

Element x Cinema

At Posterity's Gate

by Steve MacFarlane
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Still from *Basquiat*, 1996, dir. Julian Schnabel

WHERE TO EVEN BEGIN with this one?

The Christmas after 9/11, my older brother returned to Seattle from his first semester at Cooper Union, bringing with him tales of the painter Basquiat and the 1996 biopic ***Basquiat***. I was fourteen and had not yet been to New York; up to this point my visions of the city came from *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, *Ghostbusters*, *Home Alone II*, *Men in Black*, *Seinfeld* and the American *Godzilla*. *Basquiat* was my first glimpse of NYC as a place where artists stayed up all night collaborating on records and videos, trading drugs for paintings, endlessly discussing their ideas and passions while chain-smoking in diners and back alleyways; a New York where punks, bohemians, children of the working and elite classes alike could bump shoulders at the same sooty nightclubs. (Shot entirely on location, *Basquiat* is as much an ode to the good/bad old days of the Lindsay-Koch era as it is, in hindsight, a document of Giuliani-era Manhattan that

looks pretty good/bad compared to the version rescaled by the compassionate corporatism of Bloomberg and his successors - but I'm digressing...)

Which artist fed me this fantasy? Not Jean-Michel Basquiat, but instead the filmmaker, Julian Schnabel, who seemed at the time a sensitive witness to the art-world vampirism and bigotry (casual and otherwise) faced by the young Haitian-American painter as he navigated these majority-white spaces. Part of *Basquiat's* attraction is its ensemble: in addition to Jeffrey Wright (making his screen debut after a star-making performance in the original Broadway run of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*) as Jean-Michel, the movie features a downtown who's-who playing a downtown who's-who: David Bowie as Andy Warhol, Dennis Hopper as Swiss art dealer Bruno Bishofberger, Parker Posey as gallerist Mary Boone, Willem Dafoe as a gallery electrician ("I'm glad I never got any recognition. It's given me time

to develop"), Christopher Walken as a racist journalist with a smile¹, Claire Forlani, Benicio del Toro and, most controversially, Gary Oldman as "Albert Milo" - a friend of Basquiat's, an obvious decoy for Julian Schnabel. Michael Wincott, then known to me as the villain in *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*, plays legendary art critic Rene Ricard, whose 1981 *Artforum* essay "The Radiant Child" is quoted at length in the screenplay; Ricard is thanked in the end credits, so it seemed many of Basquiat's real-life contemporaries were in on the "joke". But Schnabel's film is not a joke, rather, a requiem - right?

Last July I decided to try and speak with Schnabel about *Basquiat*, on the occasion of the movie's 25th anniversary. Our meetings took place before my pitches to various magazines or online publications had been approved; in the end, none of them were. Schnabel has stayed on top these past few decades, so I was surprised by the lack of interest, given a screening - if I'm not mistaken, the only one - held in semi-private at the MoMA Sculpture Garden. There, Schnabel premiered his "remaster" of *Basquiat*, which re(or de)-colorized the film, now in black and white. Surely someone would re-release this version, put it out on streaming for a limited time, shoot a new video featurette with Schnabel. So far, no dice. Maybe the lack of interest in *Basquiat* the film, contrasted with the worldwide explosion of the Basquiat brand in the interceding quarter-century, is its own enduring criticism.

Ahead of the interview, conversations with colleagues and friends tended to portray Schnabel as a chest-thumping narcissist and, often, the face of everything now considered gauche about fine art from the Reagan years, after deregulation surged the Dow and an artist who had been living hand-to-mouth could suddenly find themselves at the center of a blue-chip bidding war. One unnamed downtowner told me Basquiat and Schnabel were "such good friends". Another skipped the Schnabel question entirely and told me the real Basquiat was responsible for getting their friend's sister hooked on heroin. An art-world millennial relayed, thirdhand, the story of Basquiat laughing in Schnabel's face at his own opening, in front of his own paintings. A contemporary of Schnabel's told me the movie should have been called *Schnabel* instead of *Basquiat*, as a kind of postmodern bait-and-switch; this was one of the few people in his cohort I managed to talk to who claimed he liked the movie. Another scene veteran told me he refused to watch it, then and now. Jim Jarmusch said the same thing to IndieWire. And so on. If nothing else, the movie elicited - and elicits - strong reactions from people.

