

Duane Hopkins

presents his feature film *Better Things* (2008),
a project developed through a SOURCES 2 Script Development Workshop.

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DUANE HOPKINS (introduction to screening of film *Better Things*, 2008): To give you some background on the project itself: My main reason for wanting to make it [the film *Better Things*] is because I wanted to make a modern, rural, English film. It was one of the things I wanted to do cinematically because I'm from a rural area and I wasn't seeing that kind of cinema from England.

I also wanted to try a different type of narrative structure. I've noticed that with most of the films that have left a big impression on me, the things I remember never have anything to do with the plot or even necessarily the story. It had more to do with the theme and the underlying sentiment of the impression that the film left me with. These are the things that would repeat with me the day after or the week later or even a year later with certain films. So I decided that I wanted to try to make a film where I try to abandon a certain type of narrative as much as I could, and just operate with theme.

One of the ways I did that was that I had to come up with the themes that I was interested in writing about and kind of exploring. The way I always talk about this film is that it's about love stories. And it's about a life lost in intoxication. That's one of the ways I used to pitch it and kind of talk about it before we actually made the film.

So I do think the film is essentially a set of love stories. I think it's quite a romantic film. But it's also quite a hard film as well. I think I wanted to make a film which is a more honest exploration of love within relationships. I think love has a very big capacity for beauty. But it also has the same type of capacity for cruelty. I wanted to explore that within the narrative so I hope you enjoy it.

[After the screening of *Better Things*]

HOPKINS: Okay, so where to begin talking about the start of the project, the genesis of it or the whole process of it? I think *Better Things* began even before I made my first short film. I was already kind of collating scenes and ideas because I was trying to realize what sort of film I wanted to make and maybe what kind of writer I was naturally. I didn't want to write something which was according to a craft or according to how you intend to write a screenplay or what you should or shouldn't do or a character which has this problem by Act II or this thing by Act III. That wasn't how I related to cinema. That wasn't how I related to the films that I liked.

As I said at the beginning, the films that I like would be these films which sometimes didn't have story. Or even if they did, I would tend not to remember them. Instead I would just remember what the film did to me emotionally and how I felt and how it kind of re-arranged me over the few days after I'd seen it. So I wanted films which are a little more open, a little more challenging, and which discuss more with the audience what they were trying to do rather than just giving a story.

How did I do that? How did I start to write this script which had these ideas, if I wanted to be that specific about it? The first thing is that I noticed with my writing that I was more inspired by images. It would be an image I felt compelled to create and that I wanted to see on the screen. Or it would be a single character saying a certain line. Or it would be a room and a certain atmosphere that I wanted to make as an image. So it was about having that image and how I built a scene from that image, or how I constructed something which allowed me to make that image, and allows that image to be as open and as meaningful as it can be.

The first time I did this was on a short film I wrote called *Field*. I already had the name for *Better Things*, and I knew kind of the atmosphere that I wanted to make, but I had to go and do short films before I'd ever have the opportunity to make a feature. With *Field* I had the final image of the film. I knew that when we arrive at this final image, I wanted it to be kind of a surprise, kind of a shock that you've arrived here and something which makes you re-think how you've arrived here in the film. So I had this final image, and it's about moving backward through the story as to how I can arrive at it, and how it can have the most power.

That was the first exercise I did, and it worked quite well. It seemed to me to be a very natural way of writing in that I simply worked backwards in the images. I knew when I edited them together in a montage you would have a certain feeling, you would have a certain emotion. It would feel cinematic, and would give a lot of different, complicated meanings to this final image.

The second short film I did was two years later and after we'd done SOURCES with *Better Things*. I already had a first draft of *Better Things*, and kind of knew what it was. So with *Love Me [or Leave Me Alone]* it was different: I had the first image of the film, which is a close-up shot of a young fifteen year-old boy with the horizon line in the background, and in slow-motion he turns and spits. So the question was how to build a narrative from this.

I wanted that image. I was very fixed on making that one image. How do I build a narrative? What was the heaviest thing he could be spitting out which would set in motion a story or narrative or a group of images? So I made it that he's spitting in the face of his girlfriend. They're in the middle of this huge argument. And then I just continued with the film from there, and just built on all these things.

I very rarely have a story that I know from start to end when I start writing. I'm always just doing these kinds of blocks. And then of course you might re-arrange them, you might change certain pieces. But essentially you're always building on these things that you have.

Better Things was very similar because I knew that I didn't want to write a straightforward script. I knew I wanted these scenes and these images and these characters, these sequences, these juxtapositions of images and sounds. So what I did was write all of those things down without putting any pressure on myself to make any sense of them or to turn them into any sort of narrative. They were individual scenes and individual images really. And once I had maybe seventy pages of all this kind of text and all this information, I went back through it to see if there were any repeated obsessions or any themes within this that revealed themselves to me. So rather than me kind of imposing upon the script that I wanted it to be about this and I wanted to discuss that, it was more about writing down things that I was interested in and seeing what that says back. And I found that most of the scenes were about the idea of love and loss. Essentially they were about relationships. And they had quite a lot to do about drugs in a rural environment as well.

