BAFTA Screenwriters' Lecture Series: Kenneth Lonergan
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Jeremy Brock: Good evening and welcome to the opening night of BAFTA's 2016 International Screenwriters Lectures in conjunction with Lucy Guard and the JJ Charitable Trust. We're now in our seventh year and this unique series now boasts 30 lectures films online, including interviews with the world's greatest screenwriters talking with humour, acuity and eloquence about their art. Tonight we are hugely proud to have as our opening night speaker, the writer and director of such classics as *You Can Count on Me*, *Margaret*, and the upcoming *Manchester by the Sea*, of which we saw a small portion there. It's a film garnering rave reviews throughout the world. I've seen it, and I suffered the greatest compliment any writer can pay another, which was unmitigated envy. It is quite simply one of the most beautiful, one of the most beautifully executed, and one of the most beautifully achieved films I've ever seen in my life; I urge you to go.

Before I ask Kenneth onto the stage I would like to beg his patience and dedicate tonight's lecture to a dear friend and colleague from my days on the Academy's Film Committee, Clare Wise. Clare died of breast cancer some weeks ago. She was a deeply loyal friend and a fierce advocate for this particular lecture series. She understood better than anyone the primacy of the screenplay in narrative filmmaking. She never ceased to trumpet this series and battle tirelessly to persuade, cajole and seduce some of the world's most famous writers to appear here and talk. So rest in peace, lovely Clare.

Tonight's event will begin with a talk by Kenneth, and then he will be in conversation with writer, broadcaster and journalist Francine Stock, after which, as we always do, we'll open it up to the floor. So ladies and gentlemen, the great Kenneth Lonergan.

[Applause]

Kenneth Lonergan: Thank you very much. Is my microphone on, yes? Thank you for that, I have to say, overly generous introduction. I'll take it, but it was very generous.

[Laughter]

So I have to ask you to indulge me a little bit. They told me I could speak for as little or as long as I wish to. I'm not used to speaking, I'm not used to lecturing. In fact, when you think of the word lecture you don't really think of an enjoyable experience, you think, 'please don't give me a lecture, please stop lecturing me, and then he gave me a big long lecture, and here comes another lecture'. However, I have gone to lectures and enjoyed them, so I hope you'll enjoy it. I really was not sure how long I would speak or what I would speak about. I won't speak for too long but I am going to try to speak in the direct address, which is not my way. I'm used to making up. I'm alright at writing prose, I'm not great at it. I'm not used to just saying things that I think, I'm used to pretending that two imaginary people… One of them is saying part of what I think, and the other one is saying everything that I can think of in opposition to it, and then I say, 'oh, look how broad-minded I am'.

[Laughter]

So here I'm going to take a chance, and it does make me a bit apprehensive, to talk a little bit about… directly. It will come around to screenwriting but it doesn't start there. If it gets too vague and boring I'll go like that [gestures], and then we'll do questions and answers, which I'm better at.

I came to London, and I'm going to talk a little bit about being in London and it will come to the point eventually. I was thinking about imagination and how our minds function through imagination and with imagination as the primary means through which we experience the world. Because there's nothing else. There's no direct connection between what we see in front of us and what we experience inside of our minds that is not, in some way, perforated through or affected by, and in sometimes completely altered by, our imaginations, in the case of a normal person. In the case of a psychotic person the permutations and the various paths that reality goes through before it gets to you are extreme, to the point where it doesn't really matter what's out there because something else is going to show

up in here.

This is something that in its normal scope influences everybody in their private life and influences all artists or artistic people or creative people, or all kinds of people. If you're repairing a car you have to have a bit of imagination about what might be wrong with it. If you're trying to write a screenplay that's supposed to be about human beings, you have to have some imagination about what those human beings are like. And in order to enjoy a film or screenplay - we'll stick to that for the most part - your imagination has to be able to believe that what you're seeing is real, or has to not mind the parts that aren't real, or has to enjoy the parts that are fantasy because they're fantasy.

With that as a framework, I just want to talk a little bit about what happened to me the first time I came to London when I was 22. I had been here for a couple of days before that. Nothing interesting happened to me, by the way, I'm just going to talk about it. I was an intern. I went to New York University and was to spend four or five months being an intern in the literary department at the Royal Court Theatre, because I was studying playwriting. For me, London and England are a big part of my mind because when I was growing up most of the children from my background read English children's stories, and everyone from my background grew up reading English novels. And I was brought up watching not just American films but English films too. So those things - the England and the London that I saw through stories and films - was very much a part of who I was by the time I first saw the actual London as it was in 1985 when I was 22.

So I was very excited to be here. The first thing that happened to me was that I noticed that, for the first time in my life, because I'm a male, white, New York, Manhattan-dweller, which means I'm in the social evolutionary peak position you can be in, in terms of feeling comfortable in your environment. When you travel around the United States, if you're from New York, you feel that everywhere else but New York is the sticks. It's not true, but that's how you feel. You're from New York, they're in Idaho; they're in Idaho, you're from New York. So you feel very comfortable going pretty much anywhere, even though you're aware that being from New York doesn't mean that you've seen the rest of the world, you have the illusion that you've seen the rest of the world. Because you think the rest of the world should be in New York. If you'd grown up in a small town in Kansas, you'd know you'd grown up in a small town in Kansas, and part of that is knowing that there's a lot more out there. When you're in New York for your whole life - some of this may be generalised and some of it may be pertinent just to myself - you feel that you don't need to see anything else because you've seen New York and you know New York. You know where all the buildings are and it doesn't bother you and you don't mind having nine million people around you. So you feel pretty comfortable.

So the first thing that happened to me when I came to London and started my very easygoing work at the Royal Court, where they were all very nice to me, was that I noticed for the first time that I felt like an American, and not a person. We are people, as most of you know, but I was suddenly very aware - as I am at this very moment - of the way I speak. Right now it's partly because I'm speaking in public and partly because I'm speaking to a largely British audience. I was aware of my voice in a way that I wasn't used to being aware of, and I was aware of the turn of phrase that I used, which I wasn't used to. And also my friends at the Royal Court saw me as and American. I was only 22 and I hadn't seen myself as an American; I'd seen myself as a person. I realised that I was an American person, but it was just and odd experience.