Summer 2021 was the first time I read the late critic and curator Okwui Enwezor's 1996 review of *Basquiat*,

unsparing as they come, all the moreso being a review of a biopic of a Black man, directed by a white man, reviewed by another Black man:

In every shot Schnabel worked hard to dismantle the Basquiat aura, rubbing it out with each frame of the picture as if to punish his 'friend' for having died young and claimed the trophy of immortality first. I waited excruciatingly for Basquiat to utter one full, intelligible sentence, but was rewarded with only grunts. Basquiat, if we are to believe the film, is either too much of a savant on the prowl for white pussy, or simply stoned out of his eyeballs. Each step is so unnecessarily covered in a confetti of whiteness that key figures in the Basquiat constellation, such as Fab Five Freddy, Futura 2000 and Ramellzee were simply erased. Hence, Basquiat was drawn, in classic Lacanian terms, as an empty signifier, a ventriloquist's dummy encased in the amniotic sac of whiteness. Schnabel, as the ring master of this fantasy of displacement, performs the perfect pantomime in which Basquiat is not only deontologised, but equally desubjectivised.

I also read J. Faith Almiron's more recent "No One Owns Basquiat, Not Even Peter Brant" in *Hyperallergic*. Brant is a publishing mogul, a "socialite" and, as a patron of the art world (in the Borgia/Medici sense), one of the main pushers of "Basquiat" over the last three decades and, not coincidentally, one of the producers of Schnabel's film.

After I moved to New York and enrolled at Hunter College, I was forced to purchase and pretended to read a book called *Whose Monet?: An Introduction to the American Legal System*. So "whose Basquiat" was this, really? At first glance it was Schnabel's, of course. But upon rewatch, I wondered if *Basquiat* had been restructured by its producer-distributor Miramax to make good use of a number of songs - The Pogues, Bowie, Tom Waits, Van Morrison, the Stones, many more - which occasion their own conspicuous set pieces, the goal, I imagine, being to sell more copies of the *Basquiat* Original Motion Picture Soundtrack. (Reediting movies to make more money was Harvey Weinstein's earlier "bad reputation".) Is *Basquiat* a case of history xeroxing itself in real time?

After I made contact with Schnabel, he invited me to Palazzo Chupi, his mansion/studio/museum at the bleeding west side of 11th Street. Schnabel read aloud to me, a four-minute-long quotation by William Gaddis ("the last thing he ever wrote") in praise of his paintings. He had me move Napoleonic chairs so that we could sit and look at his plate paintings while we spoke. He was generous in allocating time for what ended up being two long conversations, but also evasive in the face of blunt questioning. He aborted

the first talk because he had to leave for Montauk, leaving me alone in his studio with an insanely heavy Taschen coffee table book in praise of his films; he told me to let myself out when I was finished. At the end of the second, he showed me a work-in-progress portrait of his friend Lawrence Weiner², initiated by Schnabel after he learned about Weiner's terminal cancer diagnosis. These were exciting moments in Bluebeard's castle, for sure, but only you can say if they brought me any closer to solving the mystery of *Basquiat*. Our conversation has been edited for clarity and length.



Still from *Basquiat*, 1996, dir. Julian Schnabel

Why are you interested in all this?

Well, a 25th anniversary is a nice hook. Until a week or two ago I had no idea you were redoing *Basquiat* in black and white, and to be honest, this movie (plus *Pi*) is the one that made me want to move to New York City, when I was young. I know you've heard that about *Basquiat* before...

Yes - and I always tell these young guys the same thing: *Did you forget he dies at the end?*

So is the movie a cautionary tale? It's not a "drug movie"...

I mean, New York doesn't look like *that* anymore. At the time, you don't realize you're preserving something, but that's what you're doing - even if it's a remake, or a fictionalized version. But most people making movies, they don't know the topic when they're making it. The Polish writer Lech Majewski³ was trying to make *Basquiat*, he came to interview me about Jean-Michel, I tried to help him do it right, he didn't listen. I tried to introduce him to Dennis Hopper, who could tell him firsthand about Andy - he didn't listen. Trying to educate Lech about Jean was like talking to a dead mule. He was a tourist. After some time, Bruce Weber told me: "Stop waiting for someone else to make the movie - *you* make it!" I ended up buying the

rights back from Lech, rewriting his script, and making it myself. And Lech's credit on the film is partial payment for his early help.

Why black and white? And why black and white now?

