

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

Hossein Amini

25 September 2013 at BAFTA, 195 Piccadilly

Tanya Seghatchian: Thank you all for coming tonight. Hoss, it's a real privilege to have you on this stage. What we've agreed to do as Hoss's lecture is look at the art of screenwriting and adapting novels by taking a very close look at three of the films that he's penned, and analysing the craft through an analysis of some meaty clips and good conversation. At the end of the talk there will be an opportunity for you to ask questions to Hoss yourself. So Hoss, thank you very much.

Hossein Amini: Thank you, and thank you everyone for coming as well.

TS: I hope that we can explore some of the secrets of the craft through the conversation that we have today, and I thought what we'd do is start actually with the opening of *Drive*, which is a long sequence but I think the audience is probably familiar with the film, and look at how you structured that afterwards. But is there anything you'd like to say before we show it?

HA: No, no, it would be great to start with that.

Extended clip from Drive – the opening sequence

TS: A brilliant heist, it must be easy to look at that and say 'bravura direction, good storyboard work, where's the writing?'

HA: It is a fantastic piece of directing I think, but the reason I wanted to talk about this clip is because people's perceptions of a lot of screenwriting is that it's all about the dialogue. That's a seven-page block of scene description. All those story beats were there, and the genesis of it was that I went to meet the Head of Security at Universal because they were commissioning it.

The first thing he said to me was 'there's no way you can have a police chase at the beginning because they'll have helicopters, and the moment they have eyes on the car there's no point' - which is why I think so few police chases really happen these days. And all the ones I see on TV [have] that aerial footage.

But then that became a challenge. I went away and I thought 'well what if it's a roof?' and he said 'yeah but they'll just surround the

building'. Then I thought 'what if there's a crowd?' From that it started with the basketball game, at the Staples Center, but what was really fun about it was mixing two pieces of sound writing really, which is the commentary of the basketball game but also the police radio, going on at the same time. So all of these things were scripted, and then obviously enhanced by Nicolas [Winding] Refn who directed it.

But the point is that there is so much visual writing I think for any screenwriter, and I think that's sometimes something that we're not given credit for. I love writing in pictures, and lots of pages without dialogue. That's really why I wanted to start with something like that because it's also another example of what we do.

TS: It's great when you do read the text; some of the description is so cinematic in itself. I think that police car holding back in the shots you describe as a shark. Once one's read the text and seen how it's been executed, it's very exciting to see the extent to which you're dictating everything from day one.

HA: It becomes a massive collaboration with all the people you work with. I was very fortunate with the director, but also I think this scene is beautifully edited, I think the music is fantastic. So they all add layers. And it really started with the security guy, that's the thing. I can't even say it started with me, it started with the person who went 'that's impossible'.

TS: You rose to the challenge.

HA: Yeah, I think the whole thing is incredibly collaborative and that's part of the fun. The research, for me, is one of the most important bits, and this was something that really came out of research. And then the other thing I remember doing... I don't actually drive [laughter from the audience]...

TS: Did they know that when they hired you?

HA: They didn't, I didn't tell them I didn't drive. I didn't tell them I'd failed my driving test seven times. I did tell Nicolas Refn, who's the director, and in every interview he gave afterwards he said that he'd failed his eight times, so I'm sure there's a little bit of competition going on.

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So what I did is I bought myself a map of LA, and almost planned the route as well, so all of those little stages were all kind of scripted. Obviously they didn't necessarily use the same exact roads and stuff, but it helped me visualise a lot of the driving scenes. To sit there and think 'he's going from this street to that street, and then he turns a corner there', like that underpass where he goes and hides was somewhere... the studio got someone to drive me around, and that was one of the places that we saw and had a look at. I think the research was also a very important part of that particular sequence, and it's something I love doing.

TS: And the silent hero, the Ryan Gosling Driver character, is that the kind of hero you like to write?

HA: No, there was a fabulous book, it didn't really have the same storyline but it had this fantastic central character and when I read the book it immediately reminded me of *Le Samourai* which is the [Jean-Pierre] Melville film, which is one of the my favourite films. And then also *Shane*, the idea of the Man With No Name who comes in to the small village and saves everyone and then leaves, and no-one knows who he is.

So it's very much using films I loved as well. That's why I enjoyed this so much, it was cannibalising other movies but also it was a beautiful book and it was a chance to do a film noir, which is a genre I've always really loved.

TS: I noticed the book doesn't begin with this heist and drive sequence, it begins with something else altogether. So did you have particular intentions of what you wanted to get across in that opening, and why did you decide to start with something like that?

HA: I started with this because I knew that there's quite a lot of set up before you get to the action in the movie. Universal, who I had originally written it for, with a studio you sort of can't hang around. They want to see the action beats. So in order to buy myself 30 pages I could just spend on character, establishing Driver and the love story, I knew I

had to have seven pages of action at the beginning.

