50 MPH: EPISODE 40

“DIRECTORS ON *SPEED*”

Transcript (01:16:18)

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
Hello folks and settle in because this is going to be a special episode. Well, every episode of *50 MPH* is special to me, but this one in particular has a certain shine to it that I think you’ll enjoy. Last week, as it pertains to the lasting legacy of *Speed* and its place in film history, we heard from the fans. This week, we hear from the filmmakers. I’ve put together a round table of sorts with five directors. Some of them are friends of mine. Some of them have history with director Jan de Bont. All of them have immense respect and admiration for *Speed* and I thought it would be fun to collect their voices into an assessment of this movie from those who have actually been in the trenches themselves. And I want to start today with someone whose voice we have heard briefly on the podcast several months ago. I think he is one of our great teachers in film theory and cinema history. I’m talking, of course, about Guillermo del Toro, the Oscar-winning filmmaker behind movies like *The Devil’s Backbone*, *Pan’s Labyrinth*, *The Shape of Water*, *Nightmare Alley* and, most recently, his brilliant stop-motion adaptation of *Pinocchio*. Guillermo actually has a professional history with Jan, which I mentioned previously. Let me have him tell you that story and then I’ll just let him start preaching about Jan. These will be lengthy soundbites today, so settle in with them.

GUILLERMO DEL TORO
In the prehistory, pun intended, of my career, I was co-producing a movie for Jan based on the book *Meg*, about the megalodon shark, and we actually came up with the thing – I saw it in the trailer – where the Meg eats the T-Rex. That was originally part of our pitch. And, you know, the beauty of talking to him, and the reason I produce, is to hear how people think about these things. And I think that he had a very good sense of real is better, whether it’s a mechanical puppet or a real set, and I agree with that approach completely. I think particularly in action movies, the eye is so trained, the eye of the audience. A regular audience has seen more action movies than any other generation put together, and they can tell by a margin of zero point zero point zero, like, when something is real and when something is digital. And I think that it goes from the fact that every action sequence is pre-vized, either by the same company or by the same style of pre-viz approach, and they all end up looking the same: impossible shots, camera that is too fluid for it to be jarring, and I think when you approach an action

movie, it can be *The Train* by Frankenheimer or *Ronin* by Frankenheimer or *Speed* or *The Rock*. They are all – *Die Hard* – incredible exercises in economy of storytelling in terms of the dramaturgy of it. You have a very simple plot and a very interesting story and ultimately, that – it becomes a perpetual movement machine. And that machine needs to be engineered by someone that knows how to do it for real, because if you take the approach of the short cut, of the digital thing, somebody is going to be there to supervise or produce that effect. It's really, really numbing, for the audience and the director and everything. And the fact is, when somebody like Jan comes from a physical, meaning imprinting the moment in silver on a piece of film – you know, that discipline with models, with real stunts, there is no substitute. And something always happens. You cannot plan an accident in an action movie, you know, whether it's George Miller crashing a motorcycle, and then the motorcycle hits the stunt man on the neck, or the stunt man comes out of the car or the motorcycle gyrating – something will happen. Or a piece of a wheel will come towards the lens. Something happens, physically. There's no comparison. And a DP has that discipline of trying to get it all in production, not in post. I think *Speed* is one of these perfect perpetual movement machines. There are people that say, "Oh, well, you know, an action movie, you know, is a bunch of stuff, and then you find it in the editing room." Not true. They are really, really precise pieces of engineering. I remember, when we were approaching *Blade II*, the thing that I watched the most was musicals, because I thought, "This is like watching Gene Kelly dance. You can shoot Gene Kelly or Fred Astaire in an old-style musical," which some martial arts do, wide-angle, in a wide shot, and you see Fred Astaire dance. You can shoot it like George Stevens. Or you can shoot it like, you know, Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen, with the camera being very involved and the color language and the montage. Or like Minnelli. Three completely different styles of shooting a musical. Three completely different styles of shooting action. And you have to have a notion of how these things are put together. Very hard to do. When I hear, again, somebody say, "Well, you know, the movie had $100 million. You give me $100 million, I could shoot it." No. It's extremely precise. It's entertainment that needs to flow naturally with things that are entirely unnatural. We have to simulate that the scale of the stunt could happen, and that's why the modern action film where everything is pre-vized and ultimately rendered just in digital, is less visceral and less compelling than seeing Billy Friedkin do a chase going the wrong way in *To Live and Die in L.A.* or Michael Mann doing a heist, you know? Which becomes a modern western. And *Speed* is right up there. I mean, I think the action movie is a very modern concoction. I think it depends on movement, in every sense, even the screenplay. And, you know, when you watch *The Train*, there are impossible shots with Burt Lancaster on that train. And it's a real train, and they blow up a real train station. And it's miraculous. You get a sense that's for real.

KRIS TAPLEY
Guillermo brings up John Frankenhemier's 1964 film *The Train* a lot, actually, which I love, because as you know, Jan himself has brought that movie up a couple of times and has even said Frankeheimer is his favorite action director. So, before I play this next clip, let me just briefly describe the plot of that movie for you, in case you haven't seen it. The super condensed version is it's about a train loaded with French art pieces at the end of World War II. A German colonel, played by Paul Scofield, is attempting to

move the stolen treasures into Germany, and a French Resistance member, played by Burt Lancaster, has to intercept the train without damaging the valuable cargo. It was recently released on 4K and it's an incredible film. It might even be considered the first modern action movie. Now, one of the things Guillermo and I discussed is an element of *Speed* that I find fascinating, and I've brought it up here a number of times, that it's a movie that flies in the face of screenwriting rules. There are no dramatic character arcs. Jack Traven learns nothing. He simply moves through the narrative affecting it, while not being too overtly affected himself.

GUILLERMO DEL TORO
When you say that, I remember a conversation I had with Walter Bernstein, who was a writer on The Train, and he made it very clear. He said, "Look, the character doesn't really learn anything. It's not like the character learns to love the art and all of a sudden he appreciates Matisse. Or he's able to converse about modern art." It's a clash of two wills in a moving vehicle, basically. That, you can go to *Runaway Train*, and that fits. You can go to *The Train*, it fits. *Speed*, it fits. Many, many of these models fit because you just have to have two wills that are going with the same strength in opposite directions. And you don't have to [have] a character that changes. You are submerged. Movies like this need very, very clear line vectors. Action is a vector-oriented genre. Trains are living vectors, are real-world vectors. They're going from here to here, and the trains are fantastic for action movies, whether it's *Narrow Margin* or it's *Silver Streak*, *Runaway Train*, *The Train* – you know, they are incredibly cinematic. I don't know why, but they are the most cinematic vehicle possible, and I think there is a majesty to trains and an unstoppable sense that is great. And in a strange way, what I like about *Speed* is that it doesn't take place on a regular car. It takes place on a train-like bus. It's so smart, because it's not a vehicle you associate with speed. It's public transportation, which is cumbersome, depends exactly on stopping so many times. There are very, very brilliant decisions on the vectors of this movie, and they are inherently cinematic. I think that the movie is told with a great wisdom on the economy of the gags. You have to place your bets tonally on where you want to land an action movie. What do I mean by this? You can make an action movie where the stakes are real, and then tonally, you get *Bullitt* or *The French Connection*. Ultimately, there are real stakes in the real world, and there is a more somber undertone. Or you can, tonally, go for comedy, and you're going to have a movie that is almost a comedy in an action film. The perfect tone in this movie is you have the possibility of a romance, but it's on the move. None of the consequences will have great weight, but you have characters you like, you know? They are really fast and easy to understand, contrary to other action movies, which depend on the conversation. Even, you think of *Die Hard*, there is two or three moments in which the character talks to someone and has a slightly deeper conversation. In *The Train*, Frankenheimer, there is at least one or two times where Burt Lancaster has a deeper conversation with somebody, or the stakes become heavy. Here, it's quick. It's, you know, it's types, very much like *Stagecoach*, John Ford's *Stagecoach*. These are characters you can understand very quickly. They're almost archetypical film characters, you know? The tourist, the bus driver – they are fast to absorb. And the psychopath is exactly realistic. It's this almost comic book-sized villain. You compare that to *The Rock*, which has two or three elements that, tonally, go very

