

Vol.8 No.1: The Voice-Over

Spring 2012

# CINEPHILE

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA'S FILM JOURNAL



Volume

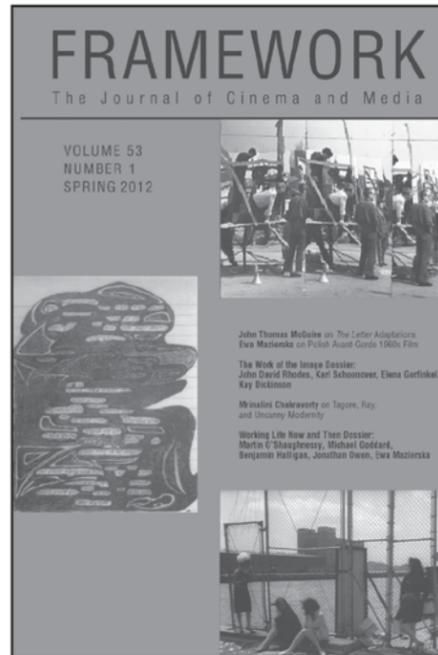


Sarah Kozloff • Stephen Teo • Laura Beadling  
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Published biannually in the spring and fall  
ISSN 0306-7661

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# CINEPHILE

The University of British  
Columbia's Film Journal

Vol. 8 No. 1  
Spring 2012  
"The Voice-Over"

ISSN: 1712-9265

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The University of British  
Columbia Film Program

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CINEPHILE is published by the Graduate Program in Film Studies at the Department of Theatre and Film, University of British Columbia, with the support of the **Centre for Cinema Studies** [centreforcinemastudies.com](http://centreforcinemastudies.com)

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*Cinephile* would like to thank the following offices and departments at the University of British Columbia for their generous support:

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# Editor's Note

While it is true that film has been historically considered an image-centred medium, the fact that hearing plays as much a role in perceiving the motion picture as seeing does, transcends it beyond a mere visual art. Furthermore, as noted sound theorist Michel Chion asserts in *The Voice in Cinema*, “the presence of a human voice structures the sonic space that contains it.” Therefore, studying parts of the cinema in which the voice gains particular significance is not only justified, but necessary. This issue of *Cinephile* revolves around diverse applications and functions of the voices in fiction films, whose sources are absent from the image frame.

Theoretical approaches to the filmic voice were only developed in the 1980s, and as the works cited in the articles here indicate, at least in the case of off-screen voices and voice-over, they have not been properly updated. One goal of this collection has been to explore various demonstrations of voice-over both in a more contemporary scope and on a more international scale. The main concern of each of the following five articles is the voice-over, showing how concentrating on this under-appreciated technique can lead to bigger conclusions about films and filmmakers.

Expanding upon her own highly influential works on the cinematic voice, Sarah Kozloff renders an analytical reasoning for the rarity of voice-over in classical Hollywood romantic comedies, and its emergence as a “staple element” in contemporary representatives of the genre. Through an insightful historiography and some “delicious” examples, Kozloff provides an inclusive contextual and structural schema to explain some of the implications and consequences of a crucial shift in this paradigm.

Carl Laamanen points out some major differences in Terrence Malick's employment of the voice-over throughout his career. Moving away from a single, narrative-centred voice-over to multiple character-driven voice-overs that speak from a “timeless present,” Malick's voices in *The Tree of Life*, according to Laamanen, place us in God's auditory position, emphasized by a disjointed structure.

In her culturally-focused examination of voice-overs in Chris Eyre's *Skins* (2002), Laura Beadling argues that the film's various voice-overs reject not only the existence of a singular authoritative voice, but the possibility of such a conclusive vantage point in the American representations of Native people and stories, both in the cinema and the

culture. The self-revealing act of voice-over narration, then, is considered a politically radical act.

Dismissing the claim that voice-over is incompatible with Asian cinemas, Stephen Teo studies the relationship between words and images in the Far-Eastern cinematic modes. Using an ancient Chinese theoretical framework of poetic values, Teo analyzes the voice-over narration in *Spring in a Small City* (Fei Mu, 1948), “as a classic example of a generic fusion between the cinemas of the West and the East.”

Finally, Alexander Fisher compares the tradition of oral performances in West Africa to the deeper levels of voice-over in cinema. Giving the example of Ousmane Sembène's *Borom Sarret* (1969), Fisher suggests that some similarities exist in the work of traditional African *griots* and the third-person *cinematic narrator* behind the voice of the film's unreliable first-person narrator.

The limited space and scope of this study prevented us from including more of the excellent articles submitted. I want to thank all the academics who sent us their essays, and hope that this critical attention can initiate a further round of scholarship on the topic of voice-over soon. I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the contributors, editors, and the artist Soroosh Roohbakhsh for their everlasting commitment and hard work. The kind words of encouragement from such distinguished scholars as David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson, Edward Branigan, and Claudia Gorbman, along with the helpful suggestions of advisor Lisa Coulthard and Ernest Mathijs, should also be noted. Lastly, I am especially thankful to my brilliant colleague and *Cinephile's* previous editor-in-chief, Shaun Inouye, to whom this issue owes immensely.

Throughout the history of cinema, the voice-over has been denigrated by some theorists, critics, and screenwriting gurus. In actuality, though, not only has its presence and popularity *not* diminished, but it has acquired new appreciation and found more significance in various cinematic cultures. As the instances in the following essays show, from the generic conventions of Hollywood to the independent works of many film auteurs, and from the poetic films of East Asia to the politically aware cinema of West Africa, voice-over rules!

—Babak Tabarraee

# Contributors

**Laura Beadling** earned her Ph.D. in American Studies from Purdue University in 2007. Since then, she has been teaching film, literature, and writing at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville. She has recently published on Mohawk filmmaker Shelley Niro, and is working on a book about Native American filmmaking.

**Alexander Fisher** is Lecturer in Film Studies at Queen's University Belfast, where he teaches courses on world cinemas and film music. He has published widely on the relationships between sound, culture, and cinematic form, concentrating in particular on the works of a number of African directors, including Ousmane Sembène, Med Hondo, Souleymane Cissé, and Djibril Diop Mambéty.

**Sarah Kozloff** has been teaching at Vassar College since 1988, where she holds the William R. Kenan, Jr. Chair. Her scholarship focuses on American cinema, particularly on issues related to language, narrative, and ideology. Her classic *Invisible Storytellers: Voice-Over Narration in American Fiction Film* (1988) is by far the most cited source on the subject. She continued her study of film sound in *Overhearing Film Dialogue* (2000).

**Carl Laamanen** is an M.A. student in English at Texas Tech University, specializing in Film and Media Studies. Following his research interests in the exchange between film, religion, philosophy, and culture, Carl's current projects range from employing feminist theology in service of film analysis to exploring Terrence Malick's connection to Heidegger.

**Soroosh Roohbakhsh** received his B.F.A. in Television Production from Tehran IRIB University, Iran. In the past decade, Roohbakhsh has been working as a graphic designer, journalist and television producer. He has designed over a hundred book covers, and is currently employed as an executive producer in the bilingual television channel, IFILM TV.

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**CINEPHILE** is the University of British Columbia's peer-reviewed film journal, published with the continued support of the Centre for Cinema Studies. The journal aims to provide an academic forum for film theory, history, and criticism. Recent issues have addressed such topics as sound, horror, anime, and contemporary realism. We are proud to have featured original essays by K.J. Donnelly, Barry Keith Grant, Matt Hills, Ivone Margulies, Murray Pomerance, Paul Wells, and Slavoj Žižek. The journal is available both online and in print via subscription. Please visit our website for more information.

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uh ... and I'm not one of those characters, you know, although I'm balding slightly on top, that's about the worst you can say about me. I think I'm gonna get better as I get older, you know? I think I'm gonna be the balding virile type, you know, as opposed to say ~~the~~ uh, distinguished gray, for instance, you know? 'Less I'm 'neither' of those two. Unless I'm one of those guys with saliva dribbling out of his mouth who wanders into a cafeteria with a shopping bag screaming about socialism and I broke up and I-I still can't get my mind around that. You know, I-I keep sifting the pieces of the relationship through my mind and ~~and~~ examining my life and tryin' to figure out where did the screw-up come, you know, and a year ago we were... tsch, in love. You know, and-and-and And it's funny, ~~not~~ not-I'm not a ...! morose type. I'm not a depressive character. I-I-I, uh, you know, I ~~was~~ <sup>was</sup> a reasonably happy kid I guess. I was brought up in Brooklyn during World War II.



Sarah Kozloff

## About a Clueless Boy and Girl Voice-Over in Romantic Comedy Today

When I wrote *Invisible Storytellers* in the mid-1980s, romantic comedy was not one of the genres that leapt out at me. *Noir*, of course, with its use of first-person detectives; adaptations of famous novels replicating the narrator's commentary (whether first-person or third); semi-documentaries and epics with their god-like scene-setters—all appeared more prominent. When I look back at my now woefully inadequate filmography, compiled in the dinosaur days of modest VHS inventories and before people posted scripts on-line or sites streamed movies, I do spot a few romantic comedies. However, none of these occur during the golden age of screwball comedies in the thirties and the forties, when *The Awful Truth* (1937), *Bringing Up Baby* (1938), *His Girl Friday* (1940) and other classics appeared. And indeed, having now taught and written about romantic comedy for many years, I know that screwballs avoided voice-over, as did most of the canonical romantic comedies in the following decades. *Adam's Rib* (1949) doesn't need it; *Roman Holiday* (1953) uses a fake newsreel to set the scene; *Some Like it Hot* (1959) eschews it, as does *Pillow Talk* (1959). You won't find voice-over in my feminist favorite, *Desperately Seeking Susan* (1985), nor in the smash hits late in the century, such as *Moonstruck* (1987), *When Harry Met Sally* (1989), *French Kiss* (1995), *While You Were Sleeping* (1995), or *One Fine Day* (1996).

However, voice-over has become—to varying degrees, and for different purposes—a staple element of contemporary romantic comedies, including *Clueless* (1995), *The Opposite of Sex* (1998), *There's Something About Mary* (1998), *Notting Hill* (1999), *High Fidelity* (2000), *What Women Want* (2000), *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001), *About a Boy* (2002), *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004), *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason* (2004), *Wimbledon* (2004), *Hitch* (2005), *Waitress* (2007), *Sex and the City* (2008), and *(500) Days of Summer* (2009). To figure out why, we have

to think carefully about this genre's mixture of romance and comedy and how these films have changed alongside changing social mores. Moreover, we need to consider the two particular advantages of using this narrative technique: providing us unique opportunities for *intimacy* because of its ability in offering insight into characters' minds, and creating *irony* through the clash of verbal comments with the visual track.

Before we can understand this recent adoption of voice-over, however, we should quickly contextualize romantic comedy's characteristics, themes, narrative structure, and history. Because they treat interpersonal relationships, these films (as I noted in *Overhearing Film Dialogue*) privilege *talk*, not action. The scripts of conventional romantic comedies cosset the leading man and starring woman with friends and confidantes so that they can discuss their initial hatred of, or growing attraction to, the person they've met. In *The Awful Truth*, Lucy (Irene Dunne) talks to her aunt Patsy. Kathleen Kelly (Meg Ryan) talks to her employees at The Shop Around the Corner in *You've Got Mail* (1998). "Aw, Ma, I love him awful," says Loretta (Cher), to her mother (Olympia Dukakis) in *Moonstruck*. If on-screen, diegetic dialogue can provide us access to the character's emotional journey from loathing to love, voice-over's special creation of intimacy and revelation of character interiority may not be needed.