So the sequence was partly to buy myself that sort of character-building time, but also it was there to show someone who was really, really good at what they did. So when you saw him in the scenes when he was being friendly with the kid, or being a slightly clumsy romantic, that's contrasted with seeing him do something very, very brilliantly at the beginning. So there were lots of reasons, but I think generally the most important one was doing what's essentially an action piece and then a character piece second. With 30 pages of quite slow character build up to come I think you need a scene like this.

TS: When you get a commission like this, you were the first person on, there was no director attached, no actor, what was the commission? Take the book and do what you want with it? Or was there a direction and a steer that you were given?

HA: No, the commission was 'stunt driver by day, getaway driver by night' which is a great tagline. I'm sure that was already what was going to be on the poster, but it was an incredibly dark book which is very unusual for a studio to commission, which is why I jumped at the chance because it was getting paid a studio rate to do something fantastic like that.

But they didn't like the first or the second draft, and it was eventually put in turnaround and became a much, much smaller independent movie. I found it very hard to follow that conceptual thing of stunt driver by day, getaway driver by night, so it sort of turned into its own beast.

TS: And looking back on the film I imagine you're very proud of this version of it. When you were in the process of writing those earlier drafts did you feel that you were onto something that you wanted to explore further in the studio context, or is this actually the more natural form for the material?

HA: I was very lucky, I was supported by two producers who were both quite keen on the darkness that the book had to offer. And I can sort of understand the studio... the character never said very much, so they wanted more

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backstory. It was all the things, the book and the screenplay had all of the things the studios highlight as being problematic: not enough backstory; the romance doesn't end particularly well; the violence, all of those things. So it was a bad combination of subject matter and studio, I think it should always have been done as an independent, which is how it ended up being [done] anyway.

TS: And to what extent did the process of bringing on a director, and the casting of Ryan Gosling, affect the evolving nature of the screenplay and what you were writing?

HA: Well what Nicolas Refn did, which was for me a terrific way to work, was we started off with a 120 odd page script, and then he said 'I haven't got enough money to shoot this, I don't have enough days to get it done, so let's just cut it down'. And that's all we did, we didn't really add very much, it was really just this thing of taking the script and I think it [was] something like 89 or 90 pages by the end of it.

It was almost like working with an editor in a cutting room, where we're just going through [it]. The other thing he did, which I absolutely loved, was he made me sit down with each of the actors from the smallest parts to Ryan, and spend a whole day just going through what they thought about their character, the changes. He was very comfortable leaving me alone with the actors, and that was a process that I really enjoyed.

It's something I'd love to be able to keep doing, working with actors once the script has got to a certain stage, because I think they have certain insights, ideas, and ultimately they're the people who have to say those lines. So I've become much less precious about nailing the dialogue in draft one or two, because I know at some stage they're going to come on and they're going to want changes, and it's got to fit their patterns of delivery. It's great to be part of that process. That was what he was fantastic about as a director, throwing me into the deep end with the actors.

TS: Well we're going to come back to *Drive*, but I'd like to go right back to one of the first things you wrote – at least your first feature film – which is *Jude*. If we look at the clip that we've picked from *Jude* you'll notice two of our finest

actors quite early on in their careers, Kate Winslet and Chris Eccleston. Perhaps you could set it up for us, and also tell me the different challenge of adapting something like Thomas Hardy brought to you.

HA: It's basically Jude and Sue, who've had a terrible tragedy happen in their life. She feels incredibly guilty about what's happened, and in this scene he tries to persuade her to come back to him.

Clip from Jude

TS: So how much was there, and what sort of process did you have to go through to reduce it to what we see in that scene?

HA: With *Jude* generally all of those scenes pretty much exist. I think that's about five or six pages and it's all dialogue in the book, so most of the dialogue there is from the book but it's obviously completely filleted down which was the process particularly in adapting *Jude* that I had to do. It was the first book I adapted, and I sort of had this system of going through it on cards, writing down every single scene. Then going through the cards, getting rid of some, inventing new scenes very, very rarely where I just needed to make links.

And it was the same with the dialogue, I'd go through with a pen and I'd underline the lines that I particularly liked. It's probably the only adaptation I've done where I've used the book. The other books that I've done have tended not to have scenes or been very different from how the screenplay ended up, but with *Jude*, because it's such a linear story with these very well crafted scenes and stuff, it was a question of choosing and unfortunately having to lose stuff.

And this was a scene, like I said about five pages worth of dialogue, so it was [a question of] how do you find the key lines, the key moments. I generally find that a single line [of] dialogue is what I prefer. It's that clip thing of going back and forth, I don't really like the long speeches. So what I tended to look for in that were those moments, and those tiny lines that would tell you everything.

It was definitely more craft than anything else, because I think Hardy had done so much of

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the work narratively that it was really about trying to shape it. Other adaptations have been different, but this was one where I'd sit and cross out lines, and underline lines and put stars next to things that really jumped out.

