

**“1916 I THINK IMPOSSIBLE TO THINK ABOUT
WITHOUT THINKING OF YEATS AND O’CASEY”:
PUBLIC INTERVIEW WITH NEIL JORDAN**

Conducted by Patrick McCabe¹

Born in 1950 in Sligo, Neil Jordan began his career as a writer. His first book of stories, Night in Tunisia (1976), won the Guardian Fiction prize. Since then he has published five novels, The Past (1979), The Dream of a Beast (1983), Sunrise with Seamonster (1994), and Shade (2005). His most recent novel, Mistaken, was published in early 2011.

Neil Jordan’s film career began with the role of creative consultant on John Boorman’s Excalibur in 1981. In 1982 Jordan wrote and directed his first feature film Angel. Since then he has written, directed, and produced more than fifteen films, including Company of Wolves (1984), Mona Lisa (1986), The Crying Game (1992), Interview With The Vampire (1994), Michael Collins (1995), The Butcher Boy (1996), The End Of The Affair (1999), The Good Thief (2002), Breakfast On Pluto (2005), and Ondine (2009). His films have been honoured with numerous awards worldwide, including an Oscar, BAFTAs, Golden Globes, A Golden Lion from The Venice Film Festival, and a Silver Bear from Berlin. He has been awarded five honorary doctorates, and in 1996 he was appointed Officer of the French Ordres des Artes et des Lettres. Neil Jordan has more recently written, directed, and produced the television series “The Borgias”, with Octagon Films and Showtime. His latest film, Byzantium, premiered at the Toronto Film Festival in September 2012.

Neil was interviewed at EFACIS 2013 by playwright and novelist Patrick McCabe. McCabe was born in 1955 in Clones, County Monaghan, Ireland. He was educated at St Patrick’s Training College in Dublin and began teaching at Kingsbury Day Special School in London in 1980. His short story ‘The Call’ won the Irish Press Hennessy Award. He is the author of several novels, including The Butcher Boy (1992), a black comedy narrated by a disturbed young slaughterhouse worker, which won the Irish Times Irish Literature Prize for Fiction; The Dead School (1995), an account of the misfortunes that befall two Dublin teachers; and Breakfast on Pluto (1998), the disturbing tale of a transvestite prostitute who becomes involved with Republican terrorists. The Butcher Boy and Breakfast on Pluto were both shortlisted for the Booker Prize for Fiction. He is also the author of a children’s book, The Adventures of Shay Mouse (1985), and a collection of linked short stories, Mondo Desperado, published

1 This public interview was held during the EFACIS conference at NUI Galway on 5 June 2013 and took place immediately following the screening of the opening scenes (which reenact the events of the 1916 Rising) from *Michael Collins* (dir. Neil Jordan, 1996).

in 1999. His play *Frank Pig Says Hello*, which he adapted from *The Butcher Boy*, was first performed at the Dublin Theatre Festival in 1992. The play is published in *Far from the Land: Contemporary Irish Plays (1998)*, edited by John Fairleigh. A film adaptation of *The Butcher Boy*, directed by Neil Jordan, was first screened in 1996. His short stories have been published in *The Irish Times* and *The Cork Examiner* and his work has been broadcast by RTÉ in Ireland and the BBC. His novel *Emerald Germs of Ireland (2001)* is a black comedy featuring matricide Pat McNab and his attempts to fend off nosy neighbours. His novel *Winterwood* was published in 2006 and was named the 2007 Hughes & Hughes/Irish Independent Irish Novel of the Year. His latest novels are *The Holy City (2008)* and *The Stray Sod Country (2010)*.

Patrick McCabe (PMC): Neil, there were a number of scripts for *Michael Collins* going around during that period weren't there?

Neil Jordan (NJ): Yes there were yea.

PMC: How long did it take you before you ...

NJ: Me? Well the problem is that if you do something about a historical subject, there's no ownership of it. That's why in the world of film there are generally about, say for example somebody wants to do a television cable series about the Medici family, there's probably about 27, 227, or 2027 scripts written about the same thing, and there's no ownership of it, you know what I mean? So I was asked by David Putnam, an English producer, he was very traditional, he produced *Chariots of Fire* (1981) and you know these kind of ...

PMC: *War of the Buttons* (1994).

NJ: Yea, yea, yea, also *The Killing Fields* (1984), you know those large-scale epic, very kind of British movies in a way. And he commissioned me, he asked me to write a script about Michael Collins in about 1984. His arrangement was with Warner Brothers. So they actually hired me to write the script for *Michael Collins*, and I knew very little about him. I had studied history in UCD, but I studied early Irish history, medieval, earlier even, early Christian period stuff like that, and I never had that much interest in these stalwart kind of heroic figures and all this sort of stuff. So I began to research him and I wrote a script, and there were many other people, several other people, the main among them was Eoghan Harris, who had written a script.

PMC: Was Kevin Costner attached to that?

NJ: He wanted to play the part of Michael Collins (laughter from audience). He did actually, it's Hollywood you know. But anyway for various reasons nobody wanted to make it, and I then, I made a film called *Interview with the Vampire* (1994) for Warner Brothers, and it was quite successful, and they said what do you want to do next? I said, well I have, you have this script you bought that I wrote called *Michael Collins* and they weren't even aware of it and they said, basically, they looked at it and they

read it and they said, 'If you can make it for a certain figure you can make it.' So it was really ironic circumstances, it was the fact that I had made a film with Tom Cruise and Brad Pitt that had become a big commercial success that allowed me to make *Michael Collins*. Having announced it and with the film coming out in Ireland it became a major public event but the fact is the guys in Warner Brothers, they just saw it as a little tiny film that they were indulging me in so it was this strange anomaly, it was this big, huge thing over here, huge public comment, it was almost like designing a national monument, or being commissioned to design a national monument here. Everybody in Ireland and in England as well had a huge emotional investment in the telling of the story like this, whether it would be or reflect the revisionist kind of current, the whole revisionist thing that was in vogue in the early '90s, you know, would it be nationalist proselytizing, would it be this, would it be that, would it be accurate, would it be inaccurate, and the people in Warner Brothers didn't give a damn as long as I didn't spend more than \$31million and as long as I had Julia Roberts on board. So it's kind of as simple as that really. There were obviously other versions of the story. So I mean the equivalent would be if somebody now wanted to make ...

PMC: Was there a movie made in the '40s and '50s about Michael Collins?

NJ: I don't know, was there?

PMC: I think there was, I think there was a black and white one, but I don't know, it wasn't called *Michael Collins*.

NJ: Oh, it was called *Sweet Enemy* or something like that.

PMC: That's what it was, it was one of those kind of things, so it had being done before.