In reverse, I was looking forward to seeing a London that no longer existed and that I had seen through novels and books and films. I had my generalised ideas about London, just as my friends might have had their generalised ideas about Americans. The other thing that was interesting - and I'm talking about me in 1985, I don't know who else this applies to - but I felt that there was a somewhat of a… I wasn't the only American there, there was a second

American who was also a college kid. He was the loud American and I was the quiet American. He was way more American than I was, which was great because I could be the intellectual, educated, quiet, classy American, and he could be the crass, vulgar one. For many years I had a great confidence in my own abilities and my own intelligence, so that wasn't affected. But what was affected was that I wanted to impress everyone, and that's not something I was used to. As I said, I grew up in Manhattan, I went to NYU, I was never far from my own environment. When I did leave my environment in the United States I was going to places where I was fancier than the people I was visiting and talking to, most of the time. There were some exceptions, of course. But I wanted to impress the people that I was meeting, automatically, which isn't something that… apart from the normal human thing of wanting to make a good impression on anybody that you meet, I had a slight nervousness based on what I perceived to be the reactions that people were having to me as an American. This story would be pertinent whatever countries we were talking about.

The other thing that I noticed which was interesting was that my identity… I noticed that there was a sort of a nervousness towards the United States, as I perceived it then. I have no idea what it's like now. I would describe this as a somewhat superior nervousness, a feeling of cultural… Leicester Square was filled with American action movies and all the American TV shows were on English television, which I was surprised to see. I had friends that were talking about *Dynasty*, which is a TV show that was very popular in the eighties for those of you that don't know, which I didn't watch. In a way I was being reacted to partly on account of an enormous product that was being shipped over here that I had nothing to do with. At the same time, I noticed that with the slightest effort this slight feeling of - I don't even want to say superiority - but this slight cultural edge let's say, comparable perhaps to the edge that I felt as a New Yorker in other parts of the United States, would collapse very quickly because the country was under siege from American culture in a way that New York was not under siege from British culture. New York was under siege from millions of cultures, or thousands of cultures, but there was no huge British presence in the United States, in New York. So I realised that there was a simultaneous feeling of 'you're over here and we're over here', and also a feeling of 'we're over here and you're all like this at us' [gestures], which was very easy to tap into.

The main point that I'm trying to make is that there was a tremendous - and not too difficult to dispel - but a tremendous initial generalised identity that I had, that really had nothing to do with me. People experience this all over the world in many more severe situations, as we all know I'm sure. This was a very mild experience but it was interesting to me because occasionally it took a little work to find a direct interaction. I thought this was quite interesting. The flip side of this I already talked about - my side of it - was that I had a great love for what I thought of as England, and it's very exciting to be somewhere you've read about your whole life. Somewhere you've seen in movies, even if the movies were made in Hollywood, in a studio in California with British actors and European exiled from World War Two directors, produced by Jewish American movie producers. I often think of *Wuthering Heights*, the first *Wuthering Heights* with Laurence Olivier and Merle Oberon, which was made in 1939. I truly love that film, but I was thinking today about it and I was thinking - because I never read the book - I love that story, which was written in 19th century England. And produced by - I think it was produced by Samuel Goldwyn, I can't remember now - directed by William Wyler, who was from Eastern Europe, and starring Laurence Olivier, who was obviously Laurence Olivier, with Merle Oberon, who was born in India, shot in the back lots of Hollywood, shot in 1939, and then watched by me in 1972. How much of the original novel did I actually absorb? I don't know. But I would say something. The reason I decided to talk about this today was because I was trying to think… I'm circling around this, and I'm going to keep circling if that's alright.

I have a 14-year-old daughter, and watching a small child's ideas about the world develop from the very beginning is very interesting. I remember noticing that, when she was about two, she first started to make things up, make up stories and play with dolls or space animals or creatures, and make up little stories. Around the same time her memory traditionally started to retain information. I thought at the time that your memory and imagination must essentially be the same function. That's just one child so it's an anecdotal theory, but it's my theory. When you remember something obviously some cell in your mind is firing off the information and you're having the memory, and it's really not all that different from imagining something. As you all know from dreaming, your dreams are comprised from combinations that are imaginary with material that's memory. I think that it's all kind of the same thing.

And one more example of how strong your memory can be, or your imagination can be, in the face of reality, that's much more prosaic. When she was learning how to swim - my parents have a place in Maine, on a lake, so my daughter grew up swimming - there was a log about 50 feet up in the water. An old log that was on a chain attached to the bottom of the lake, and we used to tie the boat up there when the water level got too low. She was frightened of the log, when she was young. It wasn't a question of drowning, because she had those floaty things on her arms, or I would be with her. But she didn't want to swim out to the log and hold onto the log because it scared her. And I said, 'but the log is not scary, there's nothing scary about the log, it's just a log floating in the water'. And she says, 'it's black, it's not brown'. And I say, 'it's black because it's been in the water and it gets black'. And she says, 'but it's got things on it', and I say, 'well you're not scared of regular trees are you?' And she said, 'no, but I'm scared of that log and I'm not going to go near it'. And I thought, with no experience at the age of five, there's nothing in her mind to fight the imaginary scary properties that that log has. If she'd swam out to it - I didn't make her do it, and the log was gone the next year, and I'm sure she wouldn't be scared of it now because she's 14 - but there's nothing strong enough in her experience to combat the strength of her imagination about why that log is frightening. Unless somebody really forced her to go out to the log, and I wasn't about to do that. So in a way I kind of think your imagination is everything.