well together, but they shouldn't combine so well. And I think that movie is a brilliant exercise in action film, because you have Ed Harris, which is doing a really dramatic sort of story for his villain. You have Nicolas Cage who is Nicolas Cage, and Sean Connery, which arguably embodies the modern action film. So, you know, I think *Speed* is right up there, is, top 10 action movies, as we understand them, in the late-20th Century, early-21st Century.

KRIS TAPLEY
I have never considered thinking about *Stagecoach* as a comp for *Speed*, by the way, but I totally see it and I love that Guillermo went there. Again, just one of our great teachers when it comes to cinema. Before we move on, one last thing I talked to Guillermo and a few of these directors about was the loss of films like *Speed*, of action films that fired on these particular cylinders and the frankly withering landscape of action cinema today, whether due to the audience's taste shifting or the corporate studio appetite for these movies fading or whatever the case may be. And so, you'll just have to forgive me that, yes, in a number of these conversations today, there is a lot of romance for the good old days.

GUILLERMO DEL TORO
There was always a point of view, very, very strong point of view. There was a Frankenheimer, a Friedkin, a Bruckheimer, you know? There was a very strong will behind these things, and I think that now you see, more often than not, franchises serviced by directors that come in and out, or producers that are exchangeable. I think that the great thing, the secret weapon, Jan de Bont had, in a very odd way, was Verhoeven, you know? Because of how idiosyncratic Paul is, even when he's tackling a mainstream action movie like *RoboCop*, which is a deranged neo-comic book that gets the best things that were floating in the zeitgeist with Frank Miller and Alan Moore and the rebirth of the superhero, and combines it with this dystopian but tongue-in-cheek, very, very Verhoeven-esque sense of humor and cynicism that is just irresistible. And that flinty discipline to achieve something more than what is required of you artistically, I think, is very present in *Speed* with Jan. His heart rate is high. He needs to deliver. The stakes are very high for him in now becoming a director, and that is there. That pulse, the blood pressure meter, feeds into the nervousness of the film in a beautiful way, and the – occasionally, the idiosyncrasy that is Verhoeven-esque finds its way. You know, there's a very peculiar and meticulous planning in this that makes it one of the great ones.

KRIS TAPLEY
That makes for a fine segue into this next filmmaker, and he is one of our legends. We've talked about him a number of times on the podcast, particularly back in episode seven, where film critic Bilge Ebiri and I did a whole breakdown of Jan's career from his DP days in Holland through his Hollywood influence behind the camera and, eventually, his move to the director's chair. I'm talking about Paul Verhoeven, the singular mind behind action movies like *RoboCop*, *Total Recall* and *Starship Troopers* and compelling dramas like *Basic Instinct*, *Showgirls*, *Elle* and *Benedetta*. Paul goes way, way back with Jan, the the 1971 short film *The Wrestler*, and Jan ultimately shot six of Paul's

movies: *Business is Business*, *Turkish Delight*, *Katie Tippel*, *The 4th Man*, *Flesh+Blood* and *Basic Instinct*. So, let's have Paul tell you the story of how he hooked up with Jan in the first place.

PAUL VERHOEVEN
I saw a couple of films. He had been working a lot with two Dutch directors and producers. Their names were Pim de la Parra and Wim Verstappen, and they had a company and they had started making movies, and there was one movie, or two, in fact, that I had seen in 1966, '67 or something. So, three or four years later I did The Wrestler. And I liked these two movies, basically. One was, let's say, it was called, if I translate it, *The Unfortunate Return of Joszef Katus to the Land of Rembrandt*. That was the name of the movie. Jan was the cinematographer, and the style was very brutal and very direct and handheld and I thought it was great. So, at a certain moment, when I got money to make this short movie of 20, 25 minutes – *The Wrestler* – I thought that I should contact Jan. So, we had a meeting and I gave him the script and then we discussed it a little bit and then we started to shoot it. That was, let's say, probably somewhat more conservative than *The Unfortunate Return of Joszef Katus*. But still, it was really a pleasure to work with him. I mean, Jan has always been very precise, you know? He has, really, a vision, and he wants to use that vision and not basically listen exactly to what the director wants. And so, when I started to do my first movie, real movie, of two hours, which is called – in Dutch it was *Wat zien ik*, but the international title was *Business is Business* — it's about two prostitutes. Almost a comedy, kind of. A comedy to a certain degree. Although it was about two prostitutes, it was a romantic comedy. But, of course, there was sex. And that was the first movie we did. It was based on a book, or somebody had written down stories about prostitutes and had invented some characters, basically. But from an artistic point, I would call that, still, pretty conservative. A bit, yeah, normal. It was a big success, in fact, but it was not what you would call an innovative style. It was basically a bit conservative. But I think we did that because of the extravagance of the project, you know? And Jan had the same feeling, that we shoot, let's say – with all the sexuality, of course, with two prostitutes having multiple very strange clients – we tried to show it so that people would not think that there was a camera, a little bit. So, I'm a bit long about this because what happened, then, when we did our next movie, which was *Turkish Delight*, I know that we were discussing the style. That also was based on a novel. The style of the book was already extremely brutal and direct about sexuality and many other things. So, it was a very modern book that basically was highly influential to the Dutch culture, in fact. And so, we were aware, Jan and I, that the style of the movie should represent that cultural shock that came from the book. It was a culture shock in Holland at that time, and a couple of years later, the book was so important that everybody at high school was forced to read it. Anyhow, so, we were very clear, me and Jan, that we needed a different style than *Business is Business*. I brought him, we went together, to see Billy Friedkin's film *The French Connection*. That was 1971. We were probably also influenced by the French New Wave, the Nouvelle Vague, in its editing or whatever. Certainly by *À bout de souffle*, or *Breathless*, of Godard. But in an American way. So, we felt that it should have the brutality of *The French Connection*. So, then, basically, when I started shooting, I forgot all that, or I started shooting, basically, in an old-

