

50 MPH: EPISODE 7

“JAN DE BONT’S EXCELLENT ADVENTURE” (with Bilge Ebiri)

Transcript (01:11:36)



KRIS TAPLEY

This is *50 MPH*!

[INTRO MUSIC]

DENNIS HOPPER (as “Howard Payne”)

Pop quiz, hotshot!

DENNIS HOPPER (as “Howard Payne”)

There’s a bomb on a bus.

JEFF DANIELS (as “Harry Temple”)

You’re deeply nuts, you know that?

DENNIS HOPPER (as “Howard Payne”)

Once the bus goes fifty miles an hour, the bomb is armed.

SANDRA BULLOCK (as “Annie”)

Stay on or get off?

DENNIS HOPPER (as “Howard Payne”)

If it drops below fifty...

SANDRA BULLOCK (as “Annie”)

Stay on or get off?!

DENNIS HOPPER (as “Howard Payne”)

...it blows up.

ALAN RUCK (as “Stephens”)

Oh, darn.

DENNIS HOPPER (as “Howard Payne”)

What do you do?

KEANU REEVES (as “Jack Traven”)

You have a hair trigger aimed at your head. What do you do?

DENNIS HOPPER (as “Howard Payne”)

What do you do?!

KEANU REEVES (as “Jack Traven”)

What do you do?

KRIS TAPLEY

I’m your host, Kris Tapley, and you’re listening to an oral history of director Jan de Bont’s 1994 summer blockbuster, *Speed*, straight from the people who made it happen. Now, don’t forget to fasten your seatbelts. Let’s hit the road!

KRIS TAPLEY

Welcome again to another episode of *50 MPH* and a bit of a detour today. Let me first catch everyone up. Last week in our ongoing chronology and oral history of the making of *Speed*, 20th Century Fox has finally found their director in cinematographer Jan de Bont. *Speed* would be de Bont’s directorial debut at the age of 49. He would turn 50 years old on the production, in fact. This after a career that took him from Holland to Hollywood, where he became one of the industry’s top DPs. I thought it would be a good idea to put this guy in the context before we forge ahead in the story. And so today I’ve dragged another of our top critics into the fray with me, Bilge Ebiri. Bilge is a film critic for *New York Magazine* and *Vulture*. He also, by the way, knows his way around a film set as a cinema studies graduate from Yale University where his thesis film *Bad Neighborhood* won the Lamar Prize. I bring that up mainly because I think Bilge is a guy who understands filmmakers and what makes them tick better than most. So, who better to sit here and dissect Jan de Bont with me than him? Bilge, thanks so much for doing this.

BILGE EBIRI

Thank you for having me. I’m very happy to be here.

KRIS TAPLEY

Of course. Now, before we dig in here, I just want to sort of lay out where Jan was coming from as a person and as a filmmaker. Jan de Bont was born on October 22 1943. That makes him a Libra, if that means something to you. He’s Dutch. He grew up in the Netherlands. Probably a key note here is he was one of 17 children. Jan studied filmmaking formally. He attended the Netherlands Film Academy in the 60s as artists of his generation were riding high on the inspiration of the French New Wave movement. Jan’s film education was production focused. He and his fellow students learned every trade on a film set and would often wear different hats. They learned to operate camera, to mix sound, to direct, to act – all aspects of a film shoot. In this spirit, Jan collaborated with a number of his classmates, both in school and on projects that came after. Some of his film school colleagues included Adriaan Ditvoorst, the documentarian, Rene Daalder, Pim de la Parra, perhaps most notably Wim Verstappen, whose film *The*

Unfortunate Return of Jozsef Katus to the Land of Rembrandt would be Jan's feature debut in 1966. Now, Jan and Verstappen worked together on a film called *Blue Movie* in 1971, and that was really kind of the launch of Jan's, I guess, notable feature career. And a quick note on *Blue Movie* is that it was true to its name. It was the first Dutch theatrical release to feature sex scenes and an erection. The same year, however, Jan began what would ultimately be a decades-long collaboration with filmmaker Paul Verhoeven. Verhoeven had been energized by the work he saw from Jan on Verstappen's films, and so he hired him to shoot his own short film *The Wrestler*. That would lead in 1971 to the first of six feature films they would make together: *Business is Business* and then, in 1973, most notably, *Turkish Delight*, a groundbreaking work that really set both of their careers on track. And this is where I'd like to bring Bilge in and just start talking about Jan's career. So, Bilge, *Turkish Delight*, I know you said it's been a while since you saw the film. I'm fresher on it. But does anything come to mind on that one?

BILGE EBIRI

It's been a very long time since I've seen it. I remember I did a deep dive into Verhoeven, like, over a decade ago. And, you know, that film, I mean, I was always intrigued by that film, because it's called *Turkish Delight*, you know, and I'm Turkish, but, you know, I remember it. And the thing I remember about that, and a lot of Verhoeven's early work, is just how energetic it all is. I mean, you know, and you can sense – and of course, you know, I don't know how much of it is de Bont and how much of it is Verhoeven. I think they collaborated very closely together, and de Bont later talks about how, you know, energy and just kind of the vitality and, you know, keeping the camera close, keeping it moving, those kinds of things were so important to him. But, you know, like, the thing you said about the influence of the New Wave, even though I mean, I would never think of Verhoeven as, like, a New Wave filmmaker in the way that I think of New Wave filmmakers, but you can see the influence in that early stuff. It's fascinating to chart that influence and how it, you know, kind of fed and fueled those early movies and how that style eventually became kind of the Verhoeven, you know, 80s, 90s aesthetic that then, you know, helps revolutionize Hollywood action filmmaking.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah, it's crazy how things are connected. I mean, with the style of *Turkish Delight* – I spoke to Paul Verhoeven for this and he was kind of leaning toward a more conservative look, and it was Jan who pushed him to, you know, "No, let's go handheld. Let's be a little more lively with the camera." And that meant having to dub sound because the handheld cameras made a lot of noise. And it was a drastic vision that Verhoeven just ultimately agreed with. He called it a "crisis" on set. Like, they were fighting about it. It was based on an acclaimed novel, *Turks Fruit* by Jan Wolkers. It was nominated for Best Foreign Language Film at the Oscars. Most successful film in Dutch history. In 1999 it was named by the Netherlands Film Festival as the best Dutch film of the century. So, you know, they love it over there! And it's just sort of full of, certainly, what would make Verhoeven tick, I think, as a filmmaker. You know, it's sort of immersed in, in some sense, the psychology of sex and the psychology of infatuation,

but then it goes into really unexpected depths. It's Rutger Hauer, Monique Van de Ven. Monique would actually become Jan's wife for 15 years. But yeah, it's just a free flowing – I don't want to say I've not quite seen anything like it, because there's certainly a lot of stuff that's been inspired by the same things that it's inspired by. But it's just full of life in interesting ways, and also in a way I think, at that time, was explosive for filmmakers, both here and in Europe,

BILGE EBIRI

You know, we talked about the influence of the New Wave, and it's not just the influence of the New Wave. It's really what it is is the influence of the 60s and, and also the tail end of the 50s, right? You know, the beats and things like that. And what's happening, I think, is, in many cases, it's kind of a delayed reaction from country to country and culture to culture. Because if you remember when, I think it's – I can't remember if it was Truffaut or Godard writing in the late 50s for *Cashiers* and kind of laying out a manifesto – I think it was Truffaut – laying out a manifesto for the kinds of films they wanted to see and the kinds of films they wanted to make. You know, this question of, you know, we want to see life as it is. We want to see girls the way we see girls. You know, I mean, it's all very, you know, it's all very male-centric.

KRIS TAPLEY

It's all very 60s.