So from this I began to see how I could take certain scenes and link them together. And if I put this scene by this scene, even though the characters never meet, even though they have nothing to do with one another, by being in the same film and by having these cuts in these places, they will begin to have a relationship and a dialogue between them, and hopefully a theme will become apparent.

That's how I wrote the script basically, and SOURCES was the first time that I'd ever sat in a room with other writers, with other contemporaries, other people who also came up with ideas and images and stories. For me, that was very interesting because I think a lot of the time you do sit on your own, and you're not provoked enough. You need this kind of provocation from other people to justify your own ideas – well, not to justify, but to understand and articulate them better.

Quite often when you write, you know something and you write it down, but you still don't really understand why it's there. I think to really finish writing a script, you have to understand why it's there because then you can make all those final adjustments. This isn't something I do at the start, but it is something I do later on.

That was really the writing of the script. Are there any questions about the writing?

AUDIENCE QUESTION: At what stage did you write the dialogue?

HOPKINS: That depends. Sometimes the dialogue comes right in at the start, and I know that I want these characters to have this kind of conversation. So you actually write the dialogue before you write anything else. Other times it will come in quite late. I think it's the same with other writers: Quite often you write a scene which has quite a lot of dialogue, and then you end up at draft five and you've found a way to remove all this dialogue, and have the scene play out in a much more interesting cinematic way. That's certainly something I find with the editing of the film. I tend to try to remove as much dialogue as I can so that the actual cinema of the piece becomes in a way a bit purer. It becomes more about how the images and the sounds relate to one another. But the dialogue changes all the time.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: How much is actually on the page? Do you describe the setting in the room, the way you want people to behave, the dialogue again?

HOPKINS: The early drafts are very, very detailed, almost down to the editing and the grammar of it. Very, very much so with the short films, maybe less with *Better Things*. But with the short films, the script was literally a written-out kind of storyboard, down to the sizes of the images; not quite the length of the images, but kind of everything else was described.

With the short films, I tried this technique of working with non-actors. I worked with them to get performance, and I was very, very satisfied with this. I liked the differences you'd get in their performances compared to what you get with actors. There were a lot of reasons why I did that, but maybe we can talk about that later.

I found out later on with the financing of the script that it's better to remove all that stuff because the financiers want to see what the emotion is, what the human core of the story is, as they often describe it, and they're not too interested in these other details because they understand that from your previous work – from your short films or from the other films you've made or that you've been involved in. They've got an idea of the kind of atmosphere you're going to evoke, and they're more interested in whether or not the narrative is going to work over ninety minutes, which of course in this case was complicated to convince them of, even though my short films were very successful. They've won awards, and sold places, and so on, but it was still a big risk because it's a very unglamorous film in a way. It had very, very few commercial prospects. And it was quite different and quite innovative in its narrative structure. It's quite unique in what it does. Also it was a first-time director, first-time DoP and first-time producer. Then there were all these characters with no set storyline. So it was very complicated to convince them.

So to get back to your question, in the early drafts, I tend to describe everything. They have to understand the atmosphere of what I'm trying to put down. And then once you understand the atmosphere a little bit better, you kind of move on from that. I think that maybe that's the first thing that comes with a film – the feeling of it. For me anyway, you don't necessarily completely understand the story that I want to tell, but I know the impressions that I want you to leave with. I know kind of what I want the ingredients to add up to. And then I think the writing down is for me my way of verbalizing with myself what it is. So I begin to go through it and figure in if it's the atmosphere I have in mind.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Could you please talk about the casting of the actors or the work with the people who haven't acted before? And did I understand correctly that the old couple are a couple in real life as well?

HOPKINS: The old couple are a couple in real life. That kind of sums up why I wanted to work with non-actors. To take them as an example, when I met them, what struck me first of all is how gentle he was toward his wife, how tactile he was, how caring. He was thoughtful all the time. He would constantly be asking her if she was okay, and if she wanted this or that. He would take every opportunity he could to hold her hand, and be very, very close to her all the time. And that was one of the first things I noticed about them, even though they'd been married for I think about sixty years.

