

## Screenwriters On Screenwriting.

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

Christopher Hampton CBE

10 September 2010 at BFI Southbank

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**Christopher Hampton:** I am going to quote a few times this evening from one of my favourite film books which is Truffaut's *Conversations With Hitchcock*, very illuminating on the subject of screenwriters. I am going to start with a joke Hitchcock tells Truffaut in the course of the book which is about two goats breaking into a film vault. They find a film, and are chewing away on the negative and one of them turns to the other and says: 'Personally, I much preferred the book.' This is a very familiar response for people who adapt books. It is also, by the way, the book in which Truffaut famously said the words 'Britain' and 'Cinema' were incompatible, an assertion that Hitchcock didn't disagree with. Rather interestingly he agreed and attributed this to class-consciousness and snobbery rather unexpectedly.

But anyway... I did a bit of statistics at the beginning to prepare for this: I found that I had, rather depressingly, written 45 screenplays of which 15 have been made, which is a third of them, which is a pretty good strike rate, I think. Then I noticed that a third of these 15 could reasonably be described as adaptations of masterpieces, of great books of one sort or another. So I thought I would talk about that this evening.

It is a Hollywood truism that you should avoid good books wherever possible when adapting for the cinema because bad books make much better films. I have felt that was a travesty of the truth all my life because, quite simply, I feel that a good book, a really good book, will yield a better movie if you do it right than an indifferent book. The question is: What do you do to get it right? And what do you not do? Well, the answer is, I suppose, to try to tease out what the particular aspect of the book is that gives it its particular quality and be faithful to that and steer by that.

I am going to start by talking about *Dangerous Liaisons*, or *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* as it was once known. This is an absolutely astonishing book written in the latter part of the 18th century by a man [Choderlos de Laclos] who never wrote another book; this was the only thing he ever wrote. He chose to write this book in the epistolary form; this was a form that had been made popular... was very popular in France because of the works of Samuel Richardson who had written

extensively in this way. So Laclos was obviously very taken with these Richardson books and thought about what the form entailed. He was a military man who did not have enough money to buy himself a troop of well-dressed soldiers and go and fight in the American war of revolution, which is what he wanted to do. Instead he was a bourgeois with not enough money to be able to afford to go to America so he was looking after a very dull garrison somewhere in Western France and he set himself the task of writing a book that would live forever. Immodest task! Strangely enough, he succeeded. As a soldier and a mathematician also what he worked out was that it would be very interesting if you wrote a book constructed of letters, to make those letters part of the plot, to make the plot depend on the way letters passed between the various characters; to make them weapons, really.

When I came to write the play, of course I was discouraged from writing the play because I was told that the two central characters never meet, that they only write to one another and I explained I intended to make them meet, and I did. That sort of changed the dynamic as far as the letters were concerned because they didn't have to be writing to each other all the time because they were with each other and it further allowed me to sort of give up on the end of the novel... or somehow try to respect it in a different way because what happens at the end of the novel is that Mme de Merteuil, the villain, is unmasked by the distribution of these very letters that she's written. Then she gets smallpox then she has a trial, which she loses, and loses all her money. Then there is a footnote where the author says even worse things happen to her, which I can't tell you about. I thought this was a sort of wink from the author saying, 'I had to do this ending, I had to put this ending on because otherwise I would never have got the book published... I had to have this moral ending.' So when I came to write the play I wrote a speech for Mme de Merteuil where she says one of her rules is never to write letters and so she got away with it at the end. However, when we came to work on the film and move it away from the theatre, from those artificial rules of the theatre, we fell to thinking about how useful these letters could be as movers-along of the plot. So we reinstated them. The film turned out pretty well and there was hardly anything in the way of re-

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shooting. I think the only thing that was reshot, as I remember, is a shot towards the end where the Visconte de Valmont (John Malkovich) hands over a bundle of letters, the letters that are going to destroy Mme de Merteuil and we stuck to the moralizing ending of old Laclos because it was rather satisfying we decided.

Anyway, I'm going to show you a clip in which this whole mechanism is set in motion. The plot is slightly complicated. Mme de Merteuil wants Valmont to seduce a young girl called Cecile because she's about to marry someone who's dumped Mme de Merteuil so she wants her revenge. Valmont, on the other hand, wants to seduce a woman famous for her virtue, Mme de Tourvel, so he's not interested in obeying this whim of Mme de Merteuil. However, somebody is writing to Mme de Tourvel warning her off, warning her about Valmont and so he employs his servant to seduce the servant of Mme de Tourvel to find out who's writing these letters, and once he's found out, he's much more willing to join in Mme de Merteuil's plot.

(Clip from *Dangerous Liaisons*)

So, I counted it up, there are actually more than 20 occasions in the film where letters are used to move the story forward ... there are other movies that use letters. One of my very favourite films is Ophuls' *Letters From An Unknown Woman*, there's *Claire's Knee*, there are all kinds of films that use letters, particularly French films, they're fond of doing that... but I think this is the first epistolary movie in the sense that everything that happens to the six main characters is moved along by one or other of the character's writing letters to one another.