NJ: *Beloved Enemy* (1936) it was called I think.

PMC: Who was in it?

NJ: I didn't even see it.

PMC: No, I think the reaction here was a bit hysterical though.

NJ: It's a strange thing. If you make a film you've got two hours if you want it to be released in the cinemas, you've probably got two, two and a half hours to tell a story and you obviously can't in a way. It's the most, movies are in a way the most public context within which to tell a piece of history or to address a piece of history and they are also the most inappropriate context because they demand drama, and they demand compression, they demand ...

PMC: So you had to leave out the treaty?

NJ: I had written a whole section on the treaty debates and when Collins went to London and all that, but we just couldn't afford to do it with the budget we had so basically it's kind of an anomaly if you think of the historical film – has anyone seen *Lincoln* (2012)? So that's, Steven Spielberg would consider that a historical film, which it

is. I'm sure everybody has seen *Gladiator* (2000), would you consider that a historical film? Or would you consider for example *Spartacus* (1960) to be a historical movie? Seriously, I'm not cynical. *Spartacus* written by Dalton Trumbo, he did research, the slave revolt, all of that, obviously Shakespeare's history plays are history plays, plays about history, but they are as gross and entertaining and inaccurate and as far-fetched as *Spartacus* – or *Gladiator*. I mean *Henry V*? Or *Richard III*? He's like Hannibal Lector or something like that. It's an interesting question so I did this, I basically had to, so what is this thing, what is this drama going to be about? And I said it's going to be about violence pure and simple, this is what I said to myself, if you want, given that you cannot do justice to the entire span of a historical incident I said I'm going to make a film about the uses and the consequences of using violence. The form for that was a very simple generic, genre with a whole set of expectations that you can fit into which is kind of Warner Brothers gangster movies of the '30s, '40s, '50s,

PMC: James Cagney genre.

NJ: Yea, *White Heat* (1949) and *Scarface* (1932) obviously *The Godfather* (1972) and so you know I said to myself it's going to be a film about a guy who builds up this kind of illicit army gets them to use extreme violence, beyond the current, what you'd call the set of agreements that seem to exist in the '20s, and having built up this army he then tries to decommission and finds he can't, you know, that's the story I set out to tell myself, that's what I imagined I was telling and that's why the events moved in it so quickly. That's why for example I had a car bomb in it, you know, because to me it was straight out of the template of a gangster movie. Each of these things that one does is interpreted, as when the film was released in Ireland, as having huge symbolic weight.

PMC: This was perhaps because the peace negotiations were continuing at that time.

NJ: They were actually on, they kept starting, there was a story in contemporary Ireland and there was a story in the 1916-1921 period, which were kind of parallel stories. They were totally different but the issue was the same, the issue was having, whether having introduced weapons and the possibility of violence into political dialogue whether you can then just magically pull it away and obviously you can't, or obviously the attempt to do so is extremely difficult if not impossible, and that's what I wanted to tell and maybe that's why the film had such kind of relevance here though I imagine anybody who – because 1916 is such, kind of an event of national fantasy in a way, which I think it kind of has become in a way – anybody who showed the GPO being blasted to bits and people coming out with their hands up I imagine that would have become a source of great public interest, anybody, whoever did it, whether it was me or Kevin Costner or anybody ... sorry! That's my account anyway of *Michael Collins*.

PMC: In the course of your research while writing the script, and I don't know how many drafts you did but I presume it was a considerable number what kind of a man

do you think you unearthed? What intrigues me about Michael Collins more than anything else is that he was only 31 years of age (when he died), do you think we may confer on him a magnitude and a gravitas that perhaps he simply didn't merit?

NJ: I think, when I first began to do the research, I had the decided feeling that I didn't like this person you know, he was decidedly kind of a, somebody, ok it's hard – shall I try and answer the question?

PMC: Please do ...

NJ: I'll have to answer it in two stages. He seemed to be built in the mode of the kind of, of the fascist in a way to me.

PMC: I think you're right yea.

NJ: You know of a general that, the kind of figure that Mussolini became, or the kind of person Salazar became.

PMC: He nominated Eoin O'Duffy as his successor.

NJ: Yes that's what he seemed to be, that was my first impression when I read, there was the Pierce Beasley biography,² which was a piece of hagiography, and when you read that biography it's like reading a biography of Mussolini or stuff like that but I think the interesting thing about Collins is that in the end he did not become that and that's what I thought was interesting about this figure, was that ...

PMC: Was that because he didn't live long enough?

NJ: No – I think it's because, it's because actually he forced himself to accept compromise in a way, do you understand what I mean and in a strange way he did abide by the democratic process in the end. Everybody pictures this figure in the bloody green thing, with the hat, touring car and all that sort of stuff, but he did, when they did put the Treaty he brought back to a vote, he did stand by it. I know he did very underhand things too, going to the North of Ireland, but that was part of his, it seemed to me, that somebody whose essential nature was a strong man you know, a military strongman, the fact that he actually did not in the end become that I found interesting, and that's why in the end I found him an interesting figure and I thought it was worthwhile making a film about him.

PMC: We were asked to do this conference here in Galway and not really thought of Neil as a political filmmaker, more of a poet really but now reflecting on it when I think of *The Crying Game*, *Michael Collins*, *Breakfast on Pluto*, and a number of other ones, politics actually is a large feature of your work and I remembered that you had done 3 or 4 episodes of a Sean O'Casey series way back at the beginning of your career, so you presumably knew a lot about that period anyway.

NJ: I did, yea I did.

2 Piaras S. Béaslaí, *Michael Collins and the Making of a New Ireland* (London: G.G. Harrap, 1926).

PMC: How do you view that period in Irish history now?

NJ: The 1916 ...

PMC: Let's say from the death of Parnell to the signing of the Treaty or perhaps the end of the Civil War?

NJ: I think it's impossible to view it outside of the prism of literature and poetry and art. The death of Parnell I find impossible to think of without thinking of Joyce – absolutely. And the, 1916 I think impossible to think about without thinking of Yeats and O'Casey, and the War of Independence I find impossible to think about without thinking of Frank O'Connor, you know. And in a way it seems to me to be an oddly literary event the whole thing more than a political event.

PMC: I suppose you're right. When James Joyce was asked about it he said you know, he said, 'You know the conquerer cannot afford to be seen as amateur, what's going on in Ireland now with the British is no different than what's going on in the Belgian Congo.' Basically he was kinda saying it was just kinda bad luck to be beside an Imperialist entity and he kinda just skipped off to Paris and Trieste and viewed the whole thing as a kinda literary event like you're saying. But I mean do you think that the inheritance of 1916 is any value in real terms.

NJ: The inheritance of what? Sorry ...