BILGE EBIRI

Yeah, but it's very 60s. But it is – you get the sense that it's like, they're frustrated with the fact that the films that they're seeing, even when they're good, aren't really reflecting the life that they recognize, and they want a filmmaking that does that. And I think you see, in a lot of countries, there's this delayed reaction where more and more filmmakers are making those kinds of films, but in the case of Holland – and I don't know that much about Dutch cinema – but one gets the sense that that starts happening in the 70s for them.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah. I was going to say this whole notion of reflecting real life back to them. That will actually become crucial in how Jan as a filmmaker operates in what he wants to capture on camera. Yeah, that's actually an interesting point.

BILGE EBIRI

Yeah, I mean, it's interesting to see how these ideas that we think of as, like, kind of almost highfalutin artistic ideas, right? Oh, capturing life is it's lived. It sounds like something that, like, vérité documentarians would say and stuff like that. It's funny how 30 years later that translates to *Die Hard*. But it's true. Like, it's still that same mentality. And it's always fun when you talk to these people. There's no difference in the way that they look at these things. Like, to them, they're still thinking of it as art, which, they have to. But it is still kind of from the perspective of, like, an artist thinking about their work as art and thinking about their work in, like, art history. Like, that's how Jan still talks about his movies, you know? That's how he talks about *Twister*. I love that.

KRIS TAPLEY

About all of his movies, yeah. After that, they would they would go on, obviously, to do a number of collaborations together, but there's a film in there – I wonder if you've seen this film. It's called *Dakota*, by Wim Verstappen.

BILGE EBIRI

I have not. What's it like?

KRIS TAPLEY

I just want to bring it up because it's got some of the *Speed* DNA in it. And, you know, you'll appreciate this. It's a movie I think Michael Mann ought to remake. It's this guy who flies a Dakota aircraft. He's a pilot. He's just obsessed with flying. He loves flying he just – like, there's a sequence where he's got these barrels of fuel that he keeps on the plane so he can just refuel the plane without landing. And there's just a sense of obsession and meticulousness about the film. I mean, it's a weird movie, and I'm not even sure it works as a movie. It goes to some narrative places, but just that idea was so kind of weird and fascinating to me. So, seek it out. It's actually on YouTube in full. *Dakota*. 1974. So, after that Jan and Verhoeven would work together again on *Katie Tippel*, which, they leveled up in production value on that one. And if you're looking for them, there's some echoes of *Showgirls* in there, I think. And then beyond that, we won't bog down in each of these, but there were a number of other productions in Europe with other filmmakers. However, Jan always wanted to go to Hollywood. Paul says this, too. He was always wanting to go to Hollywood, Jan. He wanted to go to Hollywood before Verhoeven wanted to go to Hollywood. Jan has said that he wanted to go there before he even knew what it was or where it was. He just knew he wanted to work there. It was, like, this magical place. And so, he goes there and his first experience in Hollywood is *Roar*. So, let me just let you lay out *Roar*, Bilge. I'd love to just kind of let you set this scene.

BILGE EBIRI

Well, *Roar* is the movie where, I mean, he himself gets, like, brutally injured in *Roar*, right? It's one of those films – and it's so funny because, yeah, you know, it is Hollywood, right? Kind of.

KRIS TAPLEY

In a sense. Eccentric Hollywood.

BILGE EBIRI

I mean, it's funny because – and this happens a lot with European filmmakers and others. It's like, they think, oh, American movie. Hollywood. And it's like, not really, you know? And that's the film where he gets mauled by a lion. But it's like, he gets mauled by a lion, but that's after all these other things go wrong, right? I mean, I think the film was supposed to take a few months and it wound up shooting for, like, what, five years or something? But you know, their village burned down, things got flooded, everything got destroyed, the animals got loose. And they had to, like, go hunting for them to, like,

retrieve them. And this was before the incident with the lions, which Jan has talked about many times.

KRIS TAPLEY

Let's contextualize that a little bit, for people that don't know.

BILGE EBIRI

You know, it's a film set on a nature preserve, right? It's like a horror, comedy, adventure kind of film, right? It's been years since I've seen it.

KRIS TAPLEY

It's got a wacky tone.

BILGE EBIRI

It's not a good film at all. I mean, it's a terrible movie. But if I remember correctly, the way the scene worked was, you know, Tippi Hedren – and it's Melanie Griffith, too, right?

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah.

BILGE EBIRI

They're, like, being attacked. They're out in this lake and the crew is shooting, you know – these lions are supposed to go over this thing that they've constructed and he's inside this hole with the camera, but then one of the lions gets curious and actually starts sniffing around inside the hole and basically grabs Jan's head, or bites Jan's head and starts dragging him out.

KRIS TAPLEY

And his full-ass head, too.

BILGE EBIRI

Yeah, it scalps him! The lion scalps him.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah, it lifts his scalp, and yeah, it required, like, over 200 stitches. There's a picture out there of the back of Jan's skull. It's horrific. And he talks about how, like, you know, what he remembers most is the sound of the teeth on his skull in stereo and he was having nightmares after that.

BILGE EBIRI

Yeah, he says it was like nails on a chalkboard, but, like, 200 times louder, which just sounds horrible. The thing that's interesting, though, is, you know, he goes back to set, and people have sometimes interpreted that, "Oh, Jan de Bont, he's kind of this macho man doing this." And it was actually, like, I think his doctor –because he was so traumatized by it and was having nightmares and was, like, unable to function. And I

think his doctor or somebody was like, “Maybe you should, like, go back. And maybe that’s how you work your way through this.”

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah, go face it.

BILGE EBIRI

But it’s telling that he still talks about it. Now part of it is because it’s a fascinating story, and, like, people like me will ask him about it. But it’s so clear that, like, every time he tells the story, he focuses on different elements. So, it’s clear that it’s still a very vivid memory for him. And of course, it should be.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah, I’m pretty sure I wouldn’t forget that.

BILGE EBIRI

Yeah. But what’s interesting about the *Roar* incident sort of for his later career is there are a couple of ways to respond to an incident like that. You know, you can become very careful, right? You can become very careful and, you know, be very buttoned-up in the way you might shoot action or you might shoot things that are sort of uncontrolled on set. Jan de Bont goes in the other direction and he becomes one of these filmmakers – I mean, especially when he becomes a director – who, like, doesn’t mind danger on set. Who doesn’t mind throwing actors into harm’s way, or thinking that they might be in harm’s way. That sense of unpredictability and vitality and danger, he loves to foster on his sets, so much so that, you know, there are later stories about, you know, people getting injured on the set of *Twister* and people getting injured on the set of *Speed* and *Speed 2* and stuff like that. And by the way, before he becomes a director, on *Die Hard* and things like that, they’re always doing like these kinds of crazy, dangerous things. In some ways, you know, the American action movie renaissance of the late-80s and 90s is founded on people just sort of saying, “You know what? We’ll probably be OK.” And, you know, the results are kind of amazing. I think that in terms of in terms of *Roar*, I do wonder if there is kind of a thrill, speed demon quality to Jan de Bont as a result of that. You know, how sometimes that kind of trauma can lead you to sort of want to re-experience that sort of – almost that adrenaline rush?

KRIS TAPLEY

Or even just, “Look, I just survived a lion almost ripping my head off, so I can survive anything.”

BILGE EBIRI

Yeah.

KRIS TAPLEY

He is a madman. He’s told me stories of, like, when he was shooting some documentary in the Netherlands, and there were like shipping containers coming in the water and he fell out of a helicopter like a considerable height, fell all the way down and

just crazy stuff. I mean, he's a legend, I think. I think he knows he's a legend, too. I think he'll be the first to kind of keep even certain myths going. But I love that about him, too.

BILGE EBIRI

Yeah.