A more important factor stems from romantic comedies' typical narrative structure. Romantic comedies trace the formation of the couple. In their most classic form, the filmmakers focus first on one side of the couple, then on the other. This creates a characteristic structure that Rick Altman, regarding musicals, terms "dual focus" (16-58). In a dual focus film, scenes centring on one lover alternate with parallel scenes focused on the other. For example, in *Pillow Talk*, we see scenes of Brad Allen (Rock Hudson) in his

apartment, and then of Jan Morrow (Doris Day) in hers; likewise in *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993), scenes about Annie (Meg Ryan) in New York alternate with those about Sam (Tom Hanks) miles away. Thematic issues motivate this narrative structure. As we gain more knowledge about each character, we understand that each is missing what the other person can provide. In this manner, romantic comedies address tensions in society at large. Typically, one pole of the couple is responsible, cautious, and high-achieving (read, sexually inexperienced and/or upright), while the other is unconventional, free-spirited, and irresponsible (read, sexually experienced and liberated). The union of David Huxley (Gary Grant) and Susan Vance (Katharine Hepburn) in *Bringing Up Baby* creates a happy means that makes lovers more fulfilled as a couple than they were as singles.

Classic dual focus explores additional differences besides sexual experience. In the screwball era, the protagonists often come from different social classes. Johnny (Cary Grant) in *Holiday* (1938) is a self-made man, while Linda (Katharine Hepburn) is an heiress. Class conflict in the romantic comedy continues down through the decades to *Maid in Manhattan* (2002). Along with the dichotomy of the social class, the traditional dual focus structure between the two protagonists often brings out high achievement and careerism versus less ambition and a more relaxed attitude. In earlier movies, such as *Ball of Fire* (1941) and the original *Sabrina* (1954), the male characters are losing out on joy because they can't pry their noses out of work long enough to smell the roses. Although movies continue to chastise men for single-minded ambition, in recent offerings the career-obsessed boot fits the female characters'

smaller feet. Melanie (Reese Witherspoon) in *Sweet Home Alabama* (2002), and Kate (Catherine Zeta-Jones) in *No Reservations* (2007) elevate their work above openness to life's pleasures. Many current films set about teaching women not to let their career ambitions close them off to love.

A third contrast, and perhaps the one most important to us in the pages that follow, stems from one side of the couple being commitment-phobic. In the sex comedies of the fifties and sixties, the male characters will do anything to avoid getting "trapped." The title, *Runaway Bride* (1999), captures an action that recurs throughout the genre: when it comes down to the crunch, many characters skedaddle. The issue of commitment has been so central to the genre that scholars have labeled a subset of these films the "comedies of re-marriage." These films, which Charles Musser discovers commenced with Cecil B. DeMille's silent movies, begin with a divorce (282-313). In *One Fine Day*, for example, both main characters have been scarred by broken marriages; the day's manic events crack open the characters' protective shells, making each vulnerable and open to romance again.

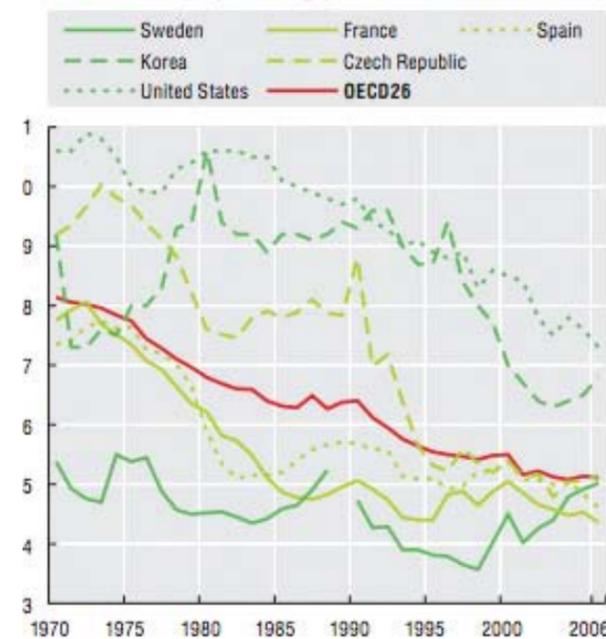
Of course, not all romantic comedies throughout film history rely on the dual focus structure. Some centre on one character: these are wholly or primarily "single focus." Frank Krutnik and Steve Neale point to Woody Allen as the primary figure of a cluster of "nervous romances" that started in the seventies after the Pill, the feminist movement, and the rising divorce rate led to a general anxiety about whether romances can ever reach that treasured happy-end (Krutnik 1990, 57-72; Neale 1992, 284-99). Allen, of course, relies heavily on voice-over in *Annie Hall* (1977)



The Return to Dual Focus in *When Harry Met Sally* (1989)

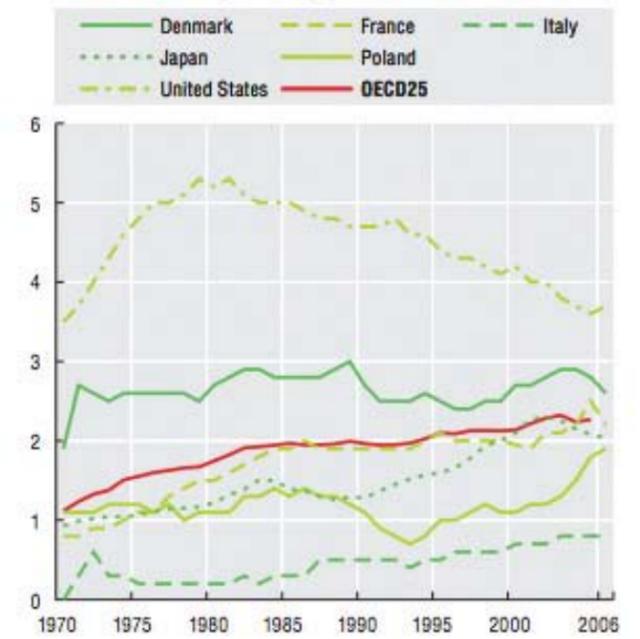
#### GE4.1. Marriage rates are generally declining

Marriages per 1 000 population, 1970-2006



#### GE4.2. Divorce rates are generally rising

Divorces per 1 000 population, 1970-2006



#### Society at a Glance, Organization of Economic Co-Operation and Development, Social Indicators (May 2009)

and *Manhattan* (1979), both of which mostly centre on the characters he plays (Alvy and Isaac) and do not give equal time or attention to his lovers. Allen's voice-over engages us in his thoughts and struggles and makes us sympathize with him when he is left alone.

However, in hindsight, I see Billy Wilder as the precursor of the "nervous romance." To switch for a second from genre theory to an auteurist lens: Wilder loved voice-over, using it notably in his noirs *Double Indemnity* (1944) and *Sunset Blvd* (1950). It also crops up—serving a variety of purposes—in his romances, *The Seven Year Itch* (1955), *Love in the Afternoon* (1957), and *The Apartment* (1960). *The Apartment*, which also features first-person voice-over by a schlemiel character, ends happily...but just barely, because Bud (Jack Lemmon) has thoroughly compromised himself by renting out his apartment to his bosses for extramarital liaisons, and Fran (Shirley McLaine), an elevator girl so misused by one of these philanders that she tries to commit suicide, almost miss one another. *The Apartment* and the Woody Allen films tie viewers tightly to Bud, Alvy, and Isaac: we have less access to the women's feelings or emotional development.

In the late 1980s, with the appearance of *When Harry Met Sally* and *Pretty Woman* (1990) and the genre's resurgent box office popularity, scholars identified a cluster of films they termed "the reaffirmation of romance" (Evans 188). Part of what made those films so commercially successful

and made them feel so deeply reaffirming was the filmmakers' return to dual focus: we see scenes of Harry alone and then scenes of Sally alone and then scenes of them together, tied forever by a final declaration of undying love. However, as Frank Krutnik wrote in his 1998 "Love Lies: Romantic Fabrication in Contemporary Romantic Comedy," these "new romances" hinged upon the viewer's suspension of disbelief: "These films propose that it is better to believe in a myth, a fabrication, than have nothing" (30).

As the genre continued through the 1990s and the 2000s, and as divorce rates continued to rise while more and more people stayed single for longer in their lives, the myth became harder to believe. Finding the "true love" that the movies dangle seems so difficult—if not a cruel sham. Filmmakers have captured these doubts and anxieties in a cluster of recent films that focus on bewilderment, unhappiness, confusion, and (sometimes) dawning hope. Leger Grindon refers to these latest films as romantic comedies of "ambivalence" (26). Many are single focus and rely on voice-over. The lover appears late in the film, if at all, and viewers never get access to him or her the same way they observe the protagonist. He or she becomes something of a cipher, and due to the intimacy between the protagonist and us provided by his or her narration, we feel no guarantee that the romance will come to a happy conclusion. Let's look through some representative films from this cluster to see if commonalities appear in their use of voice-over.

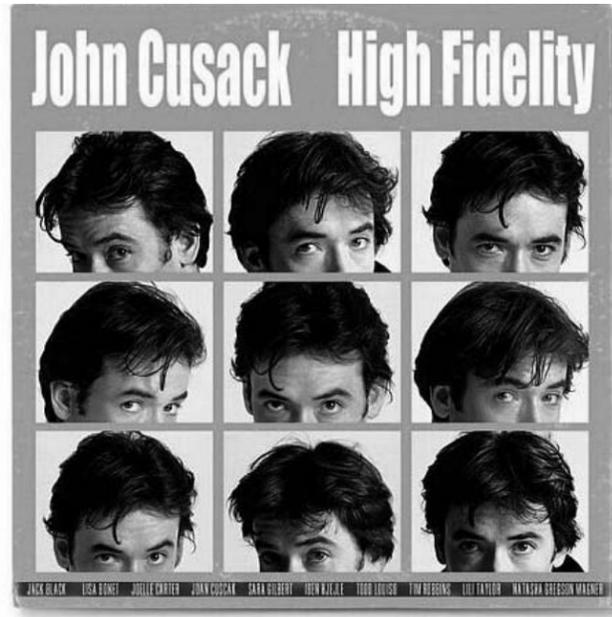
## I. The British Films

Annabelle Roe calls attention to the key role played by one British production company, Working Title, in a spate of recent romantic comedies (79-91). Voice-over is part of its house style. *High Fidelity* (total US box office gross \$27,000,000; All box office figures from Box Office Mojo) is an adaptation of a first-person novel by Nick Hornby directed by Stephen Frears and adapted for the screen by D. V. DeVincentis. The protagonist Rob (John Cusack) opens the film by speaking straight to the camera:

Rob: What came first, the music or the misery? People worry about kids playing with guns, or watching violent videos, some sort of culture of violence will take them over. Nobody worries about kids listening to thousands, literally thousands of songs about heartbreak, rejection, pain, misery, and loss. Did I listen to pop music because I was miserable? Or was I miserable because I listened to pop music?

He doesn't understand why his live-in girlfriend, Laura (Iben Hjejle), has broken up with him, and he recounts to us the four previous breakups that affected him deeply. Initially, we only see the women through his narration and warped perspective, but ultimately he decides to revisit each of them to discover why the relationships failed. The film has us witness Rob's journey towards maturity. We serve as his confidante; until he revisits former girlfriends, their motivations are just as mysterious to us as their actions were to him. Throughout the story, Rob, and not Laura, dominates our attention. Note that the film's poster design includes nine images of Cusack's character, and none of his girlfriends.

