

## Screenwriters. On Screenwriting.

The BAFTA and BFI Screenwriters' Lecture Series in association with The JJ Charitable Trust

Peter Straughan

24 October 2012 at BFI Southbank

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**Peter Straughan:** Bear with me, I'm very nervous. I wish it was 1970 so I could smoke up here, like Dave Allen. Also 'cos *Harold & Maude* wouldn't come out for another year, so we'd have that to look forward to.

I was very flattered to be asked to do this talk – it's BAFTA and it's the BFI, and the other writers that have been involved. But I did get very nervous as I thought what I would talk about because I didn't know what it was you'd want.

You have a kind of imaginary audience in your head, and I sort of imagined that half of you would be writers, or people interested in writing, and you would want advice on craft, writing technique and business tips. Secrets. And that the other half of you would be generally interested in film.

I'm not typecasting you, this is my imaginary audience it's not you. And you'd want entertaining stories about studio executives being idiots – that kind of thing. And I was worried that I wouldn't really be able to deliver any of those things. You imagine other ingredients like humility – I can do that – and quotes, so that I would appear widely read and not like someone who just Googled 'screenwriting quotes' last week.

And you want some profundity, and all those things. So you imagine what the talk should be like, and I did think I would just give a talk on technique, on the craft of screenwriting but I did do that a long time ago. I gave a talk to some screenwriting students and when I tried to think about what I knew about screenwriting, I mean really knew as opposed to having a vague opinion on or what I'd heard someone else say, I realised you could put it on a postage stamp.

So I ended up looking at the books, you know Robert McKee, Syd Field 'How to Write a Screenplay' books. And I gave them this talk on three act structure and character arcs and inciting incidents, and I didn't really believe any of it at all. At least I'd never really implemented that stuff in my own writing. So it just felt a bit

strange, I found myself teaching something I didn't do to cover up the fact that I didn't actually know how to do the thing I was doing.

I remember when I was a kid we had a swimming teacher who used to make you stand by the edge of the pool on the pretence that he was going to talk to you, and then he would just push you in. That was his swimming teaching method. I think the real function of those books, that say they can teach you how to write a screenplay, is to fool you into thinking you've learnt how to write a screenplay, so that you go away and start writing a screenplay and therefore actually begin to learn how to write a screenplay.

So I thought, in the end, I wouldn't do one of those talks on craft. I thought I'd just be a bit more free-wheeling. So what I'm saying is this isn't really a lecture, it's more of a 30 minute apology. And also I think the function of this little talk for me is not to clarify what I feel about writing films but just to make me very grateful to get back to writing films instead of having to do this.

OK. That's five minutes of blather. And there's more blather to come, believe you me. If one of the ingredients is humility, like I say, I can do that because I don't know anything. I think when Robert Towne [or William Goldman] says that it comes across as humility, and when I say that I can see that it occurs to you that it might be true.

But it's a good Socratic place to start, I know that I don't know anything, or I don't know very much about screenwriting. I used to know much more, but I was so much older then and I'm younger than that now.

This is how I got started. When I was a teenager I was a musician, well I was a bassist which doesn't really count, and I played in bands. I have a very dry mouth from fear [drinks some water]. That's my writing hand. And I loved playing in bands. I loved rehearsing, and I loved working out the songs together, and I loved recording the songs and then eventually performing the songs live.

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There's a sort of truism in cinema that film is a collaborative business. Or the full version for writers which is film is a collaborative business, bend over – that's not true, [whispers] It's a little bit true, but the band working in collaboration to create something, that's remained the model of happiness for me.

Then after the band I went to university, a little late, I was sort of in my early 20s. I met my friend Steve who had written a play, and I auditioned for a part in it. It was the part of a drunk and I got the part by turning up for the audition drunk, and then I maintained my performances every night by being drunk. I couldn't actually act at all. This is true.

I played Arturo Ui in Brecht drunk. I played the father in Steven Berkoff's *Greek* drunk. And then eventually I got the lead in *The Crucible*, I got John Procter, and I thought I'd better do that sober, and I never got asked to do any more plays after that because indeed I couldn't act at all.

But when you do a play, as I'm sure you know, there's a thing called the technical rehearsal just before you start, where they work out the lighting and things, and you work out exactly where to stand in relation to the lights. You know you're in the right place, because you feel the lights on your eyelashes. I remember that feeling, and you feel as if everyone is watching you.

Which makes it sound like an ego thing, but it's not that. It's a sense of the world being very compressed and concentrated, and things having meaning. So if you move your arm in a play everyone watches you move your arm and everyone looks for the meaning in that and if the play is working there is meaning in that. And that isn't the case in the real world.

So I fell in love with that, with that heightened world of drama and I couldn't act. So I tried writing some plays, like my friend Steve. And I could do it, basically I could do it. I'm aware that

there's a sort of fundamental, cruel divide there between those people who basically can do it and people who basically can't do it.

I can swim, I learnt how to swim, but I'm not a great swimmer. I really struggle with it, and my friend John is a swimmer, it's just in him, he just naturally swims. I think there is sometimes that divide, but in saying I could basically do it I'm not sure if I'm saying much more than I really wanted to do it, and if you really want it, maybe in some way, you already have it. Or maybe not. I don't know anything.

So with music I found this love of collaboration and in theatre I'd found this version of the world where everything was significant and where you could pretend to be someone you weren't and dissolve yourself. And all of those things really drew me. So writing scripts was a place for me where those different things came together. And I remember writing plays, this is odd but it's true, it felt like making little machines to trap people in, I used to think of *Mousetrap* – not the play, the board game – where you have to construct this delicate little mechanism and if everything goes well the trap falls just when and where you want it to.

The first couple of plays I wrote were black comedies, and writing jokes was like laying landmines, and you'd wait in the wings to hear whether they went off or not. Sometimes they did, and sometimes they didn't. I know these are quite cold, unromantic images for writing – I read someone else describe writing a film as making a delicious meal and then laying the table and putting all the food out and then opening the front door and hoping someone comes in; which is a nice image. But for me it was like laying landmines, which isn't a nice image.

So I wrote some plays, I wrote some stage plays and some radio plays. And then Stevie Lee and David Barron – and I'll always be grateful to them – read one of my plays and they liked it and asked me if I could work on a film script. It was a

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script they already had, and they wanted it rewritten, which is quite common in the business.

So, not knowing how to write a screenplay I found myself rewriting one. I kept the title, and I changed everything else, which is quite an extreme rewrite, obviously. There's a thing in Japan called *otaku*, which is a sort of obsessive interest in something. You get teenage boys that spend years in their bedroom learning the guitar solo from *Heartbreaker* by Led Zeppelin, or something. Years and years, until they can play it note perfectly. But they can't really play the guitar. It's an imitation of playing the guitar.

So when I said I used to know much more, I think that was sort of what I was doing. I thought I knew how to write a screenplay when I first started, but I think I was just doing my Coen Brothers solo, or my Hal Hartley solo, or my Jim Jarmusch solo; which was doubly ironic because the whole point of those film-makers is they're unique voices. I didn't do it deliberately, but I think it takes time to learn to actually write rather than to imitate, so if you see Buddha on the road, kill him. As they say.