fashioned way, as if it was the follow-up of *Business is Business*. And then we got into a real crisis with Jan, because he said, “Well, we were supposed to do this handheld,” and at that time the camera would not be blimped yet. Jan wanted a camera handheld. That was an Arriflex, and Arriflex makes sound. There was not a blimp for a small camera, but he wanted a small camera that you can jump around with. That would be the style, you know? That’s what we had discussed and that’s what I had approved, but when we started shooting, I fell back on a much more conservative style, even to the point, basically, that there was a real crisis that fortunately was solved by the producer. Otherwise, basically, we would have separated ways. Yeah, that went that far. And then the producer, Rob Houwer, came to us and said, you know, “This is not necessary,” you know? Especially to me. “I think we were supposed to do this in a very modern and innovative way.” And ultimately, I realized that I was completely wrong. So, from one day to the other after this big crisis was one or two days, we came together again and shot the movie with the handheld Arriflex, that made sound, so it forced me to dub all the voices after shooting the movie. He was a hundred percent right. I was a hundred percent wrong. Absolutely. That was something completely innovative for Dutch movies, you know? This vibrating camera, really, and I cannot imagine, basically, the film if it would have done my way, you know? This was Jan’s way, and he was right. He had this vision, and, basically, in my whole life, I have taken my collaborators – be it the composer, be it the cinematographer or the editor – I feel that these are all very important elements and that you should not be an egomaniac and think, “What I want is the best,” you know? I think a film is still a composite of, like, a jazz quartet, you know? You have five, six people that define the movie. So, I think a democratic atmosphere on the set where everybody can come up with different ideas, that would always be something to take very seriously and see if what they propose is better than your own ideas. And often, of course, because it is their field more than mine, they know better.

KRIS TAPLEY
I think this entire moment with Paul and Jan, by the way, was a bit of a creative awakening for both of them. While I wouldn’t say they are similar filmmakers in a story sense or what they’re drawn to narratively or thematically, I do think they both have a streak of lacking inhibition that has really defined their separate careers. With that in mind, here’s Paul with some more thoughts on *Turkish Delight*.

PAUL VERHOEVEN
We did everything that way. We were running through the streets. We didn’t even, let’s say, stage things. We’d said, “OK,” to the actors, “you come from here, you have to go down and see how you get through traffic and whatever. That’s your problem.” And Jan was hiding behind a column or a car so that people wouldn’t look, and we would shoot it all right in normal traffic, you know? Without any people being warned that there was a film being made. So, that was the style. A bit dangerous, certainly, for the actors and actresses. There’s a scene in the film on a bike that’s in the center of Amsterdam, rotating through the traffic, and that was difficult because the car drivers were certainly not warned that they would do that. So, that was the style and we did that until the very end, and it was, yeah, it was an enormous success, even more so than *Business is Business*.

KRIS TAPLEY
When I hear all of that I can't help but think about something like Ridley Scott's *Black Rain*, which Jan has talked to me about in the past, how they were out there in the streets Tokyo, guerilla-style, grabbing footage without permits and things like that. Pretty ballsy for big late-80s studio production but, again, very in keeping with how Jan likes to work, free of guardrails. Paul and Jan worked together on one more film in Holland before Jan made the move to Hollywood with *Roar*, which finally released in 1981, which we've discussed before. Talk about no guardrails. Then he came back to shoot one more film with Paul in Europe, *The 4th Man* in 1983, and finally, Paul made his own move to Hollywood.

PAUL VERHOEVEN
I know that Jan, even when he was in film school, always wanted to go to United States. Not me, in fact, but he was always thinking, "OK, that is good for the time being, but ultimately I want to go and want to work in Hollywood." And so, when he got, finally, a real invitation to be a cinematographer on *Roar*, he left and I had to find another DP. And then later, of course, when I came was 10 years later, after him, when I decided to go Hollywood. Then by that time he was a member of the cinematographic group or whatever it's called here. So, I remember when we were doing *RoboCop*, I could not work with him because that was impossible, because it was outside the unions and stuff like this. And Jan was just stepped into the union, basically, the cinematographic union, and, I mean, he was forbidden. It was only a couple of years later, even after *Total Recall*, that we were working in a more union way at Carolco. *Total Recall* was shot in Mexico, as you know. But with Basic Instinct, we finally got together again, because then we were kind of unionized. How you call that, say that? We were, let's say, respectful members of the unions, and then he was allowed to shoot. It was a lot of fun to be together again in this new country. But doing *Basic Instinct* was absolutely fantastic. I felt that his cinematography was so beautiful and so, in my opinion, heavily influenced by this painter, Hockney. Hockney made a lot of paintings of all these swimming pools in California at that time, you know? So, we were looking at that when we were preparing. And in fact, we had done that, also, when we did *The 4th Man* in Holland, and *Flesh+Blood*. We looked at Dutch painters, Belgian painters. Especially, of course, for *The Crusades*, we looked at Bruegel, Hieronymus Bosch. Jan and I have always looked – certainly for *The 4th Man*, there's a kind of a strange story. It was certainly influenced by surrealistic painters, be it Dalí or others, you know? We also were looking, a little bit, at Hopper. And for *Basic Instinct* it was more Hockney. Basic Instinct was, in some way – I won't say an homage, but certainly heavily influenced by *Vertigo*, Hitchcock's movie. Hitchcock, in general, would not use, let's say, a handheld camera. But the camera was always moved, but you don't even notice. Jan used the movement of the actors to hide the movement of the camera. And then, two years later, when I was preparing for *The Crusades* – that didn't go forward; it became *Showgirls* – then he stepped over into becoming a director. So, he was gone. He was gone for the second time.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah, so, I've let Paul go on and on about all this stuff because, well, first of all, this is Paul freakin' Verhoeven. He can have as much time as he wants. But I think he obviously has a unique perspective on Jan and his tendencies as a filmmaker given his history him, and I'm not sure how much play that has ever really gotten in the press, so, I'm eager to put it into stone here. But now, we come to it. Paul Verhoeven's reaction to *Speed* and Jan's transition to directing.

PAUL VERHOEVEN
I didn't know that he had the ambition to become a director. No, I didn't know that. He didn't tell me that. I was there at the premiere of *Speed* and I was sitting next to him. I remember that and I was so happy, basically, that it worked, you know? That the movie was such a success. I was stunned, basically, at how good it was. I was so impressed, you know? I didn't know that he could do that. I didn't even understand that he would go from a cinematographer to this sometimes not-so-pleasant position of being the director of a movie. But later in his career, I think he felt a bit the same, I think, but at that time, no. I thought it was great. I was sitting there at the premiere and everything worked. But he had, of course, worked with other directors in more action-oriented work before he became a director. He had been working on *The Hunt for Red October*, *Flatliners*, *Die Hard*. All these movies, basically, had done a lot of action, you know? So, he picked that up as a cinematographer and used it as a director. So, the timing was great and the shots were better than what had been done before. It was really eye-opening, I thought. It was all done without pushing it, you know? It felt very natural. It never dawned on me that – it never felt tricky. It all felt very real. Even basically jumping over an enormous amount of distance over the freeway without breaking up or whatever. I saw it and I thought, "It's not possible. What are they going to do?" And, [whistle sound], go over it, and it worked, you know? Everything worked. That's not always the case when making an action movie.

KRIS TAPLEY
I've said before I wish we could get another Jan de Bont movie. It's now been 21 years since he directed a film. But I did wrap up my conversation with Paul with a bit of a nudge. Because, look, if we can't get another movie from Jan as a director, maybe we could get another Jan de Bont/Paul Verhoeven collaboration?

