a profound pacifist statement: honour among multiple thieves. A more modern form of love and justice triumph, and Aznavour, the musical soul of Paris, takes us out in a glorious direct-address, pan-up-the-Eiffel-Tower crescendo. In a cinema culture that's increasingly immoral for the hell of it, Demme, with *The Truth About Charlie*, provides a quiet, revolutionary corrective.



When it was announced that Demme's next project would be a remake of John Frankenheimer's *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962), one could practically hear the groaning groundswell ("First *Charade*, now *this!*?") (14). The resulting film should lay the naysayers to rest, though there's currently enough resistance to Demme's version – especially among several of our best critics (15) – that it humbly reminds of Marcel Proust's cogent thoughts on artistic posterity (16). In our chaotic present moment, then, think of Demme's *Manchurian Candidate* (2004) as a colour-coded critique, as precise an examination of its red, white and blue country of origin as Brian De Palma's *Blow Out* (1981). "I have dreams"/"I don't have dreams" is the key dialogue exchange, a philosophical argument engaged throughout the film by Ben Marco (Denzel Washington) and Raymond Shaw (Liev Schreiber), former Gulf War comrades now on wildly divergent paths (Marco is a shill for the U.S. Army, Shaw is a potential vice-presidential candidate.) Both characters are unwittingly brainwashed at the behest of the Manchurian Global corporation – slaves, interestingly enough, to their own names – though, in the final analysis, big-business is this *Manchurian's* MacGuffin. Demme is much more interested in personal inquiry so he replaces the stark intellectual gamesmanship of Frankenheimer's film with fever-dream hysteria, a discombobulating, Escher-like nightmare of aural and visual information that effectively drowns out individual truths in service of white-noise propaganda. To wit, the former film's flower-show hallucination is rethought here as a slowly-resolved amalgam of Corman-like exploitation-film signifiers – exposed brains, distorted faces, and trickling rivulets of blood make the characters' (and America's) violent, confused histories play "like a movie". To ensure the future, these false pasts must be resolved with their resultant paranoia-stricken presents, so Demme holds Marco and Shaw (ostensible "victims", both) to their internal moral responsibility in the film's superb climactic assassination scene. As both men conclude their "dreams" argument through the sight of a gun – Shaw's campaign tagline, "Secure Tomorrow Today", ironically informed – the truth of the film's thoughtful search for lost time becomes crystal-clear and, in a profound moment of righteous bloodletting, America's achingly enigmatic history is re-written for one and for all.

The struggle, of course, continues. Demme's films (despite deceptive genre appearances) never leave one with tight and tidy resolutions. Think of the jubilant throng at the end of *Citizen's Band*, of Hannibal Lecter walking off into the crowd at the close of *The Silence of the Lambs*, of *Beloved's* formerly haunted house dotting the landscape of American memory, or of *The Manchurian Candidate's* Ben Marco standing at the edge of a vast ocean, finally facing his tormented past. In each of these images there's a sense of challenges yet to be met; they're a reminder that humanity's story doesn't end just because we momentarily balance the scales. Indeed, the story moves on through all of us and it is our responsibility, for all posterity, to articulate and add to the enduring narrative. For Jonathan Demme, movies are the medium of address, the means by which he explores and comments on the world surrounding, the way in which he answers the muse's clarion call to create. It is the great gift of his cinema that it inspires us to go out, expressive individuals all, and do the same.



Filmography

Caged Heat (1974) also writer

Crazy Mama (1975)

Fighting Mad (1976) also writer

Citizen's Band (1977) aka *Handle with Care* aka *The Great American Citizen's Band*

Columbo: Murder Under Glass (1978) television

Last Embrace (1979)

Melvin and Howard (1980)

Who Am I This Time? (1982) television

Swing Shift (1984)

Stop Making Sense (1984) also writer

Alive From Off Center (1984) television series

Something Wild (1986) also producer

Swimming to Cambodia (1987)

Trying Times (1987) television series

Married to the Mob (1988)

Famous All Over Town (1988)

The Silence of the Lambs (1991)

Cousin Bobby (1992)

Philadelphia (1993) also producer

The Complex Sessions (1994)

Subway Stories: Tales From the Underground (1997) segment director, also executive producer; television

Storefront Hitchcock (1998)

Beloved (1998) also producer

The Truth About Charlie (2002) also writer, producer

The Agronomist (2003) also cinematographer, producer



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Adrian Wooton, “The Guardian/NFT Interview”, *The Guardian*, October 10, 1998.

Shawn Zeytinoglu, “Spending Time with Melvin, Howard, and Mary Steenburgen”, *Storefront Demme* [[HTTP://WWW.STOREFRONTDEMME.COM/](http://www.storefrontdemme.com/)], October 18, 2002.