It's been a long time now since I've written a play. I haven't written a play for about ten years, I've been working in film. And I'm currently writing for TV for the first time. I'd say about two thirds of the scripts I write are adaptations. To be honest this is partly because I'm lazy and so if someone comes to me with a book and says 'do you want to do this?' if I like the book I say 'yes, I'll do it.' But if they're waiting for me to come up with something of my own free will and bring it to them they'll have a long wait.

Pretty much all the work you get offered as a writer comes in the form of some kind of source material. So Darwin was right, we do indeed have to adapt to survive. That's the sound of a landmine not going off, just there. I knew I should have cut that stupid line.

It's common to say that the reason there are so many adaptations now, and I don't think there

are more now than there've ever been, but the reason often given is the film industry wants to minimise its risk by picking stories that have been proven to work with a large audience. Obviously that's sometimes true, it's true of something like *Fifty Shades of Grey* I suppose.

But I don't think it's true of Paul Thomas Anderson when he adapted Upton Sinclair's little known novel *Oil* into *There Will Be Blood*. And I don't think Tarkovsky was hoping to pull in the Comic-Con fans for *Stalker*. And I don't think Kubrick was relying on the box office power of Thackeray when he did *Barry Lyndon*.

I heard Frank Cottrell Boyce say that he thought original screenplays at the Oscars were often very similar, whereas adapted screenplays were often much more interesting. I was quite struck by that, I think there's some truth in it, and I think we can return to Darwin for the reason why, because the studio movies which make up the bulk of the Oscar nominations, can be viewed as a product of creative inbreeding, with writers and directors having ingested a view of what kind of stories are cinematic and how they should be told.

This can lead to recessive movie genes. And we all know cross-fertilisation is infinitely superior to self-fertilisation. So I wonder if the books and plays and the true life stories which make up the source material for adapted screenplays act as a kind of injection of healthy, alien genetic material. And interestingly I think something similar to that happens in the relationship between the writer and the director. Or it can do.

You'd think a good film is created in an environment where everyone is on exactly the same page in terms of what they're trying to say. But when I think of some of the happy experiences I've had working with directors, with John Madden or with Tomas Alfredson, then I think what happens is the two slightly different inputs merge into a third voice. So you get a kind

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of dialectical process where the director can lift you up and beyond your comfort zone.

So original screenplays and adaptations; originals are harder, not surprisingly, you have to come up with all the raw material yourself. But the interesting thing is that the process of writing both is much more similar than you'd think because even when you're adapting someone else's work you still haven't decided what you're going to say with it. That's why I sometimes wonder about the notion of a faithful adaptation.

I think if you're really writing, as opposed to just going through the motions, then the script will be being guided by your own preoccupations and your own desires and your own emotions. You won't know it because all of this happens at a level that you don't want to go to, but every decision you make will be completely guided by this.

I remember reading that when you sleep in someone else's bed, if you don't get a good night's sleep, it's because the bed is facing in the wrong compass direction from your own bed. So it's north-south rather than east-west, and that your brainwaves have got used to a certain magnetic, tidal direction as it were, and they're thrown when they're aligned differently.

As I'm saying this I'm sure it's not true, I don't know where I read that. It sounds like nonsense, doesn't it? But anyway, I like the idea. I imagine something like this happening with the faithful adaptations, when the grain of your own inner world happens to be smoothly aligned with the grain of the source material. I imagine when this isn't the case, when the grains cross hatch over each other, that the adaptation is much more difficult. Although the final work could be even more interesting, of course.

A long time ago I was supposed to give a talk on adaptation and I bought two identical mirrors, and I broke one of them into pieces. My idea was that I was going to take the pieces of broken mirror and glue them onto a football, so that the

same pieces of mirror – story – would be rearranged and create a new form, as a sort of visual metaphor. It didn't work, because I cut my hand really badly on one of the pieces of mirror. I actually nearly severed one of my flexor tendons, which would have meant I couldn't write with that hand; which would have been ironic.

So, I've adapted film scripts from novels and novellas, true life stories, documentaries, other films and plays. Of these you would think that plays would be the easiest source material to adapt from. Obviously the piece has already been conceived as drama, the characters are created, the dialogue is already written. But if I can give you one piece of advice, if any of you are writers, it's this; think very carefully before trying to adapt a stage play to the screen. They come as friends but they are secretly assassins.

I think it's because when something has existed in one art form it's very strongly marked by that form, and it doesn't easily pass over into another form. For example, you have to scrub all the barnacles of the novel from the hull of the story. But a novel sort of advertises its difference from a screenplay, and you're forced to reimagine it as a film from the very beginning.

A play comes looking so much like a film script that you can drop your guard, and then you end up with a recorded play, and no matter how good the play was I don't think that can make a satisfactory film. That's probably the only really useful thing I'll tell you tonight.

You know what; I'm going to do my quotes now. I thought I'd just do them all in one block. And they're all by the same person as well, to make it even easier. These are all from the film-maker Robert Bresson.

'My movie is born first in my head, dies on paper, is resuscitated by the living persons and real objects I use, which are killed on film but placed in a certain order and projected onto a screen come to life again like flowers in water.'

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'Do not use two violins where one is enough.' I should say these are notes to himself, I know this sounds a little aphoristic, but they are. They were just notes to himself that he made over many years.

'Shooting; put oneself into a state of intense ignorance and curiosity, and yet see things in advance.'

'Don't run after poetry, it penetrates unaided through the joins.'

'A small subject can provide the pretext for many profound combinations, avoid subjects that are too vast or too remote, in which nothing warns you when you have gone astray. Or else take from them only what can be mingled with your own life, and belongs to your experience.'

'An old thing becomes new if you detach it from what usually surrounds it.' He's very good isn't he?

'What is for the eye must not duplicate what is for the ear. When a sound can replace an image, cut the image or neutralise it. The ear goes more towards the within, the eye towards the outer.'

'Everything escapes and disperses. Continually bring it all back to one.'

And the last quote, I love this one; 'make visible what, without you, might perhaps never have been seen.' That concludes our quotes section for the evening.

A while ago a taxi driver asked me what I did, and I told him I was a screenwriter and he asked what I'd written and I mentioned a film. He thought about that, and then he said 'so, did you just write the words that they said?' This sort of bothered me, because I felt it wasn't true, but when you look at a script you could be forgiven for thinking that that is the case.

On the surface most scripts are dialogue and not much else. You can get some scene headings, little paragraphs describing basic action, but basically lots of lines of dialogue. I think this conception of the screenwriter is quite common, that we write the words and then directors come and turn them into film, into image and sound; that the script is an important part of the film-making process but it's only a part. I'd like to come back to that.

But in terms of dialogue, the truth is I think the dialogue is possibly the least important aspect of a script. Or at least the surface of dialogue is the least important. Hitchcock said dialogue is just one more sound in a film, it just happens to come out of people's mouths.

I think it's certainly true that if a character is telling you what is going on, who they are as a person, what they're feeling, what you should be feeling. If those things are present on the surface and are only being delivered by the surface then you have problems. So the meaning of a film isn't in what's been said, it's in the complicated and subtle play between what's said and what isn't. What's hidden, what's implied and can be inferred. What was accidentally said, what was deliberately said. There's a net of words and silence and image and music.

But if dialogue words are all that's on the page, where is the rest of the film? I think the answer to this is in the structure. I just want to do a quick little detour about those books again. I don't think there's anything wrong with the 'How to' books. I don't think there's anything wrong with thinking of your script in terms of three act structure or characters arcs, inciting incidents or stages on the hero's journey.