So there was this very, very beautiful thing between them. And of course I'd written this story of this character who's kind of a depressed old man. There was some sort of problem, some sort of fissure in the relationship between him and his wife. We never really find out what it is, but there's this problem between them. I was interested in what would happen if I put him in front of the camera and told him he can't do any of these things that he normally does with his wife. So he says the words that I've written, and he does the movements that I've asked him to do. But all the time he wants to be close to her yet I'm telling him that he can't, and I'm filming it. I know that this is causing him a certain amount of pain and creating a problem for him. So in that way, you begin to use the camera as a kind of microscope. You're recording all these other little things, all these details, which for me is more compelling and more interesting when I watch it, and is also more challenging to them to turn it into the story. Of course, when I take all of these different elements and piece them together, you have a story. You have the atmosphere and you have the elements, and you have a very different performance than what you'd have from an actor. Not to say that one is better than the other, but for me, this one is kind of subtle. It has these other kinds of notes to it. And it has something unusual to it as well.

The reason I arrived at working in that way started with my first short film *Field*. It's about three young boys who hang out together in this village. The reason they hang out together in this village isn't necessarily because they like one another, but because there's really no one else to hang out with. During

the film, there's always an atmosphere of violence between the three of them, that something could kind of erupt between them. And you find out at the end of the film that they're responsible for what could be considered quite an evil act. These boys are 14 or 15 in the script, so I knew I wasn't going to find these boys that I was going to believe on screen in any kind of acting schools. I was going to need kids that not necessarily already had the potential to act this way, but who had this very rich kind of life outside of school and outside of their parents and their normal kind of socialization. They would still be themselves. They would still be kind of aggressive and mature.

I felt like I needed kids who had life experiences beyond their years. I thought the place I would most likely find this is kids who were from schools where academically they don't do so well. So I went to a school where we knew most of the kids from the school had been thrown out by the schools. There were three kids who knew one another but didn't hang out together. When I first put them together, there was a very fascinating dynamic between the three of them in that the one guy was always trying to impress the other two, and the one guy was always trying to impress the other one. So there was an absolute natural hierarchy that already existed between these three. I thought if I took what was already in the script, if I take these images, and I get these three boys to enact these images, and I could also get some of this hierarchy within the photography, then I think we've got something very, very interesting. So that's what we did, and it worked very, very well. I'm extremely happy with the process.

Then we did it again on the second film, which is *Love Me or Leave Me Alone*. It worked again. Then I felt like I needed to see this process through to its natural conclusion in a way. I think now I'm very interested in performance and maybe working with actors because I think there's something else you can do there. There's another type of element you can bring in because you have to find a different way of working with actors, like with the older guy I mentioned earlier. With *Field*, I shot it almost as a group of single images. The kids never saw the script. I never even blocked a scene with them. I would just turn up, set up the camera and tell them what they had to do within the single shot. And then they would do that.

One of the final shots of the film, which leads up to the final shot that I discussed earlier, is the one boy who is always trying to impress the other two in school assembly. So he sat in front of the assembly and about 400 kids sat behind him. I needed him to look guilty. Obviously I couldn't say anything to him like, "You need to look guilty." It wouldn't work. But knowing what I know about him, I got some tape and put it on the floor in front of him. Then I put the camera just behind that. And I told him he had to stare at the cross. He couldn't take his eyes off the cross. I knew he wouldn't be able to do this. I knew he'd start to fidget and move and become very anxious about not being able to keep his eyes on the cross like I'm telling him to do. So when we filmed it, he looked guilty and anxious. We filmed it for five minutes, then I took the fifteen-second bit I needed. That's how I shot the whole film. I would do all these kinds of little things to basically get what I needed from them.

So in that way I don't have the same kind of relationship as you might have with an actor, which I am interested in. Friends of mine who are directors have had that relationship with actors. I think there are a lot of performances which I like very much. So I'm intrigued to start doing that and start doing films where you have this kind of mix, as long as you can make the mix and the balance kind of work to achieve the equilibrium in the film that you need.

Any questions about the casting?

AUDIENCE QUESTION: How many takes could you afford with these non-actors if it didn't work out the first time.

HOPKINS: That's the thing. On the short films, I had much more luxury than I did on the feature. On *Field*, it was quite generous. It was an eight-day shoot for a ten-minute film. But that was good because it was the first time I was going through this process, so I was really kind of finding my feet as to how to do it. Then I could try a lot of different things. I had a storyboard, but I shot a lot of things around the storyboard. I knew that if I got these images I had the film, but I wasn't necessarily going to discover anything new in the film. But I had enough time that I could really shoot around everything. And I had enough time that if I wanted to use 5-10 seconds of something, I could kind of build the scene and make the scene work and run for almost two minutes. So I had a lot of options for where I could pick this image from.