*About a Boy* (\$41,000,000), directed by Chris and Paul Weitz and scripted by Peter Hedges, is another adaptation of a Hornby novel. Starring Hugh Grant as Will, this story softens the main character dramatically. The movie, again, eschews giving the woman equal time. At least Laura appears in the first scene of *High Fidelity*, whereas Rachel (Rachel Weisz), Will's eventual love interest, doesn't even appear on screen until more than half-way through. We never see her alone or have access to her thoughts or feelings. The title and the poster accurately abstract the movie: the dual focus in this case exists between Will and the young boy, Marcus (Nicholas Hoult), whom he meets accidentally. In Hornby's novel, the story alternates between chapters centered on Will and those centered on Marcus, all written in the third-person, but the film script develops their characters through cleverly-written voice-over. Middle-aged, never employed, supported by the royalties of his father's



Poster for *High Fidelity* (2000)

authorship of a vapid Christmas song, Will lives unfettered by emotional ties to anyone. As he says in voice-over at the outset, contradicting John Dunne's phrase, "No man is an island" (which he believes was coined by the singer Jon Bon Jovi):

Will: A complete load of bollocks. In my opinion, all men are islands. And what's more, now's the time to be one. This is an island age. 100 years ago, for instance, you had to depend on other people... Whereas now, you see, you can make yourself a little island paradise... And I like to think that, perhaps, I'm that kind of island. I like to think I'm pretty cool.

His voice-over continually recounts his lies and evasions to keep from interpersonal engagement. Will's foil, Marcus, is a hopelessly nerdy twelve year old whose mother is clinically depressed. He too speaks directly to the viewer in voice-over:

Marcus: There were people out there who had a good time at life. I was beginning to realize I wasn't one of them. I just didn't fit. I didn't fit at my old school; I definitely didn't fit at my new one.

At first Will finds the drama of Fiona's suicide attempt exciting, but soon he recoils from any deep engagement with this needy family, revealing his thimble-sized heart through television metaphors.

Will: The thing is, a person's life is like a TV show. I was the star of "The Will Show." And "The Will Show" wasn't an ensemble drama. Guests came and went, but I was the regular. It came down to me and me alone. If Marcus's mum couldn't manage her own show, if her ratings were falling, it was sad, but that was her problem. Ultimately, the whole single mum plotline was a bit complicated for me.

Will's isolation has cut him off real people and real suffering. However, as the film proceeds, through the example of Marcus's selflessness and through Will's falling in love with Rachel, Will grows out of his self-centeredness, and even risks humiliation to rescue Marcus at a school performance. The ending Christmas luncheon demonstrates that Will has opened his life to others and Marcus now has a larger support group. Happily sitting on Will's couch, surrounded by friends, lovers, and family, each narrates his new contentment. The sequence begins with a mid-shot of Will watching TV alone.

Will: Every man is an island. I stand by that. [*Rachel comes into the shot and kisses him. Then the shot widens to show that Marcus and Rachel's son are sitting next to him.*] But, clearly, some men are island chains. Below the surface of the ocean, they are actually connected...

Helen Fielding's novel *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1999) proceeds entirely as a series of diary entries. The film, also written by Helen Fielding and directed by Sharon Maguire (\$72,000,000), nominally keeps a similar structure through Bridget's running voice-over commentary. Bridget, for instance, starts the New Year:

Bridget: Resolution #1: Oooo- obviously will lose 20 lbs. #2: Always put last night's pants in the laundry basket. Equally important: will find nice sensible boyfriend to go out with and not continue to form romantic attachments to any of the following: alcoholics, workaholics, commitment-phobics, peeping toms, megalomaniacs, emotional fuckwits, or perverts. And especially will not fantasize about a particular person who embodies all these things.

Like *Pride and Prejudice*, which zeros in on Elizabeth Bennett and her gradual understanding of the true nature of the people around her, this story centres solely on Bridget (Renée Zellweger); we never see Daniel Cleaver (Hugh Grant) or Mark Darcy (Colin Firth) except when she is in the scene. And although the camera sometimes lingers

on facial expressions, viewers interpret more wisely than she does, and Bridget's voice-over is the only one we hear. Bridget—who in the novel is close to an alcoholic and a compulsive dieter and binger—comes off in the film as a wonderful free spirit whose only flaw is her susceptibility to emotional fuckwits like handsome Daniel; a weakness she finally surmounts. But mostly, as Mark Darcy tells her, we like her just the way she is.

Two other British films deserve quick mention here: *Notting Hill* (\$116,000,000), written by Richard Curtis and directed by Roger Michell, and *Love Actually* (\$60,000,000), written and directed by Richard Curtis. *Notting Hill* revolves around Will Thacker (Hugh Grant). Will is just an ordinary shopkeeper, while Anna Scott, the American movie star played by Julia Roberts, is an unknowable, unreachable, mega-celebrity. *He* gets the voice-over introduction to the film, explaining his neighborhood, setting the scene, and telling us that his wife deserted him; the film focuses on *his* loneliness and heartbreak throughout. Hugh Grant's voice—here and in other films—is perfect for voice-over: recognizable, resonant, expressive, with a London accent that is just slightly high-toned.

*Love Actually* also uses Hugh Grant's voice-over at the film's opening in the International Arrivals Terminal of Heathrow Airport. These documentary sequences of real people greeting one another differ so from the rest of the fictional stories that we can't quite tell whether the voice-over commentary about the importance of love comes from Hugh Grant's character (the British Prime Minister), or serves as a third-person omniscient judgment. On his commentary track, Richard Curtis has said that his inspiration for the film came from being stuck in the Los Angeles airport, watching people greet one another and realizing love's universality and multiple guises.

## II. American Films

Three high-budget, big box office films vary widely in how integral voice-over is to their scripts. *There's Something About Mary* (\$176,000,000), directed by the Farrelly brothers, merely starts with Ted (Ben Stiller) retelling in voice-over to his psychiatrist the story of his blighted high school prom date with Mary (Cameron Diaz) and how he's been in love with her ever since. *What Women Want* (\$183,000,000), directed by Nancy Meyers, also begins with voice-over; in this case with Nick's (Mel Gibson) ex-wife, Gigi (Lauren Holly) speaking. However, Gigi merely serves as a surrogate to explain Nick's childhood. Raised by a Las Vegas Stripper, Nick is a terrible chauvinist and womanizer who never listens to women until he undergoes a life change when a

freak electrical accident makes him able to overhear women's thoughts. *Hitch* (\$179,000,000), written by Kevin Bisch and directed by Andy Tennant—note the movie's single focus title—uses the protagonist's voice more substantively. It starts with Alex Hitchens (Will Smith) doling out to men, whether in the film or in the audience, his rules for romantic success. Although he is wildly successful as a date doctor, Hitch himself only pursues fleeting relationships because his heart was broken in college. Soon enough, however, Hitch gets entangled with the tabloid journalist, Sara, played by Eva Mendes. Despite presenting scenes showing Sara alone, à la Will's nomenclature, we could call this movie, "The Hitch Show."

These films, and most of the British examples discussed earlier, suggest a pattern. They centre on *men's* journey to greater sensitivity and love. They offer audiences intimate connections with attractive male stars in order to woo (heterosexual) women viewers and offer (heterosexual) male viewers attractive role models. Although the male character may start off emotionally stunted, through being bonded to such a likable star via access to his private musings and voice, we care for him immensely and welcome his psychological progress towards greater sensitivity, emotional commitment, and marriageability. Although *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994) and *Ghosts of Girlfriends Past* (2009) don't use voice-over, they share this basic plotline. These thematic similarities provide plausibility to the conclusions of the psychologist Amy Shalet who argues that changes in gender expectations wrought by feminism now allow men to be more romantic (A17). Are these movies object lessons for the men in the audience: *this is how you should behave towards women in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?* In Cynthia Lucia's interview, Stephen Frears argues vehemently regarding *High Fidelity*, "It's a feminist film. It's a cry for men to grow up" (13). Or do these films, again, marginalize women characters in the one genre that supposedly addresses female viewers? Do they merely present to women an updated fantasy: *the current or future men in your life can/will mature into caring, sensitive adults, eager for commitment?*

I want to switch now to a single focus, voice-over film centring on a young woman. *Clueless* (\$57,000,000) falls into a sub-genre that Stacey Abbott terms "Prom-Coms." Abbott astutely notices that several contemporary movies make their characters work out their conflicted feelings towards high school and the complicated feelings of rejection or acceptance of that shark-like venue (52-64). *Clueless*, chronologically the first of the voice-over romantic comedies I listed in the introduction, presents a slantwise adaptation of Jane Austen's *Emma*, updating the story to 1990s Los Angeles, showing a young girl who tries to do good deeds but miscalculates through naïveté and an over-assess-

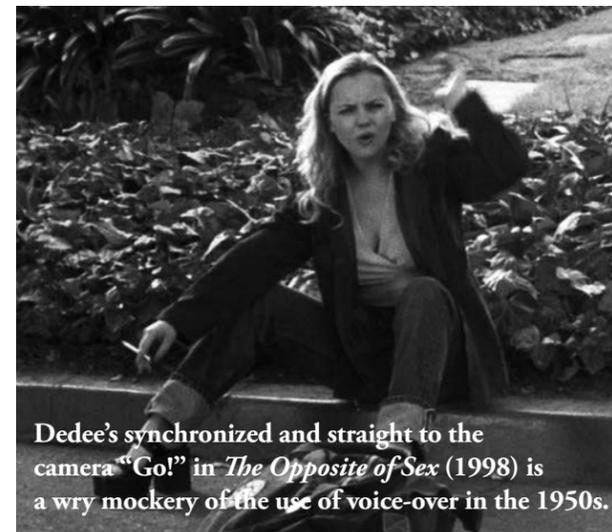
ment of her powers. Writer/director Amy Heckerling creates humor and disjunction with high culture by employing a unique and unusual verbal idiom, "Valley Girl Speak." In Cher's (Alicia Silverstone) practice, Valley Girl speech relies not only on "like," but incorporates *au courant* references to pop culture and buzz words. As Nora Lovotti notes in her thesis, "Cher's narration often includes phrases such as 'the buzz,' 'snaps,' 'eww' and 'mental.'" More than that, Cher's voice-over and the camera have a teasing, interdependent relationship (13). After we see a montage of happy, laughing teenagers, Cher begins narrating:

Cher: So, OK, you're probably thinking, "Is this, like, a Noxzema commercial, or what?!" But seriously, I actually have a way normal life for a teenage girl. I mean I get up, I brush my teeth, and I pick out my school clothes.

After the last line, the camera shows Cher matching her skirt and top through a complicated computer program of choices—definitely not the normal method by which most girls pick out their clothes. The disjunction between the visual and aural track above pokes fun at Cher the shopaholic, but the example below, after Cher has matured, pokes fun at audience assumptions, or the "horizon of expectations" that form a contract between audiences and each genre film (Neale 2003, 171). Cher and Josh have just kissed, and Cher says in voice-over: "Well, you can guess what happened next . . ." Cut to the scene of an outdoor wedding ceremony, showing a couple only from the back. But Cher immediately breaks in: "AS IF! I am only 16, and this is California, not Kentucky." The wedding turns out to be that of her teachers, not of her and Josh. In Jane Austen's day, girls married young, but this will never do for our Cher, who has further adventures in her "make-over of the soul" before she walks to an altar.

Moving further down the slope of box office popularity brings us to two independent films whose voice-over narration I find most intriguing. The issue that captivates me is not clever writing; we see great scriptwriting in both *Clueless* and *About a Boy*. The particular significance of the narration of *The Opposite of Sex* (\$6,000,000, written and directed by Don Roos), and *(500) Days of Summer* (\$32,000,000, written by Scott Neustadter and Michael H. Weber, and directed by Mark Webb) is the way in which the narrator's position straddles the line between the first-person and third, or intra- and extra-diegetic, creating an ironic frisson.