KRIS TAPLEY

One thing about *Roar* I will say. When you watch that movie, it is not a good movie, as you said, but they caught some crazy shit on camera. Like, you got – your kind of jaw is open the whole time. Your jaw is on the ground. Just, what you're looking at is real. These lions and all this shit going on. I mean, it's a wild movie. And so, anyway, definitely seek that out if you haven't seen it. It's not going to change your life or anything but it's a specimen. So, as Jan goes through Hollywood. He's doing films like *Private Lessons*, *Cujo* – the Stephen King adaptation, which I'm a big fan of, by the way – *All the Right Moves* with Tom Cruise. And then a few more Verhoeven collaborations, you know, *The 4th Man*, what a fascinating piece of work. He went back to Holland for that one, so it's not part of the Hollywood stretch, but man, both him and Verhoeven went off with that movie. It seems like it's rare for a movie to be both Hitchcockian and Lynchian in, like, the most complete, like, definition of those terms. And I think, again, they both sort of leveled up with that movie. It's incredible.

BILGE EBIRI

It's also indicative of his versatility as a cinematographer, because it's not one of those films that I think of as – like, there's a precision to *The 4th Man*. It's been years since I've seen that one, too, but I remember – I mean, like you say, Hitchcockian, but there's a precision to it, a precision to it visually, which surprised me when I saw it, because I think of Verhoeven as more unhinged a filmmaker. And, you know, *The 4th Man* – obviously, he made it back home, but it sort of harkens back – not harkens back, but it foreshadows the work he did post-Hollywood, when he kind of went back to Holland, or to Europe. It's interesting. It would have been fascinating to see him continue in that vein.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah, there's a formal approach that's unexpected, I guess, at that time for him, even in Hollywood. I think maybe I read this, that Verhoeven has called *The 4th Man* like a spiritual prequel to *Basic Instinct*, which it kind of is. I mean, you can see it. But yeah, it's a wild movie, and regarding the versatility, I mean, Jan – these guys are coming up as kind of not as formally rigid, and it's not that I think the movie is formally rigid, but it's definitely a little more locked down. It doesn't feel as from-the-hip as that early stuff.

BILGE EBIRI

Yeah, like I said, I mean, there's a real sort of precision to it. And I wonder sometimes, because this is before – I mean, Verhoeven comes to Hollywood after de Bont does. And I wonder what kind of influence de Bont had on that film, because there is a certain sort of slickness to it. That that makes you wonder, oh, is this like him kind of saying, "OK, I've been to Hollywood. Here's how they do it over there." You know?

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah, it's true. Now, when Verhoeven does come to Hollywood, I guess it's *Flesh + Blood* is kind of the start of that. I mean, it's Orion, gives him most of the money. It's a mess of a movie. It's a strange movie. There's not much to grab onto in terms of who I'm rooting for here. It's just depicting the Middle Ages and all of its agony.

BILGE EBIRI

Well, I mean, I love *Flesh + Blood*, though, because it's just-

KRIS TAPLEY

None of that was a value judgment, by the way. None of that was a value judgment.

BILGE EBIRI

I mean, everybody in that movie is utterly vile. And it's funny because I never think of it as a Hollywood movie. I always think of that as that movie – also because it actually has, like, weird dubbing and stuff like that – like, when I watch it, I watch it as, "Oh, this is one of your Verhoeven's, like, you know, Dutch movies." And it's not. Yeah, it is kind of his entrée. It doesn't feel Hollywood at all. I mean, it feels like something that, you know, some deranged European producer just, like, threw a lot of money at and, you know, came out with this kind of nutty cult movie.

KRIS TAPLEY

Totally. It doesn't feel like a 1985 movie even. It feels like a late-70s movie.

BILGE EBIRI

Right. Yeah. Exactly.

KRIS TAPLEY

There's something off about it. Jennifer Jason Leigh is in that, with Rutger Hauer again. Jan goes on to *Jewel of the Nile*, which is the sequel to *Romancing the Stone*. That's Lewis Teague, who directed *Cujo*. He does something like *Ruthless People*. So, now we start getting into some of the wacky Hollywood stuff. He does *Ruthless People*, which is, you know, Abrahams/Zucker brothers film with Danny DeVito, Bette Midler, Judge Reinhold. He does *Who's that Girl?* with Madonna, and I find this interesting. Because he's got *Who's that Girl?* with Madonna. Earlier he has *All the Right Moves* with Tom Cruise. So, you know, stars. And not that Tom Cruise was Tom Cruise at the time, but there's something about how this is a guy who was starting to capture these stars on camera in kind of their early years, and I find that fascinating.

BILGE EBIRI

It's also interesting because a number of these movies – I mean, he does *Who's that Girl?* He does *Leonard Part 6*.

KRIS TAPLEY

Talking about wacky.

BILGE EBIRI

He does *Clan of the Cave Bear*, and a lot of these films are – I mean, I haven't seen *Leonard Part 6*. I remember when *Leonard Part 6* came out. Everybody was like, "What the hell is this?" And it's, you know, one of the most reviled movies ever made.

KRIS TAPLEY

I've never seen it. I've seen the trailer.

BILGE EBIRI

Obviously, Bill Cosby was huge back then, but nobody expected that movie to be any good. But there are a number of these movies that are just kind of, like, famous flops.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah.

BILGE EBIRI

I mean, *Clan of the Cave Bear* came with a lot of expectations, too. And that, if I remember correctly, was kind of a disaster. I mean, the book was a runaway bestseller, so there was a lot of expectations around it. And, you know, I mean, he's cutting his teeth in Hollywood, but he's cutting his teeth on some, like, notable runaway productions. I mean, *Who's that Girl?*, I don't know much about the production of that movie but I know that some of those early Madonna movies were really troubled productions because I think she was very difficult. I think there was this, you know, sort of heavy attention on them because – I mean, *Shanghai Surprise* is another example of these. And it's interesting. I mean, he's working with stars, but also, in some ways, maybe learning how to deal with them and learning how difficult it can be to work with stars. Like you noted, I mean, Tom Cruise is not huge. I mean, *All the Right Moves*, I believe, is the same year as *Risky Business*, right? It's right around then. And I think that'll come in handy later when he's dealing with, you know, star egos and also trying to figure out how to make stars do things they don't want to do, which comes into play with *Speed*, obviously.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah, definitely. Well, now he moves on to – I like to say this is when he moves on to Hollywood's A-list director set with *Die Hard* in '88. John McTiernan coming off of *Predator*. This is when Jan is going to start developing an aesthetic, I think, that will influence movies of this breed for years to come, and is still looked back on by directors, cinematographers, as an aesthetic that they want to emulate. I mean, anamorphic lenses – not to get too deep – they're back in demand. You know, people say they want that "Jan de Bont look." So, let's get into it. *Die Hard*, I mean, what else can be said about *Die Hard* that hasn't been said? But when I've talked to Jan about this movie, and just about his approach as a DP, operating camera a lot, wanting to be there with the actors. You know, wanting to be there running across the glass with Bruce Willis. And there's something, I guess, about being able to capture a performance of reality that he's really big on. There's this intangible quality about that and how he shoots these

films. So, there's *Die Hard*. There's *Black Rain*, with Ridley Scott. I don't love that movie but it's got a lot of the run-and-gun kind of stuff, kind of the way his early years were. Because they were, like, shooting on streets without permits and things like that. They were just kind of knocking footage out here and there.

BILGE EBIRI

Yeah. It's interesting to look, though, at *Die Hard* and *Black Rain* together, because I mean, we talked a little bit already about Jan's versatility as a cinematographer. Those are two very different looking movies. I mean, they're both action movies. There's a lot of similar elements, but they're two very different looking movies to me.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah.