That actually goes back to the 20th anniversary of the movie. This friend of mine, Bob Melet, in Montauk, wanted to project it on the side of a building. So we're all sitting outside watching this thing, and the guy couldn't figure out how to make the color work on the projector. The movie comes out black and white, I go, "fuck." Then after a moment I realize: this is *heavy*. It's much heavier like this. It feels more like you're seeing the real thing.

What "real thing"?

In color, people are immediately viewing it through their own reverential relationship to art - in this case, Jean-Michel's art. They're looking for authenticity, to see how well the work is represented. In black and white the art is just part of a frame, which is artificial, and so that frees you to focus on the story. Because it's a movie: *everything* is artificial! Black and white, you hear what people are saying, more. To me it felt more like a Shirley Clarke film or something. After the credits, you see him painting in color, you get the bang outta your dollar and you think: "Now I'm seeing the real thing." Would someone complain to Von Sternberg, "This doesn't look real at all!" No. The point is it's much better than reality.

You're saying it's more real, but you're also walking back expectations of accuracy. Or verisimilitude?

Have you seen *Andrei Rublev*? The black and white helps you feel like you're in freezing cold 15th century Russia. At the end you finally see the paintings in color, in the frescoes, and I don't even think you notice that as much as in my movie. When you see Jean-Michel painting in color, you're like "Oh wow: That's the real him." I think that overpowers the rest.

I must say I prefer the color version. I mean. The surfer...!

Well, you *could* have kept the surfer in color. I thought about it! But *then* what is it about? You make a decision, you have to commit to it. I like both. If Criterion wanted to release both versions, for example, I would be okay with that.

Let's break the viewership of this movie into two categories: people who were there, and people, like me,

who were not. (Albert Milo tells Basquiat, "Your audience hasn't even been born yet.") Did any of the former category tell you, in pre-or-mid-production, "You're making a big mistake"?

The painter Francesco Clemente's wife Alba Primiceri was against me doing it. Glenn O'Brien was another. People felt very proprietary about their relationship with Jean-Michel. It's funny what fame does to people. They felt they were there, for this spark, that becomes part of their identity. I didn't need that as part of my identity - I did it because I felt responsible to Jean-Michel, and I knew the story. I always wanted to make movies, we all did⁴ - but I never thought I actually would. And now, nobody cares. People change their minds.

There is a lingering criticism that you inflated your role in Basquiat's life, that some people find the movie self-aggrandizing.

(*long pause*) I haven't heard anybody say that too much, certainly not recently.

I think people were extremely jealous that I made the film - why should I do that? People were gaging me all the time: "Did you ever take heroin with Jean-Michel?" That kind of thing. I would say, make your own movie then.



Still from *Basquiat*, 1996, dir. Julian Schnabel

Your angle was the authenticity of your recall. I presume that extends to the recreated paintings.

Jean-Michel's father would not give me permission to use the artworks - but his family also didn't stop me from recreating them, which I did, with my assistant Greg Bogin. I knew Jean, and his father knew that we knew each other. I think I did quite a bit for Jean by making the movie - he became a household name! My father said I should have made the movie about myself.

...Which is what your dissenters claim you did, with the film *Basquiat*.

If I would have done that, I would have called Gary Oldman's character "Julian Schnabel".

But your children play Milo's children. Your parents play his parents, in the scene at Jean's big opening. Later they get into a hilarious argument with Warhol about whether Saddle River is in New York or New Jersey. So what is the difference?

Well, if I was called "Julian Schnabel" I would hear my own name every time I saw the movie. And it was much easier for me to separate that: call the guy "Albert Milo", and make him a fictitious character, based on myself. Rockets Redglare plays himself. The scene where Jean is trying to buy caviar, the (white) cashier doesn't believe he can afford it, and he gets Andy to pay for it - that was me, not Andy. The scene where Rene chases him down the street to buy one of his paintings, after he sees it at the party - in reality, Rockets chased him down the street. But in a film, you use what's succinct or usable, what might have more impact on the story, rather than trying to make a documentary. I mean the movie is made of vignettes. Right?

Yes. My favorite scenes are the ones playing out in what feels like real time, or even slow motion.

I felt the film was actually a portrait of Jean-Michel and Andy. At Andy's wake, I said to John Cale that I wanted to make a requiem for Andy. And Lou Reed had not gotten involved yet. John told me Lou didn't want me involved because he thought I would take over. But that wasn't true. Lou and I became friends after that. He denied ever saying anything like that. But *Songs for Drella* was basically my idea. Which was fine; I said, don't wait, do whatever. They didn't need me. I'm glad they did it. Lou and I became friends at that moment and I'm glad we did.