The end of the film... I wanted to say that although this was a key 'in' to respecting, as it were, some spirit in the novel that we wanted to preserve, I wanted also to say that I think it is a mistake to be slavish in your homage to the piece of work you're working from. There's usually a way of realising in cinematic terms what's expressed in a slightly different way, and we'll see that later on, I think, with the other clips as well.

At the very end of the film - we had a lot of trouble with the end of the film - we couldn't decide what to do with it, how to finish it properly.

We actually filmed Glenn Close being guillotined at one point but when Stephen [Frears] and I saw the rushes we both burst out laughing so obviously that wasn't going to work. What I thought was I'd end with a quote, just a quote across the screen from the book about Mme de Merteuil which says: 'From then on her soul was written on her face,' so we were going to end the film with that quote. Glenn Close said to us one day on the set that she could act that, she didn't need this prop, she could act it, so we started to think about how to do that. Sideways to this is a remark of the usefulness of having the writer hanging about on the set - something which directors don't like to do but Stephen insists on - we set to work thinking about this and eventually the light bulb went off and of course the film begins with her putting on her make-up so we thought the thing to do was end the film with her taking it off. We found a corner of the studio and literally at the end of a day shot this little scene once - one take - with [DoP] Philippe Rousselot on the lighting board turning it, turning it, down to fade-out and that's what we did. In fact, Philippe was so skilful that when he saw a tear coming out of her eye, he faded it up a bit, but not really noticeably so brilliantly did he do it. So that's a way in which you can use an image, a sequence, that's actually much more powerful than a sentence from a book.

I am going to move on now to *Atonement* which some people may not think is a masterpiece; I happen to think it is, and it's one of the only jobs I have ever applied for. I read the book on holiday and came back to London, rang my agent and said I would like to write a screenplay for this book. This turned out to involve being interviewed by Ian McEwan who had wisely retained the right to approve the writer. So I had to go and have dinner with him and pitched to him my notion of how I would adapt the book. In fact, the pitch that I made to him which got me the job bore little or no resemblance to the finished film. The book is very interestingly constructed. It's in four parts. The first part covers one day in the summer of 1935 and takes up more than half the book. Parts two and three take place simultaneously; part two in France during 1940 in the events leading up to the Dunkirk evacuation, and three at St Thomas's Hospital in London. Then there's a coda, an epilogue that explains a lot of things, explains principally that what you've been seeing

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is a novel written by the main character. So what I said to Ian was, 'I don't think it's going to work like this and so what we need to do probably...' and I was thinking of *The Go-Between*, a sensational screenplay in my view by Harold Pinter, in which a mysterious figure haunts the film – Michael Redgrave – and you don't know who he is. In fact, there's a series of flash-forwards and what you learn at the end is that Redgrave is the little boy who is the main character of the film. Now, *Atonement* has many things in common with *The Go-Between* and I thought this was quite a good strategy to kick off with. So I said that, though not exactly the same as that, we should begin with this old lady who was just finishing a book called *Atonement* and we should see her from time to time in the course of the film. We should learn pretty early on who she is, that she's Briony the main character at the age of 77 but we should see her from time to time and we should hear her voice on the soundtrack, a voiceover. Furthermore, the second and third parts of the book which happen simultaneously... we should cut to and fro between them and not have them in blocks. That's what I did in the first draft in 2003.

Slowly over the next three years, just about all of that plan was ditched. The first thing that happened was I did two or three drafts with Richard Eyre who was going to direct it, in consultation with Ian McEwan who was an executive producer on the film. Slowly we moved towards eliminating the voice-over and then Richard wasn't available anymore; he decided to go and make another film, and having worked on it for two years I met Joe Wright who started off by saying 'It's all very well, this script... there's a lot of good things in it, but I would like to start from scratch.' So we did. It was very illuminating really, because slowly we found ourselves travelling back towards the shape of the book: a big chunk, a chunk in France, a chunk in the hospital and an epilogue which was a surprise. It happened bit by bit until suddenly, there it was, the book's construction; the book's very original construction laid out in our script.

There was, however, within this, another set of problems which had to do with a narrative device of Ian McEwan's in which you see what's happening through various people's eyes. This starts with a scene in the fountain at the beginning where you, the reader, are told what

has really happened, which is that Robbie, the gardener/adopted son of the house has broken a vase and the bits have dropped into the fountain. Cecilia gets undressed and gets into the fountain and brings out the pieces so you know as a reader what's happened. You then see it through the window through Briony's eyes and she, of course, puts a very sinister interpretation on it. There are three or four more in this first section, three or four more pieces like this, where you see what really happens and then you see what Briony makes of it. Sometimes these pieces are separated, sometimes they are together and we tried all kinds of ways.

I started off doing much as I'd been doing with Parts two and three, i.e. intercutting. First of all I devised a way of showing the whole scene in one cutting back and forth so you could understand what was happening and you could also understand how Briony was misunderstanding it. That didn't seem to work. Then, in the second draft, we made it like the book. In other words, what happens in the fountain happens, then later on you go back to it and see. Then I thought it would be better the other way with Briony seeing it first and not understanding it then it being explained later on. Then, and I don't quite know how we happened on this, but Joe Wright and I were together and we happened on what I can only describe as a flash-sideways, as opposed to flash-forwards and flashbacks, where you would begin a scene with an image you would take through as seen by one party, in fact by Briony, and then you would arrive at the first image of the scene and you would start again and show the scene as it really was. It's such a simple solution that I can't for the life of me understand why it took three years to arrive at but I'm going to show you a clip now which illustrates one example of this. Here again this is a bit where in the book there's a gap between one sequence and another; we just went straight from one ... you'll just see the first part of the sequence.