BILGE EBIRI

It's been a while since I've seen *Black Rain*, which is – I don't love it either. But, you know, Ridley Scott is such a – especially back then – was considered such a visual stylist, right? I mean, you know, he's done *Alien*, he's done *The Duellists*, he's done *Blade Runner*. And it's interesting to see Jan de Bont work in the Ridley Scott style, and he's able to do it. I mean, *Black Rain* is a gorgeous movie, but it is interesting to see him bring certain elements in. And I wonder if Ridley Scott himself learned some things from Jan de Bont. I've never talked to either of them about that movie. Because Ridley Scott's style has been sort of, I mean – I've used the word precise already to describe Jan's work, or some of Jan's work – but there is this kind of very painterly quality to Ridley Scott's work. I would never – even though Jan de Bont is actually obsessed with painting, and I don't know if he has a painting background, but, you know, he's done lectures on Rembrandt and stuff like that. So, he's very well-versed in the history of painting and the history of art and things like that. But I would never think of his style as painterly, right? Whereas Ridley Scott's is. But Jan brings a sort of heatedness to it, right? And the thing you mentioned about *Die Hard*, that idea that he's always – and he's always operating his cameras, too – so, he's always there. He's always up close to the actor. And he's able to kind of see what he's getting from the actor in terms of tension. Sometimes it's performance and sometimes it's just, like, those intangible things that we think of as performance, but it's really just the actor as a human responding to things around him.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah.

BILGE EBIRI

You know, that, I think, becomes part of his directorial style later. And it's fascinating to watch how in *Speed* it pays amazing dividends, and a movie like *Speed 2*, it's like, "Jesus Christ. Pull the camera away. Like, why is everything in, like, you know, a handheld, breathless close up?" These people are relaxing in their room, the cruise is about to start. Like, just calm down, you know? But I think he understands the value of

that. And sometimes later, he'll maybe start sort of overdoing it. But with *Die Hard*, it's perfect. It's absolutely perfect.

KRIS TAPLEY

And then he would work with McTiernan again, going into the 90s, *The Hunt for Red October*. This is where he would actually get into trouble for operating the camera, because he's dealing with Hollywood unions. Now we've got to hire somebody on set to operate that camera. You can't just grab the camera and operate. And, you know, his argument was – I mean, obviously, this is what he wants to do anyway – but his argument, also, was that it was a necessity because of these kind of enclosed situations with a submarine movie, you know? He's got to get in there. But he ran afoul of the unions with that, and he says there was lawsuits and he eventually had to hire people to come on set, and they would just sit there and not do the job because, "We've got to hire you, fine. But I'm still going to operate the camera." So, anyway, *The Hunt for Red October*, I'm a big fan of that one. It's such a 1990 movie. And no, I'm not going to explain what that means, but hopefully people understand what I mean by that.

BILGE EBIRI

Yeah, it is, actually. And I remember when I when I saw it, I was not that big a fan of it. But, you know, over the years, as its reputation has grown, I've revisited and I love it now. But back then it was, I mean, these Tom Clancy movies, I would get so kind of wrapped up in, like, the Cold War politics of it all, but it's just a kick-ass submarine movie. I've since, over the years, come to terms with the fact that I don't think there are any bad submarine movies. It's just one of those genres, or one of those subgenres, I'm just kind of – *subgenre* – I'm just kind of, like, you know what? Prison break movies and submarine movies. Those are the two. And I don't know what that says about me, but it's like, you really have to screw it up really bad for me to not like one of those.

KRIS TAPLEY

You can really soar with it too. *Crimson Tide* is unbelievable visual storytelling.

BILGE EBIRI

Best thing Tony Scott's ever made, you know?

KRIS TAPLEY

I agree. Yeah. Same year, *Flatliners*. Joel Schumacher. Another top director. Not a great movie, in my opinion. But talk about stars, I mean, all of these young stars kind of going at it. Kiefer Sutherland, Julia Roberts. You know, I don't know what there is to really say about the movie, but he gets to play a little bit and here's some experimentation.

BILGE EBIRI

And he's talked about this as well, in terms of *Flatliners*, just going back to what you were saying about shooting stars. You know, he has a different visual strategy for each character and each actor, right? You know, Kiefer Sutherland's character is very kind of aggressive, right? So, when they're shooting him, the camera's always kind of moving,

it's very close to – moving into close-ups, a very kind of heroic style of shooting him. Which, by the way, actually works against the movie a little bit, because he's annoying. And then Julia Roberts is, you know, they pull back a little bit because, you know, she's so gorgeous and elegant and almost sort of untouchable that there is that sort of, well, let's just make sure she's perfectly lit and we don't need kind of crazy handheld stuff around her. And then there's Kevin Bacon, right?

KRIS TAPLEY

Kevin Bacon, yeah. Oliver Platt. One of these things is not like the other.

BILGE EBIRI

Right. But with Kevin Bacon there, because his character is a little more conflicted and uncertain, there's, you know – they shoot him differently. And I actually love it when filmmakers do that. *Flatliners* is not a good movie. I know there are people out there who think it's a great movie. I am not one of them.

KRIS TAPLEY

It's a great concept is what it is.

BILGE EBIRI

It's a great concept. Schumacher is an interesting character also, because a lot of these guys, you know – I mean, de Bont, obviously, at this point, he's still a DP, but you know, he later becomes a director. There have been a number of cinematographers from this period who become directors. Schumacher himself was a costume designer, right?

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah.

BILGE EBIRI

But all these people that come from the visual side of filmmaking, right? And the idea that these are people that are going to make the films look amazing, right? They may not know how to work with actors. You don't know yet if they can work with actors, but you know that they're going to give you a great image. And that's something that happens a lot in the 80s and 90s. Like, that's something that people pay a lot of attention to. Studios pay a lot of attention. It's why Ridley Scott becomes a big-time filmmaker. I mean, obviously, his films are successful, but it's because people know he's such a kind of a visual craftsman.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah, he's coming from the world of production design and advertising. So, yeah, it's a skillset.

BILGE EBIRI

Yeah. And I've always wondered about that. Some of it's, I think, coming from the fact that the music video revolution has kind of put aesthetics to the forefront. The stuff coming out of France, the cinéma du look films like *Diva* and stuff like that. Suddenly

there is this emphasis placed on just incredible imagery. It doesn't matter if the story doesn't quite work or if the actors aren't all great. If it looks amazing, then, you know, then we've got something.

KRIS TAPLEY

Give us trailer material.

BILGE EBIRI

Yeah, trailer material, something to distinguish it from VHS. I mean, Hollywood's always fighting against whatever home video format is coming up, and so they're always trying to find ways to just make everything look amazing. Because they're convinced that's going to be the thing that drives people to the theater.

KRIS TAPLEY

And by the way, during all of this, unfortunately, he's not able to work with Verhoeven on Verhoeven's big, splashy *RoboCop*, *Total Recall*, because of the union scenario. Or with *Total Recall*, anyway, but in reverse, because now Jan couldn't do it because, you know, they were shooting that down in Mexico and sort of on the outskirts of union rules, so Verhoeven couldn't hire Jan, who's now entrenched in the union. That kind of scenario at that point. So, it's just kind of unfortunate, in a way, that Jan couldn't shoot those two movies. I'd love to see what he would have done with *RoboCop*.

BILGE EBIRI

Yeah, in my mind it, I think Verhoeven learned so much from Jan de Bont that there is that-

KRIS TAPLEY

He's in there.

BILGE EBIRI

I mean, yeah, it would have been great for Jan de Bont to shoot those movies, but every once in a while, I'll make the mistake of thinking he did shoot those movies, because, you know-

KRIS TAPLEY

Totally.

BILGE EBIRI

He and Verhoeven, I mean, they really mind-melded, right? And I don't know if it was because they always kind of felt that way or because Jan sort of pushed Verhoeven in that way, or if Verhoeven pushed Jan in that way. I mean, I'm sure it was all kind of a mixture of things and symbiotic.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah.