That brings me now to screenwriting and to films and to art in general. I'm not the first person to make these observations, but James Joyce said famously - and he's either paraphrasing or translating or interpreting Saint Thomas Aquinas, I don't remember which - when he's fairly young, saying that the dramatic art form is the most superior. Because what it does is creates an object, it creates a story or a drama, that is equidistant between the creator's imagination and the imagination of the audience. Because the experience that you have when you're working with actors, or other collaborators on any kind of a project - a film or a play - one of the most enjoyable things about it is the combining of imaginations that goes on when you're working on part of the film.

I've had this sensation with most of the actors that I've worked with, after the work was done. For instance Anna Paquin in my film *Margaret*, which was a tremendously difficult and demanding role and a big movie to shoot, even though it was on a fairly modest budget. By the end of the 50 days of shooting I felt like we had both been pretending to be the same teenage girl for 50 days. We had been in the same emotional space, in a way, in an extremely intimate way. We're friendly, but we haven't stayed friends, but I have a connection to her because we both pretended to be this person as hard as we could and with all the freedom of our imaginations that was available to us. I've had that experience with many friends, with Casey Affleck who's in *Manchester*, we've just gone through the same thing. Who is he? What is he doing? Where is he coming from? Why is he behaving this way? How is he reacting? That meeting of souls, in a way - and I use that word loosely - is profound.

I think that the same thing happens when audiences see and engage in your work, or when I see and engage in someone else's work. I think that's why these things are so important to us, because my ideas about London and their ideas about Americans and my ideas about English people, which we had to weather until we got to know each other a little better, are ephemera, and not meaningful, terribly. But the fantasy of watching a film, of watching *Wuthering Heights*, of all things - *Wuthering Heights*, a corny Hollywood movie, a really good one, but a corny Hollywood movie - that puts me, or at least I think it puts me, in connection with those characters that were invented in the 19th century. Or at least with the characters that were invented in 1939, and with the imaginations of the people that made that film. And that's an immensely exciting thing, and it's a genuine contact, unlike a lot of the contacts that you have in life when you're talking to someone, and they're talking to someone - and you're essentially talking to your idea of them and they're essentially talking to their idea of you - and there's no connection whatsoever.

I do believe that there's an intimate connection between people that they're not always so aware of, it's hard to characterise. I think people are very sensitive to one another no matter what's going on, but what they're thinking and what they're feeling can be, as you know from your own relationships - and this is not a criticism of your relationships because I don't know you - but as you know, you can have one idea of a conversation that you've come from and the other person has a completely different idea. It's well known that juries and witnesses in criminal trials and civil trials, 20 people can see the same thing and have a different experience. But one of the places where this is bridged, where there is actual contact between minds and souls, is in art, I think.

Sometimes I think, 'what is so important about recreating life in a movie or in a play or in a photograph or in a painting or some more abstract expression of it in dancing or music?' I try to make everything as true to life as possible, that's why I'm interested in - there's millions of ways to make films and plays that are interesting that are not strictly naturalistic but are truthful. If you listen to Werner Herzog talking about naturalism… It makes him want to throw up, he doesn't like it, but his films are very truthful and they have a resonance and you feel connected to the people in them. I think that this is because, just watching that little clip of those other films - not so much the Pixar stuff, although humour is another way to access other human beings in a way that you can't otherwise… I'm actually going to Munich for a day and I'm going to Vienna next week to help promote the film, and I'm really excited to go, but I'm thinking of those places in terms of - in nothing like as human as those little clips we just saw, and seeing that man come out of the closet… I haven't seen the film yet, I'm very much looking forward to it… but seeing that funny scene of that thing he did; suddenly he'd a human being and he's not a German, whatever German means to me. He is, but he's a person. And I think that that's something that film can do instantaneously. Not just films but novels, the whole gamut of the arts. That's one of the things I think that gives it its tremendous value.

When you're watching something that doesn't have that… I was trying to think, when I was thinking about this, what is it that I don't like? When something feels false to me, why does it feel false? I think when films feel false, or TV feels, or anything fictional feels false, I think it's because the creators are trying to… They're not reflecting their own experience, I think they're trying to guess what the audience is like. The see someone talk in a certain way, or behave in a certain way. I think they're seeing it not from the point of view of… Not as real. It could be a science fiction movie, or it could be a complete fantasy movie, it doesn't matter, this is nothing to do with the naturalistic level of the fantasy. It has to do with the sincerity of the intent. And whether the sincerity of the intent is to say, 'ok, we all know this kind of guy, and he's like this'. To me, half your mind's on a generalisation, and very little of it is on a guy. And if you

forget about what you think the audience is looking for, and you look at the guy, then you say, 'well he doesn't really talk like this, I've just heard other people talk like this on TV', there's a difference. I'd have to develop this thought a little more to really put it out there, but I know I'm right.

[Laughter]

So I guess finally I'll say that it's nice to think that this stuff is important. When you're in show business - and unfortunately especially when things are going well… You want them to go well but sometimes you feel a bit shallow because there's a lot of shallowness around show business, let's face it. Why should I spend my life asking people to listen to my fantasy, and pay attention to my emotional life? The answer is because everybody's emotional life is important and everybody's fantasies are important. I think that it doesn't take much of a look around the world to see that the more actual connection there is, and the less generalised identification of others there is, the better. So on that note, I will go like that [gestures].

[Applause]

Francine Stock: Thank you very much for sharing that with us.

KL: That was really scary.

FS: Well you got through that with great aplomb, you didn't seem scared.

KL: I don't like to wear my heart on my sleeve.

FS: There are so many things that we could talk about, and I will bring in the audience in a moment, but I want to talk first of all about… There's a very popular adjective around at the moment - that liminal space - that idea of where the imagination of the writer and the imagination of the audience meets, and how you get it to do that. Naturalism and truth are obviously really important things, but there's a lot of craft around that as well.