In the movie version, Warhol's death is what pushes Jean-Michel over the edge. And it's the only time you use real footage of any of the people portrayed - camcorder footage of Warhol, set to "Waltzing Matilda" by Tom Waits.

I think when Andy died, Jean-Michel was devastated. When I showed the movie in Paris people said, "Oh, it wasn't like this." Somebody once said something to me, "I don't believe their relationship was like this." Look: the fact of having been there does not mean you're saying, "This is what really happened." You can't tell a whole person's life in two hours, even if it was truncated. People criticized it for being an episodic movie - to me this is like saying a painting looks like wallpaper. What's wrong with wallpaper?! This is why, in the movie, Milo talks about Chinese calligraphers

changing their names and restarting their careers - the freedom to avoid the pressure to repeat yourself. We're talking about paintings: there are some people who will always just stroll past paintings as if they were furniture. A person could have spent their whole life making that furniture! Everything outside that rectangle will shift, but the furniture, the sculpture, the painting - it stays like it is. A film should work like that too, and go past the edge.

But was I thinking any of this at the time? No. I was just trying to tell the story as I remembered it.

Let's talk about Rene Ricard. He approved your use of his text, his words, his personage in the film.

Yes.

But Wincott's Rene is the conscience of the first half of the movie - then he drops out, after he feels betrayed by Jean-Michel. It's a lonely feeling for the viewer - that voiceover is so instructive in the first half.

The last thing you hear from Rene:

"What is it about art anyway that we give it so much importance?... The picture a mother's son does in jail hangs on her wall as proof that beauty is possible even in the most wretched. And this is a much different idea than the fancier notion that art is a scam and a ripoff. But you can never explain to someone who uses God's gift to enslave, that you have used God's gift to be free."

Then we follow Jean into the cab, and Charlie Parker's "April in Paris" is playing. Well, Parker was another heroin addict. And critics said he sold out when he recorded *Charlie Parker With Strings* - they said it was too conservative. But it's a beautiful record. Anyway - for Jean-Michel it just got lonelier and lonelier. I combined his different girlfriends into one, Gina, played by Claire Forlani. When she showed up, Claire was nothing like Jean-Michel's last girlfriend, Suzanne Mallouk. But Claire was so versatile, she had so many dramatic buttons she could press, I had to give her the role. That's part of the fiction, part of building something. And I think her contribution to the movie is fantastic.

The scene where she has to revive Jean, after his non-fatal overdose: on paper it sounds like movie-of-the-week stuff. But there's no music, it plays out in real time, and I think their performances make it feel real. It's also a kind of a fake ending, a memento mori, because there's, what, an hour of the movie left?

You're the guy who knew nothing about him when you saw

it, right? But also, the way Jean left her; she was really a victim of what was happening to him, and he was so callous towards her. When he comes back and puts the scarf around her neck, after he's gotten it from Courtney Love - I know it's like kabuki, in a way, you see the scarf, it tells the story of an indiscretion - but when you're watching the movie it's like: "C'mon Jean. This girl is great, and you're blowing it." I told Jeffrey: "Lose the battles, and win the war. People won't care about the character if you win every scene, every moment." Now, I think Jean-Michel was more beautiful, more charming than Jeffrey. Jeffrey lost thirty pounds to do the role. He did a great job. But I think my affection for Jean-Michel came through in the way we saw Jeffrey.

Was that your hope, during the filmmaking?

No. I mean... Jean-Michel was like family to me. Just the other day I was remembering, listening to "The Little Drummer Boy" - pah-rum-pum-pum-pum, rum-pum-pum-pum - right?

Right.

It came back to me, sitting in this car, waiting for Jean-Michel to come out of his apartment. We used to listen to that record a lot. We'd make up words to the melody - it had nothing to do with Christmas, or the song, but I remember that. I loved Jean-Michel.

Did you ever tell him that?

(long pause)

No.

But I put up with a lot of shit. I was not offended when he peed in my hallway. He had given me this drawing, and maybe he felt like he had overextended himself. He was insecure. I knew my topic - what's riveting, hopefully, in the movie, is seeing things you don't normally see.

The movie is about success, how it overwhelmed Jean-Michel. But what if we use the word "money" instead of "success" - what is the movie saying then? About the art market? Does money imperil threaten a painter's ability? His essence?