BILGE EBIRI

But that sort of heated, let's really get into it, let's keep things a little too close, you know, that is the Verhoeven style, at least back then. And that's something that I think Jan helped him perfect. So, he's still spiritually there.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah. Which is a perfect segue, because *Basic Instinct* in 1992 is when they do come back together. And what a movie. Just formally, aesthetically, this is the movie Jan should have been nominated for. The editing was nominated. It's obviously just entrenched in pop culture now. But it's an incredible piece of work.

BILGE EBIRI

It is. And I remember when I first saw the trailers for that movie. I remember I was in college and I don't know what movie I was seeing, but I was there with my roommate, who was also a film buff. He didn't study film but he was into film. And so, the trailer started and we were just, like, "Oh, man. What the hell is this?" And the trailer, if I remember correctly, it might have been like a teaser. There was no dialogue in this one. It was just flashes of images and, you know, Sharon Stone grinding, and at that point, we knew who Sharon Stone was because of *Total Recall* and we thought of her as actually, like, a really good actor. And I remember we were kind of disappointed because it looked like a flashy, shitty erotic thriller, right? There were so many movies like that back then.

KRIS TAPLEY

Like a Shannon Tweed movie or something.

BILGE EBIRI

Yeah, like, it just looked horrible. And we were, like, disappointed. Verhoeven? Sharon Stone? What's going on? And I remember, my roommate leaned over to me and he said, "This is going to be one of those movies where you're going to see the newspaper ad and there's just going to be this giant quote at the top that just says 'Stylish,'" you know? Which, of course, yes, it is stylish. But it was so funny because, like, at this point, the thing I was just talking about, this idea that movies had to look amazing, that idea has now curdled into movies look a little too amazing. They're a little too slick and we're kind of over that now. But then you see the actual movie and you're like, "Oh, OK, this is great." So, it really took a lot of people by surprise, because it looked like it was just going to be crap. And Sharon Stone got nominated, too, didn't she?

KRIS TAPLEY

No, no, it was just – the Academy was on top of the craft with that movie. It was nominated for film editing and original score, Jerry Goldsmith.

BILGE EBIRI

Was she nominated for a Golden Globe?

KRIS TAPLEY

She might have been. You know what? Probably.

BILGE EBIRI

Which is also why I still sort of, like, have a place in my heart for the Golden Globes. Because there's so many movies that, years later, you're like, "That person should have been nominated for an Oscar." And you're like, "But they were nominated for a Golden Globe." They were on top of it.

KRIS TAPLEY

She deserved an Oscar nomination, too. I mean, that movie, it just really works and it's people at the height of their craft, you know? Just knowing how to put a movie together and knowing how to pull you in and working from this script from Joe Eszterhas That's in – have you ever read that script? Like, the first page where she's killing the guy, it's just short bursts of words. I mean, it's very sparsely written and just pulls you in. Just the way it's written on the page.

BILGE EBIRI

Well, it's the era of the overpriced script deal, right?

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah, I was born too late.

BILGE EBIRI

That's right.

KRIS TAPLEY

Shane Black and all of that, yeah.

BILGE EBIRI

Shane Black, Eszterhas. They're getting the, you know, the seven-figure deals that are making headlines in *Variety* and stuff like that.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah. And speaking of Shane Black, the *Lethal Weapon* franchise – *Lethal Weapon 3* is going to be Jan's final film, at this stage, as a DP. It's actually my favorite *Lethal Weapon* movie, unashamedly. I mean, I love it. I'm sure that's insane to some people, but I like it. It's kind of the most "*Lethal Weapon*" *Lethal Weapon* movie, if that makes any sense. And that's working with Richard Donner. And then there's this movie *Speed*. And at this point, everyone's heard on this podcast the story of the development and how it crashed and burned at Paramount and then was put into turnaround, came over to Fox, and they were searching for directors. And now they've settled on a guy who is a bit of a risk, because he's a first-time director, obviously. But also, I mean, his whole pitch is making everything that's on the page bigger. Which is bold for movie that, at the time, is just meant to be a \$15 million B movie. But it's also a fun risk because, like, do we go with a conservative choice for something solid or do we kind of roll the dice for a

home run? And they roll the dice. So, with that, let's talk about *Speed*. Everyone knows where I'm coming from on this movie, so what's your take on it?

BILGE EBIRI

Well, thinking about it, and in some sense, in the context of Jan de Bont and sort of him moving from cinematography to directing, there are so many little touches in the film. We don't need get into why *Speed* is amazing. I mean, it's amazing, right? I mean, so many things about it are just wonderful, and the things that always jump out at me from *Speed* are these, like, little touches, tiny little touches that do not need to be there, right? That the movie would work fine without them. But, like, the extra little bit, I'm just like, yeah, that's it. That's the thing that makes *Speed* special, because that speaks to the mindset of the people making it. And the two things that I'm always delighted by – I always forget about these and then I watch the movie again and I'm like, "Oh, right. This thing." It's after the first bus explosion, you know, with that one driver early on that Keanu witnesses. And then the phone rings, the payphone rings, and he walks to the payphone and you see the pay phone and the little silver backing of the payphone. You see the flames, the reflection of the flames. That reflection doesn't need to be there, right? Any other film, especially today – the guy who's going to do the six-episode *Speed* miniseries for Netflix – he's not going to bother with the fucking flames reflected in the payphone, right? There isn't going to be a payphone, but it's going to be, like, an angle of a payphone that they shot two months after, you know, the rest of the movie, and nobody's going to give a shit that there isn't, like, flames reflected in the payphone. But there are flames reflected in that God damn payphone and you're there. Like, you are there.

KRIS TAPLEY

What's cool about – sorry to jump in – but what's cool about that shot, too, is the angle is wrong.

BILGE EBIRI

Oh, yeah.

KRIS TAPLEY

Like, the flames would not be reflected at the angle that they're shooting it at. And it doesn't matter.

BILGE EBIRI

Yeah. The flames are not there because, like, they happened to be there. They fucking made sure the flames are reflected in that payphone, right? That's a cinematographer. Like, that's a guy who understands everything on a visual level, knowing that that needs to be there. It's beautiful, certainly. But it also adds so much to the movie, and that speaks to the philosophy with which the film was made. The other the other shot was, you know, it's the classic one when they when they realize the highway is broken, right? When they realize that there's a gap in the highway, and then there's that big sort of zoom in, right? It goes over the highway and it kind of zooms into the distance and you

see the little gap in the highway, right? And right there is, like, a little flock of birds, right there in that gap, right? And, and I don't – was that CGI? I don't think there's CGI birds.

KRIS TAPLEY

It is CGI. And that's, in fact, a CGI trick, to kind of make something look real that could be dodgy if you looked at it too much. But I know what you mean. I mean, there's something about the feeling that evokes.

BILGE EBIRI

Yeah, I mean, it's not just – it makes it look real, and that's important. But the other thing about the birds is you realize how big it is and how desolate it is. Like, it's just that, oh, this is a huge gap and there's a giant flock of birds behind it. Like, it just adds that little "fuck you" that says, "Oh, yeah, it's huge. And look." I mean, it's like a gag on *The Simpsons* or something like when they show something being totally silent, and in the background you might hear, like, a dog howling, like, "Woooo." It's a little visual gag like that. But that they went to the trouble to do that, again, visual storytelling.

KRIS TAPLEY

And that shot, by the way, I'll get into it with all of the digital effects artists and such, because the movie is such a hybrid of practical and early CGI, in some ways. And I'm going to get real deep into all that in later episodes, but I will just say this. That is the most expensive shot in the entire movie.

BILGE EBIRI

I'm sure it is. I mean, every time I see it, I'm just like, "Holy crap. Like, how did they do that?"

KRIS TAPLEY

Because it's on a helicopter and it's zooming and it's tilting. I mean, there's so much movement that the digital matte artists and stuff had to deal with and it just took a lot of time to achieve that one shot in 1994.