PAUL VERHOEVEN
Yeah, that would be great. But I'm doubtful. I'll try again, you know? I am working on an American script. I don't know if it will succeed, but if he would come back, that would be great. Yes, absolutely. Perhaps I could seduce him. I'll try. I promise you, I'll try.

KRIS TAPLEY
Can you imagine? OK, let's stay in the realm of Jan's collaborators from his cinematographer days. I would say Paul is foremost among them, but who is the other director you think of when you think of Jan behind the camera? You're damn right, it's John McTiernan, director of *Die Hard* and *The Hunt for Red October*, both of which Jan shot, and then, of course, there's *Predator*, *Last Action Hero*, *Die Hard with a Vengeance*, *The Thomas Crown Affair*, etc., etc. John is one of the great action

directors of our time and he was definitely a Holy Grail interview for this podcast. And I got him. And funnily enough, it was Jan's work with Paul that made John track him down for *Die Hard* in 1988. So, here is John McTiernan.

JOHN MCTIERNAN
He did a film with Verhoeven called *The 4th Man*, and it had just wonderful camera moves in it. So, I sought him out specifically for that. I went looking for him. You're going to get me in trouble with the American union, but I always have found that I'm happier working with European or Australian DPs. They're just less formal and somehow all came to their craft by, oh, somehow doing everything. It's sort of the way – you know, we all made movies in college and, you know, everybody does everything. So, I've often gone looking for those sort of DPs. And I saw *The 4th Man*, and the camera moves were just exquisite and I wanted to learn about them. I wanted to learn how he did them. I don't know. It just had always been kind of the center of what I cared about in film technique. I just always, you know, loved Bertolucci and that sort of stuff, specifically for that style of camerawork, which now is, you know, now is just basic stuff. Everybody does it. But at the time, no one did it. And when we started doing *Die Hard*, you know, there were still rules about, well, you can't cut until the camera stops moving, and all that stuff. And, you know, we had bozos behind us in the studio, you know, the junior executives who are always trying to undercut anybody working on a movie so they can advance themselves. So, we had people shooting at us, saying, "Well, that won't cut! The camera's moving!" And all that stuff, right? And that was what it was like at the time, you know? All those old sort of 1940s rules. And, you know, Janny and I both wanted to break all those rules. We added one other guy. It was a sort of trio of us. It was Frank Urioste, who was a cutter who had also worked for Verhoeven and was really interested in breaking all those rules, and learning how to break them. His family had all been musicians. So, the way he thought about movies and, you know, how they're constructed and, you know, that sort of thing, came from a musical concept, as opposed to people who come to movies out of text and grammar and that that kind of – I mean, they had imposed, in the 1930s and '40s, a film grammar, which was, like, all those rules about what you can do with the camera moving, and all of that other stuff. What you can cut to what and those sort of things, but Frank, because he thought of films in a musical way, was capable of a lot more sophisticated understanding of what cuts and what doesn't. And so, we started out, learning how to do stuff like, you know, really forbidden things, like cutting a moving camera to a moving camera. And at first, we didn't know how, exactly, to make it work. So, we would shoot multiple speeds of shots. We knew where the cut was supposed to be, but we'd change how fast the dolly was moving near where the cut was supposed to be, so that Frank would have a – we'd try to give him two-to-three speeds of both the outgoing and the incoming shot so that he could make the cut. And eventually, he taught us that we didn't need to worry that much. Or we learned how well enough that we didn't have to do the multiple speeds. It was sort of like we knew how to hum it. Both Janny and I had learned how to hum it, and we could tell, pretty much, whether it was going to cut or not. We only got away with all of this because Frank Urioste, who was a, at the time, you know, one of the Dons of editing. You know, he had credibility in the studio. And so, when folks would be shooting at Janny and I for what we were doing, he, you know – and they'd say, "that won't cut,"

and Frank Urioste would stand up and say, “Yes, it will. It cuts very well, as a matter of fact.” And so, you know, after a little while, they stopped that. And in fact, we would have the bozos who were the grammarians who were originally trying to prove they knew more about filmmaking than we did. But the other side was, we had all these people who would come to the dailies just because it wasn’t standard master, medium and close-up nonsense. It was, like, “Wow, these are interesting shots!” So, we would have all these studio people who would come to our dailies specifically because they’d see stuff that was different and they enjoyed it.

KRIS TAPLEY
Again, no guardrails. Working without inhibition. This, you’ll find, is a hallmark of any filmmaker who has truly mattered to the form. No one has left their mark by simply following in footsteps, have they? Now, we got into Jan’s temperament a few episodes back, talking about his short fuse on the set and sometimes volatile personality. Some of my conversation with John, I think, was illuminating in that regard.

JOHN MCTIERNAN
Janny and I were actually from quite similar families. Pretty tough folks. You know, we both had, you know, parents who were kind of hard on us. So, we would disagree with each other about stuff, and at first, crew was terrified and whispers would go out through the crew. “They’re at it again! They’re fighting again! They’re fighting again!” And we weren’t fighting at all. We were having a perfectly good time, because we both respected each other, so, we would say what we really meant. “No, that’s wrong! That isn’t the way it’s supposed to work,” and all this stuff, right? And, “This will work!” And we would argue with each other about all sorts of stuff, and there wasn’t a moment of it that was personal or actually, in the least, made us dislike or even be annoyed with one another. It was just working. It was, we were serious.

JOHN MCTIERNAN
We had to work – on *Die Hard*, we had to work Christmas Eve, the morning of Christmas Eve, OK? Like, in the two, three, four, four in the morning, the morning of Christmas Eve. And we were in this cold, concrete parking garage. It was, you know, open. It was, like, six floors up and wind was going through. I mean, Los Angeles can actually be cold, and this was, as I said, December 23rd, maybe. And – yeah, it was the morning of December 24. And everyone in the crew would gradually disappear and come back with a cup of coffee that didn’t have coffee in it. Alright? Until even, like, the first AD did it, which is, like, really shameful! And about the time we were just about to – because we worked splits. We would start at four in the afternoon and go until four in the morning. And about 3:30 in the morning, Christmas Eve morning, I looked around and we were in this miserable, cold, concrete thing with the wind blowing through, and everybody on the crew was pretty well, like, gone, except – I looked over and there’s the damn Dutchman, and he was stone-cold sober and serious about the next shot, and that was what we were about, the two of us. After a while, the crew realized that, so, they stopped worrying about us.

KRIS TAPLEY

OK, let's get to *Speed*. You know, I was reading the movie's Wikipedia page the other day, and I think maybe I need to just spend an afternoon correcting some of the bullshit on there. I mean, it states outright that when the project was set up at Paramount, the studio offered the movie to John McTiernan. Well, we've had everyone from producer Mark Gordon to Paramount's former VP of production, Don Granger, make it clear that they never got as far as looking for a director. Furthermore, when it was at Fox, everyone has also made it clear that John McTiernan and his ilk were way out of the question given the budget they were working with. The only other director who was also in the mix to direct *Speed*, as I've revealed previously, was Dwight Little. That said, I did ask John if he had ever been offered *Speed*, and he simply couldn't remember. So, I don't have a denial on the record from him, but given all these other sources, it's safe to say John McTiernan was never in the mix to direct *Speed*. That does not mean, however, that he did not have a hand in what you see on screen, and so I want you to hear this incredible nugget about how a tip from John McTiernan led to the performance we see from Keanu Reeves in the film.