With *Love Me [or Leave Me Alone]*, I had a little less time. But I also prepared with the actors a little bit more beforehand because there was a lot more dialogue and blocking of the scenes. So the start of the film and the argument we had to block because it's a three-minute scene, and there's a lot of

movement and dialogue and shouting and fighting in it. I would have to block it as a complete scene, and run it and cover it from different angles. But that was kind of conscious because I knew and felt that had been an exercise in terms of montage and really executing a certain type of photography. I knew *Love Me [or Leave Me Alone]* had more played out scenes because otherwise it would have been impossible to make a film like *Better Things*, which is just kind of montage all the time.

Better Things was actually very, very tough because we shot it on anamorphic 35mm, which I think is an absolutely beautiful format. It has this incredible drop off on the focus, and gives this wonderful kind of painted texture to the images. But it's an absolute bitch to work with. It requires a lot of light. It requires a lot of time for set-up. It's very bulky. Focus is very, very hard to achieve. So working with non-actors with a set-up that's technically very, very hard and that you need a sizable crew for, that was very, very challenging because we had so many more people behind the camera on *Better Things* than we had on the short films, which of course makes it harder for the non-actors, unless of course you want them to be self-conscious within the scene.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: And with the old couple? Was that as hard as with the young kids, for example?

HOPKINS: I think it's harder with the older couple actually because with the younger kids, they have a lot of energy. They're not as set in their personalities. They're not as narrow in their definition of themselves. So they're a lot more willing to try things and be less self-conscious and be more open to pushing and giving energy to the camera. So with them it was kind of easier. With the older couple, it was tougher, but also simply because they get tired. They can't shoot for twelve hours. You can shoot with them for a couple of hours, then you have to stop, then you can shoot for another couple of hours. But, of course, you've got to tie that in to how you direct and how you use it. I think as long as you've had enough time with them beforehand and you've thought about it, you can turn that into a positive, just like with any other non-actor of a certain psychology and a certain personality. There is a part which is correct for them; it depends on whether or not that part happens to be in your film.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Could you talk about your use of sound in the film because I noticed that you cut it in and out in a kind of harsh, abrupt way?

HOPKINS: We had quite a heavy sound design. I think this ties in with the film as a whole, and what my ambitions with the film were. I wanted to take on social realist elements, or what you'd consider social realist elements, which is kind of location shooting, working-class characters, problematic things like drug use, which would normally be explored in a film in terms of class or social economics or social strata or whether or not it's a problem for society – all these kinds of political elements. I wanted to de-politicize these and look at them more psychologically and from a more lyrical, hyper-real point-of-view.

English cinema is very much known for social realism. That's our foundation, our base. It's what we're really respected for. We have Ken Loach and Mike Leigh, who are two practicing masters of it. But I think we also have a very good tradition of taking those elements of social realism and turning them into something else and subverting them: either Powell and Pressburger or with Bill Douglas or Terence Davis or Lynne Ramsay. I was more interested in taking those elements and making something bigger.

For me, the way the sound relates to that is I don't want a straightforward sound design. Instead I want something which juxtaposes against the image and creates a new world, something else which is different. I like cinema where I see all these elements which are normal and real, but they're cut up and rearranged and put back together in a different way. Then I really feel like I'm seeing the director's point-of-view, the director's vision, and kind of the atmosphere that they wanted to bring across.

With *Better Things*, some of that is kind of designed in the script. There it says we see this action but we only hear the sound, or we see this but we don't hear the sound, or we see this but we hear a different sound from what we would normally expect to hear here, or the sound is slower. Some of these things are kind of built-in. But a lot of it is when we're in the edit and we're putting things together and we're manipulating all these things to see if we can heighten certain elements. Or what I really like is when you use these things to actually tell the narrative, to actually describe how the person's thinking or how the person's interpreting the situation. For me, that's what makes cinema really an art form above just a craft. It's not just a recording of a naturalistic performance saying this kind of naturalistic dialogue. It becomes

something else. It aspires to something which is bigger, which is more sublime than just the straightforward stuff.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Sticking to sound, there is just one scene – and maybe you’ve just answered this – where there’s a car and the sound is completely cut out. That’s quite a strong dramatic choice.

HOPKINS: It was an accident. The scene wasn’t designed that way. Originally I wanted to shoot the scene with no low-loader – the thing that the car is actually mounted on so that you can mount the cameras. I was arguing with production because I didn’t want to shoot with a low-loader. I wanted to shoot it kind of normally with the cameras on the side, and we’d shut down the roads. But we weren’t able to do that for certain insurance purposes, so we had to have the low-loader.

So we go there and I’m directing the scene. Of course, we have to have the windows down so that we can get the angle that I wanted to the car. And, of course, all the dialogue is unusable because of the noise from the low-loader. So just before we finished the scene, we kept the kids in the car and wild-tracked the conversation. We did maybe fifteen takes from start to finish of the whole conversation. I’m directing this, and asking them to do it maybe a little softer or quicker or slower. My favourite version was this very, very soft interpretation of the words.