KL: There is. And also it doesn't require naturalism. Most of my favourite movies are not particularly naturalistic, it's just something I got interested in trying to work with and to do. One thing that I forgot to talk about was how you can… One interesting thing that happens is that you can filter out, say if you happen to like old films as I do… For instance just take *Casablanca,* for example, or all those World War Two movies in which the French resistance was just a pantheon of heroes. It was partly a propaganda thing and partly a Hollywood thing. But you don't watch *Casablanca* and say 'what about all those rotten, murdering collaborators?' You have to take the stated values of the movie - which are fantasy values - but if you believe in them you can have a really good cry and you can enjoy that movie and it can be quite moving.

But you have to sometimes substitute things that you know are a lie for something that actually has some meaning to you. I don't mean to be too psychological about it, or discuss this from such a psychological angle, but that's what you do in dreams. You can have a dream where something grotesque and weird happens and you have no reaction to it whatsoever, or something terribly upsetting happens and you wonder why you were so upset about that in the dream. The affect is detached from the content completely. That can happen a lot too when you watch films. But I don't think that I'm answering your question.

FS: Well let's go at it another way then. When you begin with a situation or an individual and you are starting with, say, Lisa in *Margaret*, which perhaps it might be easier to talk about because not everybody here has seen *Manchester by the Sea*. Is there something about that character that you know at the very beginning is going to produce that very space where the imaginations of the two are going to meet?

KL: Well, not as such. See everything I'm talking about is just observations, which are fun to talk about but on the ground, as it were, I'm trying to find anything that seems alive to me and I'll grab onto that and hold onto it and follow it along what feels like its natural course. I had an idea, whatever that means, about a

teenager. It came from an anecdote that I was told when I was 17 that always stuck with me. I had an idea to do a story about this girl who witnesses and partly causes this bus accident, and tries to do something about it, and fails. For me, I'm interested in a lot of things. But the things that I'm interested in from a writing point of view I don't know why - and I don't know where it comes from - for me it's a question of trying to make it as real to myself as possible, as an actor would if they had to act the role. That means just following it along and following her as she goes. Seeing would she do this and would she do that and what would she do next? And hopefully most of the time I don't have to even ask those questions, it just occurs to me and I write it down.

FS: But the actual structure of *Margaret* is so complex and everything plays out so beautifully. As indeed is also true of *Manchester by the Sea*, where everything plays out so beautifully. There are so many trails laid all the way through. With the dialogue there will be these contrapuntal moments where one person is saying something and then somebody else is chiming in with something else. If you look at it on the page you can see 'ah yeah ok, that was how that worked'. All of these things… Do you have a grand architecture as you start, or does it evolve as you go along?

KL: I usually have to have at least a loose architecture to start with or I can't get very far. I can have an idea for a character or a situation, but if I don't have an overarching idea I get nowhere. I wrote a rough outline for that script in my notebook. I don't usually write outlines but I had all the ideas at once, so I wrote them all down. Not all of them, but I had the main ideas at once. I wrote all of them down. The one idea that I had, which I cared about and seemed exciting to me, then really set the tone, was the cornerstone of the whole structure of the script. I had the thought that it would be fun and interesting to write a script where you didn't drop the rest of the character's life when the main plot kicked in. You see a movie about a guy who works in a bank and then he witnesses a robbery and then he gets involved with the police and then he gets involved in the caper. He might have a scene at the beginning or he's at work, then the rest of the film you never see him at the bank again. I always wonder like, 'well he had to go to work before he ran off at night with the police or the thieves or whatever the story is. What did he do all day long?'

So I thought it would be fun to insist that she kept the rest of her life going. That included her relationship with her parents and her friends and her school, as well as the events that followed from the accident. That then led very naturally to wanting to include everybody else. I knew that the mother would be a strong subplot all the way through. Then the characters that her mother meets. Eventually I tried to give everybody who we see some sort of a life, or at least an indication or a colour of another point of view coming in from a completely other direction. That led to wanting to show the city as much as we do, and the idea of all those windows and what's going on in every single one of those windows, and then hearing the off-camera dialogue. Eventually it turned out that that's what the film was about, it was about her not being able to eke justice out of the world because there's so many other people in it doing their own thing, and living their own lives, and having their own interests. And it's just not possible to affect the world as much as a teenager thinks she's going to be able to.

FS: The question of observation, which you referred to now when you were just talking, and the importance of observation. There are writers who can observe, but there is something particular about the way you may observe perhaps an awkwardness in a situation, which in a more conventional drama there wouldn't be. There are certain dramatic conventions that, I don't know, if someone's breaking news about a tragedy or if there's a moment of elation or something. You will often find something that people stumble over, which makes it particularly acute and affecting. But it's also quite bold dramatically.

KL: I really like those moments because

they happen to me all the time. The door is always stuck and the shower doesn't work and I trip. Not just to me but to everyone. I think they're very… If you lose your car keys and you're in a hurry, that's going to affect you a lot more than what you read in the newspaper about the victims of the earthquake or if something wonderful happens also. If you're really in a frenzy to get going and you cannot find your car keys and you've lost them for the third time and you're in a rage with yourself. I feel that this is very dramatic, only because it upsets you. If it didn't bother you that much it wouldn't be that interesting. I think that these things are a real goldmine. All these daily accidents and the imperfections in the day and the interruptions and the stumblings… I just find them, well, first of all I think they're funny, second of all they seem to be what life is made of.

There's just a generalised dictate when you're writing a screenplay or a play is to stick to the point and get on with it. That's not the end of the world, you know, there are films and plays that have an amazing economy about them that's really beautiful. They manage to do so much in such a short time. I often think that there's no point in doing anything just for the sake of it. When I was in screenwriters' school they'd say 'it's a visual medium, don't have too much dialogue'. And all the movies I liked were from the 1930s and 1940s where all they do is talk. And I was like, 'what about all the movies I like? Those have a lot of dialogue in them'. Then you see something like *Barry Lyndon* that has twelve lines of dialogue in it. The rules are all nonsense, it's whether the rules help you get to something that's interesting. And I like car keys being lost.

FS: Given that you haven't only worked for screen, you've written for the stage as well… In terms of looking at contemporary cinema, are you conscious of - and certainly as a consumer of it I'm conscious of it - the predictability so much filmmaking, of hitting certain beats, of the fact that someone starts a sentence and you know how it's going to end?

