

A PINWOOD DIALOGUE WITH RICHARD LINKLATER

From ensemble comedy to intimate flirtation, Richard Linklater's films capture the natural awkwardness of human encounters and the minutiae of conversation. His acclaimed *Slacker* (1991), *Dazed and Confused* (1993), *SubUrbia* (1996), *Before Sunrise* (1995), and *Before Sunset* (1998) each portrayed a short span of time full of finely-observed interactions. *The Newton Boys* (1998) marked a departure for Linklater in content and scale: a period Western about little known Texas bankrobbers. At a preview screening of the film at the Museum of the Moving Image, Linklater talks about his discovery of this film's would-be legendary characters, and how he evokes naturalistic performances from his actors.

A Pinewood Dialogue following a screening of *The Newton Boys*, moderated by Chief Curator David Schwartz (March 15, 1998):

DAVID SCHWARTZ: Please welcome Rick Linklater. (Applause)

RICHARD LINKLATER: Thanks! Thanks for coming out and hanging out.

SCHWARTZ: Congratulations on a beautifully-made movie. First I want to ask you about last night, about the premiere [of *The Newton Boys* (1998)]. That was, from what I understand, an incredible event in Austin, Texas.

LINKLATER: Yes, I talked 20th-Century Fox into doing the premiere—instead of L.A., we did it in Austin. We actually did it in the theater where we shot two scenes in the movie, this old theater in Austin. It was a really big event; Texas hadn't seen anything like it. (Laughter) We had these old Studebakers that the cast drove up in and they had the old lights out front and all this. Everybody was freaking out; it was great. (Laughter)

All these teenage girls were just screaming for Matthew [McConaughey] and Ethan [Hawke]! (Laughter) "Matthew!" It was wild. I was like, "What world am I in?" I got out there and I was just overwhelmed, but I think if the Newtons were alive today this is the kind of premiere that they would expect.

SCHWARTZ: Both Matthew and Ethan go way back. Ethan I guess was born in Austin and Matthew...

LINKLATER: Yes; Matthew was born in Uvalde, Texas, where the Newtons are from. His uncle actually bought a horse from Joe Newton later in life. It was close to home.

SCHWARTZ: You cast Matthew in his first real major film role in *Dazed and Confused* (1993). Can you talk a little about how you discovered him?

LINKLATER: He just came in on an audition. The casting director I was working with had met him in a bar and said, "Hey you should just come in." I was casting a lot of non-actors, so it didn't occur to me that Matthew wasn't an actor; he just came in. He had moved to Longview, Texas; I was from Huntsville, Texas—these are east Texas towns. He came in, and he said, "Listen man, I ain't this guy... but I *know* this guy," about that character he played—the old guy hanging out and still dating high-school girls, getting older and older. There's one in every town, right? (Laughter)

That was a lot of fun, and that part was really a pretty small part. He didn't really have any lines past the beer bus, but I rewrote the script because I liked him so much and he was bringing so much to it. We were inventing scenes, improving. I just liked him.

SCHWARTZ: Let me ask you about the ending. First, of course, is the footage, the Johnny Carson footage and the documentary footage.

LINKLATER: Yes, that's priceless.

SCHWARTZ: Did you see that early on in the process of working on the film?

LINKLATER: Yes; I read a *Smithsonian* article about the Newtons—this was about four years ago. I'm a lifelong Texan, and I'd never heard of them—and no one's really heard of them. If they say they have, they're lying; they're really, completely obscure. I went and met with Claude [Stanush], the writer of the article, who became one of my co-screenwriters.

He shot that documentary footage of Willis [Newton]. There was a short documentary he made that never really got out there, but I want to try to get it released on video because it has Joe and Willis, the surviving brothers. He shot this in the mid '70s—it's pretty fascinating stuff.

Then the Carson clip: I had heard [Joe Newton] had been on the show, so we got in touch with Carson Productions. They never license their stuff to movies, they just don't do that—but Johnny remembered Joe and he really liked him and he let us do it. People were like, "Oh, you're never going to get that." And we got it! I'm just so thankful to Johnny. Carson's great, you really miss him. Not that [Jay] Leno's bad or anything... (Laughter) It's just the fact that they would bring in people from Americana, "Oh, some old bank robber, an 80-year-old guy; Let's bring him on the show." They don't do that much anymore.

SCHWARTZ: It's incredible how much the real Willis seems like Matthew's performance.

LINKLATER: Matthew plus fifty years equals that guy—the real Willis was a lot like that. He's just kind of crazy. I mean his eyes are flashing... that's why I love him. He's 86-years-old here, and he's still angry about that \$200,000 that idiot left! (Laughter) He was unrepentant to the day he died.

He and Joe were very different. Joe regretted it, the way he does in the movie. We show he had a lot of apprehension, moral problems, until the end of his days. He resented Willis, I think, for

dragging him into all of that. Later in their lives they would go on these historical panels, historical conventions. They'd be "the two oldest surviving train robbers,"—that's what they were called. They'd have these discussions where Joe would say, "When he sent me that hundred dollars," (or I don't know how much money), "that was my downfall right there." And Willis would go, "Hell, boy—that was your up-fall! That made your life; you wouldn't be here now!" (Laughter) They had this between them forever.

SCHWARTZ: You said that you worked with Claude Stanush who wrote the book [*The Newton Boys*]. How did you get interested in this and decide you wanted to make a movie with this material?

LINKLATER: I just love the story so much. I love those characters. I guess being a Texan I always knew I was going to make some kind of real Texas-roots Western. I love Westerns and gangster films—everybody who loves movies loves those genres, of course. I always knew I would do it some day; it just took me finding *this* story.