I think there's a merry-go-round you can get on. I never got into a situation where I had a bunch of assistants making my stuff and turning out products. Some young artists came by here recently. I don't want to point a finger - I won't name them. They had a lot of success, very quickly.

And then they had people making things on their behalf, the market wasn't there to sustain what they were doing, and now they're gone.

In the movie, one of the very first things Basquiat says to Warhol is, "You don't even make your own stuff!"

Andy was Andy. Somebody could think, Oh, this is a good model, I'll have a factory of people doing whatever - but the content was there. And the way that he was working made the process part of the content. It wasn't just about getting a bunch of people to make stuff. I mean, I don't know what Jeff Koons' overhead is... How long can that sustain itself?

My early plate paintings, Mary (Boone) was showing them to people and they were excited, but at first they only sold for a couple thousand dollars.

Your Jean-Michel is a Rorschach blot. There are scenes where he's breathtakingly callous. Then there are scenes where his closest friends are saying racist things to his face. Milo is not one of them. Your character also experiences a tremendous success, but Basquiat gets lonelier while Milo moves into a mansion, this mansion, Palazzo Chupi, surrounded by his work, he has a family, he becomes an institution. What were you saying about your careers in juxtaposition?

I was saying family is everything. Taking care of other people. Family didn't make a big difference, it made the difference. My parents were at the opening, as you see in the film - his father came with his stepmother, and Jean-Michel says, "Oh, those aren't my parents." My mother wasn't in a mental institute like Jean's, my father wasn't an asshole. His parents had no idea what he was doing. My parents had no idea what I was doing either! But whatever I did, they loved me. The freedom he had, to sleep out in a cardboard box - he felt secure enough to do that. But he had also been thrown out of the house.

So was he "secure", or had he been thrown out of the house? And why?

You'd have to look somewhere else to find that out. Check out Phoebe Hoban's book, maybe - of course, she's an idiot. I've never read her.

Basquiat: A Quick Killing in Art. I read the chapter on your film. In the interview with Jeffrey Wright, sometimes it sounds like he's indicting you, others like he's indicting himself. Here's the quote:

"Julian made him out to be too docile and too much

a victim and too passive and not as dangerous as he really was. It's about containing Basquiat. It's about aggrandizing himself through Basquiat's memory. It's really fucking barbaric. But maybe our culture can't take the real danger of Basquiat right now."

He doesn't know what he's talking about.

Elaborate?

Exactly what I said about "lose the battle so you win the war": he wanted to say, "*the trusteeees are haraaaaassing me.*" I said, "Jeffrey, if you say it like, that, people will hate you. If you say it like you're saying 'pass the salt', they'll buy it." He says, "I don't know what you're talking about." We try it again: *cut*, goodbye, that's it. Jeffrey did everything in forty seconds. Because he was coming from theater, because he'd never been in a movie before. Once he asked me: "How come you always listen to Benicio and never listen to me?" I said, "Tell me something I don't know."

I do feel that the on-screen character Basquiat has more agency, or is at least more talkative, in the second half. In fact he articulates, verbatim, what other people say is happening to him, the allegations he's being "used" by Warhol, et cetera.

Obviously the art world has grown and many more people became involved. There's a whole upper-middle class group of people investing in art, now - they hear something pop, they run off and buy it. What do they have to lose? It's incongruous with the life of the artist, is the problem. One of the reasons I made *Basquiat*: I survived, Jean-Michel didn't. But he also had a dependency on drugs. I thought he had the constitution of an ox, I'll tell you - I would smoke some weed sometimes and be paralyzed. He was perfectly fine.

I have read elsewhere that Miramax changed the title - that your original title was taken from a SAMO/Basquiat tag, *Build A Fort, Set It On Fire*.

They didn't change it. I changed it. It's shorter! Like Rene Ricard said, his name "sounded famous already".

I also went back and watched the original trailer, which is pretty weird. Jeffrey Wright is credited last ("and introducing...") but, even weirder, there's a pullquote at the end - after the title, the credits, the fine print: "Jean-Michel Basquiat was the James Dean of the art world." Attributed to the *New York Times*. What's the deal with that? Did you work on the advertising, or...?

I would never say that. I would never do that. And I had a big row with Miramax about the cover; I wanted Jean-Michel walking down the street, the red painted cover I made. They wanted those four guys - Bowie, Hopper, Oldman, then Jeffrey - on the cover, because they were famous.

