NECSUS

'Le Plaisir': Voices and viewpoints

John Gibbs and Douglas Pye
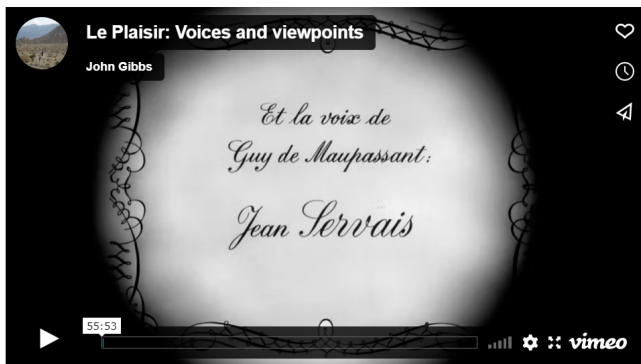
One impulse, as we began to think about collaborating on this project, was to explore some of the potential of binaural sound in an audiovisual essay. This coalesced with our love of Max Ophuls' movies, and with previous work on Le Plaisir, to suggest an essay in which voices would be central – those of the film and our own. The ways that Ophuls and his collaborators found to problematise the narrators in four of his later films encouraged us to look self-consciously at the status and authority of all the voices we incorporated.

These evolving intentions intersected with debates about the role of voiceover narration in videographic criticism and, much more broadly, with contexts which have made voice a subject of critical investigation in relation to gender, ethnicity, or class position. [1] The fact that we are both male was thrown into sharp focus as we considered how to deploy our voices in the discussion of a film which is very much concerned with the relationships between 'narrative, male voice and the representation of women' [2] (we are also aware that our voices unavoidably carry a range of other connotations, not least those that cluster around Received Pronunciation in English, but in this essay we can only take self-consciousness so far).

Opting for a conversation as the basis for the work, rather than something closely scripted, and recording this conversation with a binaural microphone were key decisions. We hoped to parallel Maupassant (Jean Servais) addressing us in the dark as Le Plaisir opens by using binaural recording to position the listener in between us, echoing his unnerving claim that he might be sitting next to us (as we hope you experienced, we also remixed some of Servais' opening words to enhance this sense of his proximity to us in the audience). Speaking and listening in the dark became central to the work's structure, with a recurring pattern of voices unaccompanied by image.

We talked without the film in front of us and with just a broad sense of areas we would discuss. This led to errors of fact, slips of the tongue, lapses of memory, and omissions, all of which are predictable features of conversation and which we did not attempt to edit out. Instead, we took these mistakes as an opportunity to call the authority of our narration into question. We used layering of voice to create 'afterwords', which interrupt the original recording to amend what we had said. Editorial notes in caption form added another layer of 'voice', as though a third person was commenting on us. This metacritical approach seemed appropriate for exploring Le Plaisir, with its eloquent forms of distanciation, even if our strategies are not as elegant as Ophuls'.

We also wanted our dialogue to act as a reminder that while written criticism is rarely conversational, good criticism should imply a conversation. The achievements of the best

criticism, whether in prose or sound and image, can sometimes seem to offer the last word on a subject, even if what is intended is to invite not just agreement but also extension, or challenge, through different ways of understanding the evidence. As we wrote in the introduction to the edited collection Style and meaning, when discussing interpretative criticism:

> This is to suggest that processes of argument and of persuasion are involved, rather than merely the demonstration of a position: that what I have found in the film is not simply my view but represents an understanding capable of being shared or challenged and, in the process, enhanced, reworked or replaced.[3]

Our hope is that this form of audiovisual essay makes the dialogue of criticism more apparent.

Acknowledgements

Authors

John Gibbs is Professor of Film and Research Dean for Heritage & Creativity at the University of Reading. He is an editor of *Movie: a journal of film criticism* and series co-editor of Palgrave Close Readings in Film and Television. His publications include *Mise-en-scène: Film Style and Interpretation* (2002), *Style and meaning: Studies in the detailed analysis of film* (2005), and *The Long Take: Critical Approaches* (2017), the second and third of these co-edited with Douglas Pye with whom he has also made a number of audiovisual essays.

Douglas Pye is Senior Visiting Research Fellow in the Department of Film, Theatre & Television at the University of Reading. His publications include the edited volume *V.F. Perkins on Movies: Collected Shorter Film Criticism* (2020), *100 Film Musicals* (2011) (with Jim Hillier), and *Movies and Tone* (2007/2015), now a *Movie ebook*. His collaborations with John Gibbs include *Style and meaning: Studies in the detailed analysis of film* (2005), *The Long Take: Critical Approaches* (2017), the series *Palgrave Close Readings in Film and Television*, *and audiovisual criticism.* He is a member of the editorial board of *Movie: a journal of film criticism*.

References

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Pye, D. 'Le Plaisir', Movie, 29/30, 1982: 80-89.

Notes

[1] See, notably, Ian Garwood's audiovisual essay 'The Place of Voiceover in Academic Audiovisual Film and Television Criticism' from the Autumn 2016 issue of NECSUS.
[2] Pye 1982, p. 89.
[3] Gibbs & Pye 2005, p. 4.