BILGE EBIRI

But what's beautiful about it is it feels rough, right? It feels like a rough shot. Like, it feels like almost documentary. And that roughness adds realism to it, even though, as you say, it's got all that work done on it. But all these things speak to kind of the way that Jan – I'm assuming it's Jan. I mean, it would make sense that he would have just kind of foregrounded this as a visual experience. And, of course, that requires a bigger budget. That requires, you know, more money, and probably why, you know, the budget – I'm sure the budget expanded from \$15 million, right?

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah, it basically eventually doubled after various things.

BILGE EBIRI

Right. And in later films, he does get in trouble for – not in trouble, because the films are financially successful, for the most part, except for *Speed 2*. But it is part of Jan's journey, right? I mean, this journey from sort of the way he was doing things as a cinematographer and sort of what was innovative for him or what was special for him and how that eventually translated to him as a director, but then he kind of kept going, right? And then kind of maybe overdid it on some of these movies, where you're like, "Oh, maybe you needed to take a step back. Maybe you needed to go more in, like, a 4th *Man* direction, you know?"

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah, not, it's – and I said this to Justin Chang a few weeks back – there's a shaggy dog quality to the movie that I like. Like, there are cameras visible in certain shots, if you're looking for them. There's just a lot of imperfections that obviously Jan is well aware of, but your eye is diverted. And that's the magic. I mean, you're capturing this chaos on camera. It goes all the way back to *Roar*, right? Like, capturing this kind of chaotic reality and all its imperfections. And this is why he doesn't love CGI, because CGI – not to speak too broadly about it – but it's largely a pursuit of perfection. And I try not to bog down on here with dumping on CGI, because I'm not that guy. But there is something to that. That practical in camera stuff. It captures a sense of spontaneity and, again, imperfection, that adds to the experience and is obviously what attracts Jan to it.

BILGE EBIRI

It changes the meaning of imperfection and perfection, right? Because CGI, I mean, you might be looking for perfection in one area, but that leads to imperfections in another. I mean, a perfect example for me is *The Haunting*, right? And I know Jan de Bont has talked about how, you know, he wishes *The Haunting* didn't have so much CGI in it. And a lot of it doesn't. I mean, the best scenes in that movie are the ones that don't have CGI, right? I mean, it just works, those scenes. But there's a scene in *The Haunting* where, you know, all this crazy stuff is coming out of the walls and there are, like, faces in the walls, and there's, like, a giant hand coming out of the walls. And the actors are sort of casually running away and Owen Wilson says something like, "Oh, we gotta get out of this freaky house!" And at this point, we still don't know what Lili Taylor is seeing versus what the others are seeing, but we've seen a giant fucking CGI hand come out of the wall. It's enormous, right? It looks totally janky. It doesn't look right at all. But the actors are running away, you're just, like, "These actors have no idea what they're running away from," right?

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah, you're right. There's a very big disconnect with the actors in that movie that you can see. Like, especially Lili. Like, she's lost the whole movie, it seems like to me.

BILGE EBIRI

Yeah. And it's especially difficult because there is this narrative tension between what they're seeing. Like, she's seeing these things that they're not, right? But then later, they're seeing the same things, right? So, it's like the house really is haunted or

whatever. And it's kind of like, what is going on? The actors don't know what they're responding to, so they can't convey what's happening. The story isn't telling us because, I don't know, they forgot. But like, we're seeing all this stuff and we don't know if it's real, which, that's one thing. But if the characters can't convey to us what they're seeing, we're totally lost and all the menace is gone, and there are scenes like that. So, it's like, you know, they worked so hard to get those effects right, and I'm sure they, you know – obviously, it's effects. They worked on those later. So, the actors didn't know what they were running away from, and then they cut to the actors and Owen Wilson doesn't look like he just saw an enormous, you know, steel hand come out of a house wall, you know? I'm sure you've probably talked about this. There was a real question back in, you know, 1994, as to whether Keanu Reeves was a good actor or not, right? I mean, there was this question as to whether, you know, he had the ability to do this stuff. I mean, not the ability – he wasn't a bad actor. I remember when I first saw *River's Edge*, before I knew who he was, I was like, "This guy is an incredible actor." But later, then you see stuff like *Parenthood* and *Bill & Ted*, obviously, and there was the sense that, like, he's good for this thing, but then he keeps trying to do these other things and it just sounds totally wrong. And the whole surfer dude Keanu, I remember a lot of people talked about how, like, his voice was just totally wrong for some of the movies he was doing. *Speed* is actually the same year as one of my favorite movies, *Little Buddha*, where he plays Siddhartha, and I think he's great. But you can also tell they've done something to his voice in that movie.

KRIS TAPLEY

I've actually never seen it. One of your favorite movies?

BILGE EBIRI

Well, I'm a huge Bertolucci fan. But I've seen *Little Buddha* many, many times. Talk about a visual filmmaker.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah.

BILGE EBIRI

But with *Speed*, I think the sort of quote unquote "doing it for real" and creating that real context, I think that helps Keanu Reeves a lot and I think Keanu Reeves learns a lesson from that movie as well, which he later brings to his other action movies, because at that time, he wasn't even sure if he wanted to be an action star. But later on, I think he realizes the more realistic we can do this, the more we can get into, you know, real stunts and things like that, the better I will be.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah, totally.

BILGE EBIRI

And that's an important connection.

KRIS TAPLEY

How about *Twister*? I mean, I assume you're *Twister* fan.

BILGE EBIRI

So, I saw *Twister* opening day, because I was, like, such a big *Speed* fan and I was like, "Alright, let's do this." I hated *Twister* when I saw it, and it wasn't so much the effects. I actually thought, oh, the effects are great, but I was like, "These performances are terrible." I have over the years come to accept *Twister* and I actually do like it now. When I interviewed Jan, it was for *Twister*. At *Vulture* we did a *Vulture* Movie Club live tweet of *Twister*. I didn't do the live tweet, but I did the Jan de Bont interview. So, I do like *Twister* now, and I can kind of – I don't hate the performances in it now. Actually, Bill Paxton had that Keanu-esque quality where the timbre of his voice sometimes worked against the type of parts he was trying to do. You know, I mean, now watching him is just like a nostalgia trip for me. So, I don't know if that's just my opinion changing about his performance and all of that, but you can tell in *Twister*, you know, they are in some cases being faced with just, like, real shit happening to them.

KRIS TAPLEY

Oh, yeah. They get hurt for sure. We were just talking about that earlier, but, like, big chunks of hail from the hail machine or whatever not breaking up completely and smacking them in the head. Yeah.

JAN DE BONT

And de Bont himself has talked about this, where, you know, he had to tell them, "Listen, this is a hail machine. It's not going to be perfect. These chunks are going to be big." And you're like, "So, you actually created a situation where it's worse than actual hail. Like, hail wouldn't do that. A hail machine is a very janky piece of equipment and might actually send, like, enormous hunks of ice at your head." It's such a Jan de Bont moment. "This is going to be more dangerous than the real thing," you know?

KRIS TAPLEY

"But it'll look great!"

BILGE EBIRI

And it does look great.

KRIS TAPLEY

I've never not loved that movie, by the way. Like, I know there's people that still hate it. And I can't understand where they're coming from, obviously. I mean, that summer of '96 and I look at that as, like, the last summer movie season of my childhood and it was a big one. I mean, obviously the summer of '89 was huge for me, summer of '96 was just packed and I was at the theater all the time and just into it. You know, *Mission: Impossible*, *Independence Day*, even *Eraser*.

BILGE EBIRI

Oh, yeah. *Eraser* is fun.

KRIS TAPLEY

It's just, like, one after another that year. And I've just always loved *Twister*. I also wanted to be a storm chaser at a certain point in life. So, you know, this movie, I saw it and I was like, "Man, I want to do that."