PMC: The idea of insurrection shall we say.

NJ: No. It was such a tiny insurrection and it was such a tiny event and it involved so few people. If you think of it in contemporary terms, if you think of Iraq, or you think of what's going on in Syria, or you think of what's going on in Tunisia, or what did go on in Tunisia, it's like, when you think of 1916 and you think of the amount of people who were, you know members of the Citizen Army, or the IRB or the volunteers, all that such of stuff, tiny groups of people. It kind of must have taken the British government so little effort to cope with as badly as they did in a way, when you put it in those terms. When you think of the civil war, or the bits I had to research heavily for the Collins film, the groups of men were, you're talking about 6 and 7 people, hiding out in fields.

PMC: Maybe 2 or 3 rifles in Mayo.

NJ: So I think the entire of the story, particularly of Collins' effort, he was very aware of the force of bloodletting, and public opinion. It almost seems that every murder that he committed was designed for British tabloids, you know, designed to force a reaction from not only the British establishment but from the British public and British press. It seems the entire event is part of some kind of cultural dialogue, to me it does because the end result of it obviously was, the end result of the Treaty that Collins came back with was as everybody, Conor Cruise O'Brien, Roy Foster and all these people would say, was probably what would have been arrived at anyway if the Irish Parliamentary party had not been annihilated during the First World War and

had been allowed become the natural party of Irish nationalism. So that's why I think it's kind of an event that dominates, that is designed to be filtered through literature and imagination and through O'Casey and all that sort of stuff. That's my perspective and I'm sure I'm wrong.

PMC: No, no you're perfectly valid. But it does bring you to other works that kind of follow from that such as say Brendan Behan's *The Hostage* which is a story really recycling yet again Frank O'Connor.

NJ: Yea, well if you think of that. Frank O'Connor wrote "Guests of a Nation" and Frank O'Connor was ...

PMC: He was from the Republican side.

NJ: He was during the War of Independence and he did witness something like that event when the little private was taken out and shot.

PMC: I think it was Dan Breen, I'm not sure.

NJ: Dan Breen that did it?

PMC: Jeremiah Donovan character might be Dan Breen, I don't know, it's just hear-say.

NJ: Yea, yea, so that's, O'Connor wrote a magnificent story about that, that was about the '20s. *The Hostage*, Brendan Behan copied that story, he used the story for *An Giall*, an Irish-language play.

PMC: The bones of it.

NJ: Yea, but it wasn't set in the '20s his story.

PMC: No.

NJ: It was set in the '40s.

PMC: Yea.

NJ: And I copied that story again for the beginning of *The Crying Game*, which was not set in the '20s or the '40s, it was set in the '80s. It's an interesting little progression of things because the beginning of *The Crying Game*, the first 20 minutes of *The Crying Game* are basically based on O'Connor's short story. So you've got a little piece of storytelling haven't you refracted through 3 different periods and that seems to me the way that the Rising is relevant.

PMC: To bring you back to *Angel* (1982), which is a very strange animal. If you look at it now, it's a truly magnificent film I think. I really do. I think when you look at it now. Did it have a relationship I was wondering when I saw it recently with *Odd Man Out* (1947)?

NJ: Yea, absolutely.

PMC: There's another one that ...

NJ: That's another wonderful film actually.

PMC: With James Mason and ...

NJ: Carol Reed directed that, didn't he?

PMC: Carol Reed directed it, yea. It's a very strange movie but it has the same kind of existential landscape in an Irish context as *Angel* has. Could you tell us a bit about the relationship to Irish history that *Angel* has, if it has one,

NJ: It has none (laughter). It actually hasn't because it's ... when I wrote that film, when I wrote *Angel* and when I started to direct, I didn't have much of a clue about filmmaking but it was interesting because the script was just about a guy who was taken over by – Stephen Rea played the part of the Saxophone player – and he was taken over by the compulsion, the ease with which he could kill people. Because he accidentally witnessed a murder and he gets his hands on a gun through a series of accidents and it was, I remember when I was shooting it cameraman Chris Menges he comes from this, he works with Ken Loach a lot, and he came from the documentary tradition and the kind of populist Marxist background thing. Chris always wanted me to show scenes of riots and British soldiers whacking people on the head and I said 'no Chris we're not doing any of that, we're doing this film without any context, any historical background, any socio-political contemporary background to it, it's going to be set in these landscapes and it's going to be a simple thing about this guy who before he shoots everybody he asks them what their name is basically'.

PMC: Was *Point Blank* (1967) an influence on that?

NJ: A little bit, a little bit. But I think the reason why people found it powerful was because it was a story about what was happening at the time, in the border areas and in the north of Ireland, of sectarian violence and killing been enacted upon people who otherwise would have been neighbours, you know that kind of thing. And if you do something like that, if you strip everything away and tell that simple thing it kind of becomes shocking in a way because you're not explaining or you're not justifying. And the film was criticised a lot at the time when it came out, it was criticised by, mainly people on the left, you know, as I was at the time, it was criticised heavily for not providing what they call context, socio or political context.

PMC: Alan Clarke had the same criticism leveled at him, for *Elephant* (1989).

NJ: That's a brilliant film.

PMC: It removed the context as well and it leaves you with the aftershock of true existential horror, really.

NJ: In a way, yea and that's the interesting thing that movies can do and I ...

PMC: In an Irish context that's why *Angel* was so radical because ...

NJ: Is it?

PMC: Oh I think it was you know. There had being an endless procession of movies namechecking all the various atrocities and everything and this place was in a really dark universal space that ...

NJ: It's interesting when you do that, when you remove the kind of possibility of justification, of historical or political or sociological stuff, it's interesting that that very negative act can make things more arresting in a way.

PMC: And then there was something equally radical with *The Crying Game* in that you take a provisional IRA man and turn that on its head because that had become an almost cinematic/literary cliché of what an IRA man is.

NJ: Some people say he is a cliché of what a ...

PMC But anyway the fact that in the sense that he is a compassionate guy and a complex guy ...

NJ: Of course, absolutely, but *The Crying Game* is a different thing you know, a different period.

PMC: I know it is but it's still, it's political in your own peculiar poetic way and that's what I find very interesting when I look at these movies again in its context.

NJ: Well now *The Crying Game* is about how people define themselves. And how the central character, his name is Fergus, played by Stephen Rea, he starts out defining himself, he is an Irish person, he's white, he's nationalist, he's rationale, and he's male. So he's all those things. And in a way the story was designed as a series of, kind of, what would you call them, tests, or a series of ...

PMC: Like mythic kind of ...

NJ: No, just okay so let's put him close to, you have to kidnap a black British soldier.

PMC: OK.