It meant everything to me that it was true. I wouldn't have been interested otherwise, and I probably couldn't have invented it. We tried to be as historically accurate as you could be—everything in the movie it is true; we didn't invent characters. All the major characters are historic, based on research, close to what their characters were like. Everything in it happened—like Willis's gun jamming in Toronto that turns into a street brawl or the horse in the middle of the two banks that explode. In writing a script you couldn't say, "Okay, let's shoot this guy four or five times and he lives." You would go, "No, that's not really realistic, you can't do that." If you stick to the facts, it's crazy but it's all true. I just found my way into it. I just loved the characters and got really obsessed with it; I felt if it was my story to make.

SCHWARTZ: How long was it after you made *SubUrbia* (1996) four years ago?

LINKLATER: It was four years ago—this month, even—that I first met Claude and read the article. With my producer, co-producer, and one of my co-screenwriters, we all met with Claude and just started working with him.

I went off to Vienna and did *Before Sunrise* (1995), but I couldn't wait to get back and do *The Newton Boys*. It was really tough to get the project going because I knew it would be a bigger-budget movie. I was seen as a low-budget guy, and I knew this one would cost some money. Just to recreate the '20s and the look that the film needed was really difficult to get off. No one really wanted to do it, but eventually it ended up at 20th-Century Fox.

They pushed it back a year because of casting. The cast wasn't coming together to their liking; the actors didn't seem like big enough names. Ethan was aboard and then he took another movie... I don't know, it just wasn't meant to be that year. It got pushed and I did *SubUrbia* in the interim, and then came right into *Newton Boys*.

To get delayed that year was actually good. It gave me another year to think about it. I eventually got my ideal cast; everyone in there is who I wanted the first time around. A lot of these people weren't available that first time around or were falling out, schedule-wise. It was meant to happen when it did.

SCHWARTZ: What convinced Claude that you were the right person? Apparently other people had approached him over the years and tried to make this into a movie.

LINKLATER: Yes, that was the big hurdle because he had been approached. He was the literary executor of Willis's estate—he had the story rights, and he had been approached off and on over the last twenty years. It was always people coming in, Hollywood coming in, and saying, "Oh, we want to buy this story," but they wanted to make it a different kind of story. Like, "Let's get the Texas Rangers in here, make it a cop and robber thing." Claude said, "That's not the story."

I think he liked that I liked the story so much. I'd say, "No, this is the story. I don't want to change anything. I want to tell this story as accurately as possible and just try to make it work as a film." That was my goal. He liked that, but he also wanted to learn a little more about me as a filmmaker, so he wanted to see some of my films. I said, "Okay this is where I lose it. This 78-year-old man likes me, he likes my passion for the project, but uh-oh, now he wants to see a film!"

(Laughter) He wanted to see *Slacker* (1991) and I said, "Okay this is the end". But he loved it, he loved it! We had a really intelligent conversation about it. Claude's the hippest 80-year-old guy I know. (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: The first unusual thing of the film is the ending, the fact that it's a happy ending for a movie about gangsters.

LINKLATER: Well, "happy"? They're walking off to prison, so...

SCHWARTZ: Right, but it's not *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967).

LINKLATER: Yes; they're not dead. I told everyone it had to be sort of a *Huckleberry Finn* ending; neither a happy nor a tragic ending would be appropriate, it had to be bittersweet. Their triumph, of course, was living to be old men and getting light sentences; a slap on the wrist, basically.

SCHWARTZ: When you made *Dazed and Confused* you wrote a very funny journal about dealing with Universal Studios and the back and forth of some of the problems. What was it like in this case? Was this the film you always intended, or were you getting feedback from the studio to do this and do that?

LINKLATER: No, it gets easier every film. I think *Dazed* was a struggle because that was the biggest leap I ever made. Going from a privately-financed film like *Slacker*—just me and my credit cards and loans from family, that type of off-independent film—to doing a film financed by Universal was a big jump. Even though that was officially my third film and I had it all in my head and I knew what I wanted, they treat you like you don't know what you're doing. I had less respect, I think, as a filmmaker.

As I described in that [journal], it's really psychically draining—but you get your film made. It was a real challenge to get my film made. I realized how strong you have to be; there's nothing easy about it. And with the studio giving you a lot of hell—that was the only time in my whole film life that I sensed everyone wanted me to fail, wanted it to suck. Rumors were out like, "Oh it's terrible." I just wanted everybody to see

the movie because I was really happy with it—but it was a weird dynamic, that sophomore slump kind of thing, where they just want that second one to be terrible. I sensed that vibe, it was nasty. I felt I was getting it from all angles, but you just have to survive that and keep going.

This one, even though it's a bigger budget, was really smooth. You have two showdowns: one over the budget, that's a big one; and then one at the very end when they have to sign off and say, "Okay that's it, lock picture, go do the final sound mix." You have all these guys at the studio who don't own the studio, they just have a job there, and their job's on the line. It's their fear and their insecurity that you have to deal with. You have to convince them that, "Yes, that's the film," and "Sure, we could re-shoot that." The ideas are pouring out. Usually it's just, "Cut things, cut a lot of things." I'm writing five-page faxes saying, "Well, if we cut *that*, *that* won't make sense, and *this* won't make sense. Right now we've got a tight movie that I think all makes sense."

SCHWARTZ: Was this pretty much the length it's always been in the cutting process? So many movies these days are two-and-a-half and three-hours long.

LINKLATER: Yes; this is two hours and one minute—that's nothing compared to most films, but you can always cut more. (Laughs) That was another showdown—but that's not bad for me; that's par for the course. Meanwhile the studio was making *Titanic* (1997) at the same time they're making this film. They all figured they'd be out of jobs soon, and it was a tough time. The residual effect was pretty bad, because they can't do anything to [*Titanic* director James] Cameron, but they can take it out on me! (Laughter) Heads were rolling—like it's their fault that *Titanic* is over budget or something—so they focused on these other films, cut a few thousand dollars.

SCHWARTZ: Approximately what was the budget for this film? The physical production is so beautiful and so realistic.