TS: It's interesting, you wrote this nearly 20 years ago. If you were to take on something like *Jude* now would you approach it differently, or would that be the same process?

HA: I don't know that I'd try to adapt *Jude*... at the time it was literally the only thing I'd been offered that was a feature film, so I would have done anything. I really would have done. I remember my agent, Nick Marston, who's still my agent, he told me this had come up and Michael [Winterbottom] wanted to know if I'd read it. I lied and said I had, I absolutely hadn't read it. I think it's a tough one, and one of the things I found...

It's a bit of a spoiler but there's a horrible scene where two children die, and I remember when we went to Cannes to try to get the script funded, to get turned into a film, Fox Searchlight were really interested but they said 'we'll make it as long as there are no children dying'.

I remember being so outraged, 'Philistines, how could they? It's one of the most famous scenes in English literature, etc'. I remember, stupidly, sitting in a theatre when it was in a proper cinema with a proper audience, and just watching people get up and leave the moment that scene happened.

And because it was [my] first film I paid it a lot more attention, I remember standing outside a cinema. It was our opening night, and everyone would come up to buy their tickets and I'd overhear people saying '*Jude* got quite good reviews... oh no, it's supposed to be really depressing, let's go and see *The Nutty Professor*'. I can kind of understand it, because it was on a Friday night, and one of the problems I've had is all of my falling in love with film experiences happened on Monday afternoons.

I've tended to write stuff which four or five people sit in a cinema on a Monday or a Tuesday afternoon, and that Friday night thing... I sort of wrestle with that thing of is *Jude*

really such a great thing to try to turn into a movie? Especially now, I think people go to the cinema largely for entertainment, and I think it's certainly not entertaining. There are other ways we have that intellectual stimulation.

I'm very proud of it, but I do question its commercial validity in an industry where you have to make money in order to justify doing the next thing. It's a lot of money to make a film.

TS: It's interesting because David Goyer in his lecture was talking about how you still, as a writer, have to be true to yourself, so you grew up on Monday afternoon movies, you referenced Melville and the cinema of process. You're attracted to the dark and sometimes depressing. How much of yourself do you put into your work?

HA: I put all my taste in it, and I think that's why probably the next thing I do is going to be just as dark and depressing as that. Actually, the only ones I've been able to do that aren't like that and have some sort of commercial [appeal] are when I've been doing rewrites on studio movies. I don't know that I could originate something that's going to be the Friday night film, rather than the Monday afternoon film. Certainly initiate it, [though] I'd love to.

TS: After *Jude*, and the success of *Jude*, you got the label for being the period man and the guy who could adapt our classics in an interesting and original way. Perhaps we could go on to talk about what you put in of yourself to *The Wings of the Dove*. And maybe you could set up the first clip for us.

HA: The story is really about these two lovers who conspire to... they befriend this sick, dying girl and the woman who is played by Helena Bonham Carter, who's not in this scene but a later scene, convinces her boyfriend – played by Linus Roache – to seduce Milly the dying girl so that she will leave him, and therefore them, her money at the end. What happens is he starts to really fall in love with her, and in this scene she's found out their plot, and he goes to try to tell her that he never meant to hurt her. It's his apology.

Clip from The Wings of the Dove

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TS: I believed him when he said he'd stood in one spot and waited for hours.

HA: That was actually something that had happened to me. I'd been in Venice, I went quite a few times as a student, I think I had a crush on someone and I remember doing exactly that same thing but it was, sort of, waiting because it's one of those cities where people can go round, and a lot of that film was... because in the Henry James book there aren't any scenes in it. Everything's reported off screen.

For example that scene, there's no scene written, you just hear from somebody else that Merton went and confessed to Milly as far as I remember. It made it really exciting to adapt, because everyone thought the later Henry James novels were unadaptable, which took some of the pressure off. And because they weren't really scenes I felt free to invent them. With something like that, with that scene... the box of biscuits thing is the thing I remember.

The scene needed a turn, because it's really like suspense. They're delaying getting to the point of the scene, which I liked. Subtext is allowed to bubble underneath. They both know what's going on but they refuse to talk about it. But at some stage you get to the point where they need to get into the meat of the scene. For me those are quite often hard turns to find in a scene.

The box of biscuits felt like a sort of way for her to mention that she's dying – Ophelia drowning and whatever – and then allow him to talk about the situation. It's another example of scenes that I really love where, if the context is right, they could talk about anything and it can still be powerful, because subtext is working underneath.

So, for example, if you know the wife is going to leave their husband because you've heard them talking to their lover in the scene before, she can go and talk to her husband in the next scene and they can talk about the weather or anything and it can be really powerful because you know something that...

And because the situation between them was so heartbreaking in a way, I felt you could

delay getting to the point. So that initial chatter was quite fun to write, because I felt they could talk about absolutely anything and it could be naturalistic and the subtext would be working underneath and keeping it interesting.