We started putting that on to each individual piece, and of course it’s competing against the wild track of the sound of the car. So we’re thinking we’re going to have to use something else. And we’re watching this scene back again, and the editor by accident turns off the wild track of the car. So as we come into the scene, we have the bit of the car, which he’s looped, and all of a sudden it cuts off, and we just hear the first bit of dialogue from the one kid. The editor stops and goes, “I’m sorry. I’ll just get that right.” And I was like, “No, no, no. Can I watch the whole thing?”

So we watched the whole thing, and it completely changed the whole scene. What it did was it made the scene play out so that you didn’t know whether it was real or not. It made it as though it could be an imagined discussion. It could be real. It could be something he’s wishing he were saying to his friend. It could be something that both of them are kind of imagining. And this within what we know about the characters and their being heavy drug users seemed absolutely perfect within the atmosphere of the film. And also because we were cutting into the POVs of the characters as they’re hurling through these lanes, it completely changed the interpretation of the POVs. With the actual sound of the car on, you’re just watching a straightforward POV. But if you remove the sound, you feel like you’re inside the character. It’s as though this is what the character is feeling happening to him.

So those things kind of happened on set or in the edit, these little mistakes or little windows of opportunity that open. And you decide whether or not you pursue them.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Your second short, is it *Love Me and Leave Me Alone*?

HOPKINS: *Love Me and Leave Me Alone* is the full title.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: In that one, there was a lot more tension. I always felt like something was about to happen. In *Better Things*, it feels like you’re sitting back a lot more.

HOPKINS: Not necessarily on purpose. I think that’s partly to do with the narrative structure of the two films. In *Love Me [or Leave Me Alone]*, you just have the two characters. So you’re only interested in the relationship that exists between these two. Because the film starts very dynamically, I think you’re always aware of this problem that exists between the two. But it is also a faster film as well. There are more scenes and more action within them. I think *Better Things* is about a more singular kind of atmosphere, which is over the whole film. It’s not necessarily about the relationships between these singular characters. It’s about the impression of the area and the atmosphere as a whole. I think that was in the script.

I still don’t know 100 percent how I feel about *Better Things*. With *Love Me [or Leave Me Alone]* I do. I kind of understand this more because there’s more distance between me and making the film. But with *Field* and *Love Me [or Leave Me Alone]*, it was probably two to three years after making them that I could go back to them and really view them in a more objective way. *Better Things* I still watch and I still react to it very intuitively. I still can’t get enough critical distance to it.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Do you think this kind of style works with a more uplifting theme?

HOPKINS: Possibly. This is one thing about *Better Things* that has been remarked upon is that it's bleak, it's heavy, it's quite harsh. For me, it's not so much that because it comes back to the idea of social realism. If you analyse the film as a social realist text, as though I'm a documentarian and I'm saying this is how it is, then I can understand that kind of analysis. But that isn't what I'm doing. I'm obviously turning things into metaphors, and using them as a kind of ciphers to talk about something else.

So for me, the film is quite intensely romantic. In the script, for instance, we had it so that the character of Rob – the guy who overdoses in the barn at the end – survives. But when we were watching the cuts back, we were seeing that because of his performance, because of the way that he interpreted the character, because of certain things that he had done, there were elements to it that weren't actually in the written character. We realized this character really wanted to die. This character really wanted to go and see his girlfriend again and stay there. So it's also very much about responding to the material you have and which seems to be the correct way of giving the characters what they want. In *Better Things*, I think most of the characters do kind of achieve what they're after. And if they don't, they still certainly have that potential; they still have that light. Maybe my execution of it is quite heavy. [Hopkins and audience laugh]

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Are you allowed to tell us what's next? Do you have anything coming up?

HOPKINS: Yes. *Better Things* is the only feature script I've written. I'm about to start writing the second one. At the moment it's called *Bypass*. I'm trying maybe a slightly different method. In *Better Things*, I wrote it in just this way of writing all these obsessions and different things I had, and seeing how I could pull that together into something cohesive. With this project, it's coming from something different because I'm not necessarily writing about an environment which is very close to me. *Better Things*, *Field* and *Love Me [or Leave Me Alone]* were all things that I'd seen or heard stories about, or that I knew people who had been through it. So I had either first-hand or second-hand experiences of all of these stories, and knew what was authentic and what wasn't. I knew what the correct things were. I knew what all the practical elements were that I needed to put together. But the new film is kind of different. Maybe I have experience of this when I was young, before I was twenty maybe, but after that not so much.

I grew up in a working-class family. I have a certain kind of memory of what the atmosphere was like, and what the estate was like and what the place was like, and how people kind of related to one another, and what working class meant. When I started doing the casting of *Better Things*, I was always assuming I was going to go back to this environment to find a lot of my principle characters. When I went back to all these places I'd kind of known but hadn't actually been back to in ten or twelve years, they seemed extremely different. So I started thinking about what working class was, what it meant and how it's changed.