There's software now which you can buy, which generates plots for you, from what it considers the definitive list of story archetypes. And there's software that generates characters for you, from a list of 32 characters divided into good guys and bad guys. And of course it is possible to describe a script in this way, if it helps you do it. What I

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think is problematic is when the descriptive becomes prescriptive.

I think there's a subtle tide in film-making and it does flow in that direction. The direction of prediction formula and you won't find many people who would wholeheartedly endorse it, but almost all of us get drawn by that current to a certain extent. And that current makes us begin believing the film should have a certain structure, and should have certain top beats and elements, and characters that should have back stories that explain their situation and which will end up being satisfactorily resolved.

And I think, worst of all, as audience members who are fed on a diet of this we begin to expect that too. Instead of being open to stories that work in a different way we feel baffled or bored or obscurely insulted by them. So we reach the point where we can only digest stories that tell us things we've already been told. And that has to be anti-art.

Samuel Johnson said about artists that their greatest ability was to make new things familiar and familiar things new. And here's another aphorism; 'be as ignorant of what you're going to catch as is a fisherman of what is at the end of his fishing rod – the fish that arises from nowhere.'

It's obvious why the film industry, as an industry, would want to find ways of predicting and controlling the success of a story with an audience. I understand why they want to turn writing into a science. And I understand it because I want to, too. When I looked at a screenwriting software site to see what software I could condemn, I nearly bought one. I did, 32 characters; that might be quite useful. We all want those magic shortcuts, but I do think it's a mistake.

So when I say screenwriting is structure, I'm talking in a much more general sense, structure, rather than that kind of way of analysing a script. An example from E.M. Forster 'The King died, and then the Queen died.' 'The King died, and then

the Queen died of grief.' What's the difference between those two statements?

The first is story, it's what happened, it's all the events, it's the outside. The second is plot, it seeks to find why things happened, it tries to move inside, it seeks to make connections. I think if I had to boil down what the screenwriter does into one simple sentence, it would be that. We look for the connections, we decide the connections, we create the connections. You can trace this back to Eisenstein and the theory of montage.

Eisenstein says that the film-maker tells the story through the juxtaposition of uninflected images. It's all about the order in which we put the words, the images, the moments, the scenes together. If you put the colour blue against red it changes the effect of the colour. The blue itself hasn't changed, but our perception of it is transformed.

So let's say we have two shots. We have one of the Queen, dying in bed, and one of the King dying, falling accidentally from his horse. If we play the shots in that order we tell one story, the story of two unrelated deaths, the story of an unlucky family perhaps. If we let the Queen's death follow the King's accident we have the possibility of a different story, of an event that's caused by the previous event. And if you've ever been in a film edit this will all seem very obvious, this is what editing is, deciding which order shots should be placed, and what rhythm and what difference these juxtapositions make to the story.

But long before the edit, this is what the writer is doing; this is all he or she is doing. Deciding what are the pieces, and in what order they should go. I think that's one of the reasons why the edit always feels to me like a much more comfortable environment for the writer than the shoot.

Because filmmakers don't have to imitate the appearance of people or objects, as painters would or sculptors would, or a novelist would. We have machines that do that, we have cameras and sound recorders to do that. All we have to do, all we can do, is choose the bits and then

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decide where to make the knots that tie them together.

I think this is where poetry becomes possible. Not in a single scene, but in the combined effect of the scene that came before and the scene that came after. And this is where the emotional effect of cinema lies, not in the shot of the actor crying as hard as he or she can, but in the combination of the shot of the actor crying and the shot which preceded or follows that shot.

If this sounds obvious, it is. But if it sounds easy it isn't, because the choices are infinite. The road you can take forks and forks again and it's much easier to get lost than to find a way through. David Mamet had a sign on his desk, which he borrowed from Clinton's Presidential campaign team, and it read 'keep it simple, Stupid.'

But simplicity shouldn't be and can't be the starting point. Instead you start with this great mass of material, all of these possibilities. Simplicity is the end product of moving through all those choices, it's the reward for all your hard work. Empty the pond to get the fish. I don't know what that means, but it sounded good.

T.S. Eliot said that poetry can communicate before it's understood, and I think that's true of good films. Some things are hard to say. Some things can't be said without being killed in the process of saying them. A director was asked what his film was about, and said 'I've just spent two hours telling you what it was about.' A good film can't be translated into simple words, into a message or a meaning.

It's reaching after something that's very difficult to hold, like smoke. You have to come at it sideways, and don't look at it in the eye in case you scare it off. With great films I think it's the case that the film-maker doesn't necessarily know what they're creeping sideways towards. Or else they thought they were stalking one animal, but end up catching another.

When the novel was invented it wasn't just a new way of articulating the way we experienced the world. It created new ways of experiencing and feeling about the world. The same is true of cinema, as Bresson said. It's a new way of writing, and it brings the possibility of new ways of feeling.

So if I think about the feelings that were created by that last shot, just as an example, of Truffaut's *400 Blows*, have they ever been felt before? The French New Wave or Italian neo-realism or American cinema of the '70s didn't so much reflect the way things were in the world as create new ways of relating to it. And I know this sounds a little grand, and might seem a long way from someone who'll probably be working on a rom-com or a thriller next year, and it seems to sit more easily with so-called art house cinema.

But I don't think that hierarchy's very useful. If we think of a Billy Wilder rom-com or a thriller by Melville or Jacques Audiard or Ben Wheatley, these are films that forget they're rom-coms and thrillers. Genre is just the rhythm section in music that can be endlessly varied and inventive. So I think this is what film writing can be, and obviously I hope it goes without saying, I'm not making claims for my own work, this is just aspirational stuff. I'm still hoping I'll come good.

It's a structuring of events that creates poetry, allows us to see something in the world we wouldn't otherwise have seen. Allows us to feel in a new way, and feeling is a kind of thinking. And I think I've ended up talking about film-making as a whole, rather than specifically screenwriting, but I think that's natural for a screenwriter to do because film-making is an odd and sort of wasteful process.

The work that the screenwriter does ends up being just the fossil of an act of imagination. It will all have to be written all over again in the filming, and no matter how great the script, the actual film will only be a distant blood relative of it, it will never be an identical twin.

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I don't think I've quite said what I meant to say. I think what I mean is that the script is what's left over from a film that you had in your head. And it's a failure. But almost as a by-product from that, can come a different film – the film that will be made from the script. But it's very tangentially related to the film that you had in your head. So for the writer the film was already made.

To conclude by returning to that question 'what does the screenwriter do' I'd rather answer by saying what it feels like we do. And in this context I don't want to claim a little more of the film as being my responsibility. I don't want to accept the script as a valuable but limited part of the process of making the film. I want to say that it is the film.

Paul Schrader said 'a screenplay is not a work of art; it's an invitation to collaborate in the creation of a work of art.' And I know this is true, we don't queue up and buy tickets to walk into a cinema and leaf through a script. And I'm not making the usual gripe that writers make about not being appreciated enough.

I'm just saying it isn't how I experience writing a film; it's not what it feels like when I'm writing a film. When I'm sitting down and start typing I don't feel that I'm writing an invitation for collaboration. I don't feel like I'm writing a blueprint or an instruction manual, and when it's really working I don't feel like I'm writing a screenplay. I feel that I'm transcribing a film that I'm watching, and it's the whole film, all the images, the sounds, the music.

