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Third Person – Confessions of Screenwriter-Director Paul Haggis

Sophia Stein · Wednesday, June 18th, 2014

In *Third Person*, Paul Haggis explores how difficult it is to trust those we love, those who have either betrayed us or been betrayed by us, and the leap of faith that great, unconditional love demands. Haggis delves deep into an exploration of guilt and forgiveness that is at once personal and autobiographical, while deconstructing for us his own process as a writer. On full display is Haggis' whimsical, extravagantly romantic sensibility. *Third Person* operates as a psychological mystery that Haggis attributes as his homage to Michelangelo Antonioni.

It was at the suggestion of actress Moran Atias, whom Haggis directed in *The Next Three Days* (2009) and the TV series *Crash*, that he was sparked to pen a multi-plotline film about love and relationships. Haggis sets into play three stories, one taking place in Paris, one in Rome, and one in New York. Michael (Liam Neeson), a Pulitzer Prize-winning fiction author, holes himself up in a hotel suite in the City of Lights, where he is visited upon by his bewitching young mistress, Anna (Olivia Wilde), and intermittently intruded upon by the wife he has abandoned, Elaine (Kim Basinger), as he fervently tries to complete his latest book. In Rome, Scott (Adrien Brody), a corporate thief, becomes entangled in the affairs of a mysterious and alluring Roma woman, Monika (Moran Atias), in her mission to free her ransomed daughter. Meanwhile in New York City, down on her luck divorcee Julia (Mila Kunis) wages battle against her ex, Rick (James Franco), for joint custody of their son.

The third plot-line in particular, which builds to a heart-wrenching climax with superb performances from Kunis and Franco, seems directly inspired by autobiographical details of the writer's life. When his divorce became final in 1997, Haggis and his ex-wife were ordered to undergo psychological evaluations that resulted in the court awarding full custody of their three daughters to Haggis. Haggis was a practicing Scientologist for over thirty-four years. He left the Church in 2009 when its support of Proposition 8 and its implicit condemnation of homosexuality did not jibe with Haggis' core beliefs. It is ironic that Scientology, which vehemently denounces psychiatry, also has an active policy of "disconnection" in which members are encouraged to separate themselves from friends or family members who criticize Scientology or are deemed "Covertly Hostile," toxic by Scientology standards. Haggis seems to be actively wrestling with demons of condemnation and forgiveness in *Third Person*.

Ironically, Haggis got his start in Hollywood writing cartoons (*Scooby-Doo* and *Richie Rich*) and television shows, including *The Love Boat*, *Diff'rent Strokes*, and *One Day at a Time*. He received an Emmy for an episode of *thirtysomething*, was executive producer of *The Facts of Life*, and

credited as co-creator of *Walker, Texas Ranger*.

In 2004, the Haggis-written *Million Dollar Baby* won the Oscar for Best Picture. The following year, *Crash*, which he wrote and directed, was similarly honored. It is the only time in Academy history that a writer has penned consecutive Best Picture winners.

I met with Paul Haggis recently at the Fairmont Hotel in San Francisco, just prior to the release of his feature film, *Third Person*. His spirit was generous and engaging, and the pace of his speech betrayed his well of manic energy. He was quick to respond to questions that I could barely complete. As I was walking into his room, Haggis was sneaking a quick smoke, and just afterwards, escaped downstairs for another.

When I ask if he plans to ever write explicitly about the Scientologists, he responds, “I haven’t found a story that I’ve wanted to tell. I’m not either afraid to do it, nor am I shying away from it. I’m not running towards it either. It’s just hard to find a decent story anywhere in the world. So if I found a particular story that really intrigued me about that, I would give it a try.”



Director Paul Haggis and Adrien Brody, Third Person.

Photo by Maria Marin, Courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics.

Sophia Stein: You dedicate the film: “To my father Ted who taught me to take risks.” How did he encourage you and inspire you?

Paul Haggis: He has lived his life always taking risks. He was in the construction business. He tried different companies. He continually tried to redefine himself. He always went with his gut. He succeeded, and failed. I always admired that very much.

