

WINTER/SPRING 2007

SYCAMORE REVIEW

VOLUME 19, ISSUE 1

# SYCAMORE REVIEW

LITERATURE, OPINION, AND THE ARTS



WINTER/SPRING 2007 VOLUME 19, ISSUE 1

INTERVIEWS WITH MICHAEL MARTONE, TOM BENEDEK  
AND NATALIE AND DREW OF MARRIED TO THE SEA

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Tom Benedek, *Plot Holes No. 07*

# SYCAMORE REVIEW

VOLUME 19, ISSUE 1

PURDUE UNIVERSITY—WEST LAFAYETTE, INDIANA

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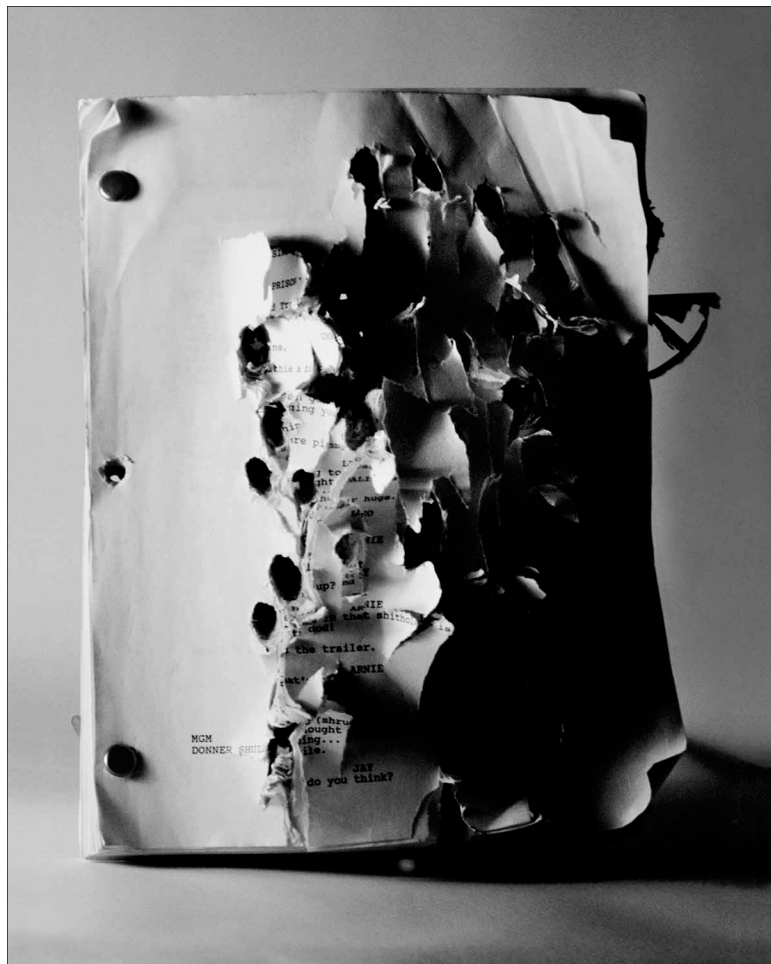
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Front Cover: Tom Benedek, *Plot Holes No. 23*.

Back Cover: Natalie Dee, *Mermaid Salute*.

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Tom Benedek, *Plot Holes No. 25*

# The Bullets and the Paper and the Text

## An Interview with *Tom Benedek*

Tom Benedek, who currently teaches screenwriting at University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, is the artist behind the front cover art for this issue of *Sycamore Review*. More information about his projects—and images from *Shot by the Writer* and *Heated Words*—can be found at his website, [www.tombenedek.com](http://www.tombenedek.com).

—Rebekah Silverman

*Sycamore:* You studied fine art as an undergraduate at University of Massachusetts in Amherst. How did you get into screenwriting? And what brought you back to photography?

*Benedek:* Though I was always interested in film, I started college with a double major in English and Journalism. I had done a great deal of creative writing and was editor of my high school newspaper. I had always loved movies and I originally picked up a still camera in order to learn cinematography.