“City Arts: Season 4, Show 16”, *City Arts (WNET New York)*, April 2, 1998.

* all accessible through **Storefront Demme** [[HTTP://WWW.STOREFRONTDEMME.COM/](http://www.storefrontdemme.com/)] website (see below)



Web Resources

Storefront Demme [[HTTP://WWW.STOREFRONTDEMME.COM/](http://www.storefrontdemme.com/)]

Seemingly the only website dedicated exclusively to the director. An excellent resource with frequent news updates and links to pertinent articles and interviews.

Film Directors – Articles on the Internet [[HTTP://MYWEB.TISCALI.CO.UK/JEANRENOIR/D.HTM](http://myweb.tiscali.co.uk/jeanrenoir/d.htm)]

Several online articles can be found here. Just scroll down

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WORD=JONATHAN+DEMME&MODE=BLENDED] to search for Jonathan Demme DVDs, videos and books at



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Endnotes

1. These years begat a delicious Demme anecdote, as printed in the *Premiere* magazine tribute to Pauline Kael, December 2001: “When I was a reporter for Film Daily, I was invited up to Connecticut for a press conference for a film that was being prepared by Otto Preminger (that he never made). I got to ride in a car with Pauline [Kael] and Andrew Sarris. As we were standing around, Andy started going off to Preminger about his vision, and I remember Pauline saying, ‘Oh, Andy, cut the crap. You know that *Hurry Sundown* is a piece of shit. Even Otto will tell you that.’” See <http://www.storefrontdemme.com/paulinekael.html> [[HTTP://WWW.STOREFRONTDEMME.COM/PAULINEKAEL.HTML](http://www.storefrontdemme.com/paulinekael.html)] .
2. From Kehr’s *Chicago Reader* capsule review [[HTTP://ONFILM.CHICAGOREADER.COM/MOVIES/CAPSULES/1557_CAGED_HEAT](http://onfilm.chicagoreader.com/movies/capsules/1557_caged_heat)] .
3. I’ve yet to locate this work in addition to five other Demme projects: *Alive From Off Center* (1984), *Trying Times* (1987), *Famous All Over Town* (1988), *The Complex Sessions* (1994), and *Subway Stories: Tales From the Underground* (1997).
4. I’m more apt to blame *Melvin and Howard*’s Bo Goldman-penned screenplay as opposed to Demme’s direction. The director’s empathy is apparent in every frame, though it seems at cross-purposes with Goldman’s tonally obvious Podunk dialogue and the film’s overly episodic structure. That Melvin’s (Paul Le Mat) story – claiming that he gave a ride to Howard Hughes (Jason Robards) and was one of the heirs to the famed tycoon’s fortune – is heavily based in fact goes a way towards explaining the unevenness. The real world’s inherent messiness of experience finally trumps *Melvin and Howard*’s cinematic cohesiveness.
5. There is also an account of the *Swing Shift* debacle in Michael Bliss and Christina Banks’ otherwise worthless book *What Goes Around Comes Around: The Films of Jonathan Demme*, Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale, April 1996. It’s a travesty that this is the only English-language study of Demme’s films and it requires immediate remedy.
6. My favourite of these is the film’s final sequence: Lahti meets Hawn in a driveway and apologises to her for a prior wrongdoing. Goldie accepts, the two women hug, and the image freeze-frames on Lahti. But as the end credits begin, there’s an awkward look-at-me! cut to a freeze-framed Hawn, her cartoonish Joker smile oozing that particular brand of audience-hating contempt seeming unique to second-tier Hollywood divas.
7. The trilogy’s linking factor is David Byrne, who stars in *Stop Making Sense*, contributes the mood-setting opening song of *Something Wild*, and scores *Married to the Mob*. The three films’ colourful, anything-goes structures ably parallel Byrne’s musical spirit.
8. This frequently discussed Bazin tenet holds that every moment of filmed experience is a potential vision of God. Demme’s “direct eyeline” compositions – especially those from *Something Wild* on – give this viewer a sense of breaching the movie screen (that two-dimensional veil of experience) and glimpsing something indescribably divine.
9. From Aphorism 146 in Nietzsche’s *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886).
10. One of the unqualified successes of *The Silence of the Lambs* and, to a lesser extent, the first Hannibal Lecter film *Manhunter* (Michael Mann) (1986) is the way in which they refocus the movies’ culture of victimhood that allows for audience passivity in the face of untold horrors. We, rightfully, squirm in our seats during Catherine’s dialogues with Jame Gumb because we recognise