(Clip from *Atonement*)

Those of you who haven't seen the film or read the book, I should explain that the letter of which they speak is a letter which in some Freudian way contains a sort of sexual fantasy which Robbie has inadvertently posted to Cecilia rather than the rather formal letter of apology he had left on his

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desk. Briony happens upon them, is horrified and it unleashes a series of terrible events. But the truth of the matter is that Cecilia is rather excited by this letter that she's received and we see the next sequence; what really happened which is her greeting Robbie much more warmly than he had anticipated.

Right, I am going to end this little section on *Atonement* by reading you a small exchange between Truffaut and Hitchcock: They are talking about Hitchcock's film *Stage Fright* and Hitchcock says, 'I did one thing in that picture that I should never have done; I put in a flashback that was a lie.' Truffaut says, 'Yes, and the French critics were particularly critical of that.' Hitchcock says 'Strangely enough, in movies, people never object if a man is shown telling a lie. And it's also acceptable, when a character tells a story about the past, for the flashback to show it as if it were taking place in the present. So why is it we can't tell a lie through a flashback?' Well, in fact, at the end of this film, just at the end of the third section, there's perhaps the climactic scene of the film where Briony, now 18, seeks out Robbie and Cecilia and apologises to them, and it's a lie – it's a flashback which is a lie, so, we did it despite Hitchcock's feelings.

Now we come to the final, and kamikaze, part of the evening, which is where I show you a clip from a Hitchcock film and then from a film I directed covering exactly the same event. The Hitchcock film is called *Sabotage*. There's a slightly complicated back story to this. *Sabotage* is Hitchcock's adaptation of [Joseph Conrad's] *The Secret Agent*. Unfortunately he had already called a film *The Secret Agent* a few years before so he had to think of a different title, and it was called *Sabotage*. It was updated but Oscar Homolka plays Verloc, the secret agent and the plot is pretty much the same. It was not one of Hitchcock's successful films and I'll tell you afterwards what he says about it, but he regretted it, I think it fair to say. However, there is a sequence towards the end which is where Verloc is killed by his wife Winnie. What's happened is Verloc has given a bomb to Winnie's younger brother, a child in the Hitchcock film, to put somewhere – in cans of film in the Hitchcock film – to deliver somewhere and the bus gets stuck in a traffic jam and explodes killing the child. Here's what Hitchcock said to Truffaut and what Truffaut

said to Hitchcock about all that. Truffaut says, 'Making a child die in a picture is a rather ticklish matter: it comes close to an abuse of cinematic power.' 'I agree with that,' says Hitchcock, 'it was a grave error on my part.' Then they move on to talk about this scene we're about to see, the murder scene, in which, as you'll see, it isn't really a murder scene at all; it's brilliantly organised. I worship Hitchcock so I don't want you to think I'm... I'm making quite a different point, as you'll see later on... but anyway Hitchcock said: 'We had a problem there.' The fatal stab. 'You see, to maintain the public's sympathy for Sylvia Sidney [Winnie], her husband's death had to be accidental ... and it was absolutely essential that the audience identify itself with Sylvia Sidney...' So let's see what he made of it.

(Clip from *Sabotage*)

Hitchcock changed the plot in various ways. First of all, Verloc has absolutely no idea that this is coming upon him. He has no idea that the only reason Winnie married him was because she wanted to protect her younger brother who is mentally defective in Conrad's version and also in our version – played by Christian Bale – and he also, it's his insensitivity in the end in the book for Winnie finally to lose her marbles, as it were, and kill him; so here's the scene as we did it, pretty different with Bob Hoskins and Patricia Arquette; same scene.

(Clip from *The Secret Agent*)

I must say, the only spontaneous round of applause I ever heard from a film crew was for the bowler hat, again it is a detail from Conrad, and really it is an interesting debate because what Hitchcock felt rightly or wrongly was that you couldn't really deal with all those things in one sequence. The focus would be destroyed in some way or other, and perhaps it is. But the fact that in the book it's his sexual invitation to Winnie that causes her to kill him seems to me an extremely powerful piece of invention by Conrad, so we wanted to keep that. It's true to say that in the year after *The Secret Agent* was published in 1907, in 1908, Conrad earned less than £5 in royalties so maybe Hitchcock was right that this is a story that people don't really want to take on board despite the fact it deals with terrorists and suicide bombers, and all kinds of things that we're all too

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familiar with. For me, it is the great novel of the early 20th century and I'm very happy to have been able to do it.