JOHN MCTIERNAN
If you look at *Speed*, you'll see that a lot of stuff, a lot of shots, particularly the first half of *Speed*, Keanu is huffing and is almost a little bit out of breath in the shot. If you look at it, you'll see it. It's there. And that came from – it was something we worked on. Keanu was a very young actor then, and he didn't yet know how incredibly charming he is, and how just him is, like – the camera adores and he works fabulously. But this was right after, really – he hadn't done much aside from *Bill & Ted*, and he was worrying about how does he act and was trying too hard. He hadn't learned that he knew how already. I mean, that he knew how to be a movie star. That he already knew how. But he didn't realize it yet. So, Janny and I worked out this thing of, right now, Keanu was thinking he had to act with a capital A-C-T. And so, what we came up with is, in effect, make him too tired to act, and then he'll be a movie star. He'll be fabulous. And the gimmick was, we said, "OK, have him do push-ups right before the shot. Right before you go call action, make him do push-ups so that he can't get his brain in the way. He will just behave naturally with whatever the situation is, instead of planning it, because he was at that stage when a young actor thinks he has to plan something. And so, we talked about that gimmick, and there's maybe a dozen shots where you'll catch that he's huffing, and it's because just before Jan had called action, he had Keanu doing push-ups right next to the shot. When he didn't let his mind get in the way, and somebody had told him that he had to, you know, formally act, he was magnificent, but didn't know it yet. So, all you had to do was just keep him from thinking about it and it'll work beautifully. And, I don't know, it was a gimmick someone had taught me, so I passed it down to Jan, that's all.

KRIS TAPLEY
There was also, of course, plenty of talk about the nuts and bolts of shooting *Speed*. The movie lives in the shadow and tradition of *Die Hard*, built on the import of practical applications, which we have talked about ad nauseam. But someone like John certainly knows the truth of that.

JOHN MCTIERNAN
There was a lot of hard technical work to be done in making that movie, and Janny knew how to do it. I mean, we had done a lot of stuff, and conquered a lot of – I mean, we learned a lot of stuff on *Red October*. We worked in a lot of difficult circumstances. And at that point, there was no one in the industry who was better than Janny at being able to deal with the difficulties of making that film. You know, you're shooting on a moving bus. And it should be a moving bus. It shouldn't be, you know, a bus that you wiggle and you're going to add junk on the – outside the windows later. He kept the thing real, so that you believed it, because if for a moment you didn't believe one of the shots, then you don't believe the entire premise and the whole movie falls apart. You have to actually shoot it, you know, in something very close to the real circumstance.

KRIS TAPLEY
By the way, I asked John if he was surprised that Jan became a director. It's an unusual transition, cinematographer to director. And Jan really took to it, even if it was an abbreviated career after a far more extended one behind the camera. But, for John McTiernan, did it feel like the director's chair was Jan de Bont's destiny?

JOHN MCTIERNAN
His destiny was whatever he wanted to do. Look, I'm not particularly humble. I'm one of the more skilled filmmakers, you know, of my generation or something. Janny is a magnificent filmmaker, OK? So, what role he's going to play, exactly, is up to him. I mean, directing has a lot to do with a lot of politics and blah, blah, blah and all sorts stuff that doesn't have to do with filmmaking, and he might have said, "You know, that stuff is really annoying and I don't want anything to do with it." But he's, you know, pick a number. Of his generation, he's, you know, somewhere in the top 25, most knowledgeable people of his generation in filmmaking, OK? Top 25 people who contributed to the work in the years, you know, when he was alive, is alive. So, anyway, no, there's no surprise about that.

KRIS TAPLEY
Alright, we're going to round it out today with two filmmakers who have no professional relationship or history with Jan, but who absolutely worship at the altar of *Speed*. And they could not be two different filmmakers in their own right. I'm happy to call them both friends and thrilled they were willing to discuss all of this with me on the podcast. I'm talking about Barry Jenkins and Joe Carnahan. Barry is the Oscar-winning director of *Medicine for Melancholy*, *Moonlight* and *If Beale Street Could Talk*, as well as the Amazon series *The Underground Railroad*. He's currently working on a massive level-up in studio resources and certainly budget with *Mufasa: The Lion King*, which is the follow-up and prequel to Jon Favreau's CG-heavy remake of the 1994 Disney classic from 2019. Joe Carnahan, meanwhile, has enjoyed a wildly varied career as a director, working in the independent realm, within the studio system and on the fringe of scrappy financing — which I think he would call a euphemism. Joe has made movies like *Narc*, which is an utter masterwork and grabbed the attention of Tom Cruise 22 years ago to the point that Joe was even developing a *Mission: Impossible 3* once upon a time. He did *Smokin' Aces*, *The A-Team*, *The Grey*, which is one of my favorite movies of the last

20 years, as well as *Boss Level* and *Copshop* in recent years. The dude is always working. He literally has two movies more or less finished and still on the way. And I haven't even touched on his efforts as a producer and supporter of budding directors. So, again, these two guys couldn't be more different when you look at their output, but I actually find them to be similar minds and just down-to-earth dudes who love movies like *Speed*. So, I figure I'll just let them start talking. Here's Barry to begin.

BARRY JENKINS
You know, the biggest thing that sticks out to me when I watch *Speed* is just – especially that era. You know, I know you've spoken to John McTiernan and some of the other cats from that time, just how grounded the set pieces were. How kinetic and propulsive everything was, and it wasn't about logic, like, A plus B plus C, you know, equals this, as far as, like, the set pieces, but everything was so photoreal and grounded that you did feel like you were watching real, everyday human beings navigate these larger-than-life circumstances. That's one element of it. The biggest thing, though, man, is, the real rush I get out of watching *Speed* is I am watching a director who is directing for their life. I mean, Jan de Bont is directing for his fucking life. When you watch *Speed*, there isn't a wasted setup. There isn't a wasted bit of blocking. I mean, you can tell they set up these stunts – and I know it wasn't, like, a massive budget – and he's, like, "We're doing this thing. Where is the absolute best place for the camera to be at this moment?" You know? "What are the actual stakes in this scene?" I love that – the opening elevator sequence. You got three minutes of credits. The worst thing about *Speed* is the way the title card "Speed" animates and comes towards camera. That is the only bit of cheese in the whole damn film. But you get that for three minutes, and then, for 20 minutes, you're in the set piece. You're just, like, on the ride. And at the end of it, there's this woman in the elevator. You have this actor, who's not one of the main players, and she is doing it. She is emoting just everything, all the stakes. I think of Jan making that film and just obsessing. Everything has got to hit. It's all got to connect. And when I think of the film that way, I think of Damien making *Whiplash*. A director directing for his fucking life. I think of Greta making *Lady Bird*, directing for her fucking life. And when I watch *Speed*, I see Jan de Bont, who's this DP who's done two of, just, like, the most revered action films of that era – *Die Hard*, *The Hunt for Red October* – and now he's got his shot, and he is just directing for his life. And the zeal I see in that – because that can go one of two ways. You can either get really cagey and get uptight, you know? You kind of get the yips, you know? You're unfortunately the Detroit Lions in the second half, and you get the yips, you know? You're either that, or you're just, like, you're Brock Purdy, and my shoulder was out last year, we're down 24 points, and you're just, like, "Yo, I just got to let this shit loose." And he is just, like – I mean, Kris, the movie is so impressive. I watch it and my jaw is just open the entire time, because, you know, man, you're on set. You got all these setups, and you're trying to sync every single shot. And there's just no fucking way you can hit them all. And he hit them all. He hit them all. It is – wow. So, I enjoy the movie as a movie. But as someone who also, you know, is a visual storyteller and who, you know, had to break into this industry, I watch it and I just, like – I just get this rush of energy because it's, like, he fucking did it. He did it. He did it. He did it. But that's what I see when I watch *Speed*.