But, all of it only very dimly seen. So it's Plato's Cave over the DVD player. I think the script is just an attempt to capture this film that one person saw once, and it bears the same relation to the film that the police artist sketch does to the real murderer. So what I wanted to say to the taxi driver – but thank God I didn't – is 'no, I didn't just write the words they said, I made the whole film. It's just I was the only one who got to see it.'

OK, we've been talking about films. I thought we could maybe look at some; these are just a few clips from films that I love. They're just moments that have always stayed with me, poetic moments I think. Interestingly none of them have dialogue in them.

### *Montage of clips*

Just some clips from some of the films I've written there [he jokes]. I didn't always get credited for them, obviously. By the way, that story about the mirrors; that was a lie. I thought I would do it but I couldn't be bothered in the end.

One of the films there was Werner Herzog's *Aguirre: the Wrath of God*, and I did come across this review and I did come across this little review, and I was going to end by reading it. I think it's by someone quite young, so it might be quite a cruel and snide thing to do. I'll just read you this little line, because it made me laugh.

So this is a review of *Aguirre: the Wrath of God*; 'what really made me feel bad was that poor horse. It seemed like every time Aguirre got pissed he was hitting that poor dishevelled horse. They should have changed the name of the movie to *Aguirre: Scourge of Ponies*. I'm no animal lover, but I felt really sad for that horse. Overall I enjoyed the movie, it kept my attention at least.'

I love that ending, 'it kept my attention, at least.' I'd be happy with that to be honest. Thank you very much.

**Tanya Seghatchian:** Peter, thanks very much, that was absolutely great. So many exploding landmines and so much poetry actually. If I can, given you pitched those clips, and I'm not sure if all of the audience will be familiar with all of the pieces, can I just ask you tell us what they were and why you picked them?

**Peter Straughan:** Yes, I literally was just trying to think of moments that have stayed with me for years. Often without knowing why they stayed



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with me for years, but then I think that goes back to the [T.S.] Eliot quote that [film] can communicate before it's understood. So they were the Werner Herzog film, *Aguirre: The Wrath of God*, there was some shots from the ending of Antonioni's *Eclipse*, which was a beautiful ending. There were some shots from the *Werckmeister Harmonies* by Bela Tarr, which is the whale. And that's where the music came from as well. There was *The Tenant* by Polanski, there was *A Prophet* by Jacques Audiard. And there was *Come And See* and I can never remember the name of the director.

**TS:** Erem Kilmov.

**PS:** Oh, well done. You didn't know that an hour ago, so you've gone off and checked that.

**TS:** I interviewed him in 1992, and it was one of the oddest interviews I ever did. It was in Moscow and we didn't have enough lights. We'd taken one light and he'd given us an interview in Dom Kino. There were seven men who were in the room, and they all took their jackets off and stood around him. I kept asking them to move because I felt they were crowding him, until I realised that actually what they were doing was positioning the effect of the light on their shirts, as a reflector, to put him in the best possible frame that he could have for the interview. Fortunately at the BFI here tonight we have enough lights.

It's a great selection of pieces of European cinema that shows the real full impact of poetry in screenwriting. And it's an odd selection, really, given how unsimilar it is to the choices you've made as a screenwriter yourself, in terms of the work that you've done. I'm not saying that you haven't written very poetic films but one wouldn't necessarily see that clip reel and think that's the inspiration for Peter Straughan. So can I ask you talk a little bit about the choices that you have made, and why you made them?

**PS:** I think first of all in terms of influences, that's definitely involved – inevitably, of course – as it does for everyone. It's strange that I started

writing plays because I didn't really ever go and see plays as a young person. I still don't really. But I was brought up watching movies at home. So I'd watch a lot of black and white Hollywood movies, and then when I was in my teens I guess I was watching American indie movies, things like the Coen Brothers or Hal Hartley, or Jim Jarmusch.

And then after that, really quite late, was I discovering European cinema. I think the films that I first started out doing were to do with the American indie sort of influences, so the first couple of scripts – when I read them now – feel very heavily influenced by the Coen Brothers, or other filmmakers like that. But, to be honest, I kind of took the jobs that I was offered. We had a daughter, and I had to make a living. But usually it would be one of a list of things. If it was from a book, it would be that I liked the source material. Or it could be that I really liked the director that was involved and wanted to work with him. Or it could be that I liked the producer, and wanted to work with the producer. So hopefully, always, one of those boxes was ticked and, when you're very lucky, all of those boxes are ticked.

**TS:** Which is, I assume, how it felt on *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* which looked to me like it was one of those gift collaboration.

**PS:** Yes, *Tinker, Tailor, The Debt* being another one. I suppose the longer you're around and the more secure you begin to feel as a writer the more you start to pick and choose the work. So I'm hoping that's where I'm at now. I think I feel increasingly interested in trying to tell stories that are a little bit more off the beaten track. It doesn't necessarily mean that they wouldn't be genre movies. I suppose I just feel inspired, much more, by those kind of movies now. I suppose that's the direction I'd like to go in.

**TS:** I was very intrigued by the quote you gave from Frank Cottrell Boyce about original screenwriting. And also that sense of cross fertilisation and in-breeding. The clip of *The Tenant* that you showed has always been a film

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that has interested me, because actually if you think about the plot of *The Tenant* it doesn't seem like it's going to lend itself to being a particularly cinematic experience. Or a good story to unfold onscreen in an easy manner, and yet somehow it's absolutely thrilling and absolutely riveting. That kind of imagination is something I guess we all strive to try and pull off if we can. We're crossing genres but also doing something which is very profound at the same time. Have you ever been offered anything quite like that, which is either seemingly unfilmable – but you managed to film – or have you toyed with the idea of doing the unfilmable and turning it into something which actually can be translated.

**PS:** I feel that that's more where I'm at now. The projects I'm considering would maybe fall into that category a little more. There's a Greek director [Giorgos Lanthimos], who made *Alps* and *Dogtooth*, and I'd very much like to work with him. I think his instinct would be to find something that seems on the surface quite unfilmable. I quite like the challenge of that now. I suppose some adaptations can seem quite tricky. *Tinker, Tailor* seemed tricky to get right, seemed difficult to get right. It wasn't obviously unfilmable, it had been a huge tv adaptation, but it had been an enormous piece of work. Hours and hours.

**TS:** And did that daunt you?

**PS:** Yes, it did. It was definitely a ghost hanging over it at the beginning. We watched it once. I wrote *Tinker, Tailor* with my wife Bridget [O'Connor], and we watched it once just to lay the ghost of it really. But it was also an inspiration because it's such a good adaptation, a very faithful adaptation. And it was also a way of reinforcing that we couldn't do that, we couldn't just do a straight faced adaptation of *Tinker, Tailor*, it had to be handled differently because it was only going to be two hours long. So it was useful, really, to watch it rather than debilitating.

**TS:** And that thing you said earlier about compression and meaning, you realising through

the theatre that that was part of what the power of drama could be. In a sense that seems to be what you did with it, you took the poetic form.

**PS:** I think cinema always strives towards poetry in a way, and that felt the right thing to do with *Tinker, Tailor*, to try and create the poem of the book. Something that would be much more compressed and concentrated, more vivid but smaller, more elliptical. But somehow would have the essence of the book but boiled down.