I'm going to end with a little exchange between the two of them, and this is about the film of *Rebecca* in which Truffaut confesses he can't really understand the end of the film. 'I never completely understood the final explanation in *Rebecca*,' he says. Hitchcock says, 'The explanation is that Rebecca wasn't killed by her husband; she committed suicide because she had cancer.' 'Well I understood that,' Truffaut says, 'because it's specifically stated, but what I'm not too clear about is whether the husband himself believes he is guilty.' 'No, he doesn't,' says Hitchcock. 'I see,' says Truffaut, 'was the adaptation faithful to the novel?' 'Yes, it follows the novel very faithfully,' says Hitchcock, 'because Selznick had just made *Gone With The Wind*. He had a theory that people who had read the novel would have been very upset if it had been changed on the screen, and he felt this dictum should also apply to *Rebecca*.' Now, anybody who's read the book of *Rebecca* knows that in the book the husband actually murders Rebecca. He shoots her dead, puts her in a boat and sinks the boat. So it's strange that Hitchcock misremembers this to the extent of thinking that it was all an accident. It's very hard to say that Hitchcock was wrong about anything and indeed *Rebecca* won the Oscar for Best Picture in 1940. Hitchcock didn't; it went to John Ford that year, but *Rebecca* he delivered as he thought it was written.

### Q&A

**Matthew Sweet (Host):** Everyone in this room knows that when we see a film with your name on the credits that we must go with high expectations, that we are going to be in for something special, so you must forgive me for wanting to begin this conversation by trying to return you to your moment of failure, your period of failure. You said that when you wrote your first screenplay you did it thinking this would something terribly easy. Why did it not turn out to be that way?

**CH:** Well, because it isn't easy. It was a complete mistake on my part. I thought the theatre was very difficult, technically demanding, all the rest of it

and the cinema was... that you had absolute freedom, liberty, you could go anywhere; skip from here to China in a second. Therefore, how could it not be easier? I was hired to write a screenplay based on my first play, *When Did You Last See My Mother?* And I realised at this point that I had never actually read a screenplay and so my education as a screenwriter was to go out and buy five scripts by Harold Pinter – they were published in one volume – and the five novels they were based on. And the first really interesting lesson was that the better the novel, the closer he stuck to it. It may seem obvious but for *The Quiller Memorandum* he was making up things left, right and centre; *The Pumpkin Eater* he rearranged, stuck essentially to it but rearranged it quite drastically; *The Go-Between* he was extremely careful to be faithful to. So that was interesting, and his screenplays taught me a great deal about economy and elegance, all those things that we know about him.

**MS:** But what didn't they teach you? What were these errors you were making?

**CH:** They didn't teach me that to copy out my play and hand it in was not a screenplay. It was a rip-off. And furthermore the attempts I made to open out the play were hopeless. They were not interesting, they didn't grapple with the idea of keeping the audience... they were just random. Oh, he's working in a factory for a few minutes, or now he's in the pub. I wasn't really thinking and it took a good ten years really for it to dawn on me that it wasn't that films were easier, they were different. They had different rules, just as complicated. The liberty that you were provided with made it in a sense even more important that you maintain an iron line through the whole film.

In 1986 I was hired to write an adaptation of an even more difficult Conrad novel called *Nostromo* for David Lean. With the exception of the first six weeks when I wrote the script as fast as I could because he was very impatient and wanted to read the first draft, I went and worked with him every day for a year. Lean wasn't then at the height of his reputation. *Ryan's Daughter* had derailed him really because there was a famous dinner in New York when Pauline Kael said 'How can a director with your greatness make such a terrible film?' and he only made one more film; that was *A Passage To India* and that took him 15

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years. So his confidence had been rattled, but on the other hand he had a real abstract feel for what worked and what didn't work in a film. The more I worked with him the more I learned from him and the more I respected him. We were talking about the changes Hitchcock made... Hitchcock saying 'Oh, I made a terrible mistake killing the child... Sylvia Sidney, we had to make her sympathetic...' That was obviously a very common mindset at the time. There's a character in *Nostramo* called Hirsch; he's Jewish, a cowardly shop keeper who gets caught up in this revolution but he has a moment of real nobility at the end when he is being tortured to get some information and the torturer makes an anti-Semitic remark and Hirsch spits in his face; the torturer is so startled and annoyed he shoots him, thus depriving himself of the possibility of getting information that Hirsch was just about to give him. Lean was terribly, terribly anxious about this character and he kept wanting me to take the character out. Eventually I said to him, 'You can't do it any other way; this is how it is in the book and the plot won't work any other way. Why are you so...' And he went, 'When I made *Oliver Twist* in 1948 we couldn't show it in America for 18 months because they thought Alec Guinness's portrayal of Fagin was anti-Semitic and I don't want to do that again.' I said, 'You won't do it again because the man is ultimately a hero.' He said, 'Yes, but I don't want to risk it.' So, eventually, the character got cut for reasons that were sat-back in the '50s, I suppose.

**MS:** You said that he had strong abstract ideas about cinema. What ideas about the structure of the film did he impart to you?