KRIS TAPLEY
And here's Joe Carnahan.

JOE CARNAHAN
Like, *The Hunt for Red October*, the way that that's kind lensed, it's very atmospheric. Like, what I love about that, what he did, and I think it's Jan de Bont's contribution, is there's a weight to it. There's a textural sense of that photography. I mean, if you go in to Panavision, the G series lenses, you can say, "I want the de Bont anamorphic flares," you know what I mean? Because they were kind of specific to *Die Hard*, *The Hunt for Red October*. Like, that was a real specific look. And I think, obviously, with him directing, you still felt that, texturally, really kind of heavy – you know what I mean? The sense of, like, you could just put your hands on it. It had gravity to it, and that he can't say that about a lot of – you know what I mean? A lot of stuff, it's just – it just feels – it's either stylized, and that stylization, it's weird, because I think you can add kind of dramatic import in a real meaningful way and give kind of additional girth and weight to the performances. I think that's why Keanu is so good in that film. I think he was really surprisingly great in *Speed*. Not that the guy's not – I mean, listen, he's a national treasure, now. It's Keanu. But I think at the time, there was this, still, this sense of, like, "I don't know about this guy." He was the pretty boy, and I think that he was, like, a dude in *Speed*. You know what I mean? Like, he was, like, a dude. They got very nuanced things out of him in that film. Like that end, dude, where he and Sandy Bullock kind of survive, and he gets emotional, and she says, you know, "Are you going to cry?" He goes, "I might," you know? It's, like, it's this great, real, genuine reaction. I remember that line really stuck out in my head, that moment really stuck out in my head, like, this really, like, wonderful, kind of tender moment between these two people that have kind of fallen in love. And you could have handled that in any number of ways that would have been really kind of treacly and lame, and they didn't, you know? It was a really kind of a lovely little grace note to all that stuff.

BARRY JENKINS
But I think of how, even within all these set pieces, he always made sure to remember the human stakes. And he cuts to the woman, the executive, who's the last one on. He cuts to her once or twice. He's always just – not telling the audience, but giving the audience just enough that when that final moment comes, and he's got the clock ticking, and the bolt gives way and the thing comes through the thing, and then it drops and it drops again and everybody's being pulled off, he cuts to her and her back's against the wall, and right away, now it's not about the elevator falling down the shaft, you know? It's about, can this woman, like, manifest the courage to actually reach out and take his hand? Can Jack, you know, somehow come out of just, like, "do it" mode and be a human being and connect with her? And when you can build an action set piece and it comes down to those stakes, can this human being connect with that human being? You're just, like, "I'm in." You're winning. It's, like, not even you're winning. You're crushing. You're crushing. And so, when I think of the movie magic, that's the shit that I go, "How did he do..." Like, I was re-watching the scene. I was just jumping around the movie. When the woman's pushing the stroller and the bus hits it, and it's so ridiculous.

They basically just launched a stroller out of a cannon and it's just floating, and you see the cans hit, and Sandy Bullock is just, like, losing her mind. It's such an amazing – just, like, she's just all over the place. He doesn't even cut to her. He just does it all with audio. Such a frantic moment. And he doesn't have time to tick the clock where the bus hits the thing, the lady reacts, the stroller's flying through the air, Sandy Bullock's going crazy. You want the audience, in real time, to see the stroller hit the ground. No time to really cut to her reaction. You know what he does cut to? Keanu Reeves losing his shit, as he's saying, "It's just cans! It's just cans!" You can see, it's like an SNL skit. He's basically laughing. But the movie is so joyously made that they're, like, "Yeah, you know what? That's in the film." And so, I see a guy working within genre under – and as a director, I've been there – extreme pressure, to maximize all those resources, and yet still leaving room for the actors to play, remembering the human elements, the human stakes. I mean, before we started recording, you were mentioning this guy who's collecting all these VHS copies of speed. The first time I saw it was on VHS, actually. You know, it was this movie and *The Lion King*, of all things. My sister's husband at the time, just, he was sort of, like, an avid movie person. And so, we just had VHSes all over the house. And my nephews would always settle down to watch *The Lion King* or to watch *Speed*. So, I first saw the movie on VHS on a 13-inch television, and back then, it was all about the bus jumping over the ramp. That was the cool thing. But now, watching it as an adult, I just see so many – especially as a filmmaker – so many other elements to it. I mean, man, it's such an awesome movie.

KRIS TAPLEY
Now, bear with me through this next stretch, because as I warned you at the top, there would be a lot of yearning for a bygone era. That's where my discussion with Joe inevitably went when we were talking about how a movie like *Speed* holds up so well 30 years later, whereas so much of what we see today seems unlikely to hold up 30 years from now.

JOE CARNAHAN
Dude, listen, it's one of the reasons why I think this last *Indiana Jones* film, for me, didn't work, because, you know, they're on trains, they're on this, they're on – it seemed like they're going everywhere, but they're not moving. You know what I mean? Like, gone is the actually being on the truck, actually being on the tank, actually riding a horse. You know what I mean? It's like that, and I think what you see in *Speed*, and it's one of the – again, it's where we've gotten away from that now. It's where the digital realm has taken over to the point where, you know – and I understand. Listen, dude, I'm a big fan of LED screens. I'm a big fan of the volume. I've used them. We shot a lot on them. It's hugely helpful. You get a full 12-hour day and you don't have to worry about, "OK, let's reset. OK, lock up traffic. OK, here we come." You know, it's a lot safer. There's a lot of benefits to it, right? But you're seeing in that, the old applications of having to get out there and shoot that stuff, and really put a guy under a bus and really safety him and really, you know – and I think you feel it. You feel that in the way that when you watch *Apocalypse Now*, you feel those helicopters, because that that was real. These weren't CG approximations of helicopters. They were helicopters. And they moved and had a presence and weight and this shift in that, I think you feel it in those types of movies. In