To put it kind of simplistically, I think you have a middle class which has come out of that, which has white collar jobs and houses. There's an economic improvement in that way. And then you have another side, which have become almost a kind of underclass. They've kind of dropped off the economic map. These were the areas I was kind of going to. I became very interested in what your morality has to be like if you're in that environment where you're three generations deep into unemployment, and what you really think your options are.

One night I was out casting for *Better Things*. The way I cast is very time-intensive. I actually go to these places and approach people on the streets. I would go to schools, job centers, anywhere where I thought these characters were going to be. I was in this one estate in this one quiet, run-down town that had lost its industry about fifteen years ago. The one estate is quite rough. I see a kid who's walking away from me. There's something about the way he's walking. He's talking on his phone, and there's something about his mannerisms which is quite interesting. So I shout, and we have a small discussion, and I say, "I'd be really interested in doing a kind of interview with you." So he says, "Okay, come around to this address tonight at 9 o'clock."

So I go around to this address, and it's kind of set out like a squat. It's quite dirty. There's just a PlayStation, an old television, a kitchen which looks as though he just eats sandwiches. McDonald's everywhere. It's cold. He's there in his jacket, and he's got a wooly hat on, and two of his friends

are there as well. So I sit down, and we have a conversation. I do an interview with all three of them, and I take some photographs. It's very good. They're very good, and they're very open and candid about who they are, what they do, how they've grown up. And then I ask them what they're doing later on, and very frankly they tell me they're going out and going burglarizing. So we discuss this, and it turns out they actually know the people they're about to burgle. [audience laughter] There's one part of me that's kind of surprised by this, and another part which is kind of okay. This has evolved into this, this has become this.

I don't believe I've just sat with three bad kids. But what was interesting is again the dynamic between the three. You could almost tell that one kid didn't want to be there, and was having a problem with being there. Whether or not it's me kind of imagining that he was morally having an issue with what he was about to go and do or whether he was just scared to do it, I don't know. But for me that was very, very interesting, and it's kind of what has triggered the idea for the new script. The new script is set in an urban area, in a satellite town which has lost its industry, and it's really about the idea of whether or not morality is a luxury. It's something that you almost buy. It's something that you can have if you can afford it. But if you can't afford it, what really is moral?

With this project, I think I'll maybe work with a mix of non-actors and actors because this project will be very much about a singular character, about one person. *Better Things*, of course, was an ensemble piece. The character I worked with the longest was the character who played Rob. And I still only got to work with him for eleven days out of the whole shoot. Now I really want to have a much more intensive relationship with a single character over the whole shoot. So this one will be about one character, about one person's journey.

What else would you like to hear about?

AUDIENCE QUESTION: How many kilos of heroin did you have to consume while you reced?
 [Hopkins and audience laugh]

HOPKINS: Yeah, I'm glad I didn't fall into that. The kids who are in the film are actually ex-users. It wasn't actually challenging to work with them because they were very good. But there were a few characters that I wanted to cast in the film who were still using, and for insurance purposes, we weren't allowed to do that. [audience laughter]

AUDIENCE QUESTION: What was the budget [of *Better Things*]?

HOPKINS: £ 1 million.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: I guess it's a bit like documentary because afterwards there is a certain responsibility. After you've stuck these kids up on screen, and they're not users any more, they must be reflecting on their own past a little bit, I guess. How did they feel afterwards?

HOPKINS: I think maybe in a way I'm not so sure that they were [reflecting on their past]. In terms of taking someone who's been through that and putting them on the screen, I think you have to be very upfront with them right from the start. So first of all there's a relationship that you have to have with each of them before you even decide to work together. In that relationship, you have to figure out first of all how you're going to direct them, what your options are for getting the performance that you need, and of course whether or not they can handle the rigors of a shoot because a set is quite a tough environment. You have to do things again and again and again from different angles, and it's tiring. It's very unglamorous. So you have to make those decisions as to whether or not they're capable of doing it. And then in conversations with them you have to find out whether or not it's interesting to them. The reason that I used the people I used in the film in terms of being ex-heroin users wasn't because that was a philosophy that I went into the film with. It was more through the research because heroin was something I had no first-hand experience of, but I'd lost a few friends to it. It would be things like after I'd moved away from the area and I came back to the area and asked where's so and so, and they'd say, "We don't see him anymore. He's using." And then I'd see kids in the pub who were obviously taking heroin. And then next time I'd come back I'd find out that maybe two of these kids were now dead.