Which ended up being the design for the DVD/VHS cover.

Yes.

So the theatrical poster and the soundtrack artwork were yours. The home video stuff is theirs.

Yes. But they put the poster on the back of the DVD. Because nobody had ever heard of Jeffrey at that time. *(pause)* Where were we?

Well, the trailer makes the movie look like a feel-good, inspirational drama. The home video packaging looks like a bizarre comedy.

Whatever they did, they did - but I was responsible for everything in the movie. I had Iggy Pop's "Lust for Life" in the Mudd Club scene and they took it out. To give it to *Trainspotting*. That's how they operated. So I could only have a tiny little bit of the song, as Basquiat and Gina are exiting the club. Iggy was my friend, but the full song had to end up in *Trainspotting*, I guess. I said to Peter Brant: "Tell Harvey to go fuck himself." Peter said, "No, no!" I said: "Tell him to go fuck himself and he'll accept it." And he did. It's fine. *They* didn't tell me to change the title. I just thought *Basquiat* was more succinct.

Let's talk about the soundtrack. This movie also introduced me to Public Image Ltd, Grandmaster Flash and Melle Mel, Miles Davis, Joy Division...

Many of those were Jean's records. I had saved some of them. And I had been there in the basement with him, listening to them as he worked.

The ending is so abrupt. I thought that might have been Miramax, but it was you?

That was me. Jean-Michel was a prankster, remember. And it's a true ending: his life was truncated! I'm responsible for everything, better or worse. I shot 90,000 feet of film, which is very little. I treated the whole thing like the footage was a found object, for me to turn into a movie. The crew was confused by my lack of coverage, the way I wanted to

switch between lenses and create these jarring effects... I was a first-time director. People try to help you, in a way, but they're confused. I had no rules, but I had seen a lot of movies. Before I had any money I spent all my time in the Elgin Theater, on 19th Street. When it was cold out, you bet your ass we'd sit there and watch four movies a day.

Does it bother you when people describe you as a "maximalist"?

I don't know anybody, personally, that calls me that. That particular term, as coined by Robert Pincus-Witten, is retarded. It's retarded! What does it mean? Minimalism, you had a real movement, with card carrying members - "maximalist" is just an adjective! I don't know ten capital-m Maximalist artists. Do you? I'm not a "neo-expressionist" artist, and I'm not a "maximalist" artist. To name is to numb. I don't actually feel a desire to put everything into this or that rubric - I'm still in the middle of a practice. From the 19th century through the 20th, there was a trajectory: art seeming like it was about figuration, towards abstraction, then towards formalism, and then at a certain moment that linear trajectory collapsed, you realized there were either kinds of iconoclastic artists who have proliferated what we think of as "painting", like Duchamp, Picabia, Man Ray. It's not anti-painting, it's part of what painting is. With these artists who were marginal at the time - it was a thread that was found useful, and found ways to differentiate between abstract and figuration.

Making art is more like playing saxophone to me. As a painter, I don't ask myself: *What does this mean? Why am I doing it?* When Jean-Michel asks the interviewer, "Would you ask Miles where he got that note?", that's my favorite line in the movie. And that's Jean-Michel speaking. That showed how smart he was. People ask about my filmmaking technique, I don't know that I had one. I made it the best I could. I want the film to be: human beings are interacting, and people feel something is happening to them while they watch it. Not saying I invented something where the camera is flying around this way or that way. The way *Basquiat* is shot, very simple. So is looking into a cup of coffee - someone puts the cup down and it's shimmering, you see a reflection of light for a second - or you walk past the window and you see something out of the corner of your eye, and *that* becomes the thing you remember.

***Basquiat* was, for an indie film of this scale and budget, a hit?**

Michael Ovitz, people like that - they told me, never put your own money into it, but I didn't see any other way so I put in 1/3rd of the money, guaranteed the other 2/3rds to Peter Brant and his cousin, they put in the other 2/3rds, \$3.6 million shot in 23 days. I didn't have to give anyone any paintings because everybody got their money back. But I never got a nickel from it being on HBO, Showtime, whatever - I don't know where the money went. I guess the Weinsteins built their expenses such that you're never gonna see anything more than the minimum guarantee on your contract. My company, Stella Maris, we just got the rights back.

Did you lose friends over this movie?

I was never really close with Kenny Scharf or Keith Haring. I think they had a different relationship with Jean - I heard rumblings Kenny had wanted to make the movie. The reason I did it is because he admired me so much that I think he'd wished I would do it, more than any other person.