TS: And if you say that the book doesn't have really have many scenes, and therefore it's a freeform adaptation, how do you know that you should say yes? And how do you begin?

HA: Well the thing is, both with *Drive* and *The Wings of the Dove*, even though very few of the scenes in the screenplay exist in the book, what both writers – James Sallis and Henry James – do is create these extraordinary characters that are so brilliantly described that actually it becomes very easy to write dialogue for them, even if that dialogue doesn't exist in the books, because they're so well defined and you know so much about them that it sort of flows.

It's them writing, not me, I just feel that the characters are so well drawn and the situations are so powerful. For example, Driver in *Drive*, in the book, he goes to a series of cafés and just sits there and drinks coffee on his own. I'd say a good third of the book is him thinking, and sitting there and being lonely. But I think that loneliness informed the story.

And with *The Wings of the Dove*, again, these three characters were so brilliant I could have written dozens of versions of any of these scenes and I think they would have come as easily because the base – which is Henry James' characterisation – is so strong that you know exactly, as a writer, how these people feel, what they'd do then and you get to know them really well.

TS: And I think you said to me with *The Wings of the Dove* that you started with the ending.

HA: Yes, which is the next scene we're about to see. The scene comes pretty much straight after the one we've just shown, and what's happened is Milly has died and just as Kate – Helena Bonham Carter – anticipated has left all her money to Merton. So now in theory they have the money and everything's hunky-dory.

Clip from The Wings of the Dove

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TS: Very rare to have that much character development and storytelling in a sex scene.

HA: The funny thing is, in the book the dialogue pretty much exists as is, but it's spoken, they're standing by a mantelpiece, fully clothed. I remembered, coming back to your question, it was a book I read and I found it really quite hard. It's a very dense read, and I had no idea how to adapt it, and then I got to this scene at the very end, and the irony that they've finally got the money but somehow they've corrupted their love really resonated.

Partly going back to the film noir idea, it was like this couple hadn't killed her but they'd broken her heart and killed her that way. And somehow they couldn't be together, so I had the potential of doing a film noir costume drama. And then also it sort of reminded me of that idea, when you read about passionate lovemaking just before a couple are about to break up. I thought it was quite nice to have a costume drama where people have their clothes off at the end, so you start off with them completely naked, just to partly show that costume dramas are still about people. They got naked, and they're not that different.

So it became interesting working backwards, and so I sort of really went back and that became the theme of the story, and it allowed me to find the way, and the film noir became the genre, I guess, which I fixed on to the period drama thing. There was lots of that clipped dialogue, I guess Harold Pinter meets Dashiell Hammett sort of thing, and then it became easier to have these single lines and play them off each other, and have something that felt different from the period dramas I'd been used to seeing.

TS: Again, seeing the ways the lines fit so comfortably in the mouths of actors, and hearing you talk so comfortably, and hearing you talk about Nick Refn and the experience with *Drive*, I just wondered if we should cue the last clip in order to give you an opportunity to talk about actors. Do you want to set it up in any way?

HA: This is a scene between Shannon, who is Driver's friend and mentor, and Bernie Rose who is the villain of the piece, played by Albert Brooks. The important thing in this scene is

Bernie Rose has always felt sorry for Shannon, and they're sort of friends. This is a scene where he comes to confront his old friend.

Clip from Drive

HA: I just want to say that scene was completely inspired by a Hitchcock quote about filming your love scenes like murders and your murders like love scenes. It's always been something I've tried to go against, what the scene is about. The scene is a little bit shorter than the one in the script, there was even more of that fondness between the two men.

And the scene afterwards was like he's almost mourning, like he's broken up with someone, so it was that idea of these men almost in love ending up killing each other. That was, again, a scene that was not in the book but was inspired by these two great characters who are in the book.

TS: And did the cast themselves bring anything to the scene?

HA: Yes, this was really going back to what Nicolas said in making me sit down, he'd go off location scouting and I'd be left with them saying 'I don't like my scene', 'I don't like my line'. So he was safe. Originally the way the scene had been written was Bernie Rose comes to hug him, and stabs him.

Bryan Cranston was saying 'that sounds like a painful way to kill someone you really like, apparently it's painless if you slash the wrist'. I don't know if that's true or not but it sounded good and he seemed pretty convinced. So that idea came from him. And the little bit where Albert Brooks talks about the car, he didn't ask for that but as the two of them were riffing and talking about the scene between each other, he was kind of going 'yeah, I like your character, in a different world we could have ended up doing this racing car team, it'd have been great'.

I'm sitting there listening and thinking 'that's kind of interesting' and then I'd go away the next day and write. It was a very privileged position to be a writer in an actors' rehearsal, and even more so in a case like this where you're sort of almost leading the rehearsal in the sense that they're talking and you're kind

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of taking ideas in terms of how to write the scene. It does bring me back to the point that actors are quite often potentially the best collaborators for screenwriters.