LINKLATER: \$27 million. That sounds like a lot for me or for my other films, but if you look at the Hollywood average now it's \$40 to \$60 million. You see films like *As Good As It Gets* (1997)—it's \$65 million, and you're like, "It's a contemporary

film with a few locations, hm..." (Laughter) I'm going, "Oh, we had 81 locations." Our art department, their jaws dropped. They said, "You're kidding!" You know you're in trouble when the crew is asking you to cut scenes and the cast says, "Just cut Toronto, please. We can't do it, it's just too much." My production designer Catherine Hardwicke and her whole crew deserve medals for what was achieved here. She did that film *Mad City* (1997), and she said she had more money in her budget for one set on *Mad City* than the entire *Newton Boys*.

SCHWARTZ: How was Toronto filmed? How much of that was glass paintings, matte work, or that sort of thing?

LINKLATER: We filmed that in San Antonio. We found the one beautiful green granite building that looked period, and then there's a big parking garage there that became downtown Toronto. The budget was just enough to spend \$35,000 to work with Matte World; they do a painting and you just put it in there.

SCHWARTZ: How hard was it for you to do a period film like this in terms of how you approach the visual style, the way people talk, and the very mundane decisions about directing?

LINKLATER: That was the fun part of this, the really rich experience of it all. For *Dazed and Confused*, I remembered [the time period] only too well, and everyone I was working with did too; that was a world we had lived in. On this film, there's hardly anyone alive who was old enough to remember, "Oh yes, those are the kind of shoes we were wearing." We were really going strictly on historical research, and we did years of it. You just try to nail all the period details and get the language right.

My real attitude toward the film was, yes, it's a period piece, but I want it to feel like a contemporary film—like *we filmed it then*. It was the same approach I had on *Dazed*—"Let's nail all the period aspects, but let's act like *we made the film then*." I told the actors this. A lot of period films can tend to get kind of important, to have a sort of stuffiness enter in—I didn't want that at all. The Newtons seemed very modern and I didn't want it to seem too precious. It was a wild time; I wanted the film to have that tone, fun and playful.

Cinematically I wanted that too. It starts off, obviously, like a silent film and a Western. By the end—the last third of the movie is a gangster film under the subgenre of heist film. You could call that scene *The Great Train Robbery*, because it is the largest train robbery in U.S. history. It's amazing no one's ever made a film about it, but I guess not quite enough happens in it and it just ends in court. It might seem like it's not dramatic enough for its own movie, but I thought it was great—it has wonderful twists and turns. I loved the experience, and cinematically it was my homage to those genres.

SCHWARTZ: One section of the film that really feels like a homage and was beautifully done was the montage section about halfway through where they're going through all the bank robberies and it's done to music. Just talk about that; that's something that you don't see much anymore.

LINKLATER: I've seen it in some movies—but it was a lot of fun. I conceived it as sort of a Warner Bros. '30s or '40s gangster movie. I would say that Don Seigel could have edited it—he was an editor at that time specializing in montages. See any movie; in *Yankee Doodle Dandy* (1942), there's a big montage that's used to advance the storytelling. We really needed to do it here because they robbed eighty banks, but no one wants to sit through eighty bank robberies that are surprisingly similar in a lot of ways. (Laughter) You only get a handful in the movie but they were very prolific and I needed to show that. I also needed to show Willis and Louise's relationship, and Willis's investment in oil. I thought specifically about *storytelling* and *time passing*: It is two years and a lot of activity.

SCHWARTZ: One thing that's really been striking about your films, especially the more recent films—*SubUrbia* and this—is how comfortable the actors seem and the quality of the ensemble acting. Supposedly you're famous for your rehearsal process. Parker Posey wrote a journal about *SubUrbia*, about the encounter games...

LINKLATER: Did anybody read that?

SCHWARTZ: It's available on the Internet.

LINKLATER: That's all bullshit, you know! (Laughs)

SCHWARTZ: That *is* the problem with the Internet, of course. But tell us about your process.

LINKLATER: [The Internet] is unregulated. Everything is true! (Laughter) No, she was telling stories like I came in in a gown and we did Shakespeare exercises; or I fed the cast mushrooms and we did all this...She's crazy! (Laughter) I mean we do sit for three weeks and rehearse; we work.

SCHWARTZ: Just the long rehearsal process—to have that luxury seems rare. Tell us the true story of how you work with actors.

LINKLATER: It's pretty boring, actually, from the outside. You just sit around and you talk a lot about your characters, what's going on in the scene. I trained as an actor for five years. I was always making films, but I was in acting classes, too. I didn't want to be an actor but I liked the environment creatively, it was just kind of fun. I always liked rehearsals. It's like if you're an athlete—I liked practice more than the games. It's fun, it's very creative. I like to work with the actors and treat them like collaborators, and they come up with a lot of lines. Dwight Yoakam and everyone in the cast—a lot of their punch lines and funny things come out of a creative atmosphere where they feel free enough to just say, "Hey, what if I do this?"

SCHWARTZ: Was it easy for them to get the period feeling? It's remarkable to me how natural the performances seem.

LINKLATER: Well, I don't think that's so much the period—although they all did a lot of period research. I gave them a lot of materials to read, and you try to set a mindset to each character. For Jess [Newton], it was like, "You were in World War I, you were lucky you didn't die there or in the flu epidemic. Here's what the world's gone through, here's the state of [affairs]." I'd write up memos about, let's say, corruption. "The Harding administration is the most corrupt; this flaunting of the Volstead act; no one respects the law." There was a different vibe then, it was a crazy time—unregulated industries, banking and insurance. Willis's attitude didn't come from nowhere. He had seen that kind of corruption. He was on the bottom of society from birth, and he had an attitude about it.

SCHWARTZ: What do you make of the distinction between independent and studio film? It seems to be less and less meaningful these days.

LINKLATER: I don't know. People are grasping for some sort of definition, but it's never so simple. For example, last year at the Oscars there were all these supposed "independent" films. If *The English Patient* (1996) had been at 20th-Century Fox, that would have been a big studio film, right? It went to Miramax and became an "independent" film—but it's the same movie.