He encouraged me to go to Hollywood. I was working in construction with him, and he knew I was no damn good at it. My heart wasn’t in it. I had written plays and was trying to write movies. He said, “Go to Hollywood. I’ll give you \$100 dollars a week” (which was my salary at the time), “and I’ll support you for a year.” So I did. I packed up. I got married. I went home and told my girlfriend that I wanted to be a writer-director, and we were moving to Los Angeles. I worked as a furniture mover for four years after that for Moishe’s Movers. I would work 8-10 hours a day, then come home and write 2-3 hours a night. That’s one of the things that haunted me. At that time and then as I struggled to make it in television, I spent so much time pursuing that goal...because you have to be fierce in order to make it as an artist or as a writer, and often other people in our lives pay the price for our selfishness. Because we’re very selfish as artists. We have to be. We say we’re doing it for others. We’re not; we’re doing it for ourselves. So your children get ignored (which is a theme in this movie). The ones you love put up with things that they shouldn’t have to put up with. Supporting us. So that’s certainly something that haunted me during the making of this film.

I literally wrote *Third Person* from the inside out. I purposely didn’t structure it to start. I wanted to explore these characters and see where they took me. They’d often take me to places that I didn’t want to go. Blind allies or things that just didn’t work, but sometimes, like the voices gnawing in Liam Neeson’s head [as Michael], the characters kept pushing me towards something that I wasn’t ready [to accept].

We try to control our characters. We try to control our canvas. We try to control anything as

artists or filmmakers. Often it is when we just abandon ourselves and go “O.k., fine. What is this script supposed to be? What are these characters telling me?” If you actually listen to them, they take you to surprising places. But often, they do things that don’t seem to make sense.

Liam’s character, Michael is in a state of denial through this whole movie. He’s using Love, he’s using his Writing, he’s using everything — to try and avoid thinking about what he doesn’t want to think about. The characters he writes literally lead him to the answer at the end.

Sophia: I heard that you wrote fifty drafts of the screenplay?

Paul: That’s probably hyperbole, but it felt like it. It was two and a half years of writing and rewriting. There were probably at least fifty full drafts, and then there were a lot of interstitial drafts.



*Olivia Wilde as Anna and Liam Neeson as Michael, “Third Person,”
Photo by Maria Marin, Courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics.*

Sophia: What were some of the issues you were tinkering with or obsessing over?

Paul: Who the characters were. I knew what the three stories were. I started writing the Michael and Anna story first because I wanted to explore what it was like to be a writer, and what we kill to create. Anna’s character changed multiple times. The betrayal changed, how they would treat each other, who came out on top — it just kept changing. Until I had an idea of what that story was.

Olivia Wilde’s character, Anna, has been so destroyed early in her life. Why does she have this issue trusting men? What happens if she opens up and is truly vulnerable?

I wrote the Italian story next. Just sketched it out. I had been in Italy promoting *In the Valley of Elah* some years ago, and I noticed the way that the Italians treated the gypsies. There was “The Romanian Problem” as they called it. I thought, Wow, I wonder what it’s like to be judged like that? What kind of armor you have to build up? If you have that much armor, what’s it like to trust somebody? You get used to using people (that’s easy, that comes second nature), but what is it like to trust someone who says they love you? Or who doesn’t say that they love you, but who acts like they love you?

With Adrien Brody (Scott), I wondered about the times that you are with someone, and you just don’t trust them. You know that they are inherently untrustworthy. I had been in some pretty tough relationships. But what if you decide to trust them? You’re a smart person. You know that they are probably lying to you, but you decide to trust them no matter what. You try to believe in somebody who can’t believe in themselves. Is love transformative? In and of itself? A very romantic notion.



Moran Atias as Monika, “Third Person.” Photo by Maria Marin, Courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics.

With Moran Atias’ character (Monika), this gypsy just can’t stop herself from using men. But then, she has a need — Does that child exist? Does that child not exist? Maybe it doesn’t matter. Maybe it is all about her needing someone to believe in her.

With James Franco's character, Rick, I was exploring what it's like "to damn" somebody. To say, "I know who you are. Face who you are! You can't change until you face it." Do you get what you want then? With Mila Kunis's Julia, I imagined what it is like to be a character who is always one step behind? Well-meaning, but always screwing up, her own worst enemy. We think Theresa, played by Maria Bello, is just an attorney, but she carries a terrible weight. Why is she acting this way towards her client? Damning her client like that even while she is defending her? That's not professional in the least. Well, maybe something has happened in her past. Kim Basinger's character, Elaine, has seen it all and is forgiving. For Michael, in some ways that's actually worse! He can't even go home because she forgives him when he can't forgive himself. For Michael, Theresa is Elaine's alter-ego. He is quite comfortable with the idea that this person should be damned and never forgiven. Loan Chabanol's Sam: You see this man who you love turning into who he really is, and yet, what if you don't judge him? What if you just continue to love him?