It's quite difficult because you have to get to the stage where the film is being made for that to happen, but quite often the most valuable notes I've had have been from actors. Like what their first line is, I've found that they need a strong first line to define them, to help them play the part. Or something that doesn't feel right to them – if they walk through the door they need to have something that feels natural.

I've sort of found it very, very interesting and useful to follow their instincts in the later stages of the script, when the structural work is being done and the scenes have their shape. It brings me to another point, which is quite often actors will claim that they re-wrote the scene or whatever. Which is true to a certain extent, and I think every writer will say this, but [they] wouldn't have been able to write it if the scene hadn't been there in the first place. The blocks are there for them, and then I think it's fine to let them riff and change a line here or there, because the shape is there and the shape isn't going to change that much.

TS: I suppose it's the same thing with pace, as well. You can suggest the pace but you can't dictate it. Whether that's to the actor or the director, *Drive* must be a fine example of that.

HA: You can't dictate pace, but being a sneaky writer you can try and manipulate [it] with pauses. I love pauses, because generally I like the reactions to a line that said probably more than the line sometimes. What I'll tend to do is write a line in between two lines of dialogue, and they're usually really bad because 'she stares out' or 'he reflects' or something like that. But it's still creating a sort of rhythm. Whether the director sticks to that, that's really up to them, but you try to do it.

I don't like doing 'close up on lamp' or whatever, but by starting with what you want the first shot of the film to be, so if you describe that lamp, there's a slim chance that the director might start it like that. So the frustrated director in me, I guess, is trying to manipulate through the... or like in the first car chase for example the idea of the police car appears

like a shark, or something like that, it's saying that it's slow and gliding and whatever, so I think there are ways that you try to manipulate how it's going to be filmed but obviously it's the director who then chooses how they do it.

TS: I'm going to have to share you with the audience, but before I do that I will just take lead from that note from you, and ask you how have found it directing, because you're in post-production on your directorial debut which is you directing yourself as a writer, adapting Patricia Highsmith? Perhaps you can tell us what you've learned.

HA: Something I'd recommend to any writer is to spend time in a cutting room, because you learn so many things, like how long a scene usually can be, what goes out, coming in in the middle of a scene, and all those rules. But beyond that there's also... you're faced with problems as a director that you've caused yourself as a writer. There are bits where I had three long dialogue scenes back to back, and I'll probably do it again but I swear right now that I'll try not to because in the cutting room you find... the thing I'd always underestimated is how important momentum is and that's something you learn in the cutting room more than on the page because when you're writing a script or reading a script you can go back and forth and it doesn't bore you. Once it's shot it becomes this one and a half hour, two hour train, it's just moving. So for example I learnt you can start a film as a drama, if it then turns into a thriller in its next ten pages I think it's very tough for an audience to then go back to the pace of a drama again.

Drive just about gets away with it, but that whole thinking about how an audience is going to spend those two hours, that's quite a big leap from the page when you're writing a screenplay, to imagining the finished film in terms of its pace and rhythm and momentum, but that's when I realised how important structure and momentum and balancing of action scenes with dialogue scenes, or thriller suspense scenes with character scenes. Thinking about those combinations is really important, something I certainly learnt from difficulties in the cutting room.

TS: Can we have some hands for questions for the audience?

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Question: Hello, I really enjoyed that, thank you. I was just curious to know how you came to screenwriting? I'm a novelist myself, and I wondered how easy it is to translate novel writing to screenwriting? And I wondered whether, even if you haven't written novels whether just by adapting novels, whether you could guide me a little bit within that? I was thinking of writing a screenplay for my first novel, whether you consider that to be a challenging thing?

HA: I'd say to write a novel, the writing is obviously something you have in the bag, but what I think is important is a love of cinema and films and stuff like that because I think it deserves, as an art form, its own respect. I think if you're passionate about the movies and watch lots of them I imagine you're by far the best person to adapt it, but you need both. It's not just enough to be able to write, because sometimes the best screenplays aren't particularly well written, but they have that sense of being able to tell that two-hour story.

I didn't go to film school or anything, but I'm a complete movie nerd. I'm always borrowing from films I love or films I've seen, and sometimes I can take a scene from a musical and put it in a thriller or something like that, but it's almost like the more movies you watch the [more] you have this sort of library that you can refer to. That's the only thing I'd say, if you love films and you write then great.

Question: When you adapt a novel, whether it be out of copyright or in copyright, do you use the same dialogue that's written on the page? And if so when does plagiarism come into play?

HA: Plagiarism in the sense that you're....

Questioner: That you're copying someone else's writing.

HA: Usually when you adapt the rights have been bought by the film company that hired me, but I sort of feel that if the line of dialogue that's on the page works, great, I'm not embarrassed to take... I don't feel that I have to change the lines and actually sometimes I prefer to keep them.