BILGE EBIRI

How old were you then?

KRIS TAPLEY

I would have been 14, going on 15.

BILGE EBIRI

OK, so '96 for you is what '87 was for me. Like, '87 was my big year where I was just seeing everything and suddenly was able to, like, just go see movies on my own and stuff, and '96 was the year after I graduated from college, so that was my first year in New York. I think what happens with *Twister* for me, and like I said, I've had a journey with *Twister* over the years. You know, Hollywood action movies start to change around this time, right? We've had kind of the late-80s to mid-90s renaissance where there's still kind of a certain realism to the movies, right? I mean, they're over the top. We've had the *Die Hards* and the *Lethal Weapons* and stuff like that. But those movies are still – this sounds crazy, but there's a plausibility to those movies, right? *Die Hard* could happen. Like, it probably won't happen, but it could happen, you know? And *Speed* could happen. But the thing about *Twister* and some of the other movies that come out after this, and some of it has to do with, sort of, how CGI starts to liberate – liberate is maybe not the right word, but it does start to look like suddenly anything seems possible. And some of the movies start to be, "OK, that wouldn't happen." The little sort of bullshit detector in your head starts to go off, especially for people like me who were a little older and I think were just a little more ingrained in the way things were. But, you know, after this, you know, I mean, movies just get crazier and crazier and more over the top. Like *Stargate*, right? *Stargate* has a kind of "you've lost me" quality to it. This has gone a little too crazy. You haven't sort of quite justified how crazy it is. And it just, you know – it just loses me. And *Twister* for me – and it's funny because it doesn't start in a realistic register. I mean, the craziest scene in the movie is the opening scene, right? But because it's tornadoes and because it's, like, a real-world thing, I think I went into it expecting something a lot more, or maybe just a little more, grounded, and that opening scene, what? Come on, what? And of course, he's doing the right thing. He is starting off with a scene that lets you know exactly the kind of movie it's going to be. I mean, he loses me with the opening scene, or he lost me with the opening scene back then.

KRIS TAPLEY

You're talking about the dad flying up in the-

BILGE EBIRI

Yeah.

KRIS TAPLEY

That's too much for you?

BILGE EBIRI

Back then it was. Now I'm kind of like, "OK." Because there have been so many other movies since then and I've made my peace with the direction that action movies went in. Now I watch *Twister* and I'm like, "Oh, sure, this is great." Put it back in theaters. I'd go see it again, you know?

KRIS TAPLEY

Well, now they're rebooting it with the *Minari* guy. So, maybe you'll like it more.

BILGE EBIRI

Yeah. Whenever I hear something like that, where, like, "Oh, Lee Isaac Chung," obviously, my first instinct is, "Well, that sounds like a terrible idea." But then I think to myself, "Well, OK, look, these people aren't idiots." Like, it's not like they just say, "Oh, *Minari*, yeah, that guy. We'll get him." Clearly, he went into the room with them and had a vision for it and was just, like, "Listen, this is what it's going to be." And I have been duped many times by this, so it's not a perfect approach, but whenever I see, like, a completely ridiculous name attached to a project like that, I'm like, "This is going to be good, because there's no way they would have went for this guy, or this person, if this person didn't have an idea that just, like, knocked their socks off.} Now, sometimes that person doesn't have the chops to pull that off and, you know, you run into trouble. But I don't know. Lee Isaac Chung? We'll see.

KRIS TAPLEY

We'll see.

BILGE EBIRI

Kenneth Branagh directed *Thor*.

KRIS TAPLEY

That's true.

BILGE EBIRI

That is a thing that happened.

KRIS TAPLEY

That is a thing that happened, yes. Alright, *Speed 2*. Let's get to it *Speed 2: Cruise Control*, I should say. I will dedicate an episode of this podcast to *Speed 2* down the line.

BILGE EBIRI

OK. You should.

KRIS TAPLEY

But what do you have to say about this one, man?

BILGE EBIRI

It's a fun movie to talk about. The other thing about *Speed* that sort of emphasizes why Jan was so good for it – you know, he's very good with space. He's very good with sort of situating you in space, and he's very good with – well, he's very good with machinery, right? I mean, he's not as good a filmmaker as James Cameron, but he has that sort of engineer's mentality. But he also has, as we talked about, that desire to kind of get up close to the actor and that sort of heated, unhinged, handheld quality. So, those are two almost opposing abilities that he had – not opposing, but two different abilities that he has, and in *Speed* that works perfectly. I mean, the elevator scene is a perfect example of that. But that's also the scene in the movie that convinces us, "Oh, this is going to be good." Like, after that scene, you're totally into it. But he directs the hell out of it, right? And he's simultaneously able to stay on his characters and sort of capture the immediacy of what's happening in their faces and the energy of what's happening in the way he kind of shoots them. But he's also able to keep us sort of situated in space, right? There are a lot of directors out there making action movies who can't do either of these things. Some of them can't do one or the other, and some of them can't do either of them and it's a disaster. But he's able to do both of those things and he's very good with that. And then *Speed 2*, he's got the problem of, well, I mean, it's a boat. It's not going very fast. You know, they're on a cruise. It seems like he's trying to overcompensate for it by sort of doing the thing where he, like, stays close on the actors and kind of flails around with the camera. But it just leads to just chaos and confusion and annoyance.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah.

BILGE EBIRI

And it's really frustrating. And the other thing is, like, at first the ship is not actually in crisis, it's just, like, Willem Defoe sort of making it seem as if the ship is in crisis. So, then you have this added problem of – this is pre-*Titanic*, but there's this added element of, well, nothing's actually happening to the ship, so Jan can't do the things that he can do. He just has to make it seem like something's happening, and once, actually, stuff does start happening, you know, the film settles in. There are some nifty little moments in *Speed 2*. There are moments where you're like, "Oh yeah, these are the things he can pull off." But woof.

KRIS TAPLEY

It doesn't have that quality that the first movie had, which is, his whole mentality was, "I wanted it to be like these events were actually happening and a camera just happened to be there." Yeah, well, to your point, with *Speed 2*, if a camera just happens to be there, what's it really capturing when it's just this boat lumbering along? It doesn't work conceptually. It's fully his deal, too. I mean, Mark Gordon is not a part of this. Graham

Yost is not a part of this. It's a Blue Tulip production and he's, you know, got screenplay credit.

BILGE EBIRI

It's his auteur film.

KRIS TAPLEY

This was for better or worse going to be his baby. Yeah, exactly. And it doesn't have, you know, the chemistry between Keanu and Sandra was a big part of the first movie, and I mean, I'll never forgive this movie for ruining her character.

BILGE EBIRI

They haven't figured out what to do with the characters.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah. Anyway, we should sprint to the finish here. After this he does *The Haunting*. We've talked about that. And then the last film, *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider - The Cradle of Life*, which I haven't seen since it came out and I have zero memory of it.

BILGE EBIRI

Same here.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah, it was sort of-

BILGE EBIRI

I remember not liking it.

KRIS TAPLEY

That happened. And then it was over. I mean, he developed a number of things after that. I don't know if you had anything else to add about that one, by the way.

BILGE EBIRI

Nothing about *Lara Croft*. The thing that is – it's interesting, because he'll talk about some of the stuff he developed, and some of the stuff he developed got made, I mean, got made by other people.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah, like *Godzilla*.

BILGE EBIRI

He talks about the *Godzilla* film that he worked on. I actually think he could have made a great *Godzilla* movie. I actually think Jan de Bont would have been perfect for *Godzilla*, and the Roland Emmerich *Godzilla* is – I mean, I haven't – maybe I'll change my mind on that one, too.

KRIS TAPLEY

Nah, you won't.