I would draw the distinction more from who is doing their personal films and originating their own material. There's another thing in the industry that's just getting hired to do a producer or a studio's film. When you're looking for a job and you get hired to do a film, the director's just a little part of a big enterprise—not that there haven't been some really good films made that way, but I haven't ever really put myself out there for that. I've always stayed in Texas and just tried to get my own films made.

From a filmmaker's viewpoint, no filmmaker I know has a moral outlook on who's financing them. If some smaller company wants to give me a budget for this or a bigger company—if you can have an okay relationship with whoever's financing you—it's necessary. I don't know anyone who's going to hand me \$27 million out of their own pocket to make a movie, nor should they; it's someone's business to do it. But I've never had any problems. The four times I've taken money from people—*Dazed* and ever since *Dazed*—all felt like the same process even though the budgets varied widely.

To answer your question, I don't really know the distinction. You know it when you see it, I think. To me *Kundun* (1997) is a very independent film; even though Disney financed it, you can't get a more independent, artistic vision than that. Even if you go to the other extreme, *Titanic*—that wasn't a studio wanting to make that, that was one guy saying, "I want to make this story." You can't say that's not James Cameron's movie; that's his personal thing. So who knows?

I've always admired those guys who you felt were making their own films—Spike Lee; Scorsese, of course; Oliver Stone—who would make *Nixon*

(1995) except Oliver Stone? (Laughter) I really admire that, as a filmmaker. I think it's ballsy to make such an intensely political film and get it made at a studio with all those actors and a big budget. I go, "Wow!"

SCHWARTZ: How much do you get involved in marketing? Once a film is made, it has to be sold. These days, there's greater pressure, because films open in so many theaters. What are those discussions like, or how much do you stay out of that?

LINKLATER: You're catching me at a weak moment on that subject with the film coming out in less than two weeks. It's by far my least favorite part and the most frustrating. You're used to having complete control over everything, and then suddenly you realize you have no control. You have a thing called "meaningful consultation" and it means they send you a poster or materials or a TV ad. You call them back you go, "Hey, this is really terrible, but what if we try...?" Then they just go, "Well, we've already printed them." (Laughter) That's "meaningful consultation"! I don't want to rag on them too much, but I'm very much out of the loop. It's a drag because I do have opinions about it that are pretty strong. (Laughs)

SCHWARTZ: Let's talk about the film some more, and see if the audience has questions about it.

LINKLATER: I have an anecdote I wanted to tell you guys because I haven't told this yet. I've introduced the film and talked about it a couple of times now, but I keep forgetting this. When Doc was arrested—everybody laughs when you realize in 1968 he was arrested for robbing a bank—well they went and looked to see if he had an FBI file. Sure enough, at that moment the FBI numbers were up to 17 million, he had a preexisting file, and his number was #619. He had the oldest file active on record! (Laughter)

There were just wonderful little bits like that we discovered in the process that were just amazing—and Willis was driving the getaway car. (Laughter) I didn't know for a long time, but then in this process I met a lot of people who knew him and one guy particularly from Uvalde told me, "Yes, he was, definitely." I had always felt Willis didn't want that to get out there but I thought it was pretty funny and pretty telling.

SCHWARTZ: How did Claude feel in that film? Since obviously none of the Newtons are here...

LINKLATER: Claude loved it, and that's the only guy who I cared about what he really thought. I wanted Claude to feel like I had made the film that they would like, and that it was accurate. Claude really liked it. He said Matthew actually scared him a lot because he was so much like Willis. He would hit that—those guys from West Texas—that West Texas old man voice where it's so high, and Matthew would do that, like "Hell boy, they just did!" (Laughter) Matthew grew up around that, and Claude said the hairs on the back of his neck would stand up sometimes because it was like he was in the room with Willis. Matthew's done a lot of research—we had eighteen hours of audio tapes of Joe and Willis and we had footage. It was a great opportunity for the cast to really dig into those characters.

SCHWARTZ: Okay, let's hear your questions; we'll start down here.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Are they going to re-issue Claude's book?

LINKLATER: Claude's book is the oral history of the Newton Boys, *Portrait of an Outlaw Gang*. It's a great book. A small press in Austin did it called the State House Press; it came out a couple of years ago, and you could probably order it.

I've been interested [in having it re-released] for a couple of years. You know, "This movie's going to come out, you'll have these hunks on the cover. Don't you want to sell [books], and wouldn't it be an obvious marketing thing?" But no one's interested! I can't pull any more teeth; I don't know what to do! (Laughs) It's just hard to get everyone interested in things you think are cool.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Given the nature of your past work, this film felt a little bit like a departure to me. I'm just curious: if you had had the opportunity to make *The Newton Boys* after *Before Sunrise*, would you then have gone on and made *SubUrbia* after that?

LINKLATER: I don't know; it's hard to say—one film at a time. You don't really know what to do next until you're completely finished—what you feel like you should do next, both in the film and in

your life; what you need personally. I remember after *Dazed* I knew I wanted to do *Before Sunrise* next. I'd been thinking about that for a long time because *Dazed* had been a really big project, and I want to do something intimate, just a really small crew. That was just my own balance; regardless of how *Dazed* did, good or bad, I already knew what I wanted to do next. That was it.

I know this seems like a departure, but every film I've done—like when *Before Sunrise* came out, people said, "What the hell is this?" (Laughter) After *Dazed*, with all these characters and fun, to make this little intimate romance seemed like a big departure. Now they sort of blend together; there's some connection there now that didn't feel there at the time. I think this'll feel the same way, not now, but eventually.

SCHWARTZ: Okay, right here.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Do you think with the Newton Boys, a reason why they weren't known in history is because their story didn't end tragically? It's sort of ironic.

LINKLATER: Yes, the reason the Newtons aren't known—it's really simple, in my mind—is that they didn't kill people, and they didn't get caught. If you're an outlaw, your goal would be to *not* be known, I would think. (Laughs) They were very good at what they did, but that led to their obscurity.