The *Opposite of Sex* uses a first-person narrator, sixteen year-old Dedee (Christina Ricci), but she is completely unruly both as a person and a narrator. Cynical, angry, and



Dedee's synchronized and straight to the camera "Go!" in *The Opposite of Sex* (1998) is a wry mockery of the use of voice-over in the 1950s.

totally unscrupulous, she talks about herself, but she also wields a god-like omniscience in terms of her range, communicativeness, and a wry self-reflexivity (Bordwell 57-61). She addresses the viewer in the beginning:

Dedee: If you're one of those people who don't like movies where some person you can't see talks the whole time and covers up all the holes in the plot and at the end says, "I was never the same again after that summer" or whatever, like it was so deep they can't stand it, then you're out of luck. Things get very complicated here very quick. And my guess is you're not gonna be up to it without me talking.

Dedee breaks in with narration throughout the complicated story that follows, involving multiple characters and relationships—some straight, but most homosexual—often with caustic remarks about the other characters. But in the end, when she has given up her out-of-wedlock baby to her nurturing older half-brother and is trying to flee town, she sits down to ponder:

Dedee: Sex always ends in kids or disease. . . or like, you know, relationships. That's exactly what I don't want. I want the opposite of all that. Because it's not worth it, not really, is it—when you think about it?

We see a montage accompanied by soft music, of tender moments between many different characters, including Dedee (looking younger and less jaded) with her first boyfriend.

Dedee: Okay, so maybe I'm wrong. Maybe it's not all shit. Maybe. . . God damn it! I thought the whole

idea was *I* know what happens next. I'll tell you one thing. I'm not gonna go back to Bill's house and be this big changed person for you. I told you right off I don't grow a heart of gold. And if I do, which is, like, so unlikely, give me a break and don't make me do it in front of you! [*Dedee glares at the camera and motions it away.*] Come on, guys, go, okay? Go! [*Black screen.*] I'll give you this much, though . . . [*Fake dreamy tone of voice.*] I never was the same again after that summer.

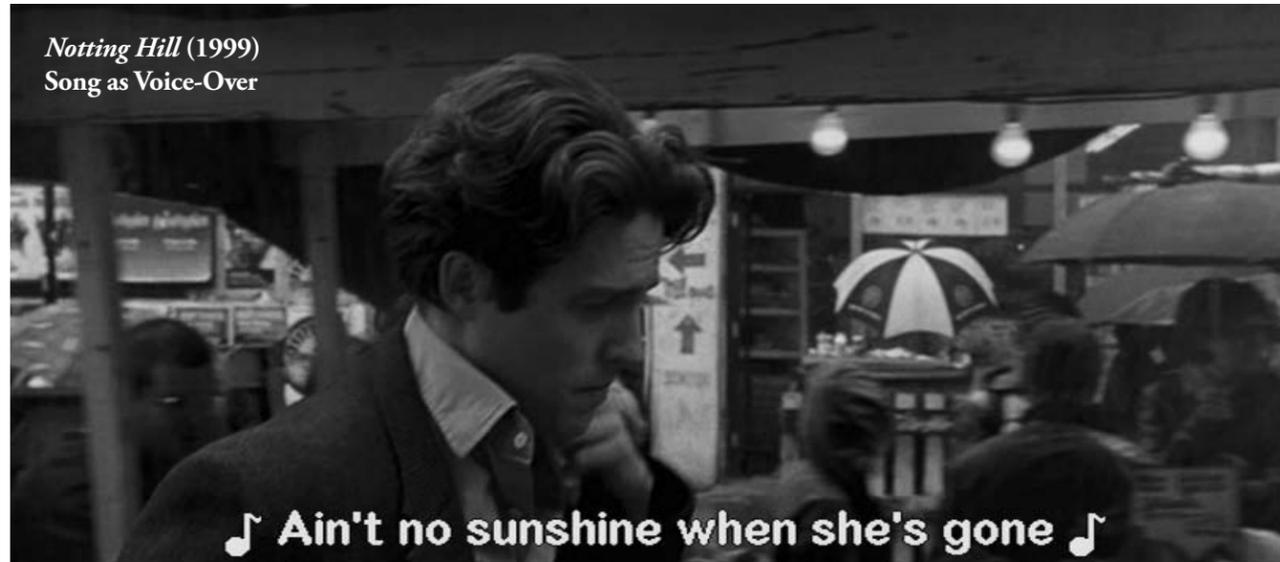
*(500) Days* works in the opposite direction. It features an "omniscient" third-person male narrator, with an over-the-top, deep, sonorous voice, who elicits laughter throughout the film because of the portentous manner in which he talks about trivialities. Crucially, as the film progresses, one realizes that this narrator is not really omniscient. Although the narrator feints towards dual focus—he voices Tom's (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) thoughts—he is so closely tied to Tom as to be his alter ego:

Narrator: This is a story of boy meets girl. The boy, Tom Hansen of Margate, New Jersey, grew up believing that he'd never truly be happy until the day he met The One. . . Tom meets Summer on January 8th. He knows almost immediately she's who he has been searching for.

The narrator tells us how Tom feels when they meet, but he keeps from us Summer's (Zoey Deschanel) reaction. Summer's true feelings remain mysterious throughout the film; although Summer tells everyone she is not looking for permanent love, Tom doesn't want to believe her, and the camera colludes by always painting Summer through his love-struck eyes. In his opening remarks, the narrator intones: "This *is* a story of boy meets girl, but you should know upfront, this is not a love story." I maintain that *(500) Days* is a love story, just an unhappy, unrequited one—a love story for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The narrator's unreliability appears again at the film's ending, when Tom meets a new woman, Autumn, and finally falls in love with the Right One. As the scene starts, Tom ascends an old-fashioned elevator. The camera rests on the elevator's gears in motion; a shot the director notes, in his commentary track on the home release of the film, that he explicitly included to show the gears of Fate turning.

Narrator: If Tom had learned anything, it was that you can't ascribe great cosmic significance to a simple earthly event. Coincidence, that's all anything ever is; nothing more than coincidence. . . Tom had finally

Notting Hill (1999)  
Song as Voice-Over



learned there are no miracles. There's no such thing as Fate. Nothing is meant to be. He knew; he was sure of it now. He was *almost* sure.

The narrator speaks not from a position of knowledge, but as a conduit of free indirect discourse of Tom's doubts and feelings. The irony, again, is delicious.

### III. Popular Music Scores

Many critics discuss the use of popular songs in romantic comedies since the new romances of the late 1980s (Garwood 282-298). These songs prime our romantic longings, their familiarity rouses our nostalgia for a time when love seemed simpler and more assured, and they cross-promote the film. Re-watching several romantic comedies for this essay, however, I am struck by how often the songs serve a function similar to first-person voice-over—that is, they give us interior views of the character(s)' emotional state at that point in the story. When pre-converted Nick in *What Women Want* struts into his advertising agency, we hear Bobby Darin singing “Oh, the shark, babe, has such teeth, dear. . .” Nick thinks of himself as the deadly womanizer Mack the Knife. When Will's heart has been broken by Anna's rejection in *Notting Hill*, in a bravura shot designed to look like one take, he walks through the seasons—starting with a wind-swept fall—unfolding on Portobello Road, and we hear, “Ain't no sunshine when she's gone; it's not warm when she's away.” After Tom in *(500) Days* has slept with Summer, Hall and Oates sing, “You make my dreams come true.”

Pop love songs differ from other types of musical scores because they use personal pronouns: I, you, she, he. Once the filmmakers mix those songs over images of the cinematic narrative, the pronouns magically slip to refer to the characters. I believe this applies broadly to all romantic comedies. When we hear “One fine day, you're gonna want me for your girl” during the opening credits of *One Fine Day*, the “you” becomes Jack (George Clooney) and the “me” becomes Melanie (Michele Pfeiffer), even though the audience has yet to be introduced to the main characters. The connection between pop songs and the character's innermost feelings shouts at us in *10 Things I Hate About You* (1999), when Patrick (Heath Ledger) sings *on-camera*, “Can't take my eyes off of you” to Kat (Julia Stiles).

But if the pop songs can serve as first-person narration, they can also assume the functions of extra-diegetic commentary. “Pretty woman, walking down the street” shouldn't be construed as Vivian's thoughts in *Pretty Woman* (if that were the case, she'd be a crazy narcissist); these are the comments of a third-person narrator addressing the filmgoer. The same holds true when Jimmy Durante sings, “Make someone happy, make just *one* someone happy,” in *Sleepless in Seattle*; this command addresses the viewer, rather than articulating the characters' thoughts. And “God only knows what I'd be without you,” which chimes again and again throughout the ending of *Love Actually* as the screen splits and splits—showing us images of hundreds of loving embraces—speaks not for one specific character, but for Richard Curtis's overall philosophy.

Sometimes, as Ian Garwood argues, pop songs comment on the action ironically. Garwood points to the opening “Wishin' and Hopin” number in *My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997), which is so over the top that it seems to satirize

the hope of getting into “his” [Michael's] heart (285). Another example occurs in *French Kiss*, where the Italian song, “Via con me” (Away with me), accompanies Kate (Meg Ryan) wandering alone all night through the dark Paris streets after losing her fiancé, her luggage, and her passport. The English refrain in the song, “It's wonderful,” resounds with dark irony given her circumstances, compounded by the fact that every time Kate almost sees Paris's beauty—symbolized here by the Eiffel Tower—she misses it. Eventually Kate will embrace her French adventure and learn to live “la vie en rose,” sung at the end by Louis Armstrong, but at this point of the film she is thoroughly miserable. The clashing mismatch between lyrics and visual track—a mismatch that Chion would call “anempathetic” (8)—creates pathos.

### Final Thoughts

Dual focus romantic comedies, where the storyline and camera switch from one person to another, automatically imply an all-knowing viewpoint, order, and inevitability. The viewers realize that these two beautiful stars belong together, and the narrative structure, in its even-handed portrayal of the complementary opposites, yin and yang, shows us that they will (eventually) fit together to make the complete Taiji circle. This fatedness and comfort pertains even to multiple storyline romantic comedies such as *Love Actually*; although some of the individual romances don't work out, the narration's wide range of knowledge is itself comforting—someone/something has The Big Perspective. Single focus romantic comedies, on the other hand, make viewers more anxious; in a way, these films bring us back to *film noir*. Like the protagonist we follow, we can't be sure what is going to happen or when. If lives are not at stake, hearts are.

The prevalence of voice-over in contemporary romantic comedies arises mostly out of a desire to bond us as closely as possible to the protagonist, to heighten our emotional engagement and desire. Simultaneously, as shown above, the voice-over is often ironic and funny, allowing the films to eschew sentimentality, wink at the audience with in-jokes, and appeal to both male and female viewers in this cynical age. In *Overhearing Film Dialogue*, I discuss how screwball comedies strive to sabotage the language of love (198). These voice-overs are thus the perfect accompaniment for an age of postmodern ambivalence about whether we live as islands, as island chains, or as the adorable, long-devoted elderly couples in *When Harry Met Sally*.

**Note:** *I'd like to acknowledge the general contribution of the Vassar College students in Spring 2009 Genre: Romantic Comedy, who brought me up to date on contemporary romantic comedies.*

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Carl Laamanen

## What Does God Hear? Terrence Malick, Voice-Over, and *The Tree of Life*

“You spoke with me from the sky, the trees, before I loved you, believed in you.” Jack’s (Sean Penn) revelation at the end of the creation sequence in *The Tree of Life* (2011) could be an apologetic for all of Terrence Malick’s films, especially considering its delivery in voice-over. Since his first film, 1973’s *Badlands*, Malick has used voice-over in a variety of unconventional ways for a number of different effects. While scholars have often considered the female voice-overs in *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven* (1978), the role of voice-over has remained largely untreated in his later three films: *The Thin Red Line* (1998), *The New World* (2005), and, due to its recent release, *The Tree of Life*. In this article, I will chart how Malick’s use of the voice-over has evolved over his filmography, especially in the twenty years between *Days of Heaven* and *The Thin Red Line*. I will argue that the shifts in Malick’s employment of the voice-over have created a unique auditory perspective in *The Tree of Life*, wherein Malick positions the audience in the place of God, able to hear the questions and objections of the soul.