**TS:** And how did Tomas [Alfredson, director] push you out of your comfort zone, I think was the way you described it?

**PS:** Just constantly, he comes at things from quite an odd angle. When you start out he says things – especially then because we didn't know him very well – you think 'I don't think is going to work, '. Various ideas he had. But then you start to have faith in him, and I think also he doesn't always know whether it's going to work or not. He doesn't always know what he means when he says something, but he then starts to move towards it and you go with him.

And it could be little things like the chess pieces, which I thought was a stupid idea when he first suggested that we'd have chess pieces with all the faces of the main suspects cut out and stuck on them. With Christmas party hats on, he originally wanted. I remember thinking that was never going to make it into the film, but it did, and I really liked it.

He started in theatre, at least he's done theatre work, and sometimes he would come at the script in a way that reminded me much more of working in theatre. Sort of playing games, almost. Script development games, like *Tinker, Tailor*'s a fairy story, what's the fairy story? Let's tell the fairy story of *Tinker, Tailor* and we'd have to work out how to express the plot of *Tinker, Tailor* as a fairy story. And that wasn't just for me, it was for all the departments.

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So he would say to the production design 'I want the film to look like an old man's foreskin,' but actually it's quite liberating when people do that because you think 'okay, I sort of know what you mean, I know what an old man's....'. Actually I should say I don't know what an old man's foreskin looks like. Sadly, one day I will.

**TS:** Did you get a lot of time together?

**PS:** We had a lot of time together, we worked very collaboratively. That's twice I've done that now, once with John Madden and once with Tomas. I may have done it another time, where you've worked with a director from the beginning, on a script, where you're both in place at the beginning. I just find it an infinitely superior way of working, because a lot of the time when there isn't a director there with you, when you're writing the script you're writing in a void and you become the director yourself and you start to direct the film.

And then, inevitably, when someone comes on that has a different voice and different direction, you end up having to throw a lot of things away and start to tailor it to them. Sometimes, in some films – it hasn't happened to me I don't think – but in some films that director then leaves the project and another director comes on and you have to tailor the script again towards them. So to know who you're working with from the beginning and to be discussing the script from the beginning together, and discovering things together and coming up with ideas together and finding the film together, you know. It just makes so much more sense of every level, I think.

**TS:** And with John Madden on *The Debt*, you say it was a similar process. You were presumably working on the foreign language version of the film, rather than a screenplay?

**PS:** Yes. We'd both watched the film. I don't know how many times John watched it, he may have only watched it once or twice. I only watched it once and then didn't go back to it. But it's not that different a process from.... I

remember there was a director saying, when he was adapting from a book he'd read the novel and when he was going to start working on the script he'd put the novel away and not allow himself to look at it. I think that's kind of what we did with the film, we sort of absorbed the sense of what we wanted to do, and then had to go away and make it new. So we sort of worked on that together from the beginning, and that was similar. It just makes much more sense to work that way.

**TS:** And when you quote Bresson, about making what would be invisible without your hand in it, visible. If you look back at your work, which bits would you say.....

**PS:** Oh God...

**TS:** Can't do it?

**PS:** I would never apply that to... I don't like my work. I never do. I think it's quite common. I don't mean I don't like the films I've done, because often I can admire other people's work in the films; the actors or the directors or the production designer or whatever. But I always just feel like I've failed really. Sometimes because [I] have. But it's what I was trying to say, you have the film, you saw the film in your head and what ends up on the pages is this pale ghost of what you saw.

But it can only be that perfect in your head because you didn't see it clearly in the first place. It was a perfect performance by the lead actor because you never really saw him clearly or heard his voice that clearly. But it seemed, through the fog, to be perfect. So you're always just aware of the imperfections. I kind of find it agony to have to watch the films.

**TS:** So the failure is not your imagination, it's the craft of translating that imagination?

**PS:** Both, sometimes you really have failed. There's moments where you think 'that doesn't work,' and you don't know that often until the

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edit. It's a very strange process, because you get it right on paper but getting it right on paper doesn't mean it's going to be right on screen. And you often don't know that until the edit. You often don't know that until it's too late. You usually don't know that until it's too late, otherwise you'd have corrected it. So sometimes it's only with an audience, and feeling an audience watch it or feeling several audiences watch it that you realise what worked and what didn't work.

**TS:** And have you examples of being in the edit where you'd been able to fix that situation or fix something that seemed perfect in your head?

**PS:** Well you're not always allowed in the edit. Not that you're barred from the edit, but I've worked on films where I wasn't invited into the edit until fairly late on in the process. So by then you give a few little polite notes, but you sense that you're not really being asked to get involved in that level, you know. But then on other films I have been in on the edit. So *Tinker, Tailor* I was involved in the edit a lot more. I think a writer can be useful in the edit, because it's just storytelling. Inevitably things have gone wrong or things aren't quite working the way we thought they would work, or the rhythm is slightly out or the balance is slightly out.

Some scene is much more powerful than you thought it would be and it's throwing another scene off. So you end up having to start moving things around, and once you do that then you have to start re-telling the story. It's useful then, I think, to have the writer there because they're one of the few people that has that whole story in their head. Or they should have that whole story in their head. So I think the edit's a good place for a writer to be, a comfortable place for him to be.

**TS:** And the edit of course is also where the soundtrack tends to get put on, and that was a beautiful choice of music from the Bela Tarr there. How much do you find the soundtrack of the films you've been involved in being

important, and appropriate? How involved have you got?

**PS:** I remember the first scripts [I wrote], for quite a long time actually, I used to write music into the scripts. Particular tracks at the start of a scene or whatever. But again, because I was seeing the film in my head and hearing the music in my head. And sometimes the director would use them and sometimes they wouldn't, which I was absolutely fine with. I feel less inclined to do that now. I think it's definitely a case that you shouldn't go too far ahead of yourself. I'm not sure the script is the right place to be trying to make decisions about music.

Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. I think probably directors feel that as well, they might not want to be making musical choices until they've got..... having said that Tomas had very clear ideas about several tracks right from the beginning. *La Mer*, which was the closing music for the montage, was in the first draft I think. He had already found that piece of music and wanted to use it. There were a couple of other tracks that he knew he wanted to use from the beginning, and they did make it all the way through.

But often you think something's going to work beautifully, but until you see it with the assembled footage you don't know whether it's going to work or not. But I find music really important. When I write I do it with headphones on, listening to music, always. That originally happened because when I first started writing *Bridget* and I were living in a little bedsit and she would be writing there and I would be writing here. It was just to block out the noise of her typing almost, and people coming in and out the room. So it was just a screen, and often it becomes white noise after a while.

It still does, but now sometimes when I'm writing in the house by myself I still have headphones on. And it's just a way of saying 'right, I'm moving into that world now'. And also I often have a single track which I listen to almost again and

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again and again while I'm writing a particular project, and each project will have its own track that I associate with it, as a kind of emotional lodestone.

When I'm not sure about something I can listen to the music and it helps guide me back. And strangely Tomas does exactly the same thing, I discovered, as we were talking one day. I used to tell people what the tracks were, and he won't do that. He says you have to keep it private, so now I've stopped telling people.