ourselves in both of them. No longer man or monster, we are *both* man/woman and monster. This speaks to a new enlightenment in cinema – a profound reconsideration of, especially, numerous exploitative '80s slasher films – that few filmmakers since have elaborated on. It's a welcome artistic pathway that frighteningly seems to be discouraged by several of our current arbiters of taste. Most surprising was this statement by the usually forward-thinking Charles Taylor from his February 9, 2001 **Salon** [\[HTTP://DIR.SALON.COM/ENT/MOVIES/REVIEW/2001/02/09/HANNIBAL/INDEX.HTML\]](http://dir.salon.com/ent/movies/review/2001/02/09/hannibal/index.html) magazine take down of *The Silence of the Lambs*' atrocious sequel *Hannibal*: "... [*The Silence of the Lambs*] was, in spots, marked by a misplaced application of [Jonathan Demme's] trademark empathy (especially in trying to individualise the killer's female victims – a big mistake; in violent thrillers, treating victims anonymously, not lingering on their ordeal, is sometimes the most humane thing you can do for both the character and the audience)..." I'll leave it for the reader to make up his/her own mind as to Taylor's heavily qualified supposition. Allow me to add, however, that I think it best for artists to first be human... then humane.

11. As referenced in *Film Comment*'s 2002 year-end **wrap-up** [\[HTTP://WWW.FILMLINC.COM/FCM/ONLINE/READERS2002.HTM\]](http://www.filmlinc.com/fcm/online/readers2002.htm) .

12. This is the backbone of contention that drives Bliss and Banks' tediously academic study of Demme. The authors posit *Philadelphia* as a gay-friendly corrective "which redeems *Silence of the Lambs*' ethical lapse in a very satisfactory way" – as politically correct a line of bullshit as there ever was and a clear case of not seeing beyond a film's surface actions.

13. One rumoured story suggests that Demme's heart was in the right place and I often return to it in an attempt at partial justification: at a critics awards dinner where Demme was named Best Director for *The Silence of the Lambs*, protestors handed out leaflets decrying the film's homophobia. Demme made note of the documents in his acceptance speech, encouraging all in attendance to acknowledge the protestors' arguments. The director seemed visibly hurt by the accusations and *Philadelphia* plays in part like his apologia. Fair enough, though it should in no way be an artist's prerogative to please a collective in lieu of being true to himself.

14. I'd encourage those remake-phobics among us to consider the respective time periods of *Charade* (1963) and *The Manchurian Candidate* – both pre-Kennedy assassination, both perfect, plot-mechanical commentaries on Cold War invasiveness – as a clue towards viewing Demme's looser, more emotional interpretations of the material.

15. The great Jonathan Rosenbaum, sadly, professed his cinephilic disdain of remakes in his July 9, 2004 **Chicago Reader** column [\[HTTP://WWW.CHIREADER.COM/MOVIES/ARCHIVES/2004/0704/070904_1.HTML\]](http://www.chireader.com/movies/archives/2004/0704/070904_1.html) , a few weeks before the release of Demme's film: "Remakes are always irritating to begin with and when it comes to remakes of masterpieces – take the soon-to-be-released *The Manchurian Candidate* – I get ill just thinking about their existence." Aside from the just plain cynicism of that statement (sprouting, it would seem, from a kind of misguided nostalgia and fatalism), it also strikes me as a profoundly irresponsible declaration of supposed fact. Should the critic apply this rule to the two versions of *Imitation of Life* (John M. Stahl [1934] and Douglas Sirk [1959]) or to Wim Wenders' and Liliana Cavani's differing interpretations of a Patricia Highsmith novel (respectively, *The American Friend* [1977] and *Ripley's Game* [2002]), all four films, in their own right, great and worthy cinema? It's a provocative implication that Rosenbaum leaves unaddressed in his subsequent *Manchurian capsule review*

[\[HTTP://SPACEFINDER.CHICAGOREADER.COM/MOVIES/BRIEFS/26278_MANCHURIAN_CANDIDATE_DEMME.HTML\]](http://spacefinder.chicagoreader.com/movies/briefs/26278_manchurian_candidate_demme.html) , which suffers from his now-often trademark condescension ("If you don't care about the first version, or what director Jonathan Demme's name once meant, the cast does an OK job..."), though I'll credit the critic for a killer of an opening line, which acts as his contextualising confession: "I don't get it." Indeed, Jonathan.

16. "What makes it difficult for a work of genius to be admired at once is the fact that its creator is out of the ordinary, that hardly anyone is like him. It is his work itself, which, by fertilising the rare spirits capable of appreciating it, will make them grow and multiply. ... What is known as posterity is the work's own posterity." – from *In Search of Lost Time, Volume 2: In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower*, trans. James Grieve, Penguin Books, 2002.

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