In comparison to Malick’s later films, the voice-over in *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven* seems to be a rather conventional narrative device, yet Malick’s decision to filter his stories through the voices of young, female narrators subverts typical notions of voice-over narration. Speaking of both Holly’s (Sissy Spacek) and Linda’s (Linda Manz) narration, Joan McGettigan asserts, “The voice-overs serve more to de-stabilize the discourse than to provide the traditional interiority of character narration” (34). Holly’s seemingly detached voice-over should, in the words of Malick, make the audience “always feel there are large portions of her experience she’s not including because she has a strong, if misplaced, sense of propriety” (Malick qtd in Walker 82). Throughout the course of the film, then, Holly’s voice-over works against audience expectations, making it “a disturbing disjunction between sound and image” that highlights

the fallibility and subjectivity of its narrator (McGettigan 35). Here, Malick’s manipulation of the voice-over stands in contrast to the audience’s desire to “embrace the character as principal storyteller” (Kozloff 49). In a similar fashion, Linda’s voice-over in *Days of Heaven* also challenges audience’s expectations, but does so in an even more complex manner than Holly’s, often undermining the narrative presented to us by the camera.

Certainly, *Days of Heaven* stuns visually—winning the Oscar for Best Cinematography that year—but on a narrative level, Linda’s voice-over constantly complicates the images presented by Malick and cinematographer Nestor Almendros. Fluctuating throughout the film, her voice-over expresses a number of different views and serves multiple functions, leading us “to re-evaluate what we see and hear...to become conscious of the narrating agency’s presentation of the diegetic world, and perhaps to become suspicious of it” (McGettigan 38). Sarah Kozloff also points to the self-consciousness of Linda’s voice-over, suggesting that “the audience becomes acutely aware that someone else... is actually presenting both the story and the purported storyteller” (116-17). If this is the case and Malick is using Linda’s voice to make us conscious of his role as the director, then we must ask what he is seeking to accomplish by using the voice-over in this manner. I argue that, as his career lengthens, Malick’s voice-overs build upon this self-awareness of a creator, and ultimately, place the audience in a position of an omniscient *creator*, listening to the transcendent murmurings of the characters.

The voice-overs in *The Thin Red Line*, *The New World*, and *The Tree of Life* depart from the voice-overs in *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven* in three significant ways: instead of one voice, we hear multiple perspectives; rather than addressing and often complicating the narrative, the voice-overs contribute to our understanding of the inner state of the



characters; and these voice-overs generally speak from a “timeless present,” not from sometime in the future (Chion 2004, 53). In addition to exploring how these differences form an unusual audio perspective, this discussion can benefit from Michel Chion’s view of the acousmatic sound and the voice-over. For Chion, the voice “instantly sets up a hierarchy of perception” in which the listener “always tries to *localize* and if possible *identify* the voice,” and when the audience is unable to do so, the voice takes on a mystical quality (1999, 5). When the voice of a character whom we have not seen until that certain point in the film comes from off-screen, but remains liable to appear in the visual field at any moment, Chion calls the speaker a “complete acousmètre;” whereas he attaches the term “already visualized acousmètre” to an acousmatic speaker who has been previously visually identified (1999, 21). Interestingly, none of Malick’s films contain a complete acousmètre for their duration, although the later three begin with a complete acousmètre who is quickly visually identified.

*The Thin Red Line* opens with shots of nature accompanied by Private Witt’s (Jim Caviezel) voice-over; Pocahontas’ (Q’orianka Kilcher) voice-over invocation begins *The New World*; and *The Tree of Life* starts with old Jack’s voice-over before his mother’s (Jessica Chastain) takes centre stage. Beginning with a complete acousmètre, the films illustrate the acousmètre’s “omniscience and omnipotence,” as we identify the bodiless voice with “God” and “the Mother” (Chion 1999, 27). However, Malick’s purpose for the voice-over is to undercut the narrative continuity and demonstrate its lack of omniscience, thus he must

quickly “de-acousmatize” the voice. “De-acousmatization,” Chion explains, “results from finally showing the person speaking...at that point the voice loses its virginal-acousmatic powers, and re-enters the realm of human beings” (1999, 23). Within twenty minutes of the onset of each film, Malick de-acousmatizes the voice that opens the film, a significant move when coupled with the shift to multiple voice-overs. Through many, differing voice-overs, Malick reinforces the effect of the de-acousmatization by not giving any character entire control over how the story is presented to the audience. As a result, the singular, controlling perspective of the voice-over in *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven* is largely abandoned in these later films, as the polyphony of voices only allows a coherent narrative by considering them as parts of a whole.

In fact, the lack of narrative in these films forces us to piece together the story, and in a sense, create the film along with Malick. Chion suggests that an “inner voice” connects the voices in *The Thin Red Line*, and “these voices that are closed to each other at the same time combine into the modulated meditations of a single collective consciousness,” comprising “a single text” that we must decipher (2004, 57). Bilge Ebiri raises a similar point about *The New World*: “One might even wonder if the characters are aware of [their thoughts]; they certainly don’t quite know or understand what they’re trying to express” (Ebiri). In *The Tree of Life*, the shift to narrative incoherence created by the voice-overs is even more pronounced when coupled with the film’s visual, spatial, and temporal jumps, far more jarring than those that occur in either *The Thin Red Line* or

*The New World*. In this manner, our attempts to make sense of an incoherent narrative force us to engage with the voice-overs, yet the multiple narrators keep us from concentrating on one as the controller of the diegetic world.

Before looking at a few specific examples from *The Tree of Life*, I want to touch on how these voice-overs address the audience. Unlike those in *Badlands* and *Days of*

*...our attempts to make sense of an incoherent narrative forces us to engage with the voice-overs...*

*Heaven*, the voice-overs that permeate these later three films rarely reflect back on the films’ events from any point in the future. Chion suggests the voice-overs in *The Thin Red Line* speak from a “timeless present” mirroring the lack of specificity about how much time has elapsed in each film (2004, 53). This effect is particularly obvious in *The Tree of Life*, as the voice-overs do very little to situate us temporally in the film’s disjointed structure, turning every episode into a moment of the present. Malick not only shows us events outside of our human abilities to see—the creation of the world, extreme close-ups of nature, the end of time—but allows us to hear thoughts and prayers of the past (and future) in the present: we are in God’s territory. Certainly, this reading is but one facet of the film’s interplay between the past, present, and future, owing to the idea of God being outside of time, most famously advanced by C.S. Lewis: “Almost certainly God is not in Time...[it] is always the Present for Him” (167). Additionally, when the characters address God through voice-over, they almost always use the pronoun “you,” further placing us in God’s auditory position as we are directly spoken to by the characters. All of these factors—multiple voices, lack of narration, and atemporality—are emphasized in *The Tree of Life*, combining to make the film’s voice-overs resonate even more forcefully than those in *The Thin Red Line* and *The New World*.

One of the most striking voice-overs in *The Tree of Life* comes slightly before the mid-point of the film, as the young Jack (Hunter McCracken) is praying; he is kneeling at his bed, struggling to keep his eyes closed, praying in the typical fashion of a twelve year old: “Help me not get dogs in fights. Help me be thankful for everything I’ve got.” Then, his voice-over appears in the mix with the unvoiced question: “Where do you live?” After another snippet of prayer, we cut to a school playground, the camera fluidly weaving through crowds of children, but we still hear Jack’s voice: “Are you watching me?” As we are, quite literally, watching Jack, we can only answer that question in the affirma-

ive. With god-like omniscience we have seen him grow up, and, over the remainder of the film, we will see some of the darkest moments of his young life—secret, shameful moments that no one else experiences. If this question had been voiced in the diegetic dialogue, its power to make us identify with our act of spectatorship would have been lost. Instead, the voice-over’s acousmatic qualities compel us to seriously consider the question in relation to the perspective Malick has given us as the audience. Jack’s next remarks reveal even more: “I want to know what you are. I want to see what you see.” His inner voice carries these thoughts to us—the unseen, all-seeing audience—forcing us to contemplate exactly who we are and what we have seen up until this point in the film. By giving us god-like attributes, Mal-



ick seems to be suggesting that the way we respond to Jack’s questioning is, in some minute way, representative of God’s character in the film: silent, creative and, ultimately, compassionate. We are not capable of speaking into the diegetic world, nor can we offer answers to Jack or any of the other characters. We are silent, as God is silent. Jack, however, wants more than just knowledge—he wants to see what we see.

Of course, what we have seen, what we see, and what we will see constitutes a vital part of who we are as the audience, and our participation in this process directly reflects the creative aspect of Malick’s God. As I mentioned ear-



*Here we are granted insight into this man's broken life, usually hidden behind the façade he presents to the exterior world, by listening to his confession.*

lier, the lack of narration in Malick's films turns us into co-creators of the narrative of the film, and the same process unfolds in *The Tree of Life*, allowing us to experience that facet of God's nature through witnessing the Creation of the world. The Creation sequence, possibly the most visually arresting sequence in the film, is understandably perplexing, encompassing nearly a half hour of screen time in a complete hijacking of the narrative. Approaching this sequence with our position as God and the power of the voice-over in mind, however, allows us to better understand how Malick uses this sequence to engage us with divine issues. The voice of the mother begins the sequence, asking a series of questions related to the death of Jack's brother: "Lord, why? Where were you? Did you know? Who are we to you?" With the burgeoning world being formed in front of our eyes, these questions come to us in the present, giving us the impression of being outside of time, hearing one thing while seeing another. Her final statement in this section of voice-over is practically an accusation—"Answer me." Though God remains silent, by framing the sequence with these words, Malick poses creation itself as the answer.

Also, by not providing a verbal answer from God, alluded to by the film's epigraph from the Book of Job—"Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?...When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?" (38:4, 7)—Malick makes it clear that it is God's prerogative to provide or withhold explanation for earthly tragedies.

As God's silence continues, the mother changes her stance in the next voice-over and asks us for something other than answers; she pleads, "Hear us." As he did when Jack was praying, Malick has conflated our role with God's, but here the effect is more powerful because we have the ability to grant her request. We will spend the rest of the film hearing what these characters are saying, hypothetically listening as God would. With these two words, Malick has given us a function that we can fulfill and, more importantly, asserted that God's main role is listening, not speaking. Due to our ability to hear the characters and empathize with them, Malick is giving us a glimpse into his conception of God's interaction with the world. One voice-over in particular, near the end of this film, illustrates this as we hear the father's (Brad Pitt) only voice-over, a startling admission of his faults and failures: "I wanted to be loved because I was great... The glory around us, trees and birds. I lived in shame. I dishonoured it all and didn't notice the glory. A foolish man." Here we are granted insight into this man's broken life, usually hidden behind the façade he presents to the exterior world, by listening to his confession. Although true revelation in *The Tree of Life* can come from seeing,



more often it comes from listening, as this moment demonstrates.

In most films dealing explicitly with matters of God and faith, the characters are often waiting for God's voice to enter into their lives, trying to figure out what God might be saying. *The Tree of Life* takes a different approach, giving us the other side of the conversation, using the voice-over to place us in the position of God. Although *The Thin Red Line* and *The New World* achieve moments of transcendence, they remain temporally conventional, their voice-overs more often connected to what is seen on the screen, not quite reaching the heights of *The Tree of Life*. Intertwined with dazzling visuals, *The Tree of Life's* voice-overs give us a taste of omniscience due to their unique qualities, revealing Malick's perception of God. By conflating our perspective with God's, Malick posits that God listens first and perhaps does not speak or intrude on the universe—a silent yet compassionate creator. In this manner, we are able to empathize with the characters through hearing, while we grasp the bigger picture through seeing. It seems to me that Malick's cinematic approach to issues of religion and God effectively portrays the ambiguity and complexity involved in any form of religious belief without pandering to the audience. In his characters' search for salvation, Malick does not censor their questions or address their suffering with cliché platitudes; instead, he amplifies their objections and voices by letting us hear the cries of their souls, to which we can offer no respite. While *The Tree of Life* is a film about characters searching for and questioning the divine, the

voice-overs ultimately suggest another, just as important question: what does God hear?