KL: I am too. I do think that's a function of people trying to make it good in an external way, or make it accessible. I think it's a function of rules and guidelines and trying to please the audiences, which is completely a fantasy by the way. One of my other pet peeves is this. This has been going on for 30 years now, but the personal growth required for every major American film from a studio just makes you want to kill yourself. It might have been tolerable when it was a soap opera drama, but now it's infected all these genres where it doesn't belong - science fiction movies, fantasy movies. *Captain America* has to have a moment of personal growth or it's no good. I don't know where they get the idea that anybody wants to see this but they cannot shake it. It's incredible. I want to see Captain America throw his shield and hit people, and maybe get in trouble and get out of it somehow. I'm not interested in his emotional progression. And I don't think anybody is. But they keep putting it on and on and on. One of my favourite examples of this is - did any of you see those *Narnia* movies they made, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*? Do you know the books, all of you?

FS: Oh god yes.

KL: Of course you do. Well, I love those books and I detest those movies. Actually *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* was ok, but the other two… There's a moment in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the film, and I don't like to be publicly critical of other people's work because I'm not a critic, but this is too much to bear.

[Laughter]

Susan and Peter are on an ice flow in a frozen river that's breaking up. Chunks of ice are going downstream and going over the edge of a waterfall, and on both banks of the river they're surrounded by wolves - enormous, CGI, double-sized wolves - snarling at them, going to tear them to pieces. And Peter's got a sword that he was given by Santa Claus, I guess, Father Christmas. It really looks like it's curtains. He's standing there and Susan says to him, 'just because someone gives you a sword

doesn't make you a hero, Peter'. And I thought, 'you can't be serious? This is not the time for that kind of discussion'. In fact, it never is.

[Laughter]

Why that's there I don't know, because nobody wants to see it, nobody wants to write it. I know it's there because, 'we really want to see Susan and Peter's growth in this process, we don't want to just have a bunch of swords and wolves, who wants to see that?' well, I do. And also in the books they have perfectly good relationships. When I saw *Prince Caspian* I knew before I went in there. In the book, I don't know how well you remember this - I remember it very well - but Prince Caspian and Peter get along just fine right away. Peter's the high king from the olden days, as far as Caspian's concerned, and the first scene they have in the book Peter says, 'I'm not here to replace you, I'm here to help you'. They get along just fine from that point on. And I knew, I knew when I saw the movie there would be a real struggle between Caspian and Peter, really going at it and then getting together. And sure enough, there they are, cursing and yelling at each other, sneering at each other. Who's going to be the king and so on. You can see it coming a mile away. I don't know who they're doing it for. It's appalling.

[Laughter]

FS: Do I get the sense that you might not be a fan of screenwriting courses?

KL: I'm not. Any intelligent individual can communicate something valuable to any other intelligent individual, one would hope. But no, I think they can be very harmful as a matter of fact. A young woman came up to me after a screening of *Manchester* recently and said did I have any advice about screenwriting. And I said, 'well you know, sure'. And she said, 'do you believe in the three act structure?' And I said, 'no, I don't even know what it is'. And she said, 'I'm at NYU', where I went - I had some good teachers and some not so good teachers - 'because they're really just drilling us with the three act structure. And I just love *Margaret* because it's such an unusual structure', she said. 'I had this movie I was writing and these ideas for how I wanted to do it, and I had to rewrite the whole thing'. And I said, 'I think you have to write a test script that you show to your peers in the class that you don't care about, and keep what you care about to yourself a bit more'.

I think rules are great if you're in trouble, and if you're not in any trouble with what you're writing they're absolutely useless, and possibly worse than useless. It may happen that every script has the characters established by page 10, and it may not. I don't think there's any reason to be thinking about that when you're trying to write a script. It may be that every successful script has a reversal two thirds of the way through and another one a third of the way through, I don't know. Every time I read a script and it goes off it's because at that point the script is trying to be like a script. It's at that exact moment when it loses its individuality and its interest.

FS: But you have to be in a position… You can say that from the position of success and strength. It's quite difficult, isn't it, for people starting out?

KL: It's terrible. I can say it from a position of success and strength. The three films I've directed I have enjoyed fairly secure protection against the script being muddled with. That's for various reasons, but the main reason is that I wouldn't have gone into the situation initially at all if I wasn't going to get that, because I didn't care enough about having a movie made or directing a movie if the script was going to be destroyed. However, that is a specialised situation. You can't create these specialised situations, but I make a living, or I made a living, and I will probably have to go back to making a living, as a Hollywood screenwriter. And I rewrite other people's material, and I try to do the best job I can. And I know the minute I'm gone someone else will rewrite it and that will be it.

Gangs of New York is the only exception because I was the last writer there and also it had a great genius in charge of the material and shaping it. I wasn't

there to write my own vision, I was there to help him out, as was everyone. But that's unusual. It's a very difficult thing to do, it's very hard to know how to handle your script in the hands of people who have power over it. There's no good way to do it. The only good way to do it is not to get yourself into that situation in the first place, either by producing the film or directing the film with producers who you are fairly sure will protect you. But at least in the States the screenwriter is a hired hand and is disposable, and will be disposed of.

FS: As writer and director, when you actually come to production, is the script sacrosanct?

KL: As far as everyone else is concerned, yes. As far as I'm concerned, pretty much so. I don't think very fast on my feet so I like to have the script pretty well sorted out before I get started working on it with other people. I'll change a line here or there, and I'll write an extra scene here or there, but the three situations I've been in, the script is protected from the beginning and stayed that way. As I say, I had to make those arrangements beforehand.

FS: I'm going to throw it out in just a moment, but just before we do I want to ask you about music. You talked about naturalism, but you also employ music in a very heightened way and brilliant way all the way through, in a sense that would almost seem to be the antithesis of naturalism.