BILGE EBIRI

But that movie stank. And I feel like Jan de Bont actually kind of had the right attitude for a *Godzilla* movie. Like, that would have been kind of – I think he could have really pulled that off.

KRIS TAPLEY

Totally.

BILGE EBIRI

He talks about *Minority Report* and how, you know, I mean – it's funny. I mean, as you've noted yourself, directors love to mythologize. I mean, everybody does. But they also sort of portray things differently. I don't know what happened with *Minority Report*. I know that he developed it for a long time. He was supposed to direct it and then Spielberg was supposed to do *The Haunting*. And at some point they switched because of timing issues. Tom Cruise was available to do *Minority Report* suddenly and Spielberg went to do *Minority Report* because, I don't know, *The Haunting* was going to take longer or something like that. Anyway. And then you're like, well – I mean, *Minority Report* is a great, great, great movie. And it's a great Spielberg movie. And maybe it was just chance that de Bont got stuck with *The Haunting* and it didn't work. I mean, it made a ton of money, so whatever. And Spielberg wound up doing *Minority Report*, which wound up being great. But there's also another part of me, which is like, "Did Spielberg kind of know?" Like, "Oh, no, no. I'm going to go make this." There is this, you know – Spielberg has a great record of having, like, developed movies and then left them to just be an executive producer.

KRIS TAPLEY

"You take this one. I don't think I want to do this one now."

BILGE EBIRI

Yeah, and then suddenly, like, that movie is not good, but it makes money, so, it's like, everybody's happy. But it's, like, and meanwhile, Spielberg went made this other movie, which fucking rocks, you know? And it just happens over and over again with him. And maybe, I mean, maybe that's just because, hey, he's Spielberg. He's a really great filmmaker. He's the best we've got. It's like, you know, you trade your best player to this other team and suddenly that other team is great and people are like, "Well, why wasn't this happening with the previous players? And, like, because they're different players, you know? But yeah, I mean, the thing I always wonder about, though, because de Bont is clearly, you know – I mean, he's become a Hollywood filmmaker. He sort of is working on these grand scales, which requires Hollywood budgets and Hollywood craftspeople and all that. But he also has this real difficulty, as you've noted, with, like, the unions and all that stuff, and also, I think, kind of, you know, has to deal with stars and things like that. And sometimes I wonder what might have happened had he gone the Verhoeven route, and just, like, you know, go back to Holland and make movies

there. What if he made, like, smaller thrillers and things like that? I could be interesting. I don't know that he ever thought about it.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah. No, you're totally right. That's interesting. I haven't really thought about that, but that would be great. Anyway, I'm just going to quickly rattle off a couple things that he's developed over the years since. *Ghost Riders in the Sky* was this legendary unproduced script. It was sort of bastardized in the form of *Cowboys & Aliens* later on, which Jan also considered directing. Kind of *Chariots of the Gods* vibes, Erich Von Daniken. Native Americans and aliens. Kind of an *Ancient Aliens* deal. He developed *Stopping Power*, which was, like, an action movie with John Cusack and I guess the funding dried up on that one. He was developing the *Point Break* remake for a period, which is funny, considering the Keanu of it all. And the last one I know of is he was developing *Mulan* over a decade ago, and then, obviously, that ultimately was made by Disney about eight or nine years later. And then now he's done. And, you know, I've told him, like, I wish he could make another movie. I want one more Jan de Bont movie. They don't make the movies – I mean, I'm sure there's a number of reasons he's not going to make another movie, but they don't make the movies that he wants to make. They certainly don't make them the way he wants to make them, and so it's sort of no country for old men, in a way, for him. He's big into photography and works with the Getty Museum here in LA a lot. he donates a lot of his collection and that's his passion. But he remains just this interesting figure, in filmmaking history, in Hollywood history, certainly latter-20th Century filmmaking. Because, again, he developed an aesthetic that a lot of filmmakers really strive for in today's overly digital world, I think. And I think he gets enough credit for it. I mean, sometimes I wonder if he does, but, again, I just wish there could be some movie that could come along that he could just knock out like he did with *Speed*. But here we are, it's 2023 and we're not going to get another Jan de Bont movie. But he's the man.

BILGE EBIRI

He is the man. You know, he thing about *Speed* is also, there's a certain claustrophobia to *Speed*, even though it's – I mean, it's grandiose. Every time I watch it, I forget that there's the whole climax in the subway and everything. But each of those scenes – not scenes, but each of those sequences are built on a kind of contained quality of space, right? There's the subway and then there's the bus, obviously, and then the elevator. Like, he's actually – he's good in these sort of small, sort of high-pressure environments, and I wonder if there might have been a way for him to make – I mean, I've speculated that he should, you know, go to Holland and make movies, or Europe, but maybe there was a way to kind of make these smaller movies with these sort of contained spaces. Whereas, you know, he's just gotten bigger and bigger and more and more grandiose, you know, more characters more, you know – like him making *Mulan* just sounds like a disaster, you know?

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah.

BILGE EBIRI

Like, why would he make *Mulan*, you know? And *Twister*, like, *Twister* is a film that, you know, in its best sequences, it's like people stuck in small spaces, whether it's like the car or the van or, you know, there is that sort of contained atmosphere even though obviously, you know, you're out in the open and there are tornadoes. But he's good with that element and I feel like there was probably a way for him to sort of make, like, lower-budget action movies that sort of played with that idea, almost like how M Night Shyamalan kind of went back to that after he sort of tried to make these bigger, more grandiose, you know, films like-

KRIS TAPLEY

Last Airbender, yeah, he kind of hit the wall with that and then came back. Yeah,

BILGE EBIRI

Yeah, and it seemed like we were so worried that he was just going to keep trying to make those types of movies. And suddenly he was like, "Oh, wait, there's this other thing that I'm good at. I'm going to do that." And suddenly it was like, "Oh, right. He's back."

KRIS TAPLEY

That's true. Maybe we can convince Jan to do a smaller project. I'm always leaning on him and trying. But anyway, this was great. Like I say, I just wanted to get a good overview of who this guy is before we forge ahead for people who might have wanted or needed a deeper dive. And frankly, it was helpful for me to revisit some of this stuff and watch some of the stuff I hadn't seen. So, you were spectacular for this, Bilge. Thank you so much for doing this.

BILGE EBIRI

Thank you.

KRIS TAPLEY

That's Bilge Ebiri, everyone.

[OUTRO MUSIC]

KRIS TAPLEY

Next week on *50 MPH*...

KRIS TAPLEY

It's time to find our Jack Traven. The studio searches high and low for a leading man as *Speed* gives birth to a new action hero.

JORGE SARALEGUI

And so, at some point, we've hit so many people. Like, Woody Harrelson is a name that just came into my head right now. But, I mean, it was a million people. So, we go out to Keanu Reeves. He passes.

KRIS TAPLEY

Director Jan de Bont has to convince 28-year-old Keanu Reeves that he's the man for the job.

JAN DE BONT

I thought he was a very unlikely action actor. I didn't want the typical, cliché, big, macho guys. I wanted him to be more like an accidental action hero. Somebody who just happens to run into it and has to deal with it.

KRIS TAPLEY

In the end, it would be the role to transform his career and set him up for global success.

RISA BRAMON GARCIA

I don't know if he knew what to do with this part, but, he ultimately – it happened, and, you know, what's a movie star? A movie star is someone the camera loves, and the camera loves him.

KRIS TAPLEY

All of that and more next week right here on *50 MPH!*

KRIS TAPLEY

Thanks so much for listening. *50 MPH* is written, produced and edited by yours truly, Kris Tapley. You can find us on Twitter @50MPHPod. I'm @kristapley. That's Kris with a K. You can also catch every episode and more at our website 50MPHpodcast.com. If you dug the show, please like and subscribe and do all the things. We'll see you next time.