What's quite hard is more often than not the dialogue tends to be quite chunky, and quite often in novels it's partly telling story whereas I think with films you want the pictures to tell the story and the dialogue ideally not to be doing that kind of storytelling work for you. I love naturalistic dialogue, so dialogue where people are telling you the theme... some people do it brilliantly but it's certainly not my thing.

Question: You mentioned research with *Drive* and Los Angeles, that's more of a pulpy film, but with *Jude* how do you feel about subjects which you don't have experience of, children dying for example. You might have an interesting perspective because you're adapting a book, so you feel like the research has been done, as it were, but do you feel it's problematic when you come to something that you don't have experience of?

HA: I think it's problematic but the moment you agree to adapt a book there's obviously something in it that's touched you, and it touches you because it hits some personal note. So I think there is that response. And the research can really help that and augment it, but the most important thing for me in adapting a book is really... there's a feeling when you read a book, and I'm sure everyone here has had it, where you get so immersed in it and you enjoy it so much that you feel that nobody else has read the book like you've read the book.

No-one else has experienced it, no-one else has been moved by it or has the same insights, and that's really for me the impetus of then adapting it because it feels like... it's not that I want to tell people how great this book is by doing my adaptation/analysis whatever. I think it becomes a love affair between you as the person adapting and the material. And the research is really part of that, because you're interested in the book and you think 'wow, I'd love to learn about...' if it's children dying in Victorian times, or whatever, all these things can help. But I think the initial thing is the first read and what you get out of that.

Question: Hoss, you talked beautifully about process, it was extraordinarily insightful, you mentioned in passing that you were given great freedom on *Drive* to work with the actors.

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25 September 2013 at BAFTA, 195 Piccadilly

Could you talk a bit about collaboration with other directors, and the extent to which as a writer you're allowed to be part of the more industrial process of actually making the film? And whether being separated from that is fulfilling in a different way, how that worked for you in other collaborations?

HA: I think one example I can give is some of the studio rewrites and stuff, because a couple of films like *Snow White and the Huntsman* that I came in very late on, and [was] quite often writing to storyboards. They'd already storyboarded it, and it's a very odd situation when you come in... they're very well paid and I think you can learn a lot from them, but it's completely industrial in the sense that there'd been dozens of scripts before [I] came on. The director has a pretty clear idea of what he wants, and you're really there to facilitate that and help him get to that.

Quite often if you invest too much they can be quite soul destroying I think, as experiences. And also if you fight too hard, you sort of have to accept that you've been hired late in the process and you're there to do a job. And you put your heart and soul into it in a sense, because you have to in order to get motivated to get up and write every day – because you still have to do that in the same way that you do for an original script.

But when the producer, who's paying you x amount, or the director says 'I need you to do this' then you do it. Or if they say 'we can't afford that monster special effect, we need to find something else' you change it. That process really is very, very industrial. But it's fun.

TS: Hoss, if I can just pick you up on that question of rewrites just in terms of the context of your career, there was a big period in between *The Wings of the Dove* and *Drive* where you seemed to be doing an awful lot of that kind of thing. As a writer how did you find yourself in that situation, and what lessons did you learn from being in that kind of a deal structure that you found yourself in?

HA: I had a very long, exclusive deal with Miramax. It was an odd deal because I realised that the films that I wanted to do weren't necessarily the films they wanted to do, and I ended up doing quite a lot of rewrites for them.

I learnt an incredible amount, because you're suddenly thrown into things that you wouldn't necessarily choose, so you're having to... I think the craft gets strong because you're having to learn how to make things work that don't necessarily work for you. They're a fantastic company, but I just couldn't work for anyone else. There was an opportunity, for example, to work on *Munich*, the Steven Spielberg film, which I would have really loved to have been involved in, but because I was exclusive to Miramax I wasn't allowed to.

And it's one of those things you learn as a writer, it's great to be freelance. There are so many great projects out there.

TS: Were you scared that those great projects might not come your way, and that the security of a big deal...

HA: The financial security was important, [it] was a huge factor in me doing it, but it's just something I regret in terms of time. The great thing about being a writer is, even if the last thing you've done was a flop you can pick up a pen, or sit at your computer and write another one. It's scary, but it's also very, very liberating and it's very exciting.

It's much harder, for example, for directors. Someone has to give you x amount of money to make a film, and as a writer you don't have that. I sort of wish I'd trusted more in my ability and not been so terrified. And I still have it; you always think this one's the last one. I have to keep reminding myself that actually you can bounce back because you can just write a script and you can do it under a different name. There's a Get Out of Jail card for writers.

Question: You said earlier that you have a lot of yourself in some of these pieces, and when you've written the script you've had things from your own life, and obviously you're commissioned to adapt other people's work in a lot of these places. When you do, do you feel that the story becomes your story that you've created and that you've shared with everybody, rather than just the adaptation of somebody else's work?