**CH:** He started, of course, as the highest paid editor in England and he famously rescued *The 49th Parallel*, the Michael Powell film, which was a great sprawling mess and he made it a great success and cut about an hour out of it. He thought as an editor and he always said the most important things in the script are the last image of one scene and the first image of the next scene. He would literally say to me, the writer, sitting in the room with him, 'Now, do you think this is a cut or a dissolve?' and you wanted to say, 'Well, you're David Lean' and he'd say, 'No, no. Take this seriously, just think about it.' So I'd say, 'I really don't know, David.' And he'd say, 'Okay, get the artist.' He had this man on retainer who would

come round and would paint three images. He'd paint the final image of the scene, the first image of the next scene and a dissolve. Then you'd look at them and he'd say, 'Well, maybe the dissolve is a good idea here or maybe it isn't.' To work in that kind of way... when you come from the theatre you don't think of working in that kind of detail. You don't really think about envisaging every single image of the film, and that's what he taught me to do. Also, he said a film can always break down into six, eight, ten chunks – no more – and each of these chunks should have a rope running through the middle of it, absolutely taut. You should go inevitably from one scene to the next and you get to the end of a chapter, give the audience a breather and start again. Don't fritter it away round the edges and put in a pretty scene about this that or the other.

**MS:** Interesting idea, that. Maybe that's a director's idea because Kubrick used to talk about building scripts out of non-submersible units as though somehow a script should contain these independent pieces whose internal coherence is maybe more important than how they fit together.

**CH:** It's certainly true to say that the directors I've worked with who I've admired very much – Stephen Frears, Joe Wright who's very, very talented, David Cronenberg who I've just worked with – they all have a sort of abstract idea, to use that word again, which is not easy to put into words but is to do with rhythms, rhythms within a scene, things not obtruding or disturbing or deviating you from that railway track, really. Before Lean, I also did a script for Fred Zinnemann. It was not made. He was the king of 'Why is this scene here? Is this contributing to the...?' He wouldn't stand any kind of quirkiness. The film got very close to being made. It was a film about the forcible repatriation of the Cossacks at the end of the second world war and we wanted to start the film with this extraordinary scene which happened in history of 50,000 Cossacks coming across the Dolomites from Italy into Austria. So we were up on a mountain – Italy there, Austria there, and a bare slab of rock there. Fred looked at Italy and he looked at Austria and he said, 'Let's put the camera here straight in front of the slab of rock.' He said, 'We'll have everyone pass the camera and look at the slab of rock.' I said, 'Look, there's Italy, it's incredibly beautiful; there's Austria...' He

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said, 'This is not a travelogue.' Easy lessons really when you think about it.

**MS:** So is it important then for a screenwriter to have a kind of theory of structure or form?

**CH:** Yes, I think it is. You can't just lurch from one scene to another or wing it, which is what I was doing when I started. You have to have a pretty iron structure. It absolutely does not have to be one of those structures as according to Mr McKee where so-and-so has to happen on page 33 and there's Act One, Two and Three. In *Atonement*, there is Act One which is long, solid and monumental, and Act Two is in three bits and that's a perfectly good structure but it is a structure and it had all sorts of incidental benefits.

If we had stuck to my original plan i.e. mixing Part Two and Part Three, I don't think we would have been able to have two separate actresses playing the child and the young woman but because we had a 20 minute chunk in the middle when she came back, it was perfectly acceptable and it was an insight of Joe's which was quite early on. He said to me, 'We really can't make this a film unless it's a child. We can't get a 15-year-old actress to play a 12 year old then she'll play an 18-year-old; we can't do it, it won't work.' I had been proceeding on that assumption because again this very blindingly simple thing of two actresses and you separate the appearance of them in time hadn't occurred to me.

**MS:** Are there ideas about structure and the form of a film that are maybe tyrannous and come from producers and executives rather than writers, maybe the equivalents of some of those questions that Hitchcock was wrestling over with the representation of the murder and how a murder should be perceived?

**CH:** No. There are tyrannous mindsets. In other words, there are awful conversations you are obliged to have where people say the characters aren't sufficiently 'positive' or they risk 'losing sympathy'; that's one of my least favourite ones.

**MS:** What do you say when you hear that kind of language? Do you grind your teeth...

**CH:** Yes. Funny you should say that because I remember once in a meeting I broke a tooth and was obliged to...

**MS:** ... swallow it?

**CH:** I said, 'I've got to go now.' It did end the meeting satisfactorily. It wasn't a strategy you could use too often.

**MS:** I don't know if I'm over-interpreting but I get the sense that one of the purposes of this season of lectures is to give at least a vigorous Chinese burn to that body of theory called 'auteur' theory'.

**CH:** Listen, I can't think of a writer who would deny the fact that a film belongs to a director; the style of the director, the stamp of the director, the decisions of the director, the choices of the director make that film what it is.

**MS:** Then we should speak about Stephen Frears' *Dangerous Liaisons*?

**CH:** People do. Yes, of course, because the film is what Stephen brought to the script and what he brought out of the script; that doesn't mean to say the script isn't vital, you know. There are various industry practices that I would think were not helpful to either the writer or the notion of making good films. The most common is that if you hire three writers, it'll be three times as good as if you hire one writer which happens all the time in America; writers lurking... well, not exactly doing that... because they know that the major part of their income is the pre-shoot re-write where someone re-writes in a week what's taken some other poor bugger a year to do, listening with half an ear to what the director says and just thinking 'That's another \$200,000 in the bank.' You can't stop it. I prefer not to do it personally; I have been offered scripts to re-write at the last minute, films which have gone on to be rather successful... You think, why do they leave it to that moment to come and ask you to re-write it? And I have also been asked to re-write films which are perfectly good, where I have said to them, 'What are you messing with this script for? This script is very good. Leave it alone. Shoot it. Shut up.'