Mila Kunis as Julia, Third Person. Photo by Maria Marin, Courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics.

Sophia: I love the scene where Sam meets Julia in the bathroom, and how Julia is so willing to put her trust in her potentially biggest enemy.

Paul: Julia just doesn't recognize Sam, and asks Sam to be her friend. It's just heart-breaking. Because that's all she needs, is a friend.

Sophia: You observe, "In any relationship there is always a third person; perhaps not romantically, perhaps not even consciously, but present in some form." That is a powerful idea in this movie. Can you elucidate?

Paul: There are always influences in our lives. If we say we know why we're doing something, we're almost always wrong. If we say we know why we love somebody, we're almost never right. It's always something else. Sometimes we just have to admit that the wrong person is maybe the right person for us.

There's always some outside influence. It doesn't have to be "the mother-in-law." It can be something that has been haunting you since you were 13 years old or 3. Some person who is controlling this relationship, and you're not even aware of it. Someone is making you trust, making you not trust, making you suspicious, making you act this way. Often don't know who the third person is. We assume it's this person or that person, but usually we don't know.

Sophia: The scene where Anna comes into her hotel room and there are all the white flowers. For me, the opening of that scene was so ambiguous. I immediately thought somebody had died. Was that intentional?

Paul: Interesting. We see Michael buying flowers, "For my wife"– because he is trying to cover up even that. And he buys lots of flowers. He buys every white rose in that city! He sends them to Anna to say, "I know what you've done to me, and I love you anyways. This is how much I love you."

Sophia: Unconditionally –

Paul: Unconditionally and unendingly. There are no more flowers you could fit in that room. I

think for her to be loved at that moment — is terrible! To be accepted when she thinks she is unforgivable. For this man to be so weak as to love her?! How can he be that weak? How could he love her?

Sophia: It's an arresting visual image. The transitions in the film are also so artful and associative. Do you script them?

Paul: I often script them. Sometimes I discover them. When I was shooting Mila picking up clothing, I thought, “Oh, oh, oh, in the next scene, I can have Olivia reach out with her same hand, and I'll cut between those two.” When one person is pulling off their top, the other person is pulling it on. This movie started as three hours long in the first cut, so you lose a lot of transitions. You find others in the editing. Jo Francis, my editor, is wonderful. It's my third movie with her; before that, we worked in television together. We work very hard to find those transitions.

Some transitions early on in the film, I bet that you didn't even notice. I think you probably won't notice them until the second or third viewing. For example, Adrian Brody's character in *Bar Americano* looks out the door as a man enters and a Mercedes passes. In the back seat of that Mercedes is Olivia Wilde changing clothes. Cut to her compact. You think “Oh, it's just a transition.” It's not just a transition. I'm trying to tell you, pay really close attention because things are going to happen that CANNOT happen. If that can't happen, then what is really happening? So obviously that's where we get to a movie about the creative process, where a man tried to rewrite his life.



Moran Atias as Monika and Adrien Brody as Scott, Third Person.

Photo by Maria Marin, Courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics.

Sophia: I love the transition out of the Italian story, where it fades to white. That is breathtaking.

Paul: Oh ... thank you. At a certain point, I want to say, “Ok, now the game is up, and the characters are going to start to disappear.” See what you think of that.

Sophia: James Franco observes that you put the darker side of yourself into your characters. In what ways do you feel that is true or untrue?

Paul: I love to write from the point of view of characters that I don't understand and characters who disagree with me. I was in this relationship with a woman who said: “It's just a game — you wanting me to open up to you. The moment I truly am vulnerable and open up to you, you'll betray me.” I thought well, she's obviously got trust issues. Completely batty. ... But what if that's true? [Under his breath.] Could be. Oh, I hate that.

I asked myself, what are the two most important things in my life? It has to be love and my art — screenwriting, making movies. O.k., choose: You can only have one — a great story or the love of your life? Choose. And I went, “Whoa.” I know what I think I would choose. I know what I have chosen in the past. Usually I'm a romantic, I would almost always choose the woman I loved.

Sophia: Really?

Paul: Yes, but I would be tempted to chose the great story. There are many questions like that in the film. I look at the darker side of myself — not necessarily things that I have done, but things I’m afraid I would do ... things I’d be tempted to do.

I also look at my better nature. This guy who just continues to believe, in spite of everything ... because maybe he’ll win that way. You see who wins and who loses in this movie. Usually, the ones who take the greatest risks emotionally are the ones who win. And the ones who try to protect themselves, lose.

