MUSEUM OF THE MOVING IMAGE

A PINEWOOD DIALOGUE WITH
NEIL JORDAN

Irish-born director Neil Jordan's film *The Good Thief* is an English-language homage to a French classic, Jean-Pierre Melville's *Bob le flambeur*, that was itself an homage to American *film noir*. Something like a remake of a remake, its storyline is fittingly about art forgery and theft. Above all, it is a romantic thriller with a soulful jazz style. In this discussion following a screening of *The Good Thief*, Jordan (*The Crying Game*, *Interview with the Vampire*) discusses how he transformed the Melville original and gave it a contemporary feeling inspired by the urban films of Wong Kar-Wai.

A Pinewood Dialogue following a screening of *The Good Thief*, moderated by Chief Curator David Schwartz (March 7, 2003):

SCHWARTZ: And now please welcome Neil Jordan. (Applause)

JORDAN: Hello. Thank you very much.

SCHWARTZ: Congratulations. Beautiful film.

JORDAN: Thank you.

SCHWARTZ: I guess the New York word for somebody who would dare to remake *Bob le flambeur* would be "chutzpah."

JORDAN: Is it chutzpah? (Laughs)

SCHWARTZ: So tell us about your relationship with the original film, and what that movie—what the Melville film meant to you, and why you wanted to take a crack at it.

JORDAN: Well, I love the film, you know. But I didn't think that it would be something I'd ever want to remake. And my producer, Stephen Woolley, suggested it, and somebody at Warner Bros. was thinking along the same lines. So that's how it happened. It was presented to me and I looked at the original movie. I was very nervous about it, but I said, "I'll try and write a script." And I began to write the script, and I began to double up on the story, and use the basic story, the plot of the Melville film, as a decoy for the plot that my Nick Nolte Bob was coming up with. And then it

became interesting. It became like a variation on the original film, and I thought, maybe if I make this, I'll do something that won't stamp all over the original, and that will be kind of a variation on it.

SCHWARTZ: What was it about the original film that was inspiring to you? It was a film that inspired a lot of filmmakers, and it had a freedom to it, a romanticism. What did you find in it?

JORDAN: Well, I mean, it's essentially quite a classical film, I think. I mean, people say—they talk about the French New Wave and all that, but the camera in the Melville movie is terribly static, you know? And it's got this beautiful kind of patina of light and shade. I think it was when it was re-released in New York, I read somewhere, some critic said, "It's the only film noir that ends happily." And I felt that that basic movement, you know, from darkness to the light was really great about it.

SCHWARTZ: One of the wonderful things about both films—both the Melville and yours—is the nighttime photography. Melville said at the time that he made his film at night because you write love letters at night, and he felt this film was sort of a love letter to Paris. Could you talk about the shooting at night and the…

JORDAN: Because Nick plays a junkie, I made him, obviously as you've seen, a guy who sticks needles in his fingers. So I wanted the photography to feel like a withdrawal or like a hangover, you know? Obviously, most of these stories kind of happen at night anyway. But I

wanted all the light to be too flare-y and the camera movements to be jagged, and we used that double-printing thing, step printing, where the movement shudders. So it's not like Melville's film photographically at all, really. But we were lucky enough to get the Old Town at Nice, and to be able to use it as a set, basically. I mean, we built all those lights into an entire complex of streets, so we used it almost like a big set.

SCHWARTZ: You made a few key changes from the Melville film. The setting of the film is different. This is not set in Paris, as the Melville film was. Could you talk about how you changed the setting? And then also, the main character, the idea of an American being the main character.

JORDAN: Well, I mean, the most obvious thing to do, I suppose, would have been to set it in America. That's probably what the studio would have wanted, you know.

SCHWARTZ: Las Vegas.

JORDAN: Like, New York, Atlantic City, or something like that, you know. But I looked at Paris, and I looked at the casino in Deauville, which was tiny. It's hardly there; it's only got three tables in it. And Deauville actually is a very British city. You know, it's in Normandy, and it looks like a town in the South of England, so it hasn't got much romance to it. So I decided, you know, everyone knows Nice from the Cannes Festival, but nobody ever spends any time there. So I spent a bit of time wandering around, and I thought that we could create a real environment full of richness and darkness and kind of danger out of there.