**MS:** So why have writers been so powerless then historically?

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**CH:** Because you sign the piece of paper. When the French invented the so-called Droit Morale of the screenwriter, lawyers laughed themselves senseless on the other side of the Atlantic. Every contract you sign has, 'I renounce the so-called Droit Morale.' They pay you and then the script belongs to the studio or the company that's paid you. In France, if they haven't made the film in five years it comes back to you which is a wonderful thing. But on the other hand they tend to make them in France which they don't do here.

**MS:** So how humble then does a screenwriter have to be?

**CH:** Not at all humble, absolutely not at all humble. You just have to know what's worth fighting for and what isn't, and you have to be prepared to be fired in the end, which has happened to me, oh, a great many times, probably eight or a dozen times where you finally say, 'No, I don't want to do that; get someone else to do it if you like but I'm not going to do it.' It's even happened on films my name is on. In other words, what's unusually lucky is that the 15 films that my name is on by and large are my own work. On the other hand, with *The Quiet American*, which is a film I like and enjoyed working on with Philip Noyce, it was decided that a voiceover would help people work out where the hell Saigon was... so I said, 'No, I'm not going to write a voiceover because the story is perfectly clear. OK?' So they then got someone else to write a voiceover, which is fine except that I still maintain that it is unnecessary, and doesn't add anything to the film.

**MS:** Do you always know when to fight and when not to fight? Have you changed your mind about the outcome of an argument after it's happened?

**CH:** You get better at knowing when to dig your heels in and when not to, and when to listen, actually. I think to start with you feel very, very defensive of your piece of work and you're very prickly and resistant with people. Later on, it turns out that if you listen to them, they sometimes have very good ideas. Directors will, of course, have good ideas, actors will have good ideas, editors will have good ideas and you should just listen

and think really carefully whether this is a good idea, and if it isn't a good idea, you can't reject it without explaining why it is not good idea.

**MS:** What happens when you are collaborating with a director who has a very powerful overwhelming stamp? You've just been working with David Cronenberg, now there's a director who has a style and a series of interests he's developed over the years. What happens when you come into contact with a director who has all of those things before you arrive?

**CH:** The first meeting I had with him he said, 'I understand that when you work with Stephen Frears you're on the set everyday.' I said 'Yes.' He said, 'You won't have that problem with me.' But in fact it worked very smoothly. I wrote a script [*The Talking Cure* aka *A Dangerous Method*], he invited me to Toronto and I spent less than two hours talking about the script. His notes were extremely lucid; he asked me to do certain things I wasn't quite sure of but he put the case for them so eloquently that I said 'Okay.' He wanted to cut certain scenes. He said very disconcertingly, 'I want to cut this scene because I am not very good at this kind of scene.' No answer to that. Very, very ingenious director's ploy, and, as I say, the whole meeting was over in a couple of hours. I then went back to London, effected the changes, sent them back to him and then got a long email saying, 'I think I was wrong about this; you were right, let's put it back to what it was here, but this was a big improvement... still thinking about this etc' and so on. I did one more pass, as they call it, and that was that except that three or four weeks before shooting ... he had said also in the first meeting 'I like a script to be 89 pages' so I sent him a script of 100 pages... and just before shooting he emailed me the script saying, 'Please don't be alarmed by this, I like to do my editing before I shoot rather than afterwards, if possible.' So I printed it out and it was a script of 89 pages. In fact he had cut it with such skill that there wasn't really anything I could object to except... I emailed him and said 'You've really done a very good job on it. Could we have back a) and b)?' 'No,' he said.

**MS:** What about when you directed your own work in the case of *Carrington* and *Total Eclipse*, for instance?

## Screenwriters On Screenwriting.

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

Christopher Hampton CBE

10 September 2010 at BFI Southbank

---

**CH:** I didn't do *Total Eclipse*... I slightly wish I had...

**MS:** ... and *The Secret Agent*?

**CH:** I got into directing purely because we had been trying for, I think, 17 years to set up *Carrington* without success. So we finally got the money and then Mike Newell, who was going to direct it, rang me up and said, 'I don't think I can do this film; I don't think I really want to do the film,' and I said, 'Why not?' and he said 'I've just done a little British film; I'm not very happy about it. I've really got to go back to America and make a proper movie.' The film he was talking about, and was in trouble with, was *Four Weddings And A Funeral*, but this put us in a spot, really, so we were offering it around to lots of people. We had this slot where we had the money, the actors so, as they say, the lot fell upon me and I was really not too happy about the idea, but in fact I found I enjoyed it very, very much. When I told Stephen that afterwards he said: 'because you're not a director.'

**MS:** Okay, I think it might be time to throw things out to you [the audience].

**Q (from the floor):** When you were on the set everyday with Stephen Frears, how was that? Was it stressful because you might have to re-write something very quickly, or satisfying?