Most of the outlaws we know—Dillinger, Bonnie and Clyde, Baby Face [Nelson], all those—it's because they were either psychopaths who killed a lot of people and captured the imagination of the public, or Hoover was pulling his whole stunt: create a Public Enemy Number One (even if they didn't deserve that), and then gun him down so that it looked like he was doing his job. That was Hoover's method.

You don't go down in history unless you kill people—but that's what I liked about the Newtons. I'm not interested in psychopaths. I'm not interested in people who just want to kill people. Willis, particularly, hated Bonnie and Clyde; he had put them up one night when they were on their crime spree and he just thought they were idiots. (Laughter) He was like, "Silly kids, bound to get themselves killed! If someone got in

front of them, they'd shoot at 'em!" He had no respect for them, and he was really jealous when the film came out. He was quoted as saying, "They'll pay big money for my story!" (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: Maybe that's why he started robbing banks again. (Laughter)

LINKLATER: Actually he sent his lawyer to California in 1948 to sell his story to Hollywood, but there were no takers. No takers then; barely takers now. (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: Okay, right here; you sir.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: There were reports a tornado wrecked the train.

LINKLATER: Yes, during production. We were lucky in our production. We had a 56-day shoot and we never really lost time for all the craziness that was going on around us. We had bad weather; two weeks before we were filming a tornado clipped our train. You probably heard about it last year. It killed a lot of people eight miles from where we were filming. I was in my trailer—we had just gotten there—and someone said, "You might not want to be in your trailer, there's a tornado like right down the street." (Laughter) I was like, "Oh really?"

I went to this vault—we were shooting in a vault, and it was just the beginning of the day. We'd just shown up and the sky looked really bizarre; I'd never seen a sky like this. We're filming this scene—it's just pouring rain outside and we're in the vault. Then it quits raining. We go outside and they said, "Oh, a tornado touched down near here, three people are dead," and we're like, "Wow, you're kidding!" Now we're outside and it has quit raining, so we keep filming and the body count just keeps increasing all night. By the end of the night we had loaned our generator to the morgue, and forty people had died eight miles from where we were shooting. It was really sad—but we never lost any time shooting. It was very bizarre! (Laughter) It was like, what do you do? You make the day.

SCHWARTZ: Okay, right there.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Thanks to David, I spent the last two weekends here [at the Museum] seeing every film you made. What really impresses me is

not that you made leaps but *quantum* leaps in terms of how each new film had so much more to say. Running through the films there's a theme: my impression was that it always was about corruption—the corruption of life, or the corruption that everybody has to deal with; it's a fact of life that some will be exploited by those who would just use everybody else. I thought the drunk in the film I saw last night [*SubUrbia*], Timmy, really almost said it all, but every one of your films has just been explosive in the message that there's so much bullshit, and these kids have so much they have to deal with. It's just incredible and totally unjust.

LINKLATER: Well, thank you. I'm glad you picked that up. People think *Dazed* is this fun comedy, but I see at the core of it this horror film or some tragic thing. Mitch, this is his initiation into being a teenage male jerk. He's this innocent kid and by the end of the night he's—it's funny and everything, but to me it was about initiation and being corrupted in a way that inevitably we all are in some way or another.

I guess you're stuck with your own personality and it finds its way into your attitude toward everything, into your writing or into the way you direct actors or just what you're interested in subject matter-wise. It's always there, but I can say the Newtons were the first guys in my films who were *fighting back*. (Laughter) They're the most active guys I've ever portrayed. Like Willis says, "I'm not going to take it lying down!" In his own way he's active, he's doing something.

SCHWARTZ: Okay, right here.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I'd like to ask you if you could speak about what it was like in Austin, what was going on in Austin culturally? Could you speak about making *Slacker* and what Austin was like back then?

LINKLATER: Are you thinking about moving there? It's really crowded now... (Laughter) No, I'm kidding. Austin, I've been there about thirteen, fourteen years and it's really fun. It's my own hometown. I've been involved in a film society there I started in 1985. We show a lot of movies, and I've seen the film interest just grow and grow. When I did *Slacker*, I was the kind of weird film guy. Everybody else is a musician and I was just

this film guy who showed movies. I was projecting films, or shooting my little super 8mm films, or whatever I was doing. I was kind of everybody's friend, but I was this film guy.

When *Slacker* got made it was a really weird thing. People made films, but they never got seen—that was the bizarre thing. Austin has this fear of success. You can see it in the music industry—as soon as you get known, everybody hates you—but I haven't suffered that in the film world. There are not enough filmmakers there to be backbiting and jealous. It's a good atmosphere. Our film society has a thousand members. We show 136 films a year. I can show any film and get 350, 400 people to come to an Ozu movie. It's great, it's a good town—but it has changed over the years. The rents have doubled, that's for sure. (Laughs) It's like San Francisco or something.

SCHWARTZ: Okay, you; then we'll go way in the back.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: What is the significance of using a song written by John Sayles in the movie—is that an homage to John?

LINKLATER: No, no, no—that's the real John Sayles. He's a friend, and he had taken a look at the script and had some notes, and that was one. He wrote the lyrics to a traditional melody, wrote just a passage—that first one. My other co-screenwriter had written a bunch of passages, but I picked those two to have the girls sing, so he just came up with those lyrics. It's the same John Sayles. He did a rewrite on it, helped out.

SCHWARTZ: Okay, all the way in the back.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I heard a rumor that you and some other people were going to open up your own studio in Austin, and I wanted to know whether or not that's true?

LINKLATER: Pipe-Dreamworks? (Laughter) I think you're thinking maybe a sound stage or something like that, which is plenty ambitious for Austin. I have a screening room, things like that—it's a big deal in Austin to have a screening room, much less a studio. We have enough facilities where you can do everything there, enough crew people, but there will be no mini-industry there in

Texas; there just won't be. I did everything in Texas except the very final sound mix. That was a couple of weeks up at the Sky Walker Ranch.