NJ: And he regards himself as what they would call mopes, part of the Most Oppressed People Ever, that thing you know, an Irish Northern Nationalist. And he's got like this overweight huge Black Sapper. He's in a context where he has to look after this guy and feed him, and keep him alive, and probably ultimately kill him, but he has to keep him alive before he kills him. So you force the central character into that kind of encounter. And then he has to help him go to the toilet, he has to enable, he has to unzip him, he has to take out his penis, which I know is a funny scene, but actually it kind of becomes integral in the end, and then the guy dies. And then he becomes obsessed with his wife so he moves to England and he kind of falls in love with this woman. And of course he finds out that she's a man. So it goes on and on. Do you understand what I mean? But basically it's, I know it became a large success, but basically it was a series of devices to subject the central character to these self-examinations in a way. And when I was writing it, in the end you say, ok the question is, after you strip everything away from this guy, you strip away his nationalism, you

strip away his weapon, you strip away his sexuality, is there anything left? Is there any definition left? And I suppose the story in a slightly romanticized way says 'Yes there is' which is interesting.

PMC: I'm trying to figure out this Old Ireland and New Ireland³ kind of thing because I don't know if novelists really, or writers think, you know, while change is an integral part, I don't know if Ireland really in our imaginations splits up into old and new, it's kind of continuum, it is in mine anyway. But in your book *Mistaken* (2011), which is Neil's most recent book, which is a doppelganger story set in Dublin of the '60s and contemporary Dublin, it's probably worth examination in this regard because if there was such a thing as 'Old Ireland' for me, it was that the supernatural and the quotidian work hand in hand, and that people blessed themselves, there's always this acknowledgement of the supernatural and *Mistaken* is full of that.

NJ: Yea.

PMC: In that Bram Stoker's influence is there but also it's a very modern story in that one side of the protagonist designs computer games. So we have Bram Stoker in the old Ireland and you have, so is there a kind of dichotomy in your mind as regards this conference, is there such a thing as an old Ireland or a New Ireland?

NJ: There obviously is a New Ireland and there obviously was an Old Ireland.

PMC: How would you define them?

NJ: I think the problem with the Irish imagination is that you don't, that it's never defined, and you contemporary people, people our age or of our generation, and I've done it myself, writing about realities that they themselves haven't experienced but writing about them as if they were realities. I wrote a novel called *The Past* (1980), you wrote obviously, one of the things that attracted me to *The Butcher Boy* (1992) was that that world was so accurate and so accurately described my childhood and what I remember from my childhood, or of childhood in the mid-'50s, late '50s, but it had never been depicted before by anybody. I didn't experience the childhood of John McGahern, I didn't experience that rural kind of isolation and that memory of this great or weird event that kind of tarnished the present, you know there's always an old IRA funeral in John McGahern's stories. I didn't experience that world, I didn't experience the world of Roddy Doyle, I didn't experience the world that Colm Tóibín writes about, but I experienced the world of *The Butcher Boy* and when I came to write *Mistaken* I said 'Okay I'm going to describe as accurately as I can the place, the experience of growing up in Dublin, the experience of the strange little kind of class distinctions there are, not between a working class person and a middle class person but between a kind of half middle class person and really truly middle class person' (laughter).

3 The title of the EFACIS conference at which this public interview took place was "Towards 2016: Old and New Irelands".

PMC: Very subtle nuances there.

NJ: But in a way they're the most important things aren't they, like the guy whose father was a doctor and went to Gonzaga college or the guy whose father was a national teacher or a turf accountant and went to a Christian Brothers school. I mean they are huge distinctions in my memory of Ireland and I said, okay I'm actually going to try and describe as accurately as I can what it was like in the city that I grew up in and I realized when I began to write it, I realized I had never come across this before, I had never seen it in any.

PMC: I haven't come across it either.

NJ: We have hundreds of stories about Dublin, but it's true isn't it?

PMC: It's absolutely true, I couldn't agree with you more.

NJ: And nobody has ever described like Palmerston Park or that, South County Dublin, those rather beautiful squares that are so entrancing and you used to wonder, oh people live there.

PMC: There's also these very urbane teenagers who are very like London teenagers with their candy stripped jackets and their beat clubs and all the rest of it and coffee bars that was very significant in *Mistaken* and every word of it is true.

NJ: It is true, absolutely true.

PMC: So where did it go, I mean ...

NJ: It was interesting writing it and I'm saying okay so I don't remember this culture that's so oppressed by religion, so oppressed by censorship and kind of avoidance of sexuality and all that stuff. I don't remember any of it when I just try to be accurate, it just didn't enter one's consciousness and I said well maybe that was my childhood but maybe then that's a constructed thing that served the purposes of that book. But I think it's interesting that a lot of Irish writing, and I don't mean to be judgemental here, a lot of Irish writing is about writing about the way a previous generation wrote. That's a very strange thing isn't it? Do you not find that?

PMC: I think it's true.

NJ: And the urge to write a novel about, the urge to write a play or something about the response to the opening of *The Silver Tassie* seems to be irresistible or the urge to write a story in which Lady Gregory features, they just can't help doing it, do you understand what I mean? It is true though.

PMC: It is true. One after another, yea you certainly kicked that to touch with the, certainly the second half of *Mistaken* with the descriptions of New York which are extraordinary, the science fiction city of the future mixed up with the past, so that's a very very modern ...

NJ: But that's anybody's experience of New York.

PMC: I wish I could have written it. I've being to New York but I don't see any big pages about living ...

NJ: Ah but you didn't have the traumas I had in New York, I really suffered there.

PMC: Well I mean that is a very very modern section of the book that is very captivating so I mean – you couldn't film that book, could you?

NJ: No I don't think, I don't think so.

PMC: But there was interest in filming it.

NJ: Yea there was yea yea well somebody somewhere ...

PMC: Why would it be so difficult?

NJ: I think stories where, if there is a doppelganger thing, or twins or something like that people try and always use the same actor to, and it never quite works really and you just know it's going wrong. I don't know what the endless examination of the past that happens in Irish fiction is about, it's strange.

PMC: But you spend a good while doing it yourself in *Byzantium* and indeed in other places.

NJ: I didn't write that, Pat.

PMC: But you clearly have a feel for it.

NJ: I know that yea I know, I know that, but ...

PMC: Just tell us a bit about *Byzantium*. This is Neil's new movie which is starring Saoirse Ronan and it's a fabulous sumptuous feast, it really is, it's kind of like I don't know would it be wrong to say it's a sibling to *Interview with the Vampire*, it certainly has kinship with it.

NJ: A little bit.

PMC And it's just on release now, it's just a great 2 hours in the cinema I think.