**CH:** For me, it's always very enjoyable. The only danger is eating too much. I think it can be a bit disconcerting. Towards the end of *Liaisons* there is a scene where Michelle Pfeiffer is dying and Swoosie Kurtz and Uma Thurman come to visit her and there's a kind of a tracking shot. It was all set up, rehearsed and Stephen said, 'I think she needs to say a line when the camera arrives there.' I said, 'What sort of thing?' And he said, 'You're the writer.' That's a tiny bit... It gives you 40 minutes to think of the line for her to say at that point. Anyway what she says is, 'I'm dying because I wouldn't believe you,' to the two of them, and Stephen was quite right; it just punctuates the shot in the right way. Then, it depends; I wasn't really there on *Mary Reilly* because I was shooting *Carrington* at exactly the same time, so I wasn't there very much on that. With *Cheri* which we did a couple of years ago there was a lot of re-writing and work being done while the film was shooting, all of which I feel

tightened, helped and shaped it. Those are things you can't really quite envisage until you are in the middle of the film. Just like, when you write a film or a play, really, in my experience you can't really tell until about two thirds of the way through what it's about. It's somehow something you've plunged into without quite knowing why, if it's going to work and if it does work how it's going to work, and it's the same with the process of making a film, I think; it continues all through. Some directors are more comfortable without having the writer there; some writers are possessive and difficult so they are not foolish to exclude writers sometimes. But, it's really a temperamental preference on the part of the director, I think.

**Q (from the floor):** A question about *Mary Reilly* which you mentioned; I wonder what drew you to it? You said you had been talking about doing a lot of adaptations, or was it doing *Jekyll and Hyde* or was it working with Stephen Frears again? It was an interesting story to exhume given that it has been dealt with so often. And the sub-question to that is, do you have any thoughts why it was so critically panned?

**CH:** The answer to the first question is I wrote it because I really liked it and ever since I was a child I've had a weakness for reading Edgar Allen Poe stories; I have a weakness for that kind of Gothic, and I've always liked it. I read the novel and apart from the fact it didn't really have an ending, which caused us a great deal of difficulty down the line, it seemed to me a very ingenious idea to come up; the Jekyll and Hyde story through the eyes of this housemaid who was enamoured of Dr Jekyll. Stephen and I have different views of this because I very much like the film and he doesn't, and there was a deal of suffering along the way, largely caused by the fact that I think the film was too expensive and too elaborate. To spend \$42m on two people in a house could be deemed extravagant. Even if we'd entered by a different door we could have done something more modest and perhaps more powerful although, as I say, I like the film. I like Julia Roberts and I think she does a jolly good Irish accent.

**Q (from the floor):** Writers often have pet projects in their cupboard. Is there some particular project

## Screenwriters On Screenwriting.

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

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10 September 2010 at BFI Southbank

---

you'd like to do which you've tried to get made which hasn't actually been made yet?

**CH:** There are two scripts of mine that I like very much which Faber were kind enough to publish so they're out there. One was an enormous movie about the Vietnam war based on a book called *A Bright Shining Lie*, a factual book, sort of *the* book about the Vietnam war, I think, and I spent a couple of years on that and it was a film of enormous size and almost got made but didn't. The material was used in an HBO film a couple of years later so I have no hopes that film will ever be made, but I do feel in some way it was the most powerful script I have ever worked on. The other film is an adaptation of a novel that I love by Edith Wharton called *The Custom Of The Country* which I think I did in the early '90s. There is no reason why someone shouldn't make that one day. It's a story told through the medium of a completely thoughtless, selfish girl, very beautiful, who cuts a swathe through New York and Paris society and destroys a number of men on the way. But it's also a story about 1900s America suddenly coming to the realisation that Europe was over and the coming century was America. It's very funny, unlike most Edith Wharton books which are rather sombre. It's a social satire, so I enjoyed writing it very much and I think it's the script of mine I'd most like to see made.

**Q (from the floor):** You've also worked a lot across language barriers. I would be interested to hear about the mechanics of that. Is it just a matter of you speaking other languages? How does it influence the work?

**CH:** I studied languages at university so I can speak French pretty well and German okay, and that's been nothing but useful to me in my career because it's opened a whole two huge cupboards of material apart from *Liaisons*. *Total Eclipse* is originally a play and then a film about Rimbaud and Verlaine; *Tales From Hollywood* is a play then was a TV film about émigré German writers in Hollywood, and the film that Cronenberg has just made was about Jung and Freud which required a lot of research in German which I was fortunately able to do. I've also worked with French producers and have just written, in fact, a screenplay from a Doris Lessing book for a French director Anne Fontaine. So it's very liberating to be able to work in those countries. In France, in

particular, the more I work there the more envious I am of the way careers are sustained there. Every film doesn't have to be a resounding smash hit. People have careers if they are accepted as being people who have done interesting work and may do interesting work in the future. On the whole, their films get financed. Now we all know that isn't the case in this country where we crawl and stagger from one grudging handout to another. Just as the Eady Levy is kicking in or the Film Council is comfortable with what it's doing, some idiot in the Government comes along and lops off the branch. There is no sustained film industry in this country because there is no support for it. Partly that comes from sharing a language with the Americans, of course, and somehow always looking across the Atlantic. It's not just only the industry that does that, it's the critics here that do that as well. They somehow look across the Atlantic more readily than they look in their own backyard.