HA: [Author] James Sallis in *Drive* I still think is the unsung hero, because it was a fantastic character that he created. It feels more craft

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than art to me. There are moments when it becomes an art. I'd say, in a screenplay, especially with adaptations – you can just through lots of thought and whatever and crafting and working and whatever get it into a certain place. There are some scenes that really then demand where the personal and the art side and the inspiration comes in. I don't know how many of those there are in any given script but I'd say it's a balance of the two.

I get a lot from the writers that I'm adapting. I'll usually read the book very carefully two or three times, then put it away and try to forget it and let my own mind take over, so in that sense it becomes mine as I'm adapting. But I'll always, especially towards the end, just pick it up and see if there's something I've left out. Even the film that I've just written and directed [*The Two Faces of January*] it feels to me like it's Highsmith's.

And what happens is the DNA of the original book always sort of reappears. I think you can start off, abandon the book, and go a whole two years of writing, shooting and editing but actually something fundamentally stays from the original book I think. So I feel it's theirs.

Question: Do you find it difficult crafting a satisfying structure and resolution for an audience, while also making it exciting and original?

HA: Endings are really hard, there's so much pressure on the ending. I remember years ago, especially when I was working at Miramax, going to test screenings and usually the problem that came out was when audiences tell you what's wrong with your movie. Quite often the endings were the things that would score... and I think that's true of almost every test screening, the ending is where it lives or dies. That's why they're very, very hard to get right.

If it's a book, if it's got a strong ending, it really helps. It's obvious, but beginnings, getting into it, I always find the first ten pages of a script really hard. Those are probably the ten pages I go back to the most. And what I've found is quite often, like in *The Wings of the Dove*, they re-shot an ending that I didn't like at all. But I think they felt it needed an upbeat ending, that the audience needed to leave the theatre

feeling a certain way. So it's not just about the story ending, it's how the audience leaves the cinema as well.

It was something that Harvey Weinstein said on *The Wings of the Dove*, he said 'do you want them all to go out with their faces looking glum?' [past] the next group of people who are waiting to choose what film they go to - 'okay, I'm not going to that movie'. But if they see people chattering and talking about and discussing it, then they might.

When I complain about those Miramax years I have to say I learned an extraordinary amount from just the brains, not creative brains necessarily but that understanding of an audience. That's something the American studios are very good at I think, sometimes too good at, of being aware of what an audience wants. I think that's a very important part of what we do. It's a balance.

In Europe it tends to be if you make a film and it gets good reviews then it's a hit. In America good reviews mean nothing if it tanks at the box office, so I think there's possibly a healthier respect for an audience there, but I think it's a balance between the two.

Question: Hoss, I love your adaptations, I particularly love that the periods ones are very modern, *The Wings of the Dove* and *Jude* are very modern films, and *Drive* which is purportedly modern feels quite period I think. But I wondered, adaptation is partly about you get offered things and that's the work you get, but is there something about the process of adaptation that makes you feel more comfortable as a writer than writing something autobiographical or more personally revelatory, when you have another writer to shield your writing behind.

HA: It's process as well, because there's nothing I hate more as a screenwriter than waking up in the morning and not knowing what I'm going to do. I think that's when I don't sleep the night before, and that's why I prepare quite a lot before I write. But to be able to pick up that book and read a bit of it, just to help me get the day going, is really important.

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I think, again, it's easier and for me it makes the writing more enjoyable. I have written originals. I struggle with them because I beat myself up a lot and then the process, the filmmaking process, originals are so fragile because there's no book to go back to. If there's a war between the director, the writer, the producer or whatever, there isn't something to go back and say 'well this is what it was'. I think the idea of having something that's come from deep inside you being turned into something horrible is really painful. It sounds cowardly to kind of avoid that, but I like my writing life because I feel like even at the beginning of a writing process I'm working with somebody else who's written that book in the first place, and that's a huge crutch/help collaboration and it certainly makes it more fun for me.

The filmmaking is as important for me as the writing, and I feel that because it's trying to turn something into a film it still feels legitimate. I don't feel embarrassed about or ashamed about working with somebody else's art, as it were. I really appreciate and enjoy it.

TS: But Hoss in that war, if there is one, between the producer and the director, who should you as the screenwriter be listening to? Or how do you play the diplomat?

HA: It's funny, because I've actually sort of, having directed one film I sort of have a lot more sympathy retrospectively for directors that I've worked with. Sometimes I wish I'd been more loyal in the sense that it's such a lonely thing when they're actually shooting and in post, and I sort of feel that my loyalties... if the producer hires me and says 'this is the director you're working for' then from the moment that happens I think my loyalty should go to the director, because they're the person who has to sit out there and shoot it and they can't do it if you're not fully behind them.

I now appreciate how hard and lonely the whole job can be, and how much responsibility, because we can all disappear. As writers we can hide behind the director. Producers can hide, everyone can move on but that director is left with the sole responsibility and potentially a crippling thing to their career.