NJ: OK, well it's about a vampire, it's a vampire story. And it was written by a woman called Moira Buffini. The only thing that would interest this conference would be that we tried to reconstitute the origin myth of the vampire. And we set it in the West of Ireland during the Napoleonic Wars. So if you're ever told that the way to become a vampire is you get bitten by a guy in the middle of the night from somewhere in Transylvania, it's a lie. To become a vampire you have to go to the South-West coast, you have to get on a currach with people speaking Irish and be rolled out to this misty island and you have to go into this hut which is basically like Gallarus Oratory, but the hut itself is a disguised Christian artifact. In fact it hides a much more terrifying pagan reality.

PMC: You made all this up, did ya.

NJ: Totally (laughter).

PMC: What a piece of impertinence is this man.

NJ: No it was a bit of fun. It's not that hard, you've made up better.

PMC: I don't know about that, I'd be afraid to do that Neil, even as we speak, an academic paper is being written about it (laughter).

NJ: We should talk about *Breakfast on Pluto*.

PMC: Yes, we should. That's a political movie isn't it?

NJ: Well, that's a novel that you wrote.

PMC: That's right (laughter).

NJ: No, but it's another example of, when Pat, when I read *Breakfast on Pluto*, it was another example of reading, of actually kind of experiencing directly the stuff that was right in front of your face but you never thought of it in such a bare and simple way, do you understand what I mean? It's like that character which Pat had written about, he wrote about this woman/man figure and in the novel, kind of a bit more like Quentin Crisp in – what was that movie ...

PMC: *The Naked Civil Servant* (1975).

NJ: A bit more like that strange lost gay kind of figure. In the movie we turned him into something slightly more joyous, but Pat describes in the novel, he described the experience I had when I was in London during the '70s for the first time, working there because I lived there for a period, when all of those, all of that IRA stuff was going on and the strange kind of combination of Irish kids smoking dope, and glam rock, dressing up like Mark Boland kind of stuff and this horrendously ancient thing erupting around you at the same time. And actually the only thing when I saw him in, when Daniel Day Lewis played Gerry Conlon in *In the Name of the Father* (1993), you remember that when he comes back to Belfast dressed as a hippy ...

PMC: Yea with Hendrix blasting, that was really really good.

NJ: He got those strange contrasts as well. And if you ever look at pictures of Martin McGuinness and Gerry Adams in the '70s, they all have these horrible bell bottoms, horrible, they look like the Bay City Rollers don't they? And you kind of forget that.

PMC: Well the Shankill butchers would have been dressed like the Bay City Rollers.

NJ: Would they?

PMC: Yes they would because they were with the Tartan gangs

NJ: Of course they would have, yea.

PMC: (singing) Bye Bye baby (laughter) I want to talk to you about *Dream of a Beast* which again has that, I don't like the word surreal, but elevated quality, it's a middle class suburb, and it's not a middle class suburb, it's an exercise in language and it

seems to be that people either have forgotten it or it's not spoken about. Would you tell us about the writing of that book? Or why you wrote it?

NJ: I just wrote it. I lived in a place, a kinda very hot summer the way it is now, it seemed so hot it became oppressive. I lived in a house in Marino and for some reason I used to suffer from eczema and I had this, I got this enormous growth on my face.

PMC: Really – I didn't know that.

NJ: Yea, really. It was huge like and I used to try and keep it hidden from people because it was so embarrassing and I remember once meeting someone who I hadn't met for a long time and they kissed on the cheek and I could feel the instant revulsion – 'oh what has happened to me, what's become of me' – you have that kind of feeling, it was a book about that kind of feeling.

PMC: And yet that was cheeky as well, because obviously Gregor Samsa [*The Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka (1915)] woke up and there he was.

NJ: Yea well that wasn't, it was more of, it was more like *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954) kind of thing, it was more like *The Fly* (1958).

PMC: *The Fly* yea.

NJ: Anyway it was just a simple way of – it's just a novel I wrote a long time ago.

PMC: Speaking of those kind of movies, like you say you didn't look at these movies when you were a kid, but you seem to know, mysteriously to know a lot about them, *The Fly* and undead creatures, and *Daughters of Darkness* (1971), and all that, they do inform, particularly in *Byzantium*, this is definitely a joyous kind of B-movie in some respects.

NJ: Yea it is.

PMC: So when you were a kid in Fairview cinema you know like a lot of us you saw a bunch of art movies but you also saw those.

NJ: Oh that's the only thing you saw in Fairview cinema, yea yea.

PMC: You didn't see a few Bergman's or anything like that?

NJ: No, no, not there.

PMC: What did you see then?

NJ: Oh God I don't know, I used to, cause our family was rather strict, he knew [gesturing to Patrick McCabe], my father taught him, he used to be a national school-teacher and my father was the, what was he, The Cigire [School Inspector] was it.

PMC: He was the Professor of Mathematics.

NJ: Was he?

PMC: He was head of sums.

NJ: Was he head of sums? I thought he was Professor of Education?

PMC: Well okay it was the '70s, the auld eyesight wasn't good.

NJ: Well okay no because I was only allowed go to the cinema once a week, or once every two weeks, so it was kind of a precious thing.

PMC: Do you think that was a good idea maybe?

NJ: I don't think so, no.

PMC: Well every movie you saw you remembered it as well.

NJ: Perhaps I did, I don't know, when I was a kid all I remember seeing was Norman Wisdom movies actually.

PMC: There was a lot of those around.

NJ: There were a lot of those around, they used to come out every week and stuff, I don't remember much of cinema, my father had a great interest in cinema.

PMC: Did he.

NJ: Yea, particularly in Fritz Lang.

PMC: Really?

NJ: Yea, weird, for some reason.

PMC: That is unusual now for a man of his generation.

NJ: Particularly *Metropolis* (1927).

PMC: Really?

NJ: Yea, he talked about it constantly. It was a big event for him. I remember him saying to me once 'You shouldn't be thinking of film' – this has never occurred to me before but he said to me – 'you shouldn't be thinking of film in terms of actors, don't think you're going to see a 'John Wayne movie' or a 'Clint Eastwood movie,' you should think of who directed the film'.

PMC: Did he really say that?

NJ: Yea.

PMC: That's a very enlightened kind of thing.

NJ: It just hit me now actually.

PMC: So what was the household like then, your sister Eithne is a famous painter, your father's ...

NJ: Oh come one Pat ...

PMC: Oh come on Neil you have to tell us.

NJ: No.

PC: It's the old and new Ireland, you have to tell us.

NJ: My father, he taught education in St. Pats in Drumcondra and he was a mathematician actually. So it was a strange mixture of absolute repression, utter repression, and total freedom, it was strange. I suppose you know people who are involved in education they tend to run interesting houses sometimes, don't they?