That made me think about why people have this experience with it and why people enter into using it. I don't think it's as simple as that they just want to get high. I think it's something else. I began

looking into heroin research because I was intrigued by it, and not necessarily thinking initially that I was going to make a film about it. Then the one kid said something very interesting. He referred to heroin as though it were a lover or confidante. So I began asking other users whether or not this description of the drug felt kind of similar, and all of them said the same thing – “absolutely.” It becomes the most important thing in your life, which keeps you safe from everything else.

Then I began to think this is very similar to a kind of relationship and this kind of equilibrium that you’re after. A heroin user gets up in the morning, and they know as long as they get this substance, then they’ll feel a certain way. I think that’s similar to how people have relationships to a certain degree. So it was interesting when I first sat down and wrote these initial scenes to see that I was already playing with that juxtaposition, and how you could kind of put those things together. It was from the research that I met these characters. Someone would say, “I know someone who used to use. I know someone who is using. Would you be interested in talking to them?” “Yes, definitely.”

So you go and meet them. I met many, many people. And some of them I ended up having a long friendship with over a period of six to nine months that I was doing the research. Then when you do that, you start thinking you can see this person as this character. I can see them doing an interpretation of that. By that time there’s already a kind of element of trust between the two of you. But, of course, for me it has to be photographic as well because it normally starts photographically with any character as to whether or not I’m interested in them. I have to want to put a camera on them and see what the camera is going to reveal.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: I’m curious about this hybrid between documentary and fiction and if you ever considered using these stories and making them into more of a documentary film or some hybrid between documentary and fiction.

HOPKINS: I certainly don’t view this as documentary because even though the characters have their own mannerisms that I wanted to film and see, and they have their own voices and own ways of moving and speaking, they’re all words that I’ve written. They’re moving within the scene in the way that I’ve directed them to move. So really it’s not them on screen because there has been this conversation about my putting these people on screen, but that’s not the case. They are essentially kind of acting, but I’m using the camera in a different way than some other directors do. I’m not just there to record it. I’m there to try to use the camera in a slightly more provocative way.

In terms of documentary and fiction, I’m not sure I really see the difference between the two things. I think normally where you do have this hybrid or crossover, it’s quite possibly where the most interesting things happen. There’s a very interesting filmmaker called Ulrich Seidel, who made documentaries for the first part of his career, and he’s made two feature films since then. I remember being told by someone who was involved in the production of his films that the only reason he would describe his early films as documentaries is because it was then easier to get the money. Then he didn’t have to have all the conversations about fiction scripts that he knew he was going to have to have: “Well, we don’t like this bit. What about this bit? Can we change this? Can we change that?” So he called them documentaries simply because it was easier for him to get the money and easier for him to maintain control over them. It’s very fascinating how he works and how he finds his characters, and how he builds his films.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Have you seen a film called *Hukkle* by this Hungarian guy György Pálfi?

HOPKINS: No, I don’t think so.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: It’s very stylized. There’s no dialogue. It’s just using sounds to tell the story. It’s a thriller and a mystery based on real documentary facts of things that happened in a village on the border between Hungary and Romania, where all the women poisoned their husbands after the war. It was a mystery for many, many years. And then maybe thirty years later they found out that they had been poisoned by their wives. So they made a fiction film out of this, and it works very well on the same level of film language [as your film].

HOPKINS: Okay. For me, when it comes to the later processes after the shooting, when you go into the edit, I think you're always very surprised by the first rough cut because it's so different from what you've written. It seems so much more open than what you had on the page. It was interesting doing *Better Things* because we had quite an extended editing process because in the script we had a whole other element of storyline. In the cut, we had the younger generation and the older generation but no real middle, whereas in the script we had the whole middle generation as well.

We actually shot all that material. Then when we cut it together, we found that the film was really repeating itself. Things we were saying in the middle generation, which was actually a well-negotiated, well worked out, happy marriage, were really saying the same sorts things that the other scenes were saying, but not in quite as interesting of a manner. Also we found that when we removed it, we had a much bigger dynamic between the young and the old, and you had this idea of what love looks like at the start of your romantic life and how it kind of looks at the end.

This whole idea of the first time that you fall in love really started with *Love Me [or Leave Me Alone]*. That's really when everything kind of changes. That's such a huge evolutionary leap for yourself when it happens. You can never really go back. But the first relationships, from what I saw with my friends and what I saw around me, were a mix of violence and intimacy. They were intimate because it was the first time you had these feelings for someone else. You've experienced love from your family and your friends, but this is very, very different. This is something you feel in a very different way, which is also quite confusing. I think the problem with this idea of first love is that one person always pulls away from the other, which is where the violence comes in because normally one person wants to pull away and the other person doesn't. Because you're young, you don't understand these relationships. It's going to be a life of compromise until you find someone you can co-exist with. But you don't understand this, so you react in a way that is possibly very, very different from your natural personality, and you begin to lose your balance, your equilibrium. You begin to change and become this other person, which you're not sure of and which confuses you.