But I got progressively more involved in photography. I went to film school in Paris during my junior year and decided to focus on filmmaking instead of cinematography there. I came out to Hollywood in the mid-seventies with my French student film and

lots of enthusiasm for the auteur theory.

That era was what might be thought of now as a golden age of the original screenplay in Hollywood. The best way to break into the business was with a great script—so I began writing. And eventually—eight wonderful and interminable years of struggle later—I started earning a living as a screenwriter. Twenty years and more than thirty professional writing jobs later, the once orderly file box storage system in my garage was overwhelmed by all those projects. I needed to compact the file boxes but kept feeling that before I could proceed, I ought to memorialize all those un-produced movies that I had worked on but would most likely have no control over again.

I had seen a newspaper announcement of a museum show for a fine artist whose work spanned the same years as my screenwriting



“career,” 1983-2003. That resonated with me. Eventually, I decided to make a bronze cast of one dead rewrite riddled with bullet holes. I then decided that I ought to do this with all the works for hire that I had labored on, but had not been made. I excluded the produced movies and original screenplays I still owned. It became a conceptual necessity. I referred to it as *Shot by the Writer, Tom Benedek: Works on Paper 1983-2004*.

*Sycamore*: Your original plan was to cast the shot scripts in bronze. You did this, but you also started photographing them.

*Benedek*: Back in college, the last “serious” photography that I did involved photo-sensitizing square sheets of plexiglass, printing photographic images on them and constructing them into a cube. I was never able to get satisfactory prints at that time. I also had painted toy soldiers and pasted them onto photographs. So, I had been attempting to fuse sculpture and photography long ago. That relates only in hindsight.

What happened was—once I had shot a few scripts with bullet holes, it became clear that the interaction between the bullets and the paper and text was incredible. I had them sitting on this shelf in my office and no one

could stop looking at them. Eventually, I borrowed an 8 x 10 view camera from the great and generous cinematographer Robert Elswit, set up a studio in my home-office and began taking pictures of the “shot” screenplays.

*Sycamore*: Which medium do you think is more successful?

*Benedek*: There is more control with the photographs. I have been able to spend a lot more time on the interaction of light with the shot scripts than I could in the casting process with the bronzes.

*Sycamore*: Do they differ in terms of meaning for you?

*Benedek*: Perhaps the sculptures memorialize the projects and serve as transitional objects for me. But the photographs transcend the original work. As I progressed with the photography in this project, I really moved further into it, picked up from where I had been when I essentially let it go for the movie business. And let the visual motifs I found carry me where they would.

*Sycamore*: How has Hollywood responded to the work?

*Benedek:* I haven't gotten sued. Yet. The directors, producers, writers, agents who have acquired pieces are generally not the ones who were involved in the projects. Most of the people I worked with stayed away. A select few close collaborators have the work in their homes and offices.

*Sycamore:* What about other screenwriters?

*Benedek:* Screenwriters respond very favorably. The imagery resonates. Although when my work was exhibited at the Writers Guild Foundation Gallery, *Written By*—the official magazine of the Writers Guild—refused to cover or even acknowledge *Shot by the Writer* even while it was on their premises because they believe it “celebrates failure.”

*Sycamore:* Where do you see yourself going from here?

*Benedek:* I wrote a novel about the movie business and screenwriting called *The Bad Version* last year. I just began a second book which is not about the movies at all.

I completed a commission for PEN USA earlier this year. A series of photographs of challenged and banned books on fire—which I call *Heated Words*. And I am in

the middle of new work in my studio using words and paper—again both conceptual and photographic with a sculptural component perhaps. This year, I'm also writing an original screenplay.

*Sycamore:* Do you still have un-shot copies of the scripts? What if you need them?

*Benedek:* I still have many drafts of each of these projects. Though there is the chance that one particular draft of a couple of these have been terminally revised at the firing range. However, the studios, of course, have them sitting on their shelves somewhere. That was their final resting place, until I began this project.

*Sycamore:* Have you taught anyone else how to shoot?

*Benedek:* I was a writer for hire for so long. I intend to keep this project personal and exclusive.