PMC: Well some of them do but my memories of him are was that he was enlightened he kind of established the project method⁴ in the Irish school system, the new curriculum was introduced around that time and he was a leading light in that.

NJ: Oh yea.

PMC: That was a big thing in Irish education at the time.

NJ: Yea, but they were all Gaelgoirs then, they were all fierce Irish speakers, as was he and most of his friends, you know you'd be taken for holidays to the west of Ireland where you'd get into trouble, you'd get beaten up and stuff.

PMC: Beaten up?

NJ: Well you know.

PMC: Well, just before we open it to the floor because I'm sure the audience want to ask you questions about your work I want to talk to you just about the new movie you're doing and maybe a little bit about "The Borgias" as well, but also your abiding and continuing interest in the ghost story and the supernatural. Possibly your next movie will be "Traces"?

NJ: Yea, perhaps.

PMC: Could you talk a bit about it, I know it's premature.

NJ: It is a bit premature.

PMC: Let's say "The Borgias," tell us about that because it's a fabulous project.

NJ: That's the cable networks in America have given a former Irish altar boy the opportunity to tell a lurid story in the Vatican in the fifteenth century. It's kind of Ian Paisley's wet dream really (laughter), *The Red Whore of Rome*, I was asked to do a script by Dreamworks on, I was sent a script about Lucretia Borgias and I began to read about the family and I thought this is really fascinating because if you were, or did ever serve at mass or had any kind of Catholic background you can't help but find the inner workings of the Vatican fascinating. The reality and lurid imagination gives rise to those secrets, so I began researching this family and I realized this are extraordinary, this monstrous pope, Rodrigo Borgia, and I read Machiavelli's *The Prince* (1532), and said 'I'd like to write a script about the whole family not just about the pope' so they commissioned me to do that and I wrote it and they read it and I said

4 This was a child-centred initiative pioneered by Neil's father in the '60s and '70s as part of the 'New Curriculum' for Irish primary schools at that time.

'what do you think would you like me to make it as a film' and I remember somebody, the head of productions saying 'interesting vermin' and I said 'what?' He says 'No we're not going to make this film because there is nothing remotely heroic about it, no character you'll sympathise with, there's nobody you can root for'. So I tried to make it independently and I couldn't. And I brought it back to them about 6 or 7 years later and Stephen Spielberg said 'why don't you try and do a cable series' which seems to be what's happening now to all challenging movie projects in the United States of America. I began to write it as a cable series and ended up doing it for three years. That's how that happened but you know it's great fun, it's a fascinating period, and actually the format of that, basically a 30- or 40-hour movie is far, far more suitable to any kind of historical subject.

PMC: Of course it is.

NJ: I mean, if I could have made *Michael Collins* as one of those events it would have being extraordinary. Anyway, a lot of it is just luck that it could happen, that they asked me to do it, that it happened that I could get the chance of it really. Initially I didn't know anything about writing serious television.

PMC: Did you find that onerous as a task? I mean, you seem to have done an extraordinary amount of ...

NJ: Well initially, for the first year everybody said it was too slow, and I suppose I was just enjoying the possibility of writing at such length. The second year I quickened it up and everybody liked it more. The third year I quickened it up again and people seemed to like it even more, so that's the story of that.

Questions from the floor:

Question 1: I believe you had plans at one point to make a film on Roger Casement. Is that a possibility still?

NJ: I think in the current climate it would be well almost impossible, the current climate of financing for films and the kind of movies that people go to see. It might be possible, it would be very possible for it to be done as a long form series for BBC television or something like that but it's also – you approach such subjects at your peril because anyone who wrote about Casement, actually Mario Vargas Llosa has just published a novel which apparently is very bad, I haven't read it – has anybody read it? It's kind of a battle zone, these fraught historical areas, you get things thrown at you by academics and stuff. You get radio programmes made about you, about how inaccurate you are – in answer to you I'd love to make a movie about Casement but I don't see how I could at present.

Q2: I love your novel *The Past*. I want to know why you dropped, or it was dropped, the epigraph.

NJ: I dropped the epigraph? What do you mean?

Q2: There was an epigraph in my edition, the 1982 edition, by Yeats and in the new kindle edition there is no epigraph, so I was wondering ...

NJ: I didn't even know that (laughter) – I wasn't even aware – so on the electronic edition they don't include it?

Q2: I thought it was, it must have been a choice,

NJ: No, no, I didn't even know there was a kindle edition, seriously there is a kindle edition of *The Past*?

Q2: Yes, there is a kindle edition.

NJ: Oh I know what's happened, they've rereleased it. They've rereleased it in the United States with a small publisher and they have it on the kindle. God bless them, that's very good. But thank you very much for that. I'll see that they put it back.

Q3: I'm just wondering, is there any nod to Yeats in the title *Byzantium*?

NJ: In the writer's, the writer was Moira Buffine, of course in her mind there was, and she had Saoirse Ronan quote from "Byzantium" yea, and it seemed to be so pretentious I just took it out. In a vampire movie, it's like quoting either of the Yeats poems would seem to be kind of absurd. I did take it out so all that was left was the name of the Boarding house, just the title.

Q3: The Coen Brothers used the "No country for old men" as the title for their film.

NJ: That's from Cormac McCarthy's novel.

Q4: You use the word 'long form,' and I know you've worked, you've done short stories, novels, movies etc. and a TV series, very much currently in fashion. Are you attracted by the possibilities that the 'long form' offers?

NJ: Yea, absolutely – it's a writer's dream, it's extraordinary – you'd love it (to Patrick McCabe), you would.

PMC: I don't know Neil.

NJ: Ah you would.

PMC: Because em ... I watched *Breaking Bad* and I watched every episode. But every other series I can't sustain my interest in them.

NJ: Yea, well what happens is this. You'd write an episode, or you'd have an idea and you'd wonder where this would go, yea, and you'd have to come up with one next week, and in normal circumstances you'd go 'Ah well, maybe it won't go anywhere, maybe it'll fizzle out.' You have to force these characters in, it's like branches of things, it's like growing vegetables in a hothouse or something.

PMC: Like *The Day of the Triffids* (1962).

NJ: Do you understand what I mean? My only experience of it is through “The Borgias”, oh what the hell am I going to write about for the next episode? Ok there’s a guy called Prince Djem, yea, yea, he was murdered, who murdered him, okay maybe – do you understand what I mean, and you begin to flesh it out that way. I would love to do it but I would have to find an interesting subject.

PMC: Well that’s a lot of pressure, how many, how long would you spend on a script for one episode?

NJ: How long would I ...?

PMC: Yea to write it?