**TS:** So you won't tell us what any of them were?

**PS:** I will tell you that I've got one for *Wolf Hall*, which is wildly inappropriate for *Wolf Hall*, it's never going to be the theme music for *Wolf Hall* that's for sure. But for some reason... it's a Latin American piece so it's about as far away as you can get from Tudor England as you'd think you could get, but there's something in it that emotionally for me feels absolutely right, and it feels like Cromwell's theme tune in some way. You never know it might end up being the theme tune, but it's unlikely. So I keep listening to that again and again just to sort of get back onto the path.

**TS:** And what were the profound combinations for *Wolf Hall* then?

**PS:** Profound combinations?

**TS:** If that's what a film should have in it. If we're going back to your Bressonian quotes, what are they in *Wolf Hall* that attracted you to taking it on as a project?

**PS:** I don't think I ever analyse a project in those terms, it's always an instinctive response. The truth is, the reason that doing a talk like this is difficult is because if you're going to be honest you don't know how you do what you do, because it's become instinctive. It already was partially instinctive, and it becomes even more instinctive, like swimming or riding a bike. You're not thinking about 'breathe out for two strokes,

come up for one,' that's how bad I am as a swimmer, you can see that. You're never thinking that way, you're just swimming, and it's the same now with writing, you're just writing and you react very instinctively.

And usually I just feel, if I'm reading a novel for example that someone's asked me to look at to see about filming, if the film starts running in my head then I know it will work. And if it's a 'film' I'm enjoying then I know I want to do it. It's just at that level, as soon as I started reading *Wolf Hall* it felt very cinematic, the film started running in my head. Or the tv series started running in my head. I think it just happens at that gut level. There were obviously some things that make that easier, if you have extended scenes, a single scene, a dramatic scene if the dialogue is good those sort of things can lend themselves.

But they're not central. Sometimes the inspiration can be quite left field, it can be something that doesn't obviously look like it's going to lend itself to film, but something in it clicks with you and the film starts running in your head and you see the way you can do it as a film.

**TS:** And you've written for some of our finest actors....

**PS:** In *Tinker, Tailor* all of our finest actors.

**TS:** Also for Helen Mirren and many others. Do you have actors in mind when you write?

**PS:** No, never. Never. It's interesting, I was going to say that often you don't know who the actor is because that happens at a later stage with casting, but occasionally I have worked on projects where I did know certainly what some of the parts would be. So in *The Men Who Stare At Goats* we knew [George] Clooney was going to play the part that he played, and I knew that from the beginning. But, interestingly, as I was writing it it wasn't Clooney I was seeing.

I don't know who it was, I can almost see their face, but it wasn't a famous actor. And because

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I knew it was Clooney, it probably had bits of him in it. But it wasn't actually Clooney's face I was seeing. I think that would kind of kill it for me, because you have to make the character your own. The funny thing about writing a film is, I think, you kind of need to forget you're writing a film. When it's really working you're forgetting you're writing a film.

There's that other quote by Bresson, when he's talking about shooting, saying you have to make yourself ignorant and curious and yet be planning ahead. There's this quite paradoxical, dualistic approach that happens I think, where one part of you is working quite technically in terms of thinking what's going to work, what's not going to work, the rhythm, thinking about things like casting, thinking about how expensive it's going to be.

On one level that is going on in your head, but another part of you is just lost in the world, and somehow you manage to do both things at the same time. Somehow those two voices kind of work together. But the creative one is the one where you're just lost in the world, and you're not really aware that you're writing a film. This sounds very, like you're in a trance or something, obviously it's not. I know I'm busy writing a film script, but on some level what feels like it's happening in your imagination, it's just that some things are unfolding in front of you, and you're just watching things happen.

**TS:** And how seriously do you take on board that consideration, of how costly the scene's going to be. And have you become better with experience?

**PS:** I can't imagine it's ever a very healthy thing for the writer to be trying to pre-factor that in. It just would make you start to self censor long before that's necessary. When you hand that first draft in the producer will tell you quite quickly 'we can't afford to do that'. Or the truth is normally there is a way of making these things happen even if they seem incredibly expensive,

there can be a way of shooting them that isn't expensive.

**TS:** Cardboard cut-outs on chess pieces...

**PS:** Cardboard cut-outs on chess pieces, yes. So no, I would never think 'I'd better not put that massive army scene in this two million pound budget film'. You would probably just go with it and then, at a later date, work out how we actually make this work. But let the creative stuff happen first, and then you can do the practical stuff after this, really.

**TS:** And whilst I appreciate that you do it all instinctively, to what extent do you see each different draft as being a different stage in the process? Do you see the first draft as necessarily representing just a condensing of the story, the second a bit more sculpting?

**PS:** No, it's very interesting because I know some writers who just want to get the first draft done, they just want to get from the beginning to the end. And they know that it's very rough, but they just feel they have to do it that way and then begins the process of re-drafting and polishing and gradually improving it and improving it. I can't work that way. The first draft always feels like it has to be the shooting script.

It never is, obviously you do then continue to redraft. But I hate that feeling of moving on feeling that the bridge isn't complete behind you. You want to feel like it's solid, all the way behind me it's solid. And obviously it isn't, but I need to feel as if it is. I can't just be sketching, I can't sketch it, I have to be painting it in as I'm going. Even if that then means you have to re-do it, and paint over the top of it and paint over the top of it.

**TS:** And obviously Bridget must have been your first reader...

**PS:** Yes.

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**TS:** How do you deal with that now? Who is your reader? Or are you your own reader?

**PS:** There's a lot of questions, because my wife Bridget who I sometimes wrote with and who was a writer as well, died just before *Tinker, Tailor* was made, and I think there's a lot of questions about what it's like to write without her that I still don't quite know the answer to. She died two years ago and I didn't write anything in the first year at all. And even the last year, the second year, I've only very gradually sort of groped my way back towards writing.

I did wonder if I was going to be able to do it again, because writing obviously does come from an emotional aspect of yourself, and my emotions were still in turmoil that I felt maybe I wasn't going to be able to do it. But now it's reached the point where I think it's a comfort. And *Wolf Hall* was really the first new thing that I was offered that made me want to write again. So I'm still trying to work out what it's like to write without her, because I used to always go to Bridget to read something or to get advice.

She was much more of a writer than I am, she was much more inventive. She could endlessly come up with ideas and plots, scene ideas. If you'd painted yourself into a corner she could always think of a way out, and I don't have that really.

**TS:** So what did you bring to the partnership?

**PS:** I made the coffee. It was my computer, as I had to point out to her several times. I think I was probably better at structure, I had a more editorial mind. She was much more freewheeling, so it felt like a good combination. I would keep her in check and she would stop me from becoming obvious. And I think to a certain extent probably what I've done is internalise her voice, so I do still ask her to have a look at it and I do sort of try and listen to see would Bridget have thought that was right or not. So I guess that's still happening on some level.

**TS:** And that structural thing, where does that come from do you think? Does the music background have anything to do with that? I loved the way you talked about the genre being the rhythm section of a film, it's a lovely way of expressing it really.

**PS:** I think I've got better at it. I think structure is one of those things that you can..... I think a lot of people if they start writing drama it's usually because they have an ear for dialogue. I think. Maybe not everyone, but for a lot of people I think they have an ear for dialogue and that's what leads them to think they can write scripts.

So some people have a gift for that. I'm not sure how many people have a natural, instinctive grasp of structure. I think that is something that you learn, but I think you probably learn it instinctively and you learn it by watching films and reading scripts. You just start to absorb the ways the stories can be told. A little bit like listening to music, you start to internalise those rhythms.