All of those things make me feel it's partly to be a collaborator but also as a friend. I didn't do it once in my career and I sort of regret it, where I was hired by the studio to come in and fix something and didn't get on particularly well with the director, and was part of what made it very hard for him to make the film. If I went back I'd still think he made a lot of mistakes, but I'd be more loyal.

Question: That was a really inspiring lecture, thank you. I was just wondering if you were to meet your younger self, say when you were 18, what advice would you give to yourself?

HA: I'd say don't sign exclusive deals. I wish I'd learnt more about... watched more shoots, get into the editing room more, go to sound mixes, just the whole process of filming. It's all part of the same thing. Just having done a sound mix now for the first time, I'm learning so much and I think that can go back to the writing. Or something a brilliant editor made me do with the film I've directed was he cut it into three short films, as it were, so following each character.

It's something I'd probably go back and do with scripts, if I want to unlock something take one character's journey and all it means is taking out the scenes that they're not in. To see, is it consistent, is their story within the overall script consistent? Is it moving? That's something I learnt from an editor in an editing room, and I think you can learn so much from other people in the industry. I wish I'd befriended more people and found more people to sort of teach me.

Question: I just wanted to ask to what extent does the casting work back towards the script. So once you have Ryan Gosling, and you know how intelligent he can be and how much you can read his thoughts, did that make you bolder in paring back the dialogue?

HA: He was quite interesting, because at one stage we had some issue about some scene and he kind of said 'you have to realise that you wrote this character and now a three dimensional human being is playing it. It's very interesting, there was a scene in *Drive* where he's been looking after this girl and her child for a bit.

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The husband reappears, and there's a scene in the corridor where they confront each other. The way I'd written it, it was almost like a stare-off between the two men. Ryan Gosling brought this goofiness, almost as if he was unaware what was going on. He brought an innocence to the part. That's not something you can necessarily write.

Sometimes they resist you tailoring it too much to them, because I think they want to find that performance. And I don't particularly like writing with an actor in mind, I find it really hard. When they come on it becomes easier, because it's quite late in the rehearsal process, so you listen to them and you talk to them and you change lines. But it's not something I can do too far back. But yeah, every time an actor comes on it becomes theirs, they take it over from you, I think. I don't feel precious about that anymore.

And it's funny because directing I'd let them change... in a way that when I was a writer looking at the monitor, every time a comma would be put in the wrong place or a line would be changed I'd be tearing my hair out. And then when I directed, if they wanted to change a line it was 'yeah, fine'.

TS: It's all about the control, isn't it?

HA: Maybe it is about control.

TS: I think we've got time for one last question.

Question: That scene in *Drive* where he slashes the vein, I've always wondered about this, had you written more afterwards?

HA: From what I remember I probably had him [Bernie] laying him [Shannon] down, and talking to him a little bit more. But nothing more than what's said really, 'it's fine, it's going to be alright'. So yes, in that sense it was, but there were a couple more lines in the middle that got cut, which were just creating more of a bond. But I don't think it was necessary. The two scenes always followed each other in the final script, but I think there was just a bit of business, maybe for pace, they felt that had to go from that more quickly.

And actually the scene after you see him cleaning the knives, you get Ryan Gosling's

character then discovering him lying down. So it could have been because of that they didn't want to repeat the same image with one person putting him down, another person discovering him down there, so I suspect that was probably why they cut it.

Question: I think this is probably a question about what do you have for lunch, but I'll try and make it sound more glamorous, I'm interested in the process, Hoss. Do you follow the same rhythm each day? Do you start at a certain time, stop at a certain time? Start by doing a certain thing [like] re-reading what you did yesterday? I'm just generally interested in how that works.

HA: I can lay it out for you, I generally start at around 7.30, 8 maybe. I write until about 1 or 2, because I find that anything I write after that I just end up rewriting the same line again and again, so I stop. I stop writing, but then what I'll do is prep for the next day, so I'll either read or research something around the scene I'm writing, I'll watch a movie which is somehow related to the scene I'm writing the next day. And try to stay in some sort of zone.

I can't do more than script at a time for that reason, I just need to [be] quite immersed, and I need to stay immersed. I can be a bit of a pain at home. If I've got a big scene to write I don't really want to go out to a party and get drunk, it's almost like some sort of weird exercise, [to] be ready. And then I'll start the next morning revising.

It was something I read in an interview with Hemingway, I think, where he talks about [the fact that] he starts by revising all the stuff he's written the day before. So I'll do that, and it's really to get back into... again, it's to stay in that zone, to get back into that zone. Which is why when I get back to a script I've written it takes me three or four days to write anything decent.

TS: Well I'm sorry we can't invite you back tomorrow night to go through a regular session of how you do what you do. But thank you so much for sharing your secrets with us.

APPLAUSE

HA: Thank you.