SCHWARTZ: The world of the casino, there's a real romanticism and a beauty to the way you show the casino, which is much more developed than in the Melville film. That seems to be something you've really brought to it. Could you just talk about that?

JORDAN: Yeah, but the Melville casino sequences, they're very elegant, actually. They play chemin de fer, you know? Or chemin à fer, is it called, that four-card—that odd little game with the big paddles? So there's a great elegance and ritual to those gambling sequences in the Melville movie.

But I mean, casinos are generally—I'm sure everybody's been to Las Vegas…they're full of neon lights and they're full of slot machines. And even the casino in Monte Carlo—it's designed by [Charles] Garnier, the guy who did the Opera House in Paris, but all of the detail is way up towards the ceiling, so all you see, really, is a shabby carpet and a load of tables and a load of overdressed Russian and French people playing, you know? So we kind of made up the casino, really, out of a load of interiors in and around Nice. There's very rich art deco, turn of the century, and later 1920s interiors. So we used a whole sequence of those to create this kind of mystery and warmth, really.

SCHWARTZ: The casting in this film is incredibly varied and very rich, and gives so much texture to the film. I mean, the two I want to ask you about are Nick Nolte, because it's so critical, and then the young actress, Nutsa Kukhianidze, who I guess was seventeen or—really, a newcomer at the time, who plays Anne.

JORDAN: Yeah, well, Nick he emerged as the only casting for the role. As you imagine, it's very tricky doing something like this because, the dialogue is very important, and I put myself out there with the way people spoke. I decided to have them just talk constantly in this hardboiled way. And if it was a $20 million dollar star—they're all too well-preserved these days to convince you, you know? I went to see Nick in San Francisco. He was in a play with Sam Shepard called *The Late Henry Moss*. And the entire play seemed to consist of Nick being kicked around the stage by Sean Penn. (Laughter) Literally. And he was subjected to a savage kind of indignity. And I met him afterwards, and I thought, this guy is perfect for this role, because you can see it on his face. So that was my decision to make the movie, when he said he'd do it, basically.

SCHWARTZ: And you didn't have him in mind—or when you were writing it, you didn't have a particular actor in mind?

JORDAN: No, I didn't have anybody in mind, actually.

SCHWARTZ: I did want to ask you about writing, because you were an established short-story

writer and novelist before you went into film. I was curious how you made that transition, because you did *Angel* and *Company of Wolves*, terrific first and second films, but how did you make that move?

JORDAN: Well, I just was lucky. I was in Ireland, I was writing fiction, and I was writing some screenplays that were being made into tiny-budget independent movies, and anytime I saw something that I'd written get made, I was always very unhappy with the results. And I wrote a script that John Boorman agreed to produce for me, and Channel 4—FilmFour—had just set up then to make writer-director-type films, and I was lucky enough for them to buy my first feature film, *Angel*. So that's how it happened to me, really.

SCHWARTZ: I did want to hear about the actress.

JORDAN: Oh, Nutsa.

SCHWARTZ: Nutsa. Because I guess another interesting parallel to the Melville film is that the young actress in that film, who is, I think, fifteen years old, was discovered, literally, on the streets, by Melville as he was driving around. Could you talk about how you discovered Nutsa?

JORDAN: I didn't discover Nutsa. She'd done one film called *27 Missing Kisses* or something. I forget the title. It's a tiny little Georgian movie. And she was very good in that. But when I met her, I hadn't seen that. She came to London and I just did a quick camera test with her, and I just thought she was extraordinary. You know, she had poise and she had this great deep voice, yet all this youth. She's so kind of like a deer or something, you know? And when I began to shoot some stuff with her, I could just see this extraordinary thing going on in her face. So I think she's great. It's her first real performance, this I think, but I hope she does a lot of good things.

SCHWARTZ: And the rest of the cast is very international, very diverse.

JORDAN: I think of it as a Mediterranean film, really, because everybody from North Africa is trying to get into those Mediterranean cities, and everybody from the former Soviet Union is trying to get in there, and from Turkey and, you know,

everywhere. So it's a kind of racial melting pot there, in a very different way than America is. I don't know how to describe it, really, but it's… Maybe it's a bit more abrasive there in some ways?