**TS:** Peter, I could monopolise you but this isn't an imaginary audience, so perhaps we should see if anyone out there has got questions that they'd like to ask.

**Question:** Hi, I recently rewatched *The Debt*, and I was really interested now knowing your strong point is structure how, in the early drafts, the timeline was set and then how much you needed to be flexible about changing it and how it kind of grew organically? And whether you were involved with the editing side as well?

**PS:** I think I did go into the edit a little bit. I can't remember. I think John Madden is here, so he could tell you, I can't remember if he let me in or not. I think he probably did. Was in the edit at all John?

**John Madden:** I did let you in.

**PS:** God bless you, John. We always knew that it was going to be a front story/back story structure

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to it, you know. That there was going to be the story that was happening in the 60s and then the story of them as older characters. So we started with that, which was also in the original film. I think we probably extended what happened when they got back from the mission the first time. I think that was probably stuff that we added – was that right John?

**John Madden:** Yeah, in the original film which you're right in saying I only saw once and you only saw once, I think the original film cross-cut constantly between the pursuit in the present tense and the events that necessitate that pursuit. We decided to keep that sealed as one, very intense sequence. So that was completely different. I can say this because Peter can't, if you spotted anything you can spot that he will not blow his own trumpet in any way – and quite right too – but you know, that was a brilliant piece of re-imagining by him all the way through, really. We did collaborate very closely on it, but he's being immodest in not letting you know how much he contributes to a film that his name is on. And that's a perfect example of it, that piece. I've never done a film where, because we worked on it very intensely in the writing process and he came to the location and we devised sequences on location which I'd never done before.....

**PS:** No, that's true, I hadn't done that before and that was very useful, wasn't it. That should happen more often as well.

**John Madden:** So the whole escape sequence was something we literally wrote on site and figured out once we'd found a location that would offer certain ideas. We did not really change the order in almost any material sense in the editing room. That's never actually happened before. That's partly the nature of the genre, I think, but it's also because the job was very well done before we started.

**PS:** I paid John to say all that.

**TS:** No, but I think it's very interesting, actually, that we assume that the writer's job's been done, we rarely take them on location as you say John.

**PS:** It was such a good idea to do. There was a chase sequence, and I think we'd probably done a draft where it was just sort of imagined what the sequence would be like when they first abduct the Nazi. But then once John had narrowed that down to the location he asked me to go with him, and we went and we actually were there thinking 'okay, that's the railway line there, here's the place that we're going to pretend is the depot, how are we going to do this? And we talked it through then and there, didn't we? And wrote it from that.

**John Madden:** Yeah we did. It just started with the idea that when the train went through nobody could see what was happening on the other side of the train. That's where it started and we extrapolated it from that.

**PS:** Yup, it should happen much more often, I think.

**TS:** Sort of build it into the budgets.

**PS:** We're not that expensive, you know. You can give us cheap hotel rooms, we don't cost that much. It's a good idea to have us along.

**Question:** Hello, thanks for the great talk. I've just got a question about the development process really, you said you often got sent some material to adapt and it's only two of your later films where you've worked from the beginning with the director. But before that presumably the producer has sort of bought the rights to that book, and has some kind of vision of what kind of film that might be. I wonder how you negotiate that, once you've agreed to, and the subsequent note giving process with them because there's more than one vision already.

**PS:** There is, there is. That's always something you're going to have to negotiate with the individuals involved. I don't think I've ever had a



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very difficult development process, I don't think. The bigger the studio, the dumber the notes often, just because it's a machine. That's probably unfair actually. No it's not, it's true. Working with smaller companies tends to feel a lot more straightforward, you feel as if you're being trusted more I suppose.

And usually you're only dealing with one person rather than a massive committee of people, or one or two people, so you can just go into a room and talk. And as long as you're not just stamping your feet egotistically, if there's a reason why you want to do certain things a certain way you can discuss that, and sometimes they'll have a good idea. And I like that, I like that sense of working with a small team that are all pitching in. I guess that's the band thing for me again, so I like the development process, I don't consider it kind of fools interfering with my genius. They're usually very good at what they're doing.

And producers usually do have good ideas as well. But I think there's a limit to how far that can go before the director needs to be involved. And it still, to me, makes far more sense to have a director involved from the beginning if possible. Often it's just because the director hasn't become attached, or they want the script to attract the director. But if you can get a director to attach themselves to the project before the script's written then I think that makes a lot more sense.

**TS:** I remember Charlie Kaufman saying that what he was looking for from the note process was whether or not it made sense. In his particular style of writing that's obviously a key factor. For you is there anything you're really looking for from the notes?

**PS:** Just praise, just endless praise [laughs]. I think I probably will already have ideas of what I think isn't working, so you're sometimes looking to see if that's confirmed or if someone says 'no, I think you're wrong, that's absolutely right.'. You just go in and listen to what someone has to say, you

get their take on what you've done and what they think's working and what they think isn't working. As I say usually they're pretty good, and they'll have good reasons for their notes.

**Question:** Hi, I'm a big fan of *Wolf Hall* and *Bring Up The Bodies*, so I was just going to ask you what attracted you to those projects, and how that writing process has been and what characters really drew you. And what's been great to write in terms of those books.

**PS:** It was [Thomas] Cromwell, Cromwell drew me to it. I just loved the character. I found him incredibly sympathetic and funny and warm and yet complicated and dangerous and driven, and wondered if he himself always knew what the motives were for what he was doing, which I found very intriguing and exciting as a character.

I thought she [Hilary Mantel] was incredibly clever in taking that historical biography, the line of events that he did and always finding a way of presenting it in such a way that we stay on his side. Even when he does some things that are fairly dark. And I loved the character of the working class boy made good, I loved the blacksmith's son who rises to that position of power. And I liked the revenge element to it. I just found him incredibly compelling and I just wanted to spend time with him really. It was all about him. And it's going very well thank-you, touch wood.

**Question:** Hi Peter, I wanted to ask you a little bit more about the way you approach a project. So if you could possibly talk about the process from just being given source material all the way through to handing in your first draft. Something as specific as how much time you spend a day, maybe, writing. Or how you structure your time and maybe even which tool you use to write – that might be quite interesting.

**PS:** Okay, my kind of working timetable is just one of failure, always. I always want to start at eight in the morning and then work through until three or four, I think that's probably about as long as you

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could write, usefully. Before you start running on empty a little bit. It almost never happens, I always end up starting too late and having to do a little bit of work in the evening, or something interrupts. I never do as much work as I want to in the day. I'm always late, I always miss deadlines. I'm usually panicking at the last minute, so none of it ever goes the lovely smooth, machine like way I would like it to.

And what tool do I use? I use a computer. I use Final Draft, as the software. Obviously in terms of what the process is, it differs massively depending on what I'm working on. But, for example, for an adaptation of a novel which I guess is what's often the case, I usually will go through and just start underlining passages that feel like they're going to make into film. Just in a very instinctive way.

Like my copy of *Wolf Hall* is very, very thumbed and almost every page has got asterisks and lines and things round it. To the point where, frankly, it's useless because of the idea was to mark out those passages that are going to make it in – well, the whole book's covered in them. So then I have to go through again, and eventually just start to whittle it down to the things that really are going to make it in.