So the way to have a career in the cinema here, in England, is to turn yourself into some kind of brilliant cottage industry or corner shop like Mike Leigh or Ken Loach, people who have, against god knows what odds, formed a consistent career of doing the kind of films they absolutely want to do; but for every two or three that manage to do that there are half a dozen who should be doing that who aren't able to because of the set-up over here.

**Q (from the floor):** Do you find you work differently in different languages?

**CH:** *Total Eclipse* was a film about French poets we made in English. I would love to remake it in French. I think it would be much better and I wish we had made it in French in the first place; but one of the problems with it is French producers don't really want to make films... French producers who are dealing with English writers and English directors are kind of doing it because they want to make films in English because you reach a much wider audience, so you'd somehow have to persuade a French producer that an Englishman wanting to make a film in French was not a completely insane idea – but I'd love to try it one day.

**Q (from the floor):** Given that a lot of your films are set in the past, how much research do you do into

## Screenwriters On Screenwriting.

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

Christopher Hampton CBE

10 September 2010 at BFI Southbank

---

the period generally rather than the particular life? How much research do you do into the period itself and to what degree does that affect any other input you might have into the film? Given that you must know a lot about these individual periods, you might have something to say about the costume design or set design, about the 'look' of the movie. The film you have mentioned a lot, *The Go-Between*, which I also like very much indeed, the one thing that spoils it for me now when I see it is that everyone from Dominic Guard playing Leo onwards other than Edward Fox have rather 1970s haircuts that they just smarmed down a little bit to show the ears, and it's little details like that I wonder whether you'd pick up?

**CH:** Yes, I think people are a bit more on the ball as far as that's concerned now than they were then. Certainly talking to people like that is a very valuable part of the process. Let me just talk about the opening sequence of *Dangerous Liaisons*. I said earlier we didn't have an end; we also didn't really have a beginning. I had done a lot of research in the period and it sort of occurred to me that rather than start in on what is the first dialogue scene I would quite like to have a kind of scene where you saw them like samurai getting ready for the battle. So I talked to James Acheson who did these fabulous costumes on a very small budget and asked him to talk me through the way people got dressed and the way they did their toilette in the late 18th century.

Well, it turned out the women had to be sewn into their dresses; they were so moulded round the corset, that perfume was in a solid block that was ground down and applied. People had these curious trumpet things they put on their faces when their wigs were being powdered. All sorts of very interesting things out of which came the whole opening sequence of the film which was not in the script. That was really given to me by those conversations with James Acheson.

I am a great believer all the way down the line in the efficiency of research. Sometimes research provides you with things you wouldn't have dared invent. The whole of the early part of what I think is going to be called *A Dangerous Method*, the Cronenberg film, comes from somebody at the Burgholzi Hospital in Zurich letting me into the basement where the archive was so that I could

copy the case notes of this particular patient. There was the first chunk of the story laid out for me, things I would never have invented, in black and white, in Jung's own notation. You can never do too much research because there are so often good surprises which will suddenly make the whole thing, this vague amorphous thing you've been working on, make sense.

**Q (from the floor):** Just thinking what you were saying about David Lean and transitions between scenes, I was curious whether in editing, given the power of the music, not least in your *Secret Agent* scene, you'd adjusted a lot in the writing having finally heard what the composer had done in his own writing?

**CH:** I think there are many instances of directors who cut to music. I haven't done that, and in *The Secret Agent* I was lucky enough to work with Philip Glass who I subsequently became very friendly with and whom I've written two opera librettos for. But he was so much the consummate professional; in other words, he'd be on tour in Cincinnati, you'd ring him up: 'I've re-edited this scene and I need ten seconds out of this bit of music,' and the next day it would be faxed – can't remember if email existed then – anyway it would be there for us to make the adjustment. So in the films I have worked on it's always been the case, I think, that the composer has written what's been given to him.

But there are relationships with composers – Stephen and George Fenton, or Howard Shore and David Cronenberg, so that becomes over time a kind of shorthand. I think sometimes, as in the great Kubrick sequences in *2001*, or others of his films where he clearly cuts to a piece of music, it works very well that way round.

**Q (from the floor):** I am curious to know about your writing process sort of day-to-day, what the actual technical process is?

**CH:** Wonderfully cheap; Ryman's notebooks and a fountain pen. I do possess something called Final Draft. I've discovered this is very impressive if you finally get your thing onto Final Draft, somebody else will put it there for me and email it, and as often as not the other end they can't open it. But they are tremendously impressed you've got Final Draft. So, in short, actually, I have

## Screenwriters On Screenwriting.

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

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10 September 2010 at BFI Southbank

---

this big notebook. I write on one page leaving the facing page blank so I can doodle on it or change things and then I have it typed by someone. After that, I can sort of just about make my own alterations on the computer if they are not too radical. I feel much more comfortable when the process is writing by hand. Always have, just a habit, really. It's silent and it's sort of relaxing and you can't really teach an old dog too many new tricks.