So, I mean, I'd written the Russian, the guy from Vladivostok; I'd written in the two—you know, Said and Paolo as two North African guys; and obviously Nutsa was Russian. Or she was Russian, but she's Georgian, actually. So I went to Paris and I just met everybody I could, you know? And I'm sure you all know Said Taghmaoui, you know, from *Three Kings* and from *La Haine*. And there's a wonderful young actor that I found called Ouassini Embarek. He plays Said, the guy who's shot. Now, he is extraordinary. He's got this street quality. He's got a very tiny part in the movie, but he is an extraordinary actor.

And Emir Kusturica. I mean… (Laughter) Well, I mean, Emir is a great director, of course, but he was in one movie called *The Widow of Saint-Pierre*. You've seen that, I'm sure, yeah? I just asked him to please… He seemed perfect for the role, for this rather strange security guitar-playing man, you know? the Polish twins were two directors. So it was like subjecting these directors to what they subject others to. It was a bit of fun. (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: One of the themes that you really brought to this script was the idea of originals and copies—which is, in a sense, what you're doing by…

JORDAN: Kind of. I mean, yeah, kind of.

SCHWARTZ: Could you talk about how you developed that theme?

JORDAN: Well, I mean, I felt a bit bad about making a remake. I felt a bit shabby. What would I say? I felt a bit like a faker. And then I gave Bob this Picasso and decided to make that a fake Picasso and, you know, came up with the idea of the paintings, the real and the fake paintings. So in a way, I was just, I suppose, playing. There was an internal dialogue, in a way, playing with the idea of: is there any virtue in a fake at all?

SCHWARTZ: I don't know how easy it is for you to talk about, but the thing that is so strong in your films is the mood that they create. and it's expressed through camerawork, through music. It's the quality that your films have that's very, very strong. And I'm wondering if you could talk about how you sustain that how you create that on the set.

JORDAN: One is not aware of what one does, really. You know, you do things because you are what you are, I suppose. It's…

SCHWARTZ: I mean, this feels like a Neil Jordan film…

JORDAN: Yeah. Well, thank you. Is that a compliment? (Laughs)

SCHWARTZ: Well, I meant it as a compliment; I guess somebody could mean it…

JORDAN: They could mean it the opposite, couldn't they, the other way?

SCHWARTZ: …the other way. (Laughs)

JORDAN: No, it's—I mean, this thing had to be all texture, really. It had to be all light and shade, and it had to have a rotten kind of underground kind of scummy texture to the whole thing. And I don't know really, that's just the way… One starts by looking through the camera, really. Or you don't start, actually, by trying to conceive what the image should be. And this…myself and Chris Menges—the cinematographer—we looked at a lot of Hong Kong movies, you know? You know, Wong Kar-wai, and all these wonderful movies that are shot in these cities that are entire cathedrals of light and neon, you know? I envy people who shoot over there, because they never have to place a light anywhere. It seems to me.

They walk down these shopping malls and all that—they're fully lit, you know? But Nice is not as full of light as that, so we had to kind of build all sorts of practicals into every environment we were in, you know? The contrast between the practicals gradually led to a certain kind of image. And then, when we came to the casino... The casino, really, is constructed of lights, in a way; the set is made out of these huge table lamps. And they had a

different quality to them; they had a different warmth, and a richer texture, you know, than the street kind of neon feeling that we worked with earlier. So that's how one builds it up, really.

SCHWARTZ: And also, in terms of mood, could you talk about your work with Nick Nolte? Because a lot of the texture of the film comes through how he delivers his lines and how the language sounds coming out of his mouth.

JORDAN: Yeah, if you can hear it.