**Note:** *The author would like to thank Cinephile's editors for their helpful suggestions, and Dr. Allison Whitney for her help during the final revision process.*

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Laura Beadling

## Native American Filmmakers Reclaiming Voices Innovative Voice-Overs in Chris Eyre's *Skins*

Most discussions of voice-over narration focus on either third-person “authorial” narrators or first-person “character” narrators. However, Sarah Kozloff argues that, in actuality, there are a “myriad of invisible storytellers” at work in all voice-over films (6). Kozloff, also, pointedly notes that “more than anything else, studying voice-over prompts one to pause over beginnings” (64). Appropriately, then, a critic examining *Skins*, a 2002 film by Chris Eyre, has much to linger over inasmuch as the film opens with not one, but several voice-over narrators. The film concerns Rudy Yellow Lodge, a Lakota tribal police officer who takes care of his alcoholic brother, Mogie, and who must also deal with poverty and Native-on-Native violence and despair every day. During a murder investigation that structures part of the plot of *Skins*, Rudy’s frustration with the justice system, and possibly his possession by the Lakota trickster spider called Iktomi, cause him to become a vigilante. He eventually realizes that this only hurts his own people. Rudy must atone for his misguided actions while learning how to appropriately express his anger, and honour his brother.

In the first four minutes of the film, Eyre uses no fewer than four off-screen voices, including, in order of appearance:

1. Then President Bill Clinton who is actually seen several times but whose voice is used in voice-over, while images of Pine Ridge dominate the visual track;
2. A “voice of God” narrator (voiced by Eyre himself) who provides factual information about Pine Ridge and Lakota history, especially the Wounded Knee massacre;
3. A female news reporter’s voice who also provides statistical information about contemporary life on Pine Ridge, including the shortened life expectancy of Pine Ridge residents and the high unemployment rate on the reservation;
4. The protagonist Rudy Yellow Lodge; a first-person homodiegetic narrator (one within the story world) who informs the viewer about the re-appearance of Iktomi, the Lakota trickster spider, in his life.

While each of these “invisible storytellers” will be discussed in more detail below, their sheer multiplicity ensures that none can occupy an unquestioned position of authority that most voice-over narrators are said to occupy by their very nature. By quickly switching narrators in the first few minutes of the film, Eyre implies that none are in possession of the only true story. As Kozloff maintains about different categories of third-person narrators, “in all cases, one finds that the voice-over highlights the source of the narrative. Instead of the discourse seeming like a translucent pane of glass, such narration makes us aware of the pane’s tint, thickness, and scratches” (74). Eyre is very concerned with making viewers aware of—and skeptical towards—the situatedness of the storyteller, not only in terms of fictional narratives but also the narrative of American history.

As a Native filmmaker, Eyre depicts the history of Pine Ridge and Wounded Knee in ways that contradict triumphalist American narratives of Manifest Destiny and the “winning of the West.” Instead of a white-washed version, Eyre revises American history commemorated in national monuments such as Mt. Rushmore, where he sets the climax of his film, to prioritize a Native perspective. Eyre also

decentres the Western genre, which often mythologizes the histories of the “Old West” and presents Native peoples to mainstream audiences as without history or culture. Beverly Singer notes, “Until very recently, Whites—to the exclusion of Native people—have been the only people given the necessary support and recognition by society to tell Native stories in the medium of film” (2). Eyre is among the first Native people to be able to create counter-images of Native lives in feature-length fictional films; *Smoke Signals*, released in 1998, was in fact the first all-Native made film to receive a wide release from a major American studio. Paul Chaat Smith puts Eyre’s achievement in perspective when he writes, “despite a rich history of Indians in Hollywood, in a real sense, the first Indian films are just now being made” (41). While it is possible to fetishize some sort of purity or complete authenticity in relation to Native-created representations, it is important to also remember that, as Sherman Alexie points out in an interview about Native cinema, the “influences are multicultural” (Capriccioso). Eyre, after all, is telling a Lakota story even though his own heritage is Cheyenne and Arapaho. Such an acknowledgement does not diminish the importance of Native directors creating their own images and narratives to work towards “cultural sovereignty,” a concept detailed by Beverly Singer throughout her groundbreaking book, *Wiping the War Paint off the Lens*. Such films work to counter the objectification and distortions of countless texts made by non-Native directors. Thus, *Skins* rewrites both American history and film history from a Native point of view.



Many theorists of voice-over, especially in documentary film, express concerns about its seemingly unassailable transcendent position of power and authoritative knowledge. Laura Rascaroli, for example, asserts “voiceover has had an overwhelmingly negative reception in documentary film theory” (1). These concerns are also relevant to *Skins* because of the film’s semi-documentary aspects. As Joanna Hearne points out,

The film’s forays into this [opening] documentary montage, with its authoritative narrator (the director himself, at one point), borrowed footage, persuasive political agenda, and vérité techniques of location shooting on the reservation in actual homes (not dressed or built for the film), ask that viewers receive this drama differently than the historical fantasies of ‘Indian Westerns’ such as *Dances with Wolves* [1990], tapping instead into the conventions of social realism. (45)

This documentary-style opening lets viewers know that Eyre will not be parroting myths of American history. In her work on voice-over, Kaja Silverman delineates what she calls the “rule of synchronous sound,” which dictates that the match between the human body and the human voice must appear seamless and thus result in “the representation of a homogeneous thinking subject whose exteriority is congruent with its interiority” (132). Silverman goes on to argue that voice-over allows the (almost always) male subject to speak from a transcendent position associated with power and knowledge, and thus, “the disembodied voice-over can be seen as ‘exemplary’ for male subjectivity, attesting to an achieved invisibility, omniscience and discursive power while women are denied this position” (134). Typically, not only is it women who are denied this position, but also people of color. However, early in Eyre’s film, there is a clear reversal of this pattern.

Eyre’s first off-screen voice is then President Bill Clinton, whose voice-over authority is undercut—despite his status as white, authoritative male—before being replaced by several other off-screen narrators, including Eyre himself. We hear part of Clinton’s speech in voice-over while the image track shows shots of Pine Ridge’s landscape and housing; because Clinton is intermittently visible on the image track while his words play asynchronously on the sound track, he is denied the match between the body and voice, as well as the transcendent power of totally disembodied voice-over. Furthermore, Eyre chooses to highlight the part of the speech in which Clinton claims, “we’re not coming from Washington to tell you exactly what to do and how to do it, we’re coming from Washington to ask you what you want to do, and tell you we will give you the tools and the support to get done what you want to do for your children and their future.” While this plays on the audio track, Eyre moves from aerial shots of the area to a series of closer shots that introduce life on Pine Ridge. As Clinton talks about Pine Ridge’s children, two shots depict children playing in front of clearly dilapidated housing. By juxtaposing the official rhetoric of the president with the current realities of the reservation, Eyre critically comments

### *Eyre uses off-screen voices... to withhold Lakota cultural information from non-Native audiences.*

on public officials who promise change and assistance, even as the reservation continues to be one of the poorest areas in the nation. Houston Wood asserts, “the mockery of such oft-repeated official promises then plays across the screen throughout *Skins* as Eyre’s camera travels the rough roads and visits the mostly rundown houses that act as a character in his story” (31).

In contrast to this ironic juxtaposition of Clinton’s voice with the image track, Eyre himself provides the second, and far more authoritative and factual, voice-over narration. *Skins* is the first feature film shot on Pine Ridge Reservation, foregrounding its very specific landscape and history that is not memorialized in national myths, but which has instead been too often erased. In the director’s DVD commentary track, Eyre says that although he scouted other locations, he decided it had to be Pine Ridge itself or the story could not be told. However, because he was worried that not all audiences would be familiar with Pine Ridge, the film opens with a voice-over introduction. After Clinton’s speech, the audio track switches to Eyre’s own voice in a documentary, “voice of God” narration that informs viewers that 60 miles south of one of America’s most popular tourist attractions—Mt. Rushmore—lies the country’s poorest county, Pine Ridge. In addition, while the image track shows the battered sign commemorating the Wounded Knee Massacre, Eyre’s voice-over explains the event by introducing the location as “the place where hundreds of men, women, and children were killed by the US Army in 1890. Today, it is known as the massacre at Wounded Knee.” During this voice-over, there are a number of shots of Wounded Knee that, unlike the ironic image track that ran under Clinton’s voice-over narration, complement Eyre’s audio track; the white flag still flying, the cemetery, the gravestones, and the battered sign commemorating where Chief Big Foot surrendered, among others.

Eyre’s voice is thus allowed to occupy the privileged position of disembodied voice-over that represents Silverman’s idealized form of knowledge and authority, while Clinton is denied that same position (132). This type of “voice of God” narration has been often vilified in documentary film because of its easy assumption of authority and a singular yet seemingly invisible point of view. Bonitzer notes that this third-person, heterodiegetic (outside the story world of the characters) narrator represents the



“voice of knowledge *par excellence* in all films, since it resounds from off-screen, in other words from the field of the Other” (322). However, Bonitzer does not evaluate the relevance of this point for specific films, especially when the voice-over narrator is himself in the position of the Other as a Native filmmaker whose concern is to decentre appropriate images of Natives in Hollywood films. Stella Bruzzi notes that while many critics of the voice-over claim that the fact that “this dubious power is so often invested in a white, male, middle-class and anonymous voice necessarily cements the voice-over forms as repressive and anti-radical,” this view, Bruzzi goes on to argue, is itself reductionist as it refuses to acknowledge any differences between voices (57-8). Eyre’s occupation of the position of disembodied authority regarding Pine Ridge and the Wounded Knee massacre seems appropriate in the context of a history of fictional films that have refused to accord Native peoples a voice in the countless films that purport to represent the American frontier.

Cinema has a special relationship to the dissemination of triumphalist histories in the form of the many Westerns and other films that gave viewers a distorted yet convenient (from the view of the dominant culture) version of the American past. Yet, film may also have a special ability to begin to correct some of these distortions. While revisionist Westerns like *Little Big Man* (1970) and *Dances with Wolves* depict a different view of the past, they were both made largely by non-Natives, and neither treated contemporary

Native realities, thus further encouraging a belief that Native peoples and issues are firmly, though perhaps regrettably, in the past. As Elizabeth Cook-Lynn puts it, “the stereotypes still abound, and the same stories are still being told only in a more sympathetic tenor” (59). However, while Eyre could have simply claimed this authoritative position for himself as the right of a marginalized filmmaker speaking back to a long history of Hollywood films, he also undercuts the authority of his own voice-over narration. He is not simply interested in replacing one authoritative version of events with another; he wants to interrogate *any* singular account of American history.