NJ: I would have to write basically a – when it comes out in April they would commit after the first two episodes are aired, if figures are good enough they will then commission the next year. So I would have to write ten scripts between April and July, it’s a lot of work. But it’s kind of this pressure that it’s actually, you actually feel you are writing something that somebody will see, you know. The main problem with writing stuff is you feel nobody’s ever going to read this. When you’re in that context you think ‘Oh my God somebody might watch this.’ Obviously somebody will watch it because it’s been made. I enjoyed that but I don’t know if I will be able to do it again, or if I’ll get the opportunity to do it again.

Q5: From your perspective, what are the disadvantages and advantages of adapting a text by a living author to write in your own script when actually making a film?

NJ: Okay, okay – by a living author or a dead author?

Q5: A living author.

NJ: A living author, I don’t know, I mean it’s like it can be a terrible trap you know working with other people’s work. What seems to happen in the film business is that if there is a book already existing it seems to give everybody some kind of security. The books, the things I’ve adapted are Anne Rice’s novel *Interview with the Vampire*, Pat’s book *The Butcher Boy*, Graham Greene’s novel *The End of the Affair* (1951), and Angela Carter’s stories *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), in each of those cases I had a direct response, an immediate response to those pieces of work. The minute I read them I could see there was something crying out to be made there if I could just find the right form for it, do you understand what I mean? But in the absence of that kind of response to a book I wouldn’t know what to do really. I think it’s far more interesting if you can write things directly for the screen, for me, but I don’t always have enough ideas and sometimes a book cries out to be made. I was going to adapt a book called *Skippy Dies* (2010), but in the end I decided not to do that because it’s a huge novel and a movie could only probably disappoint. Somebody else is doing it now. I know Paul Murray the writer is a bit upset that I ended up not doing it. It can be

a bit of a poisoned chalice in a way, if you don't get it absolutely right, the poisoned chalice being the text that you're adapting.

Q6: How do you talk to an actor whose exceptionally well known, probably an enormous ego, if that actor is perhaps, doesn't get it for a particular moment, particular scene, as a director do you feel you have an actor's sensibility yourself or how much latitude do you give actors?

NJ: Yea I know what you mean. I think you have to like actors. I do like them, and sometimes you have to realise that people who have enormous fame have really specific problems – do you understand what I mean – which bring their own insecurities. It can be very difficult to deal with but if you're, I would not like to be Johnny Depp at this moment, I wouldn't like to be Justin Bieber (is that his name?) I would not like to have that crippling fame. A lot of people lust after it, they kind of thirst after it. I think people who have that they have specific problems, and they, actually the other night if you don't mind me talking about Michael Jackson, I was looking at with my sister, he did, have you heard the version that he did of "Smile," the Charlie Chaplin song?

PMC: No.

NJ: Oh it's beautiful. Sorry but I was looking at all of Michael Jackson's old videos, I don't know why, and I think he's the most extraordinary talent and it's the most cornballed thing in the world to say but I think he was absolutely extraordinary and when you look at the things he did from the Jackson 5 to his end, it is heartbreaking. It is like looking at, what's Lisa Minnelli's – Judy Garland, people who have that kind of fame, it's crippling kind of ...

Q6: Being in the fish bowl ...

NJ: Oh, it must be a horrible thing. I wouldn't like to experience it, but the really well known actors I have worked with, unless there are some people who are just total assholes, there are people who have, you know the fame brings them problems, the sense of an enormous ego is often a manifestation of the problems that fame brings them. Generally if you find the actor underneath the star, you can work with them

Q6: It's presumably different for every actor but do you talk to them in technical ways or do you talk to them about character psychology more?

NJ: Yes about psychology, about the part, and the emotions, finding the emotional heart of the part and stuff. It can be challenging, you know what I mean, people that are big stars they are big stars for a reason, because everybody wants to look at them, and some of them are good actors as well.

Q7: You were talking about *Mistaken* as something that tells the truth of your childhood and one of the pleasures for someone from Dublin in particular is travelling

through those places and those little local distinctions like you say between middle class, and really middle class, that mightn't kinda translate or that people mightn't be able to make sense of, so is it easier or can you do that in a way in your writing in a way you can't do in filmmaking just because of the commercial imperative?

NJ: No not really, no, no, although, well if I was to make a movie that was like *Mistaken* now?

Q7: Yea.

NJ: You couldn't express those subtleties, there are some things that movies don't do, isn't there, and one thing they don't do is take time, you know, but I'm glad you recognized it actually because it's, it seems, sometimes I think that the fictions that we write do a disservice to the kind of country that we live in, in a way, or to the reality of it, but I think movies are a different thing, they are about image making really, whereas *Mistaken* could be about, you know, language and inner realities and thoughts.

PMC: What do you mean when you think that sometimes writing does a disservice because I've often wondered about that, like in my own family my brother said that 'I don't know why you're writing that, that's not the way it was, the reason that you wrote that is because there's something wrong with you' (laughter). Like you know, the thing is, maybe he's right?

NJ: Maybe he is right.

PMC: Do you know what I'm saying? Maybe if we were to examine the history of fiction writing, not all of them were functional kind of together people (laughter).

NJ: And they are also haunted by ghosts, aren't they?

PMC: Exactly.

NJ: They are haunted by bigger ghosts than they are, ghosts of em ...

PMC: So.

NJ: In many ways if you look at the shreds of memory of the Irish landscape that you find in Samuel Beckett's work it's far more kind of plangent than anything you'd read coming out of us lot, isn't it, you know what I mean?

PMC: It kind of is really.

NJ: But it's only little scraps in Beckett you hear, you look at *Endgame* or something, you can see a bit of the Wicklow landscape or something in ...

PMC: North Dublin as well in Dante⁵ and all that stuff.

NJ: I know.

5 This is a reference to a story from Beckett's collection *More Pricks than Kicks* (1934) entitled "Dante and the Lobster."

Q8: It seems to me in both of your writing, and this follows from what you were saying about there's something wrong with you, which of course there isn't, if there is then in a very good way, but both your writing seems to me in very interesting ways to be obsessed with violence. Is that because it's fun to write about or is there something in particular you find in it or...?

PMC: Well, in my case it's certainly not because it's fun to write about. I don't like writing about it and I'd rather write about tender things, and I do sometimes, but I think that maybe unlike Neil's experience not that I came from a violent household but there certainly was a great degree of repression, and I think that to me kind of suggests the violence in my books in that there is a lot of 'you can't do this, you can't do that.' I mean on an individual level, I mean on an official level, and there are a lot of things ready to burst asunder, which of course they did in many ways and in the books they do in all sorts of personal and metaphysical levels, but it's certainly not because it's fun, no.

NJ: Violence, Oh God, it's like, you're talking about the movies I've made, are you, not the novels?