Sophia: How did the professional partnership with producer Michael Nozik develop?

Paul: We met through mutual friends. We lived close to each other. He was working with Robert Redford on *Quiz Show*, the first show he produced with Redford. I would show him my scripts as I was writing them, and he was one of the people that said, “Really good script, Paul. It will never sell.” “It” was *Crash*. Then I sent him *Million Dollar Baby*, and he said, “Really good script. It will never sell.” [Big laugh.] I really admired him as a filmmaker. He was the champion behind *The Motorcycle Diaries*. So when Michael decided to leave Redford’s company and go on his own after a few years, we said, “Let’s give this a try.” We’ve been friends for twenty years and working together for almost ten years now. I like the consistency of having somebody that I can rely on, someone who has my back.

Michael is very careful, cautious, and logical; he assesses everything before he makes a decision. Me, I walk in, I make decisions emotionally, immediately, and I stick with them. It drives him insane. I often listen to him, but sometimes I take all his best advice, and I don’t follow it. Michael is a great balance because he’s completely opposite to me.

Sophia: This was the first time that you worked with Producer Paul Breuls of Corsan NV?

Paul: Paul financed the film. He is a Belgian financier-producer, and he believed in this project. He gave me complete freedom — within the constraints of a budget. He gave me his opinions, of course, but he didn’t force his opinions upon me. None of them did.



Olivia Wilde as Anna, Third Person. Photo by Maria Marin, Courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics.

Sophia: You and production designer Laurence Bennett referenced Michelangelo Antonioni’s *Blow-Up* in conceiving *Third Person*?

Paul: *Blow-Up* is my favorite film of all times, and it was highly influential here. I grew up on American and British cinema — from Hitchcock to John Ford to Howard Hawks and Preston Sturges, all these amazing writers, directors, and writer-directors. But then, I saw *Blow-Up*. It was the very first film from the Italian new wave that I had seen. To watch a film that pretended to be a murder mystery and follow those conventions, and suddenly to arrive at the end of the story and realize, you are going to be given absolutely no answer to this mystery. Oh, and it’s going to end in a tennis game between two mimes. I went, “What the hell?! You can tell stories that way?!” Godard, Truffaut, Fellini — I discovered everyone after that because I was catching up. These were not my contemporaries. These films were often made ten years before I discovered them. To watch those 16 mm prints from the projection room where I was changing reels and just getting lost in them was an amazing experience that had a huge influence on how I tell the story. *Third Person* is my poor homage to Antonioni and all of them.

Sophia: Can you talk about how you approached the score with composer Dario Marianelli and songwriter Moby?

Paul: Originally, I was hoping to use Danny Elfman because I had a great collaboration with him on my last film (*The Next Three Days*). But Paul Breuls said that we needed to use a European composer for tax reasons, so I left that decision to very late because I kept trying to get Danny. Then I remembered loving Dario's scores. The beautiful, beautiful score he wrote for director Joe Wright's *Atonement*. I wanted a score that was both lush and spare. So that's what I talked about with him, leaving space ... where it needed space. It was very collaborative. I showed him the film. He loved it. He gave me notes about the ending, and I changed the ending based on what he said, and I changed it back. I changed around a few things based on his suggestions because he's not only a composer, he's a filmmaker. Then he wrote some sketches that are just so haunting and beautiful. I sort of nudged him this way and that. Then we worked together very closely as he started to lay the score against the picture. Dario Marianelli is amazing. I thought that he really pulled the emotion of these characters with music or lack thereof. He helped so much to tell the story.

I got Moby to write that song for me. I called him up and said, "Moby, I have no money, I have no time, but I have a click track." I'd originally tried to use an Italian song which we re-recorded. It was great, I loved it. There were wonderful singers, and the band was great, but it was just too languid. I needed something that pulled you up. So four hours later, Moby had written something and sent me the demo. Moby is a friend. Luckily, I had showed him my director's rough cut, two months before, so he knew what the themes were.

Sophia: Do you have a favorite part of the process of making films?

Paul: I think when you're first discovering the characters, it's a wonderful part. I love shooting, I love editing, I love putting the music in, I love coloring the film. I love doing the audio and finding the sounds and the backgrounds. Adding the sound of the water in the beginning, doing subtle things. I like every aspect of it. But when the characters first come alive and start to talk to you, that's really fabulous.

Top Image: Liam Neeson as Michael and Olivia Wilde as Anna, "Third Person," Photo by Maria Marin, Courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics.

"Third Person" Official Website



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