### *Skin’s positioning of Native subjectivity at its centre...is a politically radical act.*

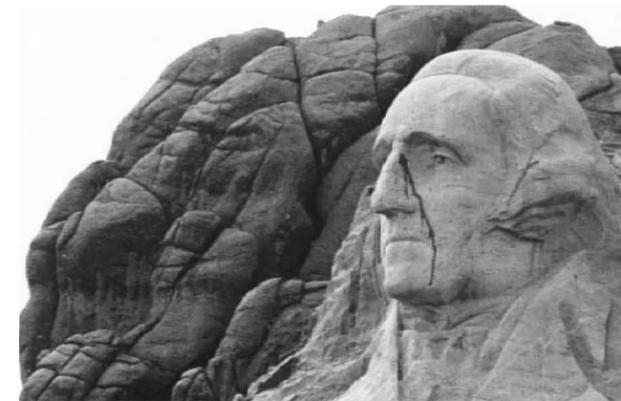
The first way that Eyre undercuts the authority of the second voice-over is by immediately following up his narration with a third off-screen voice; that of a news reporter who provides statistics about unemployment and mortality rates from alcoholism on the reservation, while archival footage of Native men being arrested and imprisoned plays on the image track. Furthermore, Bonitzer “believes that we can compromise the voice’s inherent authority if we multiply or divide it, make it relate to the image-track obliquely or ironically, and/or if we give the podium to the sex heretofore virtually shut out from these roles – women” (qtd. in Kozloff 82). Indeed, Eyre uses *all* of these techniques to question the reliability of the voice-over narrator: he includes multiple off-screen voices, he ironically juxtaposes Clinton’s voice against the image track, and he includes a female voice-over narrator. In addition, Eyre’s inclusion of the reporter’s voice sets up another semi-documentary intertext, which he then returns to in the middle of the film when the reporter is shown interviewing Rudy’s brother for a story on the thriving liquor business in the nearby town of White Clay, Nebraska.

This attenuation of the voice’s authority is appropriate, for it soon becomes clear that Rudy himself, the final voice-over narrator of the opening, is the most unreliable of narrators inasmuch as the film strongly suggests that he has been possessed by Iktomi. Iktomi is a trickster figure in Lakota culture; both a cultural hero and an amoral clown. Comical stories about him are often used to teach youth about proper Lakota behaviour, typically through negative example. After Rudy’s first vigilante escapade, he sees a spider and he asserts in voice-over narration that Iktomi has reappeared in his life. Through voice-over we learn Rudy’s

first meeting with Iktomi came when he was ten years old and bitten by a spider while in the outhouse. His brother, Mogie, carried him home, all the while telling him Iktomi stories. Interestingly, despite the multiple voices throughout the film, the viewer is denied Mogie’s voice here; young Mogie’s stories are almost entirely covered by Rudy’s narration. Eyre’s refusal to include Mogie’s stories provides an interesting counterpoint to a later moment in which Eyre chooses to black out the image track while still including voices and sound effects on the audio track. After he hears that Mogie will survive the burns inadvertently inflicted by Rudy during one of his vigilante episodes, Rudy asks a holy man to help him free himself of Iktomi and they undergo a sweat lodge purification ritual. We see Rudy and some other men gathered outside a sweat lodge in a very long shot as, in voice-over, the older man tells Rudy that they are going to pray for him. Once the men enter the sweat lodge, the image track goes black while the audio track carries the sound of splashing and steaming water, singing in Lakota, and voices talking for almost thirty seconds; meanwhile, Eyre firmly denies the audience any sight of the sweat lodge’s interior.

Eyre uses off-screen voices—in the sweat lodge with no image track at all, and in another case with Rudy’s narration drowning out Mogie’s voice telling Iktomi stories—to withhold Lakota cultural information from non-Native audiences. Eyre’s discretion makes sense given that decontextualized Native practices are often commoditized and sometimes performed incorrectly, as when James A. Ray, a “New Age guru,” improperly conducted a sweat lodge ritual that resulted in deaths of three people (Lacey). Eyre’s implicit critique of Hollywood films that lure non-Native audiences with buckskin-wearing, leathers-and-feathers romanticized images of “Hollywood Indians” would be weakened if he too commoditized Lakota sacred culture. Furthermore, by keeping his camera outside and at a distance, Eyre preserves the space of the sweat lodge for Native viewers and participants. Eyre also uses off-screen voices in interesting ways to call attention to social issues facing residents of Pine Ridge Reservation. Specifically, Geraldine, the unseen dispatcher whose voice accompanies Rudy in his travels through the reservation, provides important information to the viewer about the calls Rudy responds to, including when Rudy goes to the initial murder scene that will drive the first part of the plot. Additionally, her voice drives home the name of White Clay, which is initially unremarked upon but is pervasively repeated on the audio track. While many Westerns lack tribal, historical, or cultural specificity about the Native peoples they represent, Eyre carefully roots his film in a very specific place and context. One of the realities of Pine Ridge life that Eyre documents is the presence of White

Clay, an unincorporated town of fewer than 20 people just across the border in Nebraska. Despite its low population, White Clay’s four liquor stores “sell an estimated 4 million cans of beer almost exclusively to residents of the reservation” (Humphrey).



Similar to the opening segment, in which the visual and audio tracks complicate one another, there is a montage sequence very early in the film of Rudy driving through the reservation as Geraldine informs him of various calls he must respond to: a man has fallen out of his wheelchair and needs assistance; a group of drunken teenagers are partying in White Clay; Nebraska State troopers need assistance in White Clay. As these calls, most of which originated in White Clay, come in, the visuals show a montage of decrepit, miserable housing. By juxtaposing these visuals with the name of White Clay, Eyre exposes the relationship between the illegal sale of alcohol just over the border by white store owners and the conditions on Pine Ridge, where death from alcohol-related causes is nine times the national average. Indeed, Mogie eventually dies, not from his burns, but from cirrhosis of the liver.

By making the act of storytelling visible and including multiple voice-over narrators, Eyre encourages viewers to question who, for whom, and from what vantage point is speaking. While many theorists are suspicious of voice-over narration, some, like Bill Nichols, feel that contemporary filmmakers have not only failed to explore the many uses of voice in film, but have “disavow[ed] the complexities of voice” (qtd. in Kozloff 81). Eyre revels in the voice—as shown through his use of multiple off-screen narrators—for its ability to call attention to the act of narrating and storytelling. This enables him to call into question the whole of film history and American history. The final minutes of the film, as silent as the first few minutes are filled with voices, nevertheless are also a critical engagement with Native politics and representations in both film and history. Rather than continuing with his vigilantism, Rudy decides

to honour Mogie by throwing a can of red paint down the face of George Washington on Mt. Rushmore, which has been the site of countless film and television moments from Hitchcock’s *North by Northwest* (1959) to *The Simpsons*. Rudy’s silent act of resistance and homage to his brother seems to be confirmed when, driving away from Rushmore, he sees what appears to be a younger Mogie. Even though these moments are quiet, the feeling is unmistakably triumphant as Rudy thrusts his arms into the air joyously after hurling the paint and smiles to himself after seeing “Mogie” again. Furthermore, similar to Rudy’s defiant vandalism of Mt. Rushmore at the end of the film, *Skins*’ positioning of Native subjectivity at its centre, especially after decades of films representing Native peoples as vilified or exotic Other, is a politically radical act.

**Note:** *This essay generally follows Chris Eyre’s own customary usage of the term Native rather than other terms such as Indigenous (USA) or Aboriginal (Canada).*

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Stephen Teo

## The Voice-Over as an Integrating Tool of Word and Image

The device of the voice-over has generally been examined and analyzed through its use in the cinema of the West, primarily Hollywood, as in the laudable works of Kozloff (1988), Chatman (1975; 1999), and Rascaroli (2008). In this article, I will examine the applications and functions of the voice-over in a classic Chinese film, *Xiaocheng zhi chun* (*Spring in a Small City*, 1948), directed by Fei Mu. The film, largely regarded as a masterpiece in Chinese cinema, represents a rare example of the use of voice-over in Chinese films of that period. I will go on to examine the voice-over in *Spring in a Small City* as a tool or device through which the filmmakers attempt to integrate words with images in the manner of certain poetic techniques in Chinese traditions.

Supposing the simplistic, yet useful (for the purpose of this essay) dichotomy of the Asian film versus Western cinema, the role of voice-over in alloying words and images in Asian films may be even more prominent because of the variety of languages in which the written word takes on both aural and visual significance. Due to the general unfamiliarity of the Western audience and scholarship with Asian languages, from their point of view, Asian films may be perceived to be more visual than aural. In such a biased judgment, the voice-over would seem a strange intervention in the visual scheme of things. Furthermore, although narrative and narration are intuitively and cognitively understood to be universal, the general misconception (even among some Asian scholars and critics) is that, unlike its Western counterpart, the use of voice-over is somehow alien to the cinematic modes of narration in Asia.

No empirical study has been made thus far to determine this hearsay as a fact, and I suspect that there is more generic use of the voice-over in Asian films, from Iran to Japan, than is otherwise believed. Asia's lack of appropriate film theories, sufficient empirical research, and a "voice" in the political sense can be attributed to this misconception. Furthermore, it is certainly the case that many contemporary Asian films employ voice-over, the most well-known

examples being a number of Wong Kar-Wai's films, including *Days of Being Wild* (1990), *Chungking Express* (1994), and *Ashes of Time* (1994). The voice-over in Wong's films is used in a way that is more in accord with literary narratives; a strategy that we can also see in the voice-over narrations of Stanley Kubrick's *Barry Lyndon* (1975), and Joseph L. Mankiewicz's *All About Eve* (1950) and *The Barefoot Contessa* (1954). In this sense, Wong's films appear to fall into a more familiar line of Western narrative practices. However, if we view Wong's films as inheriting the narrative legacy of a classic Chinese film such as *Spring in a Small City*, we can then address an imbalance in the discourse on the voice-over created by the overwhelming tendency to equate the voice-over with the Western "voice."

The sense that voice-over in Asian cinema is somewhat muted can be also due to a Western standpoint that tries to apply its own general principles of narratology and "the language of cinema" to various artistic representations, which might have in fact been derived from more local concepts and traditions. Edward Branigan, in his book *Point of View in the Cinema*, essentially argues that narration "is not a person or state of mind, but a linguistic and logical relationship posed by the text as a condition of its intelligibility" (3). While noting that cinema as a language system has given rise to the debate over "the relation between words and pictures," Branigan points to the evidence of empirical studies demonstrating "the existence of two processing systems in the brain" that appear to strongly support "the notion that words and pictures do not entirely overlap (and thus neither can be posited as a master system)" (15). But what are the implications of such an improbability in the cinema? I believe that, at the very least, Asian cinemas can provide rich opportunities for answering this question. Asian cinemas express linguistic systems that are historically and culturally determined (and needless to say, quite different from linguistic systems in the West), and because there is a gap in this area of research, it remains to be seen how various Asian languages, as expressed through film, can ac-



commodate the pictorial or image-based medium of the cinema. The question is, therefore, how Asian films reconcile the issue of non-overlapping words and pictures. Can the device of voice-over, which is felt to be largely absent in Asian films in the first place, be a tool of integrating words with pictures?



Asians have not lacked a voice culturally, but this voice may not always be heard in the West. An early example is the Japanese *benshi* of the silent era who were employed to narrate and explain the plots of the movies. The *benshi* became cultural performers and were considered stars in their own right. Although, in a sense, the *benshi* presaged the arrival of sound in cinema, because of their power and cultural influence, they actually hindered the start of the sound era in Japan (Kozloff 24). Similarly, Kozloff mentions the presence of “lecturers” in the Western cinema of the late 1890s that provided “running commentaries for the audience” (23). The “lecturers” and the *benshi* functioned as early narrators seeking to integrate their words into the images on the screen. The impression of Asian (or in this case, Japanese) reticence in cinematic narration, therefore, may be an outcome of a cultural understanding of the integration of words and images in a way that there is no need to highlight the voice as a separate entity.