Jean-Michel.

Yeah.

That's... quite a statement.

For me to do it was to go to him and say, "Yeah, it's okay." I had a dream where I asked Jean-Michel who he wanted to make the movie, me or Fab Five Freddy. And he said he wanted me.

You took some credit, earlier, for making Basquiat a household name, you've said elsewhere that you "did him a solid" by making the movie. How can you do a dead person a solid?

He asked me many times if I would trade an artwork with him, if I ever felt like it. I was like his older brother or something, and I was on this mountain - I think he wanted to knock me off. The boxing match that was supposed to take place, he had the poster where it's him and Andy - but he said to someone somewhere that he wanted to have the boxing match with *me*. And it's funny because Jean-Michel's father said he didn't mean it literally, he meant he wanted to have a boxing match with my art⁵. There's a photo, taken at Mr. Chow, where Jean was saying something to me and I was saying back: "Listen. You're gonna *get* that boxing match." It was all in good fun, but I mean, I can't tell what I don't know. That story was a pretty accurate depiction of what happened to this guy, and I think I knew quite a few things that a lot of these people who thought they were his peers did not know.

Do you fear things credited to you, or "you", will get made and proliferate out in the wild, after the real you is gone?

Well, the thing is, for example, Jean-Michel's father made lithographs of the paintings, and people who didn't know any better thought they were buying originals. But they were ripoffs. He made photographic lithographs of his son's paintings.

The worst thing you could call someone in the 1990s was "sell-out". But now...

I've said no to a lot of things. People have called me uncooperative - I don't really want anything. All you have is your work. Al Pacino once told me, "You're the only person I know that's never compromised." You don't have to put that in your article, but it's a big fuckin' compliment.

Why wouldn't you want that in the interview?

I don't want to be saying "Al Pacino said this," or...

Back to Jean-Michel: his original paintings have, by now, sold for astronomically higher sums than they were ever worth during his life. The images of the images have proliferated, as merchandise - the money going, I guess, to his family estate. Sneakers, coffee mugs, hats, everything. Even if he never sold out, I feel he's been sold out, in death. Since you were there, then, how has it felt to watch that happen? Any pride? Any remorse?

I'm having a show at the Brant Foundation. They asked me if I would make a t-shirt with one of my paintings on it, a plate painting. I said, I don't want my paintings turned into shirts. Living artists have worked with these companies, Tom Sachs or Jeff Koons, Damien Hirst or whomever, but it's a pop sensibility that lends itself to that. I've already been asked if I wanted to make a sneaker for Vans, do something for Absolut Vodka - now, these people are very nice, my friend Nathan Fletcher surfs for Vans, but no, I don't want to do that. And I don't think my family will let that happen. At this point in life I do have to think about how I don't wanna be used. I'm pretty particular about that. Even, for example, these NFTs... Well, that's a whole other thing.

What are your thoughts on where cinema is headed these days?

What does Brando say in *Apocalypse Now*? "You're not a soldier, you're an errand boy sent by grocery clerks to collect the bill." I think that's where the industry is, and not

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just in the United States. They don't care. I talked to somebody about making another movie. The script is amazing, it'd be a great film! But if the main actor is someone they've never heard of? They don't care. If I say, "I want to make a movie about the person who lives next door to Mickey Mouse. Joaquin Phoenix is interested," suddenly it's: "Oh - okay! We'll bank that!"

In a sense, the story of Jean-Michel is a kind of aphorism for all that: to actually have something that gets so beaten down, by everything around it - and unknowingly, people do this.

Special thanks to Josh Siegel, Katherine Calderon and Andrew Macfarlane.

1 The Walken scene is a direct recreation of this interview.

2 (Schnabel's 7-year-old son Shooter was there too. He asked: "Why does he have such a long nose?" Schnabel replied, "He's got a long nose. And a long face.")

3 Majewski later made the underrated *The Mill and the Cross*, starring Rutger Hauer as Pieter Bruegel. Unlike Basquiat, Majewski's film directly seeks to recreate Bruegel's aesthetic in film-form; Schnabel told me he had never heard of it.

4 The first time I wrote about Basquiat was a 2019 piece for *Endcrawl* titled "The Art of Showbiz", about NYC fine artists' attempts to "Go Hollywood" in the 1990s.

5 In the movie Basquiat's first question to Rene Ricard is, "Can you put me in the ring with Milo?"