I don't usually like doing treatment, which is a way of planning out the script in some detail before you start writing the script. I find that quite a deadening process usually. Occasionally you're asked to do it, especially by a studio or something, if they can't quite see how you're going to structure it. I think for *Wolf Hall* I just did a big e-mail to the producer, saying this was going to be the first episode.

So you do that, for *Wolf Hall* for example you look for the end points, you look where the first episode is going to end and how's it going to start. And what bits are going to be included. So I do that, I sort of flesh that out a little bit. And occasionally I will do, if it's a very, very complicated structure – we did this for *Tinker, Tailor* and I did it for one episode of *Wolf Hall*, the

third episode which was very dense. I would get a notice board and lots of little cards, and write out all the scenes that I think are going to be in the film or the episode. And then start rearranging them, and seeing what I think is the best order. And then when you write it you end up having to change it a little more anyway. But you can get a rough idea of it by doing that.

And then first draft is supposed to normally take 12 weeks, but I'm always late, it always takes longer than that. Normally because I piss around for the first month, and then start to panic and then spend the last month frantically trying to do it all. But it's normally about 12 weeks. Occasionally I've handed in things in less time than that. And as I say, I never feel comfortable with the idea of the first draft being a very sketched version of the film. It always has to feel as if it's the film, even though it never will be, you then will have to go on and re-draft it.

**Question:** I just wanted to ask you, regarding adaptation, if you think there's any negative implications from straying away from a novel? Especially a classic, or a really well loved novel.

**PS:** Yes, *Tinker, Tailor* felt a little scary, you were very aware of it. Especially in Britain, Le Carré fans are quite fiercely loyal and weren't at all happy with the idea of *Tinker, Tailor* being a two hour film and were really sharpening their knives for it to fail and kind of wanting it to fail. So you're aware that fans can be quite hostile to the idea of film, because there is that notion, often justified, that the film's going to a kind of crass Hollywoodisation of a book that they really love. And it's the same with *Wolf Hall*, I'm sure fans of *Wolf Hall* will be dubious perhaps, or nervous about the idea of it being a tv adaptation. But in terms of negative aspects do you just mean the other things about novels that make it difficult to adapt?

**Questioner:** Yeah, like would you ever find that maybe you were being censored by the limitations of cinema, different from novels?

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**PS:** Yes, absolutely. Or rather than you just have to re-imagine it in a completely different way. You certainly would fail if you were trying to do exactly what the novel tries to do. So if you're trying to express a very interior world, it's so difficult to do that in film. But often you can do it in a completely different way in film through image. Through that poetry that cinema makes available, which is so much more vivid than a novel, so much more visceral than a novel, because it's composed of reality.

I should probably say that I remember feeling quite relieved when Frank Cottrell Boyce said that about adaptations being more original than original films. I think it is true, of a certain kind of original movie. But I also was aware that I felt quite relieved, and I suspect there is in me perhaps a little shame about adaptation. The shame of a writer who's aware that their work is based on another writer's work. And all the things I said about it I think are true, the process isn't that different, but I'm still always slightly aware that when I write an original screenplay it feels probably more like what I'm supposed to be doing.

**TS:** I've always been struck by people who started in the theatre, who seem to constantly say to me 'well I keep my original ideas for the stage'. You see yourself really as a screenwriter rather than a playwright, whether you feel the same way? Or whether you understand where that comes from.

**PS:** I do understand where it comes from, because I think people who say that are probably talking about control and the fact that they can keep control of their own image much more easily in the theatre, which is much more of a writer's realm than cinema is. I think it's just probably when I do have ideas for original stories they tend to be cinematic, and I suspect if anything the drive from me to achieve the same thing, the complete control, would be moving towards writer-directing.

**TS:** You've directed a short, we haven't touched upon that because this is a screenwriting series, but I do know that that is something you're interested in pursuing further isn't it?

**PS:** Yes, I was supposed to do it two years ago and then Bridget died so that sort of stopped it. But I think maybe next year I'll start looking for something.

**TS:** To write and direct?

**PS:** Yes, I think I'll probably look for something to adapt, just to make it a little bit easier. I'll probably adapt something to direct, I'm sort of doing that now, starting to look for something.

**Question:** I've two quick questions if that's okay. The first one is, is there any source material at the moment that you really want to write a script for, and you'd really loved to see turned into a film? And the second one, if you've really enjoyed a film do you ever feel the desire, or have done so, to try to look at the script that the screenwriter has done for the film?

**PS:** To answer the first question, yes there are, several things. Usually books, nearly all books I think, that I would very much like to adapt and work on, but I'm not going to tell you what they are. In case it jinxes it. And the answer to the second one, no, they're just very different ways of experiencing a film. I'm always happy just to sit and enjoy the film as an ordinary member of the audience. That's still my main relationship with films when I go and see one.

Unless I'm not enjoying it, probably. I wouldn't start analysing it and breaking down the story structure. I don't do it so much now, but certainly when I started out I used to read a lot of screenplays. You can go online and there's lots of websites, Simply Scripts and Jo Blo's Scripts and they've got lots and lots of scripts on there. And I think that's really useful for writers, especially when you're starting out, because I think that's just a way of very tangibly looking at exactly what the script is doing rather than trying to

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watch the whole film and extract the script out of that. You can just see the actual skeleton of the thing there. I always found that very useful, but I don't do it so much now I suppose.

**TS:** Is there one that you would recommend to any aspiring writers here that's a great one to start on if you're going to read someone else's work?

**PS:** There's so many, I guess. Robert Towne, *The Last Detail* and *Chinatown*, there's a book that has those two screenplays in and I bet loads and loads of screenwriters have that. But different writers offer you different things. I always remember I used to read the Coen Brothers' scripts, and they're really beautifully written scripts. Some other scripts, if you read a Paul Thomas Anderson script, especially because he's going to direct it himself, they sometimes feel very shorthanded.

And there's often lots of camera shots in there, so you feel much more like you're reading a shooting script, but he doesn't bother kind of trying to convey things with it, because he already knows exactly what he's going to say. He doesn't need to write that for himself. The Coen Brothers, for whatever reason, because obviously they're directing as well, I don't know why but they do tend to write them as beautifully polished pieces of drama. Their descriptions of action are always really nicely done.

And their little character notes are really beautifully done, so I always found them quite useful to read just in terms of realising how much you can convey to a reader in a script. In terms of exactly the way the thing should look and exactly the way the characters should feel.

**Question:** You seem to be a very funny person, why haven't you done any comedy? And what makes you laugh?

**PS:** Sadly, I have done some comedy. I did start out writing comedy, when I wrote plays they were black comedies, and I think that's what

makes me laugh, I like quite black humour. So I was talking about the Greek director before, Giorgos Lanthimos, I thought his film *Dogtooth* was very funny. But I'm not sure many other people did. He thought it was funny as well, so we had the same sick, black sense of humour.

I've just done a comedy, a script with Film4 that I wrote with Jon Ronson, it's called *Frank* which is about someone in a band who wears a big, false plastic head. Which is a comedy. But I love comedy, it's really, really hard. I know everyone says that, it's the kind of thing actors always say, comedy is hard but it is. It's much harder to get right, I think.

**TS:** Peter, I think you could have given Dave Allen a run for his money, so thank-you very much for tonight.

**PS:** Thank you.

APPLAUSE