Texans want to own everything and they get really big ideas, but it'd be a dumb business thing to think you could support something like that. These places in L.A. can barely support it; they've got films year round and they can barely make it. So it's a bad business to get into in a lot of levels. I wouldn't suggest it. (Laughs)

SCHWARTZ: Okay, right here.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I was wondering if you could speak to the challenges of working with non-professional actors?

LINKLATER: She's talking about non-professional actors. I've never had any stigma about whether someone's a professional or non-professional, particularly in the smaller parts. It depends on the role.

I'll look at a role, and I say, "This could potentially be played by a non-professional." A lot of those roles were in *Dazed*, because I think when kids are younger, they're more natural. You don't even want them to be professional actors really, because that means they've had some stage mom telling them how to smile and how to do everything and they're probably not that natural anyway. You just find an authentic person.

Casting is the key to that. You've got to find someone. My attitude toward actors is that almost anyone can be an actor if they just have the personality to allow themselves to be on camera. If they can get past that barrier, if they agree to do it—which is a big part, really—then almost anyone can deliver a certain kind of performance—with the right atmosphere, *that* you create for them.

I had non-professionals in this movie. When they robbed the first bank on horseback, in the primitive robbery? The banker—he has a couple of lines—that's *my* banker. He's just kind of a friend of mine. (Laughter)

The tool pusher, the oil well guy who's kind of swindling Willis out of his money? That's Matthew's older brother. He's a real West Texas oil guy. I met him four years ago at Matthew's graduation party, and he always stayed in my

mind. He's a real character, just the way he talks. We improvised a lot of that scene in rehearsals. His name's Rooster, Rooster McConaughey—not his real name. (Laughter) He came in and his line was like, "Hell, boy! You ain't going to get enough oil outta that hole to part your hair!" Then it was their idea to punch one another. We worked all that out.

The good thing about non-professionals—if they're too professional they come in, "Okay, what are my lines? Oh, I've learned my lines," like they're all set. I want people who say, "Well, I wouldn't really say this, how about this?" You get a freshness that they bring that I think is important, especially the one-scene actors. In the industry, they're just called "day players;" they work one day usually and do their scene. Those parts are really challenging to me. I really want those to be distinct and have some character to them. Casting is really important, and just letting that person bring you something, whatever that might be; but it's up to you, you're picking and choosing. That kind of improv in rehearsal, it's really you manipulating, trying to get to their greatest hits, since they might not be able to tell you what is really funny or not, it's just coming out of them.

Slacker was that completely. No one in that film was a professional actor. I was probably the closest; I'm the first character in it. I was the only one who had been in acting classes, but everybody has acted at some point—junior high, high school—almost everyone's acted and we're all actors anyway, right? My working attitude on that film was, "Hey, I just want to get interesting people and cast them in the part that they seem closest to personality-wise, and then we'll work up the scene from there." It's always fun.

Those are the most satisfying, actually—taking a non-professional and making a really good scene—but on the other hand, it's really fun to work with technically skilled actors, too, depending on what you're trying to get out of them. Someone like Julianna Margulies; or Ethan; or Dwight; the whole main cast; Vince D'Onofrio... Those guys were just top notch, really great actors. That's a whole other level of working that's equally challenging and satisfying.

SCHWARTZ: Dwight Yoakam was an inspired choice.

LINKLATER: I cast Dwight the same way I cast almost anybody. I hadn't ever seen him act. I guess I'd seen his bit part in *Red Rock West* (1992), but I hadn't seen *Sling Blade* (1996). I just met him, and we talked for a long time, and I said, "This is a fascinating guy. I just like this guy, he's really interesting. I like the way his mind works. I like everything about him." At that point we were talking about him potentially being a brother, it was that early on in the process. I didn't know, I thought maybe he could be Jess or something, just one of my first hunches. But then I really wanted Ethan to be Jess, and I called up Dwight and said, "I want you to look at Glasscock. I think you'd be a really interesting Glasscock." He liked the part a lot and he agreed to do it. He *became* Glasscock, that kind of very specific little nitroglycerine-carrying [character].

There's a part of Dwight that's very specific. That's how he is as an actor, he's a no-bullshit actor, he's very focused. If you were to tell me Dwight Yoakam was a Julliard-trained actor who'd been doing this all his life, I'd agree. I think he's a really wonderful actor and he came up with tons of stuff. He'd call me up in the middle of the night, "Hey what if I ...?" and he'd have a line or something. He's an amazing, creative person, but he keeps his music and his film worlds very separate. He wasn't like the guy sitting around the set with his guitar or anything. (Laughter) You would not know. Even at our party last night, he didn't get up on stage and sing a song or anything. Ethan did, of course, stupid... (Laughter) But Dwight? Two worlds—acting, music—he keeps them very separate.

SCHWARTZ: How hard is it to keep on top of the acting when the pace of shooting is so intense?

LINKLATER: Well that's where rehearsals come in. I mean we rehearse—

SCHWARTZ: That's all done before the shooting begins?

LINKLATER: Those three weeks are when you make a lot of those creative decisions. For certain scenes I rehearse on weekends, too, for the upcoming week. If there's a big scene, like the big

scene with Matthew and Julianna when she confronts him? We rehearsed that a lot. We would rehearse it every week before we did it. Writers like Woody Allen, they don't need to rehearse. He doesn't really need to talk to his actors that much because it's like, "Here's the scene, here are the words." Maybe they change a few words, but that's it. It's kind of perfect in its own way.

I never feel that way—maybe I'm just really critical of my own writing. I just want it to become something else or to find something new in it via the actors. I want to hear them do it a lot, and I'm looking forward to the ideas I'm going to have to rewrite it and change it. You're almost rewriting through them at a certain point, but that takes a lot of time, and sometimes a lot of rehearsals. You just have to be ready. I don't ever show up on set and go, "Well, what's this about?"

A lot of films in Hollywood—this is why the schedules are so long and everything goes over budget: no rehearsal. They've met a few times, the director and actors, and then they're on the set and they're sitting down for the first time with the whole crew waiting around. They're sitting down and talking about the scene really for the first time. Then three hours later you're setting up the first shot. So you just wasted three hours of a \$150,000 day. I guess I'm more frugal in that sense. It's the biggest waste of time.