With the older characters, I was interested in what happens if it's a compromise too far. What happens if you're in love with this person, but something has happened and some damage has been done, and you've compromised but you now feel that you've gone too far with it? You still want to receive this love from this person, but the love feels compromised and kind of impure, yet you still can't pull away from it.

So when we removed the middle generation, all of these things began to become a lot more apparent within the film. Then we mixed that with using drugs in the same way that you may use a relationship. We felt then that we were getting back to the essence of the script. When you read the script and you put it down, you had a certain feeling, a certain emotion, a certain impression the script had left you with. The film then had to get to the same place. It was strange because I don't think I was actually trying to do that. I don't think I ever referred to the script the whole time I was in the edit. I was just intuitively changing things: I want to move this way, I want to move that way, take this out, make this longer. And the interesting thing when we actually finished the film and locked it, and watched it back for the first time, a few weeks later we said it actually felt like the script now, even though it was actually very, very different.

I think that's a very interesting thing about scripts. Actually what you're producing is a blueprint for the emotion of the film and the impact of the film, not necessarily that the film is going to be laid out like it is here with this structure and this dialogue. That's where the challenge of working with non-actors or my interest in working with non-actors comes from because that pushes that element even harder because you'll find on set that there are certain things that you've written that they cannot do. Any you know because they're non-actors that you can't ask of them that they have to be able to do it. You have to find another way around it. You have to be very creative, and find another way of getting that emotion. And you have to do that in the edit, and you have to do that in the sound. I think that ends up creating a more innovative piece of work.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: How long did it take you to edit the film?

HOPKINS: I think we edited for about seven months in all. So quite a while. The first assembly was two hours and ten minutes. Audiences are very cine-literate; they understand, "Okay, I'm watching a multi-narrative film. At some point, all the characters are going to come together or they're going to start to

interact or shift, and I'll start to see the relationships." With *Better Things*, we had to make them understand that this wasn't going to happen, that by forty-five minutes in, these characters are never going to meet up. It's not going to happen. So you have to start interacting with the film in a different way. We realized that two hours and ten minutes was too long. Basically an audience could handle that kind of investment, but anything over 100 minutes was going to be too hard. The connections the audience was going to make would begin to dissipate and go away. So we knew then that we had to remove something wholesale from the film, actually rip a whole thing out, rather than just cut down on the scenes.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: You told us that you were somehow influenced by Ulrich Seidel. I wanted to ask you what is interesting for you, especially in making fiction films, because his early documentaries or so-called documentaries were very controversial in Austria because of his sense of social realism. Ulrich Seidel provokes and forces his characters, who are in their natural surrounding, so much that they somehow get lost in their social aspects.

HOPKINS: You mean the people who are critically evaluating the films?

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Yes, what he's doing. He's provoking them to do this and that. I know this especially from two films because I know his way of working, that it destroyed them in a social context. So could you tell us what is interesting for you in this way of provoking or building stages for what I would call actors. I would not consider them protagonists in a documentary.

HOPKINS: I don't know. There's something about his films that I kind of relate to in terms of the performances that I'm watching. I believe them. I believe the people. I believe what's on the line for them. They look to me like real characters. They don't look like something which has been written to be complicated or paradoxical or to have a conflict. To me, they have something else. The way he uses the camera, to me, is very humane. I can imagine that his sets are hard to be on, that there's a lot of tension, that it would be very intense. But I find the material that he gets to be phenomenal.

In terms of being an influence, I don't think he's been such a big influence [on me]. When I think in terms of things that you were influenced by, I think that tends to be stuff that you see earlier. I didn't see Ulrich Seidel's work until about six or seven years ago. That's when I was first introduced to it. By that time, it would have been too late for me to be influenced by him in a very natural way because I think your influences you get when you're young. I think you assimilate them, and get them maybe even before you start working. I think you take them on board very naturally, and they become a part of you. I think if you do something later on which is influenced by something, I think it can become kind of copying. But for me there was something he was doing, some kind of technique of taking something very real and then presenting it as fiction, which I found very compelling and very interesting.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Inspiring?

HOPKINS: Yes. I think so. Also that there could be a different model for making films because this supposed model for making films – that you have an idea, then you write a treatment, then a script, and go off to get financing, then cast it, and go off to do pre-production, the shoot, then the edit – if you constantly go along this way, then it becomes a craft. It becomes about how well you can execute that craft, and how much artistry you can bring into the craft.

So for me it's fascinating just hearing about other people who were having a different way of making a film using different models and saying, "Okay, I want to make this film, but I'm going to shoot it over two winters. And in between these two winters I'll edit, and see what else I need for the story." To me, that's fascinating. For me, that's a much more interesting way of working.