KL: When I'm talking about naturalism it's still made up, it's still a fantasy of some kind. I'm just interested in it as a way of telling a story. I mean, I'm a big fan of the very first *Star Wars*. I don't like the subsequent ones so much. I like *Star Trek,* I like *Close Encounters*. I really like space movies, I like science fiction, I like comedies that are not naturalistic. I don't feel that naturalism is a higher form of art than anything else. I think truthfulness is what I'm talking about, and the way I get to truthfulness is through naturalism, or ultra-naturalism, or a focus on little details that I think are interesting and truthful and dramatic, that other people possibly skip over. But that's not any means my feeling about the only way to do it.

Therefore I'm very comfortable using music to do whatever music does in a film. As it happens the way that I've used music, at least in all three films I guess, was first of all I just started out with music I liked. I didn't know what to put there at all. I just started with music I liked against the picture and it would either work or it wouldn't. It was more guided by instinct than by any theory or feeling or ideas. I think music is good when it shifts the perspective of the story a little bit. The music in *Margaret,* the extended edition, which is the only edition that I now will endorse, the theatrical release was a shorter, earlier version that was locked and turned over to the studio and was subsequently released. I supported it because people liked it and because I was being sued.

[Laughter]

I don't like to dismiss it because of the people who do like it, but for me the extended edition which you can get is much closer to the movie that I wanted to make. In that there's a lot of opera music and a lot of music that seems to come from somewhere else. I couldn't have said this while I was doing it, but the feeling I get when I watch those scenes with the music is that it lifts the situation a bit. It looks at her and the other people in the story from a wider perspective. It's sort of an anthropological look at these people struggling in their environment. It's not so much from her point of view, the music. I think that's true of the *Manchester* music as well. Maybe it's not worth talking about if you haven't seen it yet, but music just does something that gives you a different feeling in the scene. For me it's usually a feeling that makes you want to step back a little bit. But music is so important, my god. You wouldn't want *Casablanca* without that incredibly dense film score.

FS: But you're thinking of that music when you're writing the script?

KL: No, not usually. Sometimes, I'll sometimes think of a tune or a song or a piece of music that I like beforehand, but usually it's afterwards. It depends.

FS: Without going into any detail on *Manchester*, for all sorts of reasons, there's one bit where there's a very powerful bit of music used at a very powerful moment. I find it difficult to believe that you didn't have that in mind.

KL: I didn't, in fact. But that music was very helpful in editing that section. We were having a lot of trouble with that and then we tried that music and it suddenly gave us a rhythm to the section and a feeling for it that seemed to really… It's hard to talk about because music is so non-verbal, but it gave a sense, an emotional feeling to that section that seemed very right for it. But no, that came fairly late.

FS: I'm conscious that we don't have masses of time, so if you have questions please ask them now. There's a hand down there and one over there.

Q: Hi. I've really enjoyed the talk so far. I wanted to say that *Margaret* for me is maybe the most powerful film I've seen this century.

KL: Thank you.

Q: I could not forgive myself if I didn't ask you how you coped with the fact that, having made it - and you must have been aware of the strength of the film that you'd made - it didn't really get a fair roll of the dice. Stuff happened. I know I imagined if that was me, I don't know how I'd get back off the floor. So I just wondered if you could talk about that for a moment?

KL: Well, I felt bad. I felt very bad about that. It was a long, painful, stupid process that surrounded the film, which I really loved. Making the film and even editing the film was not stupid, but it did take a while because of all the procedural arguments that blossomed into this really crazy extended situation. But the truth is the film - although I still feel sort of sick at heart at the degree to which the distributor abandoned the film, and in some ways deliberately buried it - the fact that it was rescued from total oblivion by people who liked it and, particularly, I must say, English people who liked it. We had a wonderful response here after it had been very much neglected, and that helped the studio pay some attention to it and it fed the small campaign of people who wanted to see it again and helped keep it alive. And that was really nice. I don't know if that answers your question. I felt terrible, but not completely terrible.

[Laughter]

I mean the fact that we're sitting here and you've seen the film is wonderful. I mean why should you have? There's tens of thousands of other films, which you've probably seen too. I feel like the movie is clinging to life and maybe has a bit more life than it did 10 years ago. Well, not 10 years ago. It was released 2011, 2012. And it still seems to be there, so that's a nice feeling.

FS: But you'd actually started shooting 10 years ago, hadn't you?

KL: We started shooting in 2005, 2006. And then we edited it for eight months, and then we fought for four years and edited it in between fights.

Q: Hello. You were talking about difficulty editing one particular sequence in *Manchester*. Although creativity is very difficult because, like you say, it starts in your imagination and then you have to make it real. Do you know, when you're working on something, when it's difficult, how far you can push it? As in, to get it to how it is in your imagination, versus, are there times when you compromise and you're like, 'this is as good as I can get it in the tangible world of filmmaking'?

KL: Say the last part of the sentence again.

Q: Do you know when to keep pushing and when to give up when you're trying to realise your vision?

KL: Pushing against whom? Myself or others?

Q: Yeah, I guess pushing against others, because you're relying on others in filmmaking.

KL: I haven't had that. Again with the

three films that I have made I haven't had much trouble with that. I just don't function very well when I have to argue and work at the same time. On the first two films there were logistical issues with making the movie, and you have to try to adjust the script to the budget and you have to make sure you can afford to shoot the material that you have. But I haven't had any creative interference on either *You Can Count on Me* or *Manchester*. The problems I had with *Margaret* were in the editing, well after the film was shot. At first it was just procedural, they wanted me to edit in a certain way and show them the film in a certain amount of time, and I didn't want to. It escalated from that, and they never really cared about the content. So I haven't really had to grapple with that too much.

My feeling about that, however, is that if you care about the content you shouldn't have to convince anybody of anything. You're in a political situation, by which I mean you have to arrange to have authority over the content yourself, or have someone more powerful than you who has authority over the content. Because my style of arguing is to lose my temper and then give up, which is not very effective because you're both disliked and you lost.