Speed, you're like, "Man, they're under that bus. You're not faking this stuff." It's become kind of a lost practical art form. And I think, also, you're talking about a daylight film, so, you start looking over Sandy Bullock's shoulder out on to Figueroa or wherever, you know, like, racing around LA trying to stay at 55 miles an hour. You know, I don't know that you can support that look without that – I mean, *Wheelman* we shot at night, LED screens. You can't tell the difference, dude. It's great. There's a lot of forgiveness in the inky, you know, dark of night. But daylight, I just think at some point the eye is starting to go, "This doesn't feel right." Which is what happened to me in *Indiana Jones*. "This doesn't feel right. This feels artificial." You know? And I think you're right, dude. I don't know that you'd have – if you had to redo a production plan, if it would change. It's, like, "Guys, we've got to go out and get this." I think the issue you have now, dude, with contemporary filmmaking, is all of it has to be in that digital realm. So, you're never afforded the ability to kind of mix and match those, like, you know, like, mixed media, because of budgetary things or what have you. It's, like, it's got to be this, you know? And I think that we've done that to our detriment creatively. And I think that, again, going back to that Indiana Jones film, I think it really suffers from that. It's all digital. And therefore, there's something – your mind just registers it as artificial. And by the way, this is a film that, the first movie, *Raiders*, made me want to make movies. That's how important that series is to me. And, dude, I think Jim Mangold's a fine filmmaker and it's, like, there's nothing, you know – but I just felt like everything was, tactically, it felt a bit like a misfire. And again, man, it's easier said than done. It's easy for me to say that. I wasn't in the trenches, you know, trying to put that film together. But, again, dude, you do definitely see the shift away from where we were 30 years ago where you just had to go out and get it on and shoot that stuff for real, and that's how you captured it. I love that, you know, you've got, like, Chris Nolan, like, the insistence on, "Let's just shoot this God damn thing." Or this Doug Liman/Cruise thing, going to space to shoot zero Gs. That's cool. That's great. But these should not be novel concepts, dude. We've been doing this a long time. It's just that we've gotten away from it, because the studios decide it's easier to do it this way. And that's unfortunate, and we're all dealing with it, dude, you know? Think about miniatures and how they used miniatures, and, how, you know, 1/10, 1/15 scale models. Erik Carlson, my buddy, who started in miniatures on *Die Hard 2*, we did some miniatures on *Not Without Hope* with the boat and these guys in a boat, because we couldn't generate the waves in a sufficient way to put a regular-sized, you know, over 21-foot, you know, Evinrude out there and make it look believable. So, you know, what you realize is that not only is it, like, cheaper to shoot miniatures, and more efficient to shoot those things, you've got all these guys sitting around who came up doing that stuff that have this whole skill set that can't be exercised any longer because we just say, "Ah, we'll just build it digitally. We'll just build it digitally," you know? And we're still capable of all that stuff. I just think we've just shifted everything into the digital computing, you know, realm. That dinosaur, you know, running across the meadow in broad daylight was kind of Pandora's box, dude. It was great for what it did, and also, equally, you could argue, negative for what it did, because then it's, like, "Well, shit. Just give it to the computer guys. Let them do it. Why do we have to do that? Why do we have to go out there? Why do we have to shoot any of this stuff?" You know? I think what you're seeing, brother, the volume, especially this giant volume on these *Lord of the Rings* things, which, I'm not a fan of *Lord of the*

Rings. I don't watch those shows. But I've seen enough, it's, like, "Yeah, it's great. But you're not really in Norway, are you? You're not really on a glacier in Iceland." And I think, dude, that you see it reflected, dude, in all of the little minutiae. The actor's performance. Do they look cold? Is their nose red? Are they breathing? You know what I mean? Like, these things, dude, are not just ephemeral. They're very, very visceral. You feel them.

KRIS TAPLEY
I thought all of this was kind of fascinating for Barry to get into, given the project he's working on currently.

BARRY JENKINS
You know, we're working on *The Lion King* right now, and there's a lot of really big set pieces in the movie. It's got a bit more propulsion than the films that came before, because it's this journey film. And oftentimes, we would reference movies like this, you know? The DNA of John McTiernan and Jan de Bont is definitely in *Mufasa: The Lion King*, but what does that mean? You know, just watching the film this morning, watching *Speed*, I forgot this really simple setup – you know, Keanu gets the espresso, whatever it is, or Jack, excuse me. Comes out of the cafe. And Jan does – it's, like, the second time he's done it in the film already at that point. He does the *Bad Boys*, Michael Bay, wrap-around – although Jan de Bont probably did it first. But it's such simple blocking and staging. You know, he opens the door to his little Bronco, the camera, Steadicam, is 360 wrapping around, and right as it gets lined up with Keanu, boom, the bus goes off in the background of the shot. But because all those things are tied to this one moment in time, it's as real for the audience as it is for Keanu, for Jack, as opposed to cutting to a closeup of Keanu and then a close up, boom, this thing explodes. And Jan does that so many times throughout this film, and in his work with John McTernan, although I think McTiernan mastered it on *Die Hard with a Vengeance* afterwards. The same thing. They're just so good about practical effects, camera and precision blocking, you know, keeping you in a continuous moment in time, so that when the bomb does go off, or when, you know, the explosion does happen, or when the break in the action – and by break, I mean things breaking into action when it happens – you can't predict it, you know? It kind of just happens, like real life.

KRIS TAPLEY
Joe and I continued that conversation about this last Indiana Jones movie because I kind of agree with him, though I do think that film got a little too much hate. But the worst aspects of it are, to me, the aspects where it's just drowning in its CGI budget. Particularly that whole first act. But that led to a discussion of the current *Mission: Impossible* franchise, which I felt compelled to touch on given Joe's history with it. After all, if there are any filmmakers who are trying to do a semblance of what guys like Jan de Bont and John McTiernan were doing 30 years ago, it's Christopher Nolan and the current steward of the *Mission: Impossible* brand, Christopher McQuarrie. And, conversely to the latest Indiana Jones, I kind of thought *Mission: Impossible - Dead Reckoning* got showered with a little too much praise. I loved a number of the recent

films in the franchise, but there did seem to be an exorbitant amount of that “eh, just go with it” swagger in this latest one.

JOE CARNAHAN
I get a little tired of that. I don’t know how you feel, dude. It’s, like, “Yeah, you know, it’s just escapist. Just check out.” That’s not a good enough reason. There’s plenty of escapist films, *Speed* being, you know, foremost among them, that you can enjoy yourself and not feel like you’ve just completely, you know, removed your brain, and I don’t want to feel like that all the time, you know? It’s, like, wait, no, I’d like to be this to be clever as well and not just say, “Eh, you know, hey, go with it. It’s dumb. Enjoy it.” You know? It’s, like, why is that the buy-in from me? Why don’t you try harder, you know what I mean? To make something that’s more interesting and more compelling and more clever and, you know, you name it, and therefore more engaging? And I think, listen, Tom is – whatever your feelings about that series – Tom is an incredibly courageous guy to, like, to go up on the Burj Khalifa and do that thing they did in that Brad Bird *Mission*, which I think is probably my favorite of the last, you know – but I think McQuarrie made, the prior two films before this one, I thought, were really, really well done. I just felt that this one was too much – it felt too much like a Tom Cruise stunt reel, like, “Look, it’s Tom Cruise on the bike. Look, it’s Tom Cruise,” and bully on him, man. I mean, that’s incredibly gutsy to do what he did, and I’m not taking anything away from him. But I felt that, to me, it started to take over for the narrative, you know what I mean? It became more about, “Oh, wow, Tom Cruise is going to do this wild stunt.” Not, “Ethan Hunt is hunting down bad guys.”