SCHWARTZ: But you were confident when the shooting started. I would think it must be strange to show up on the set and everybody's dressed in these old costumes. Did you ever wonder, "Can I really do this?"

LINKLATER: No, no; not everyone's dressed in costumes—just the actors, and just what you see on the screen. That's the magic. If you look 240 degrees, it's a parking lot that's very 1997, when we were shooting. I was never too overwhelmed. Some of these things are really big, but I really looked forward to—like the ballroom scene, when I had that long camera move. It's really challenging, but it's fun! The variety of this film— one day we'd be blowing up a bank; one day we'd be doing a ballroom scene; dancing, bands, music, cars and action scenes; and then we're doing these intimate scenes like Matthew and Julianna. It was a very varied experience, so it was fun. It was something to look forward to— every day seemed different.

SCHWARTZ: Right back there.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I have a couple of questions regarding *Dazed and Confused*, which I've just got to say I think is an absolute masterpiece, just unbelievable. But the first question: I saw an early cut of it that had a pretty substantial subplot about the stolen statues, and I was just wondering what the rationale was behind cutting that out?

LINKLATER: Were you at one of those test screenings or something?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: No, I found a copy somewhere.

LINKLATER: On video?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Yes.

LINKLATER: God! See that's the thing about studios—they tape. (Laughs) It's an early cut of the film and it was just too long—my first cut of that was just too long. It really dragged and I wanted it to be paced right. That's just my job. It's a heartbreaking process; you cut things that are in themselves kind of good or interesting but are really dragging down the whole.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: So it was you more than the studio that wanted to cut it?

LINKLATER: Yes, certainly. I don't edit with the studio. I'll watch a film with an audience and then I'll judge how it feels. *Dazed*, that's my cut. What's up there in the final film is what I wanted there—not that that wouldn't be a good laser disc track or something. Some of those scenes were really funny in their own way, but just overall, the film meanders enough and it has no story as it is. (Laughs) It's a tough thing.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: One other thing I was wondering—there are two scenes in it where I wasn't sure if you were referencing something or if it was just coincidental; I figured you'd be the one to ask. The first scene when Slater was buying a bag from Pickford and asked someone to borrow money from Pinks and says he'll *pay you back Tuesday*. I was wondering if that was like a Popeye thing going on?

LINKLATER: Obviously yes. (Laughter) Wimpy, wasn't it?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Yes, it was. Also the part at the Moon Tower when Mitch is all fucked up—that disoriented shot of him walking through the party, I was wondering if that had a [Harvey] Keitel in *Mean Streets* (1973) thing going on?

LINKLATER: I think sort of, though I used a different method. I tied a string from Wiley [Wiggins] to the camera guy so it had a little more give—they could get closer but they couldn't get farther away, and I had it focused on the full length.

But the drunken Keitel yes, it's an homage to that. I wanted to get that same kind of feeling, but I didn't want to put him on a dolly. [Scorsese] must have done that in *Mean Streets*, the camera had to be have been attached to [Keitel] physically because he ends up on the bar at the end. Spike Lee's done that in every movie, he does the "Spike Lee on the dolly" shot. (Laughter) But there's tons of things in there—like when the mom comes out with the shotgun, that's right out of *Night of the Hunter* (1955) when Lillian Gish comes out with a shotgun. I could annotate films with little things like that are just fun little nods to other films.

SCHWARTZ: In the back row there?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: On *Dazed and Confused*, you mentioned how you thought it was Mitch's story. I think what's great about it is there's a lot of different characters whose stories are really developed even though a lot of it's subtle. I was wondering how autobiographical [the story is] and if so which character is you? (Laughter) Also, Mitch touching his nose eight times, did you tell him to do that?

LINKLATER: I liked when he did that. It was a self-conscious thing—he's talking to the girls and he feels really uncomfortable—I just liked that. In *SubUrbia* where Giovanni Ribisi, Jeff, is biting on this little string? I like little gestures like that sometimes; it just shows they're uncomfortable.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Was that him though? Did he do it and did you say to keep on doing it, or did you just let him go?

LINKLATER: Yes, he did it initially—but if you don't like it it's my fault, because I let him do it. I didn't tell him not to; I said, "That's fine." Autobiographically speaking, I think it was Wiley who said, "In a dream, every character's you." Well he said that was me in *Dazed*. I think I had a personal relationship with every character in that movie.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: So you're not just Pickford driving around smoking joints all night? (Laughter)

LINKLATER: I'm pretty far from Pickford actually. I had friends exactly like certain people—I definitely knew them all, but I was probably closest to Pink—Jason London's character; and then maybe Wiley, definitely Wiley. But everybody—the guys, Mike and Tony, who write on the newspaper staff who are kind of nerdy—that was me too; but I also played sports, so I was like Pink.

I was like every teenager: you feel like you're among everybody. When I interviewed people for that movie they'd say, "Oh, I really relate to Pink because he hangs out with all the groups. He's a kind of a jock, he's kind of a newspaper nerd, and he's kind of stoner; I have friends in all the groups." I say, "What group are you in?" No one labels themselves, but they say, "Oh, here are my stoner friends, here are my jock friends..." (Laughter) Every one of them, everybody who came in said that. We all want to label and characterize everybody else, but we're all free agents. It's a great set-up.

SCHWARTZ: Okay, Right here.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I was hoping that you would talk a little bit about *It's Impossible to Learn to Plow by Reading Books* (1988), and if you had a pre-set conceived structure for the film before you did it—and just many things about that because I really loved it a lot.

LINKLATER: Well, thank you.

SCHWARTZ: This is a Super 8mm feature before *Slacker*, for anybody who knows the film *Plow*.