[Laughter]

So you have to be a little clever, you have to know that you're going to be protected by the people who do have the power or you have to figure out how to get it yourself if you want to protect your work. But I always feel I'm arguing with myself about the content.

Q: In the course of your answering that, I mean, like, your other interpretation. Like for you, it's in your imagination and you're fighting against yourself to make it how you imagine it. Are you always able to get things exactly as you imagine it? And if not, do you know when to give up?

KL: I tend to give up. If it's just something I'm working on and it's not going well, I tend to give up. It's usually pretty clear if it's not going to go my way and then I do give up, but that's usually pretty early. As I say, if I know what the ending of the story's going to be, I know it's going to work, I know I'm going to be alright. But I often don't know, so I have lots of ideas that never go anywhere and then it's a struggle to get more material out of them. If I know what the ending is, essentially, and what the loose structure of the material is, then I feel confident that I'm going to be able to write something that I like.

It's more the wrestling with ennui and the feeling of lassitude and boredom and disinterest that comes when I'm not doing a good job. You just like hit this wall and you don't want to write, you don't want to work, you don't want to think, you don't want to do anything. You just want to watch television or read or do something else. That's the form that the difficulty takes. When I'm really involved in something and I'm interested in it, once it's underway, I've not yet… Well, I've one play that I wrote that I don't think that I finished successfully completely well. And I have thousands of pages, you understand, in boxes that are all terrible. I'm talking about the few projects of those that I liked enough to keep working on them and show people. Does that answer your question?

Q: Yes, thank you.

FS: Another one?

Q: I remember being 14 and reading *This Is Our Youth*, and it just… the characters… I loved it, I related to it so much. At the time I wished, 'maybe they'll make a film and I can see these characters on the big screen.' Obviously I think it's great as a play. When you're writing do you ever feel like you can't quite decide if it should be a film or a play, or does it come very early on with the idea that it should be one medium or the other?

KL: It comes very early on, almost immediately. Usually because, if it's a film, then there's a part to be played by the outdoors or the physical environment where the characters live. Although that's not entirely true. I wrote a play about the Middle Ages which has a lot of environmental… Many different locations, and one of the enjoyable

things about the production was using all these medieval illuminations as blown up backdrops. So, once again, I'm contradicting myself. But for the most part I know right away. I have to say I'd like to make all of my plays into films, I just haven't. It's a bit hard to make myself do that much work on something I've already done that much work on, and I don't want to give them to anyone else, yet. So we shall see.

Q: I was wondering, you talked about the ennui and the boredom…

KL: That I generate in others?

[Laughter]

Q: No, no. That inevitably hits everyone who works or does anything creative. And I was wondering if you have a ritual or anything that gets you going in spite of that?

KL: No, I don't. I get annoyed with myself and I do other things. I don't have a ritual and I probably need one. No, I have no ritual.

[Laughter]

Q: Thank you.

FS: You're not the sort of person who has to write before 10am, or something like that.

KL: No, certainly not.

[Laughter]

Q: You were talking about *Margaret,* and it being about discovering that it is difficult to get justice when there are so many other people in the world. Taking that as an example, at what stage in the writing process are you usually aware of what something is really about?

KL: That's a very interesting question, and it's a very interesting subject. I don't quite know what the answer is yet. I know that, for instance, even though I'm the one who said it, that I would be nervous to say that that's what the movie's about. I would hope that you could only say the areas that the movie's interested in. I tend to know more about the work after it's finished, in those terms, than I do when I'm working on it. And if I have ideas that are thematic, or clearly thematic, then I try very hard to keep them very much in the background of my mind when I'm working and try to focus on the specifics of what's happening to the characters, and all the specifics of the time and the place and the life that's being led. I will write down larger thoughts, but my feeling is that if you take care of the details any larger ideas will come through on their own. In fact, with that particular script I found it was immensely fun to write because I found that the more I turned my mind off and wrote whatever occurred to me, the more unifying themes and topics and ideas came to the surface without my noticing. So much so that I looked back and said, 'my gosh, what a masterful architect of story structure I am'. But I hadn't really thought of it. I made various connections between some of the scenes and some of the materials that didn't cross my mind what they were until two years afterwards. That's a wonderfully exciting and interesting process. I try to deal with it by sticking to the people on the ground, as it were.

FS: I think that works on the audience too. Having more recently seen *Manchester by the Sea,* two or three days afterwards things just kept, like little depth charges, coming through. They would suddenly work on me later, that I realised. We live in a universe where the themes are often written so large on things; this seems to be a much more powerful and enduring way of doing it.

KL: Most of the work that I like, and when I like my own work, the structure and the content and the emotional content all go together very nicely. I don't know who said this, I think it was F. Scott Fitzgerald, 'the structure is the story'. And hopefully that's true because, just to give you a vague, non-specific example, say you're trying to write a story about injustice, but the psychological content is really that a man is very angry at his mother. But he's not writing a story about a man who's angry at his mother, he's writing a story about a man who's been treated like shit by the whole world. Unless he's got that into some kind of

form that's got some kind of honesty to it, it's going to come out a little… You're going to be like, 'well why is this guy so victimised?' Something's going to feel a little off about it. It's a bad example because it's not a real example, but I think you can see what I mean. You want it all to be coming from the same place, and then it can kind of go anywhere. Anyway… Oh, I don't know. That's all.

FS: Ok, next question.

Q: My question is also about the length and pace of scripts, because often people who are trying to break into screenwriting are told it's going to be 110 pages. But then you get films, for example if you take *Gangs of New York*, which is about three hours long. How conscious are you of the length of a script? Sometimes there are scenes drawn out in films where you think, well, can I tell this story in two hours as opposed to three hours. It's something I'm just curious about. How do you feel about that?