SCHWARTZ: Right. (Laughs)

JORDAN: Because it was dicey. Well, I mean, as a director, you're faced with a problem. You see the actor give this wonderful performance with this sense of secrecy, and this low mumbled thing, and you say, "Do I get him to articulate every line, you know, and so you can hear every word?" Because then the performance will be different. And there was one scene in particular which we had to ADR entirely, the scene in the church. I remember saying to Nick, "If you knew we would have to go through this entire scene"—it took us about three days—"and you knew how much work you were going to have to put into even get people to hear what you're saying, would you have still played it that way?" And he said, yeah, he would, because an actor has to find a way to play the scene, you know? And that secretive thing was his way. But, I mean, Nick just entered into the part, really. He built up his own history for it, and he kind of knew that recovery business a lot better than I did, you know? (Laughter) Because I haven't recovered yet. (Laughs)

SCHWARTZ: Okay, let's see if anybody has any questions or comments. (Repeats audience question) The question was about the motivation of Bob going into the casino—that in the original, he knows he's going to get caught, and there's a change in your approach.

JORDAN: See, I was confused by the… I didn't know why they arrested him at the end in the original. I mean, he'd done nothing. He'd committed no crime. You know, everybody else was around outside, and they were all being shot and stuff like that, weren't they? I mean, he knew that he'd been betrayed in the original, but I

wasn't aware that he knew the entire game was finished. And there's a voice-over—there's Melville's voice-over where he says, "Lady luck made him forget why he was there." Because Bob was in the casino, meant to open some door or something, wasn't he? And he forgot to do it, you see? So I don't think he, in the original, he knew the game was up when he went in there.

SCHWARTZ: Okay, were you inspired by Nan Goldin's work, the photographer Nan Goldin, in terms of the visuals?

JORDAN: No, I wasn't, no. (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: (Laughs) Okay. Oh, a New York photographer.

JORDAN: I will look at her work, though. (Laughs) Thank you.

SCHWARTZ: (Laughs) Well, one thing about that, I mean, just to follow up on that—but there's a feeling of spontaneity that the film has. And I know sometimes you see a movie that looks like it's very spontaneous, and maybe it wasn't in the making of it, but…

JORDAN: Well yeah there was. That kind of spontaneity is really worked at, you know what I mean? what you are photographing, obviously, is spontaneous events. But some of those shots were really complicated, and the end result feels like, you know—it feels almost like cinéma vérité, but the elements involved are so complicated that it actually is not achieved through those means. It's kind of heavily designed, in a way.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) Oh, why did the American actors, the directors, the Polish brothers, speak with an Irish accent?

JORDAN: When I looked at their performance, you know, and when I looked at them, they looked like these really skinny, underfed guys from Tallaght in Dublin that I kind of knew. And I wanted them to be like that. So that's why I went that way.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) did you think about doing more looping to make all the lines… Because the lines are so beautifully

written, but not every one is, you know, easy to hear.

JORDAN: Well, I'll tell you, we went to enormous lengths to try and get people to hear this film, you know? I think it's also because there's so much dialogue, you know? You're probably not used to hearing films with all that dialogue. And not all of it is well-written. (Laughter) Sorry. The bits you didn't hear were really dumb lines, you know? (Laughs) I hope.

SCHWARTZ: Did you ever think of using voice-over? Because that's such a tempting thing, I guess.

JORDAN: I didn't know whose the voice-over would be, you know? Really, you know. I didn't, actually—no, I didn't.

SCHWARTZ: Okay, the motivation behind some of the freeze-frames that scenes end with...

JORDAN: We shot a lot of sequences, you know, at 12 frames, with a 90-degree shutter. And we double-printed them to 24. You know, double-printed them so they'd run at 24 in the end. And you get this staggered effect, yeah? And as we—as Tony Lawson, the editor, was cutting the movie, he began to experiment with those freeze-frames, because it related to that kind of image. And they became like a grammar, became a thing we were using. Eventually, they were ways to express kind of moments when the character would go from one point to another, or the story would take an unwarranted kind of leap. And they became a language we were playing with. Not everybody likes them, I know, but…

SCHWARTZ: How did you decide which scenes you would film that way, that you would film in the twelve-frame?

JORDAN: Generally, scenes with kind of lateral movement, you know, with violent movement in them. It's the kind of thing Steven Spielberg did in the beginning sequence in *Saving Private Ryan*, you know. When there's a lot of that kind of movement, it gives you this almost newsreel effect. So that's where those freeze-frames came out of.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) The Leonard Cohen song—was that a new song, or did you find that?