KRIS TAPLEY
I don’t mean to bog down in this and Joe doesn’t, either. It’s just where the conversation goes when you get the two of us together. That said, I recalled something that *Speed*’s visual effects supervisor, Boyd Shermis, said to me in a prior episode, that there was a certain charm back in the day to lying awake at night and trying to figure out how you were going to pull off a certain effect, whereas today, it might be a forgone conclusion in the digital space. That charm was built around the palpable sense of victory and accomplishment that arises from figuring out how to make something work on screen, and that sort of thing is simply fading more and more as technology continues apace. With that in mind, for a guy like Joe Carnahan, who has been making movies for nearly 30 years, is the job as fun as it used to be?

JOE CARNAHAN
You know, what, dude? It’s – no. And I say that minus the cynicism of a guy in his 50s, because that’s going to pervade. Because now, it’s, like – it’s so funny. I had dinner with Allen Hughes last night, who I love, you know? I just love him. And we’re around the same age and he’s a couple years younger than me, but, like, we were talking about this very thing, you know? It’s, like, he’s kind of the same guy that made, you know, *Menace II Society* when he was 21 years old, you know? It’s, like, nothing’s really changed. He’s been in the business 30 some odd years or whatever. But we were talking about that there was less of a clutch-up kind of, you know, micromanaging need from the studio apparatus. I think they let guys do their thing, more often than not. There

wasn't this, you know – and again, that's probably like, you know – I'm probably exaggerating, like, oh, the halcyon days when they let you do – they didn't really let you do your thing. But I think there's been more of a sense of kind of corporate control, which is why when something like *Oppenheimer* does the business it does, I'm so thrilled and happy, because it restores this faith that I have in the business that a great movie will be transcendent. I don't give a shit what it's about. And a great filmmaker like Chris Nolan will give you something to chew on. And in this instance, a three-hour movie about the atomic bomb — if you told me, dude, that movie was going to make a billion dollars, I'd be, like, "You're out of your fucking mind." The fact that it did is wonderful in ways that I don't think we can yet kind of wrap our heads around. It's fantastic. It means there's that audience out there, dude. So, you know, is it as fun? Could I make a movie like *Smokin' Aces* in the current studio system, which is kind of this nihilistic ending where, you know – it's a bummer ending, you know? No, I don't think that's going to happen. But I also – that always felt like, kind of like, the outgoing regime's little hand grenade into the incoming regime. Kind of, "Yeah, deal with this one," you know? And because it was Working Title, they kind of had to, you know – they had to do the, "Yeah, we've got to release this thing theatrically." But yeah, dude, I don't know that I still enjoy it – I enjoy it as much as ever, dude. And I've also chosen to make movies, in large part, outside of the studio system, and that comes with its own headaches and its own exposure to the most venal, horrible, pathologically sociopathic, lying, you know — you name it, dude. It's the worst. But yeah, it's certainly not the same, dude. Do I think that – you know, a friend of mine said, "I think we're going to go back into this era of kind of the super indie, like the '90s," which would be so much fun, dude. To give that control back to – more to the filmmaker. We've rounded the corners a little too much, bro. We've knocked the sharp edges off this stuff a little too much, and I'd like to see it, you know, drift back toward, you know, an appreciable kind of – let the men and women that write and direct these things, let them have their go and don't – you know, get out of the way. And you're right, dude. That idea of, like, "Man, how the hell are we going to pull this off," is great, you know? It's where all the wonderful ingenuity comes from, and all the great ideas and all the great discoveries that we make that are oftentimes happenstance, man. It's just, "Shit. We just had to – we just figured this would work." And it did.

KRIS TAPLEY
But hope springs eternal, and I asked Barry two things in that regard. First of all, given his art-house roots, maybe it's a little surprising to some that he would be such a fan of *Speed*, or that he would turn his gaze to a massive movie like *Mufasa: The Lion King*. But let it be known, Barry contains multitudes. He came pretty close a few years back to programming *Speed* as the Guest Director of the Telluride Film Festival in Colorado, which is otherwise a fairly staid affair packed with high-brow moviegoers who shelled out thousands of dollars to attend. It's the realm of Wim Wenders more than Jan de Bont. Though I do think something like *Turkish Delight* would play well there. But I digress. Barry also, once upon a time, had a sort of "*Die Hard* on a bridge" action film idea that he never went so far as to write, but he did bat the idea around with filmmaker Aaron Katz, which is actually an old film school buddy of mine who trades in the art house realm. But these are two guys, Barry and Aaron, who love Renny Harlin, OK?

Anyway, I say all of that as background to this: I asked Barry if he would ever consider directing a movie like *Speed* if it came along.

BARRY JENKINS
Again, that woman in the back of the elevator, I always think of her, because it's this really cool set piece, then at the end of it, you really do, like, think and feel for the people who are trapped, you know, in this machine. I don't know. There's just something just so dope about it. Now, you and I both know, it is hard to find scripts that do that, that do it as well as this film does it today and that are makable, and so, it would take the perfect storm, but I talked my ass all the way around that. Yeah, I would, man. I absolutely would. I absolutely would.

KRIS TAPLEY
And finally, let's close things on a positive note. I'll give Barry the last word. I asked him if, from his perch, people like me should simply give up on movies like *Speed* ever being made again.

BARRY JENKINS
No. No, I don't think so. I do not think so. Everything is – it's all cyclical, man. And I think that if you put this movie out today – case in point, my man Dan Trachtenberg, man, with *Prey*. *Prey* is a movie that is very much in the lineage of this movie. Very much. And it is a shame that that movie was not put into movie theaters, because it would have played like gangbusters. However, now he's making another one, and I think the way he went about making that film is very much in the same vein of this film. Now, it's Prey. So, it's IP. It's the Predator, all those different things. But look at what he did with it. And so, I do think if the creatives are inspired enough and can persuade the studio that this risk is worth taking, the same way Jan de Bont, who had never directed a movie, was able to convince another studio this risk is worth taking, I do think it's possible. But man, the script has got to be amazing. Absolutely amazing. The bar, the threshold, is just higher. But it can be done. Dan Trachtenberg just did it. Unquestionably. The best thing about rewatching this film is, it's still fresh, man. It's still fresh. And it's, like, OK, yeah, if people were doing this, then we'd have more of these films. But this shit is so fresh. I mean, it's just, like, we just don't make movies like this anymore, you know? It's not that we can't. We just don't.

[OUTRO MUSIC]

KRIS TAPLEY
Next week on *50 MPH*...

KRIS TAPLEY
Before we pivot to the final stretch, a quick look at the fallout of *Speed*.

JAN DE BONT
Twister came along almost accidentally. Nobody really, really wanted to make that movie, either. Because it was so complicated.

IAN BRYCE
When I say it moved people's careers, it helped move mine. I would get calls, and it's, like, "Oh, the guy who did *Speed*. Let's get him." And I line produced for quite a few years because I was able to segue also into creative producing.

KRIS TAPLEY
I'll detail where the movie's success led for its various participants while others tell us in their own words.

GLENN PLUMMER
I mean, *Speed* was my crossover film. Then I did *Showgirls* and I did *Up Close and Personal*, *Strange Days*. That was the one. It set me up. "Oh, he's good in big movies."

GRAHAM YOST
I think we were already embarked on *Broken Arrow* by that point. But that then bumped up, you know? That became less of a problem. And then we sold *Hard Rain*, then called *The Flood*, at Paramount. And then, you know, my career has been TV ever since.

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.