KL: Yeah, more than I ought to be. I think that the film should be as long as it's meant to be. It doesn't matter how long or short it is, it should work at the length where it exists. It should work at its own length. But it is something you worry about, because you're worried you're going to bore people, you're worried you're being indulgent. The best guide is to measure my own level of boredom or interest. It just depends. 110 pages is fine for a script that works at 110 pages. I just have to draw a distinction between screenwriting as a profession and screenwriting as a craft or an art or something to do for fun, or something that you're trying to do because you're trying to do it well, or you're trying to express something, or if you're doing it for yourself. Getting it sold and getting other people to like it and back it and understand it is a whole other category. I'm just talking, to make it easier, about when you're trying to be happy with your own work. In that case I say you should do whatever feels right to you. And then you have to worry about other people at a certain point. You have to worry about them, but I think it's good to trust your own instincts and feeling about it. Most of the time, you know, we all know the rough length of an average movie and probably aim for that. And if it's way shorter or way longer then if it seems to you to hold your interest, and if it seems right.

Margaret, I really did think for a long time that it could work at the contracted length, which was two hours and 30 minutes. That became the fulcrum of the arguments that we all had. It turned out that it really just didn't work. It actually moves faster and works better longer, because of the nature of the story and the nature of the structure. There was a trick that I discovered, or we discovered, where if you keep the scenes playing for longer than usual, when it's working, it draws the audience in, or draws me in, and I feel that I'm really watching a real, two people actually talking to each other. We all know what the rhythms of a movie scene are. So I consciously… The first draft I didn't pay any attention to this at all; the first draft of the movie I just wrote with my eyes closed. It came out at 370 pages, and I cut 200 pages out of it. I had scenes that were 16, 20 pages long that were just as good when they were eight pages long. But eight pages is still very long for a movie scene, I'm aware of that.

It seemed to be trying to tell itself in a way that was unusual, that was ultra-naturalistic, that was trying to not be movie-pacing. Part of that, I think, is because teenagers often think of themselves as being in a movie. The fact is there are many times in life when you wish you could just skip to the end of the movie and you can't. You have to sit at the doctor's office, you have to sit with the lawyer, you have to sit with your family, you have to sit with a person who's furious at you and you can't just jump to the next scene, you have to go through the whole god damn thing. That to me creates tension and drama and interest, and that's how that movie accessed that side of life.

The other two films were more conventional and were more of a conventional length. Look at a movie like *The Deer Hunter*, I don't know how familiar you all are with that film. That movie has a solid hour in that town

before the three main characters go to Vietnam. All that happens is that they get off work, they go have drinks, they get ready for a wedding, they go to the wedding. You meet them all and there's little scenes with these storylines introduced, but there's no real plot. And it takes an hour in that town. The effect is that when they go to Vietnam - it's the first and only movie I've ever seen where you see the soldiers as people who live in a town who are now soldiers, which is what all soldiers are. And I'd never seen that before, and I thought it was immensely exciting and great. Those scenes are great and nothing's happening. I could watch it for two hours before they go to Vietnam. But without that, without the movie proving that they exist in real life by staying with them for an hour while they have their very ordinary lives, without proving it with the structure and the content, that very bold idea, you don't have nearly the value of the horrific scenes and experiences that they have when they're fighting overseas. There's something incredible about that. It's not Robert De Niro playing a soldier; he plays a guy who lives in Pennsylvania who then becomes a soldier. Anyway, I think I've made the point.

FS: Ok, this has to be the last question.

Q: I wanted to ask a question about creating truthful works, which are often seen as the best works. To create truthful work I've been told you need to invest a part of yourself into that. After you've done a work like that, how do you find the motivation to create another work after you've invested maybe a part of your autobiographical self into a film, or similar? How do you find the motivation, the energy, to create something of similar value?

KL: Well, I think there's a lot of ways. I don't mean to dodge the question, I will answer it. But I think there are a lot of ways to access your own sense of what's truthful and what's real, and what's emotionally truthful. It doesn't need to be a literal transcribing of your life. My own life appears very rarely in my work. In the film *Margaret* I'm not there. I could point to various characters who are similar to characters I know, I could point to various things about myself that you could find in some of the characters. The high school she goes to is exactly modeled on my high school. Some of the scenes in the English class are taken directly from incidents that I watched happen when I was in high school. As I was talking about before, I hope not pretentiously because I wasn't trying to be pretentious. But when you turn yourself into character X in some way - who's also a combination of your friend, of a movie you saw when you were young that you liked, this full person who never existed before who you made up - that's invested with some truthfulness from you, and then added to that is the performance of the actor. It could be literal to your life or autobiographical or disguised autobiography, or your observation about someone you know very well who you've observed carefully, or some creature you made up out of your imagination. I think it's just a question of what feels alive on its own. Then hopefully the interest in doing that will sustain you through the next project. I think there's a lot of ways to be truthful in your work, I don't think it has to be literal at all. In fact I find it difficult to get too interested if I'm one of the characters. I don't see myself as another person, I see myself as, you know, me, to whom things happen. I don't see myself as having much of a personality at all. Although now I know I have one because people tell me I do, endlessly.

[Laughter]

But that's kind of the fun part is making up a story, whether it's just like what happened to you or whether it's a transformed version.

FS: I did say that's the last question, but to be fair…

Q: You have small roles in all your films, and we saw a really funny cameo in the new one. Is that something you look for when you're writing, for a fun thing to put yourself in there?

KL: Yeah. I like acting. I don't act professionally, I don't get offered any acting roles and I don't wish to audition, so I write myself a little part now and then, just for fun. Really that's all there is

to that.

FS: Does that give that particular character a particular significance? Because I think it does for us watching it, we go, 'ah.'

KL: It's not meant to, and now that I'm a very minor celebrity I think it's a little more difficult to. I don't want to give any additional value to the part that I play. I don't want to be like, 'oh, there's the director'. I think the answer to that would be bigger parts.

[Laughter]

Because you'll forget that I'm the director after a few minutes and then you'll be able to really enjoy my work as an actor.

FS: Well with that to look forward to, and also for those of you who have not yet seen *Manchester by the Sea* I thoroughly recommend it, absolutely wonderful. Thank you very much for your questions. But most of all, Kenneth Lonergan, thank you very much.

KL: Thank you very much.

[Applause]