LINKLATER: I didn't really have a lot of preconceived notions about what the film would be about when I first started filming, I just had some really strict aesthetic rules. I wasn't ever

going to move the camera; it was just going to be static shots. I wanted it to be about travel and the mindset of travel. I had a feel for it, but I would just wander around and say, "Oh this could be a scene." I was just setting up the camera, pushing the button, and going and doing something. I think I had more of an aesthetic agenda rather than any kind of content-related one. It was an evolving process; there was no script or anything.

That's when the film was written—in the editing. A lot of films, they say editing is when you rewrite the film or where you discover the film. I've never felt that except in [*Plow*]. I will never say, "Oh, we'll save it in the editing." It ups the ante on what you're doing on the day. It's like, "No, we're not making this in the editing room, it's going to be easy to cut together. I know exactly how I want it to cut. This has to work now. We're not going to be able to save it later if it's not good now."

Rewriting in editing is something I haven't really done—I've worked on pacing and things but I don't think I significantly find a story that I didn't know existed until I got to the editing room—except *that* film where I really had no story. It was just all these shots, and I wasn't sure what else. I was filming a lot of things that I cut out immediately, like some of the fun things with groups of people—drunken evenings and all kinds of weird stuff—because I didn't really know what the film would be. I just knew what I wanted it to feel like in general. It was in editing that I immediately threw out all the fun stuff and just left the boring stuff. (Laughs)

SCHWARTZ: All the way in the back—you've been waiting.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I was wondering what future projects you're going to be engaged in? Also, from your past work—you have in your face a gleam because of the intensity of the time period being so short—like *Before Sunrise* is one night, and *Dazed and Confused* was kind of a day—and the locations are so limited. What you do so wonderfully and amazingly is pay attention to the dialogue. The style of [*The Newton Boys*] is different in that it's all these locations and a narrative.

LINKLATER: I like that this film was different. Like I said earlier, these were active characters. I like

their purity. They weren't introspective, they weren't self-analytical—they were just pure emotion and action. I like that. Also, I wasn't constrained by the time period. I was telling an epic story, and for the first time I felt I was telling a great story that was about a story as much as the characters—but I still wanted it to be a character piece. I think what it does have in common with the other films is the relation within the scenes. It's not really dialogue-driven—the dialogue itself isn't the subject—it's the story, the life and times and all these other elements. That was fun for me and that's how I felt it was the best way to tell this particular story.

As far as future projects, I have a couple of things I'm working on. They're true stories like this. It was fun on *Newton Boys* and—no career plan here or anything—but I find myself currently attracted to a lot of true stories that I'm trying to make work as films. They're not traditional stories that would scream out "Movie!" They're always tough—*Newtons* didn't really scream out "Movie!" although I thought it was a great story. But they're not Grisham novels or anything. One's about a factory worker and one's about Texas high-school football and one's about a murder in east Texas—kind of a bizarre, hilarious murder, believe it or not. (Laughter) I don't know exactly which one will be next, but I have two of the scripts written now and I'm working on the others. So who knows?

SCHWARTZ: We'll take one more question.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I wanted to ask about *Before Sunrise*, which doesn't really fit anywhere in the spectrum, if you want to call it that.

LINKLATER: It fits into the time constraint. (Laughter)

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Yes; but it seemed like something where you had a vague idea of what you wanted going in, that really formed in the process in working with the actors. Is that correct?

LINKLATER: Yes, that's a good assumption. It was the most transformed [of my films]. I had a really solid idea of the beginning, the middle, the end—what it was and what it wasn't. What I couldn't possibly imagine was the relationship between the characters. I mean I could imagine it, I had a script, but it doesn't really work on paper. It's

amazing I even got the film made. Ethan, during the whole movie was saying, “Rick, how did we get this film financed? Why are they giving us money to do this?” (Laughs)

That was the challenge. It was really me, Julie Delpy, and Ethan Hawke sitting in a room for that same three-week period rewriting the script and finding new things. I even had scenes in there—well, it’s a lot of people’s favorite scene—the pretend phone call near the end. In the script, even when we started production, I had: “Scene in a café, their relation goes to a new level, something very intimate for the first time.” Some new intimacy had to happen about here. Sid Field screenwriting, right here. (Laughter) We talked about it. It was a twenty-five-day shoot and I think we shot that maybe day nineteen. We had been working, and it was like, okay now we had ideas. Julie had told me this idea that she did with her girlfriends, this little thing when they were younger. I said, “Yes, that’s really good!”

We worked that up into a scene, and those were the thoughts we had about that scene. It was a wonderful collaborative experience. Julie and Ethan, they’re really interesting—they’re both really smart, they’re both writers, they’re both

filmmakers, they’ve made short films, and they’re just brilliantly creative people. It was just a really wonderful time, very—like I keep saying—intimate. It’s just the three of us on that level.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: One little trivial, frivolous question. I have a debate going with some people: do they sleep together or not?

LINKLATER: Well, if it’s not in the film, then it’s in your imagination; I don’t know! (Laughter)

AUDIENCE MEMBER: It depends on where you are in life.

LINKLATER: Well, what do you think?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I think yes.

LINKLATER: You think yes? Well get your head out of the gutter! (Laughter) No, I’m kidding; they probably do—but if they did, did he use a condom? And if they...? Well, I don’t know! (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: On that note... (Applause)

LINKLATER: Thanks a lot, thanks a lot.

The Pinewood Dialogues, an ongoing series of discussions with key creative figures in film, television, and digital media, are made possible with a generous grant from the Pannonia Foundation.

Museum of the Moving Image is grateful for the generous support of numerous corporations, foundations, and individuals. The Museum receives vital funding from the City of New York through the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs and the New York City Economic Development Corporation. Additional government support is provided by the New York State Council on the Arts, the Institute of Museum and Library Services, and the Natural Heritage Trust (administered by the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation). The Museum occupies a building owned by the City of New York, and wishes to acknowledge the leadership and assistance of Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, Queens Borough President Helen M. Marshall, and City Council Member Eric N. Gioia.

Copyright © 2008, Museum of the Moving Image.