Q8: Well, you did mention violence in the movies, yea, you talked about taking *Michael Collins* and making it a simple story about violence.

NJ: No, but that was because the story of *Michael Collins* is the story of a man who introduced a specific kind of violence into the political discourse here, isn't it, that's, it's hard, I don't know what to say about violence, but there is something thrilling in smashing things up (laughter), there is, seriously there is.

PMC: Ah there is and great fun to watch.

NJ: There's a great pleasure in building a set and photographing it being torn to pieces in a strange way. I'm not a violent person at all.

PMC: But also drama like, Raymond Chandler said if you're ever stuck in your book have somebody come through the door with a gun.

NJ: I had a job, the only job I ever had that I enjoyed apart from making movies was I used to work demolition, yea for a period and I used to be told, I used to be given a crowbar and a lump hammer and I'd be sent in through it seemed like a perfect Victorian house, a room, and I'd be told to have wrecked that room by lunchtime, smash the entire thing down to bare brick. You'd go in there with one of these masks and just smash things up. It was the greatest fun I'll ever have in my life. There's something about cinema that likes violence and likes it too much, I mean if you saw the last *Batman* movie, I just couldn't watch it, it was, you know, the level of noise actually more than even the violence it just seemed to me to be pornographically addicted to this series of increasingly violent events, I think it's definitely a problem in films.

PMC: It seems to have grown exponentially from the Quentin Tarantino movies of the early '90s onwards, it seems to have become more and more violent.

NJ: I know, yea, absolutely.

PMC: Casual violence.

NJ: Yea.

Q9: I was wondering you mentioned films which have influenced your work, historical films, or older films that have influenced or had an impact on your work, are there any contemporary directors or perhaps Irish directors whose work you admire at the moment?

NJ: Pat?

PMC: Ah yea there are of course, I like Lenny Abrahamson, – what else did I see recently that I really liked – I liked Kirsten Sheridan's *Dollhouse*. I think it's interesting what Neil said the last time, there doesn't seem to have developed an Irish cinema, a sort of an Irish style of filmmaking in the same way as you could suggest about Irish writing, you know.

NJ: I know, yea, yea.

PMC: Loosely, loosely obviously. I mean they're disparate, and there are different individual voices but it's kinda funny that you have a kind of a definable Irish body of work in the last 20 or 30 years in literature but you couldn't really say that about cinema, I don't think so. Maybe it's because it costs money to make movies, and it's piecemeal, but I like them individually. It's just I wouldn't feel I could list off their names the way I could Jim Sheridan, Neil Jordan previous to that, but maybe that's just getting older. I mean less and less movies come out, there was a time when an Irish movie was a big event, now it comes and goes. *Good Vibrations* (2012) came out a really great movie about music in the North of Ireland and the Troubles, only lasted a week, it seems to me very strange.

Q10: I didn't for a moment think I was going to ask this but since the subject of violence came up Neil and sitting down with children very often watching movies we watch as a family every Saturday night and kids choose the movies, and the hero movies, and you mentioned there the violence of the *Batman* movie. I was personally also horrified by it in many ways and I know lots of people like it and I wonder if I could quiz you further to talk a little bit about what, when you're making a movie, how you're thinking about how the depiction of violence works in those sort of things, how you perhaps edit yourself or think about the context when the violence takes place. I find that very interesting.

NJ: I know, I know, it's a strange one because I was going to make a movie called *Fury* this year. It was an incredible violent gang epic thing here and it was meant to be, it was designed in my mind, as a kind of metaphor for what's happened over the last 10 or 15 years, a society where nobody's ever held accountable. But in the end I

just couldn't do it, I didn't want to do it, everything about it was too unpleasant and too violent. I mean it's great to shoot that stuff, things blowing up and all that, but it's the visceral end of cinema that is becoming less and less interesting to me. What's more interesting to me is what you can get this thing to express, and to get it to express something about a character to me is more interesting than creating a blood-fest. All these superhero movies, they are not about violence per se but they are really about noise, aren't they, they are definitely about constantly disparate events that have to keep an audience kind of viscerally excited in a way.

Q11: As a novelist and a director, which do you consider the greatest challenges of adapting a novel for the big screen?

NJ: It's very difficult to adapt a novel to the screen. I think the challenge is to do something that's worth existing in a way, that's the problem that writers and artists grapple with all the time, why should there be something there that wasn't there before, and whether it comes from a novel or not, isn't that the problem you have when you sit down and you're trying to think what will I do next? Would there be any reason for those words to be on the page, or for this piece of film to be exposed. You have to be creating something that's worthwhile in some way, and to me it doesn't matter whether it's from a novel or a film, but it's a strange world that we live in. We're not talking a lot about Ireland, old and new, are we? (laughter)

PMC: We did talk a little bit about it.

NJ: A little bit, okay thank you.

PMC: We can talk a little bit about it.

Q12: I teach your novel *Sunrise with Sea Monster* (2004) every year, and every year the whole class fights about the last bit where the father comes back from the dead, whether it makes it a good novel or a bad novel, and we all have a great fight about it, and I defend you.

NJ: You do, thanks.

Q12: I think it's absolutely great the way you have essentially created a pretend realistic novel until the very end. It's a novel about Irish history and then you just smash it up and wrap it around itself and turn it into something else.

NJ: That would be a wonderful fantasy, a dead person coming back to see you, wouldn't it, hello how are you and the clothes all wet.

PMC: I was dead there for a minute.

NJ: What?

NJ: Thank you. So what's the consensus then, do you ever reach agreement?

Q12: No, no consensus so far, no I just think it's great. And I found it interesting that as far as I know, your movies are more, either one or the other,

NJ: Yea, perhaps you're right. Liam Neeson was desperate to do that, do you know that? To play that father, he wanted to play that father.

PMC: Was there any movement on it?

NJ: Ah, if you've finished a book you don't want to go back to it, do ya, it's like hard you know, but thank you for saying that.

Q13: I've got a question about the role of sound in your films actually. You just mentioned the *Batman* film which I think has an extraordinarily poor sound mix actually but when you think about voices in your films they've got a real musicality to them, they've got particular accents, there's quite a lot of space in the sound in your films, and I was wondering at what point you start thinking about it?

NJ: I don't. You know there are some people who design sequences that are, where the sound is critical, as critical as the photography or the characters.

PMC: Like *The Conversation* (1974).

NJ: Or like – something I saw the other day where sound was so critical, anyway I do find it really refreshing when the sound tells its own story, kind of thing. I have to admit I don't think about it that much. I think more about music and about dialogue, think more about the timbre of somebody's voice. I don't think of constructing things in terms of sound.

PMC: OK then will we wrap it up?

NJ: Thanks very much (applause).