JORDAN: No, he brought out a great album last year called *Ten New Songs*. That's what it was called. And it's from that. And I also tried a lot of Tom Waits. And the Tom Waits was too much like Nick Nolte. (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: Right.

JORDAN: And he kind of dragged the whole thing into a fog of…(Laughter), something or other. But both their voices suited the character, you know? And Leonard Cohen's voice was just—it just seemed to come out…it had the same depth and the same kind of the same tenor as Nick's voice. I could've used a few more of his songs, but it would've been too much.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: [Inaudible question about cinematography]

JORDAN: No. No, not at all. No, no, no. No, no. I've never done this before. I was just going for a very jagged photographic style, really. The feeling when you wake up, when you're in desperate need of something to set you right, you know. That's what I was going with.

SCHWARTZ: Okay, if you could talk a little bit more about the character of Vladimir, the computer operator/guitar player. You know, how much that was built on, I guess, the real Kusturica…

JORDAN: Well, no, no. I saw a concert with that band called Radiohead. And they had this laser device, where the laser was bouncing around, and it was obviously responding to what was being played by the different instruments. So I went to the guy who invented that laser device— he's one of these tech nuts, a delightful man, from Sheffield in England, or something like that—and I wrote it into the script that this was a device that this character Vladimir was working on, while he was trying to work out how to undo the security system he'd built, you know? So he was that kind of character. And normally, those characters in movies are nerdy guys with big glasses, aren't they? They're kind of thin and skinny. When I met Emir, I said, "Let's make him this big, vital, cigar-

chomping kind of guy." And Emir does play the guitar. I didn't know he played the guitar when I met him but, I mean, my character had to. He was copying these Jimi Hendrix riffs and stuff like that. And so that was the character, so that's what he did.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) so if you could talk about your collaboration with Chris Menges and how you work with him to get the feeling that you want, your style and your visual ideas…

JORDAN: This is more glamorous than most things he does, isn't it? Yeah. And it's kind of richer, in a way, and it's in some ways more structured. I've made three films with Chris now— or four, I think it is—and he's one of the best cameramen there are. He tends to be very inarticulate, you know? Well, it's true, actually. I don't mean this as not a compliment, do you know what I mean? But he strives to create a specific image that will relate to the specific film, you know? And he goes to extraordinary lengths to do that. And for this film, he kind of rethought his photographic history, in a way, because we decided to take a different approach. We decided to just throw the book away slightly, you know, in terms of his aesthetic.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) Okay, is there a change in Irish culture recently, because of the opening up, I guess, of the country, that relates to an opening up in visual style?

JORDAN: I mean, traditionally, Irish culture has been made with that which is cheapest. I mean, you don't need money to use language. You don't have to pay to learn to play a jig or a reel on the fiddle, you know what I mean? And I mean, traditionally, Irish culture has been built around words… Any significant architecture there has come from England, you know—the architectural styles, and they're quite beautiful, actually.

Obviously, filmmaking is making its mark on the culture, and the visual arts are becoming much more important. It's probably a function of the place becoming a modern place. And I don't know what to say about that, but it is true, what you're saying, yeah. The literary culture is still there, but it's no longer the predominant thing.

SCHWARTZ: Okay, and I want to ask you, as a sort of last question: you've said that for you—and also, I guess, for Nick Nolte—this was a way to make a European film, a film outside of the American system and the Hollywood system. Could you talk about…

JORDAN: Yeah. No, I suppose this could've so easily been set in America. Do you understand what I mean? But I just took a decision to make it in Europe. And I'm not sure whether this film will be welcomed in France, you know, because they'll probably see it as a very American film. They probably will, actually. I mean, we've got this division, don't we, where American films are muscular and huge and massive, and European films almost define themselves as art films in a way, I thought, this is just a muscular straightforward story. It hasn't got any pretensions to be an art movie or anything like that. And I thought, I'll set it in Europe. An American kind of film in Europe, do you understand what I mean?

SCHWARTZ: Sure, yeah. Okay, well, I want to wish you luck with it, and thanks so much for being here tonight. (Applause)

JORDAN: Thank you very much. Thank you.