In the Chinese cultural and literal tradition, words and paintings are said to belong to the same source, which is to say that words and images are indelibly linked together. This was one of the maxims in *Youmeng ying* (*Quiet Dream Shadows*), a book of apothegms by the Qing Dynasty scholar Zhang Chao (1650-1707), parts of which have been translated into English by Lin Yutang (Lin 36-74). The traditional Chinese correlation of words and images shows itself in the pictorial-based language too, where individual Chinese words take on the look of iconic images. Chinese calligraphy is an art form in itself, akin to painting; indeed, both painting and calligraphy use the same techniques. Chinese painters often include words in their works, and both these words and images exist in the same space without distracting from each other. Given the cultural tendency that words and images flow out of the same source, Chinese films may, in fact, have an inherent signifying linguistic system of their own. However, to consider this trait, we need to set it off against the discourse in Western theory, which, as Branigan has informed us, allows “room to argue for a fundamental difference between words and pictures” (15). Such a difference may be culturally determined, as Western scholars themselves argue. Sarah Kozloff reminds us that “the dominant tradition of Western culture has tended towards iconophobia,” and that “the stridency of the pro-image film scholars may be a defense against this dominant tradition, a quasi-conscious revolt against the traditional favoring of the abstract, intellectual word” (11). With such a cultural background of iconophobia, it can be argued that in the context of film theory as formulated in Western scholarship, the voice-over is an intrusion into the narrative flow that posits a separation of words from images. This is contrary to the expectation in Chinese cinema that words and images can flow in tandem.

One method proposed for explaining this agreement in Chinese cinema (and one that we can benefit from for studying the role of voice-over in this issue) is the mode of poetic expression in traditional Chinese poetry. By employing the techniques of *fu* (exposition), *bi* (contrast or metaphor), and *xing* (evocation, but sometimes also translated to mean metonymy), Chinese poets engender an effortless melding of words and images. These literary techniques have been applied to Chinese film criticism. The Hong Kong critic (and sometime filmmaker) Lau Sing-Hon (Liu Chenghan) has been a long-time proponent of applying Chinese poetic modes of *fu*, *bi*, *xing* to Chinese film, and indeed, to film in general (Lau 3-43), but there has not been much English-language scholarship on how such poetic modes function as a formal construct of Chinese film theory. The example that I will use, Fei Mu’s *Spring in a Small City*, is often described by Chinese critics as “poetic,”



*In its poetic utterance, Spring effectively distills both fu and bi techniques to evoke xing imagery.*

but such critics have thus far failed to aptly demonstrate what exactly they mean by this term, and what are its constituents.

I believe that the key might be in the film’s masterful utilization of the poetic *xing* expression. In its poetic utterance, *Spring* effectively distills both *fu* and *bi* techniques to evoke *xing* imagery. Essentially, poets, literary or cinematic, will strive to achieve *xing* which constitutes the peak of poetic expression; therefore, both *fu* and *bi* are considered less vital poetic techniques. The poetic force of *Spring* is arguably a consequence of its summation of *xing* as a subtle, yet palpable conceit. *Xing* embodies the sophistication of the narrative. Many commentators, such as Wei-Qun Dai and Hongchu Fu, have singled out *xing* as the most controversial and least comprehensible element in Chinese poetry. In the same way, inasmuch as we regard *Spring in a Small City* as the cinematic equivalent of poetic *xing*, considering it as an *affect* might be more useful than trying to describe it. Each scene is an epiphany of *xing* affect. Apparently, the director Fei Mu had instructed his screenwriter Li Tianji to revise the script according to the tone and feeling of a poem

by Song Dynasty poet Su Dongpo, *Die Lian Hua* (*The Butterfly’s Romance of the Flower*) (Zhu 62). This poem is essentially composed of *bi* and *xing* parts, with a downbeat articulation of *xing*. Fei Mu had probably intended for his film to capture the kind of *xing* expression and mood that the poem enunciated. That the conceit works in *Spring in a Small City* is due to its use of a subjective voice-over narration, which enhances the sensation of poetic utterance. The voice-over, as a vehicle of poetic distillation of the *fu*, *bi*, *xing* techniques, should hence be considered a functional outgrowth of the poetic nature of the film. Naturally, Fei Mu’s method of poetic utterance relies on his use of specific cinematic techniques other than the voice-over narration, including; for example, his signature long takes and dissolves. A closer look at the way these techniques have been used to convey the poetic character of the film (as a classic example of the linguistic and logical relationship of words and images in Chinese cinema) is necessary here.

*Spring* begins with exterior images of a woman walking alone through the ruins of a mansion; her home, destroyed by the war between Japan and China. We hear her voice-over narration, gradually introducing all the characters in the film: her servant, her sick husband, her sister-in-law, and a doctor friend of her husband (and her own ex-lover) who turns up at the mansion unexpectedly. The woman’s voice-over makes her the focalizer of the narrative, the subject of her focalization being her relationship with

her ex-lover. The moral complications this brings out in her troubled marriage with her husband, and its impact on her sister-in-law are also other parts of this focus. The woman/narrator, then, is placed at the centre of a focalization, which according to Mieke Bal, “is the relationship between the ‘vision,’ the agent that sees, and that which is seen” (146). *Spring* is probably the single most revealing poetic touch in Chinese cinema up to that time, but its innovation is not limited to its poetic tone. A significant aspect of this film is that the woman’s voice-over shifts her perspective from that of a first-person narrator to that of a third-person narrator. It is in this latter role that she describes the doctor’s arrival and can see his every movement, down to the detail of his stepping on the dregs of the husband’s herbal medicine which the servant has thrown out into the backyard (Zhu 63). The woman is the agent that sees in more ways than one: her vision is conjured up by her being both a subjective and objective narrator.

In traditional Chinese poetry, using first-person narration is common, but Chinese poets make use of *bi* and *xing* techniques to associate words of a personal import

*If we consider cinema as a poetic form, we might then say that words and images are juxtapositions in a metonymic flow.*



with words of pictorial or imagistic quality without calling attention to a virtual separation of the two. This way, words are used to paint images where meanings are then conjured up metaphorically and metonymically. Juxtapositions are rife, although there may be occasions to question how words actually conjure up the right *xing* images, i.e. what is signified is actually predicated in the signifier. Commentators have explained that the nature of Chinese words makes them particularly prone to juxtapositions. Gu, for example, has declared that “poetic Chinese, because of innate qualities such as monosyllabic characters and lack of connectives, verbal conjugation, gender, case, number, etc., is often open to flexible juxtapositions with unlimited possibilities for reading and interpretation” (7). Here, the concern (more from the Western point of view) is that the narrator (often the first-person narrator) lacks the grammatical structure to make the necessary connections. But Chinese poets nevertheless make the connections through the method of *xing*, which, for our purposes here, may be defined as a metonymic flow of words into imagery. If we consider cinema as a poetic form, we might then say that words and images are juxtapositions in a metonymic flow. The question, then, will be whether the cinematic narrator can actually play the role of integrating the words and images together into a smooth and vibrant flow. Again, the example of Fei Mu’s *Spring in a Small City* can be helpful here. What will be the function of the voice-over if we are to view the film as an extended series of *xing* imagery?



The woman’s voice-over in *Spring* links the narrative with images, sometimes in a redundant fashion (i.e. the words merely repeat what is shown on screen), and sometimes as a counterpoint to the images. The voice-over acts as a crucial determinant of the poetic flow in *Spring*. In the middle section of the film, there are several passages where the narrator is utterly absent, but the images retain a certain sense of being shaped by the now-absent narrator’s authority. The poetic current of the narrative is an effect of the narrator’s previous voice-overs which shift from first-person to third-person, making her presence all the more omniscient and therefore omnipotent. The power of the narrator lingers over those scenes where her voice is no longer heard. Fei Mu achieves this effect by his skillful use of dissolves in many of the scenes where the narrator is absent.

Ultimately, the voice-over in *Spring in a Small City* is an attempt by a Chinese filmmaker to integrate not only words with images, but also an old Chinese poetic method (the connotation of *xing* imagery) with the more recent and originally Western art form of the cinema. In this attempt, the voice-over acts as a generic tool, carrying nuances of Chinese form and methodology of expression (the poetic modes of *fu-bi-xing*); while the visual technique of dissolve acts as another generic tool, helping the natural flow of

images be coordinated by words. *Spring*’s achievement is perhaps unique in that the film is still considered to be a rare case of a highly literate representation of poetic form in Chinese cinema. Despite their seemingly conscious “poetic” force, other Chinese breakthroughs, such as the films of the Fifth Generation or the Taiwanese “New Cinema” in the 1980s, are not as literate as this classic voice-over film. Endowed with a “Chinese voice” by the poet-director Fei Mu, *Spring* will remain as a classic example of a generic fusion between the cinemas of the West and the East.

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## Voice-Over, Narrative Agency, and Oral Culture Ousmane Sembène's *Borom Sarret*

The voice-over—one of the most overtly “oral” aspects of cinematic enunciation—accrues a particular significance when considered within the context of films originating from historically oral cultures; the presence of voice-over in such films would appear to be the most obvious point of intersection between the modern cultural form of cinema and the ancient tradition of oral performance. Ousmane Sembène's *Borom Sarret* (Senegal, 1969) presents a special case in this regard: widely regarded as the first sub-Saharan African film, the film's use of a first-person voice-over invites comparisons with the voice of the *griot*, the traditional oral performer in West African cultures.

However, *Borom Sarret's* voice-over is exposed as the voice of an unreliable narrator whose bias, shortcomings, and prejudices are emphasized via the unusual relationship of his vocal narration to the other sounds and images in the film. Through this relationship, *Borom Sarret* constructs and renders visible another narrator that has far more authority than the subject heard in the voice-over. Sarah Kozloff points out that “...behind the voice-over narrator there is another presence that supplements the nominal narrator's vision, knowledge, and storytelling powers. This presence is the narrating agent of all films (with or without voice-over)” (44). In *Borom Sarret*, the presence of this *cinematic narrator* is emphasized, while in classical (Hollywood) cinema it is rendered invisible. It is the god-like third-person *cinematic narrator* that recalls the autonomous narrator in some African oral performances, the *griot*. This *cinematic narrator*, operating behind the protagonist's voice-over, confides in us, and persuades us to appreciate the ironies and contradictions of the protagonist's social predicament. Within a highly economic running time of 19 minutes, *Borom Sarret* manages to articulate a complex critique of the urban poverty prevalent within postcolonial African countries, emphasizing its psychological effects. This is achieved

through the first-person, interior monologue of Modou (Ly Abdoulay), a cart driver or *borom Sarret*; a term which, according to Murphy, is a “Wolofisation” of the French term *bonhomme charette* (52), meaning the wagoner. Throughout the film, while undertaking his routine morning's work driving fellow citizens around Dakar in his horse-drawn cart, the protagonist expresses his thoughts and feelings in voice-over. As the morning unfolds, the protagonist Modou runs errands for a range of local characters, and meets a professional *griot* who persuades him to part with his earnings by singing his praises. Towards the end of the film, a well-dressed person convinces Modou to drive him to the “plateau”, the exclusive high town where the *sarrets* are not allowed. Once reaching the destination, Modou is accosted by a policeman who confiscates his cart, while his passenger flees without paying his fare. Returning to his family in the low town without his cart, and thus without his livelihood, the protagonist's monologue asks who is responsible for this misfortune.

As with many of Sembène's works, *Borom Sarret* is often didactic in tone, a characteristic which itself invokes questions about oral narrative techniques. Sembène famously saw himself as fulfilling a role akin to the *griot* (although he himself was not of *griot* lineage) and described himself as a “*griot* of modern times” (Pfaff 29). Moreover, *Borom Sarret* reflects Sembène's self-confessed commitment to the cinema as a tool for mass education, summarized in his statement, “cinema is an evening class for the people” (Sembène 184). Indeed, the director was known to tour his films around West African villages that lacked facilities for film exhibition, thus exposing his political ideals to as wide an audience as possible. Amadou T. Fofana, too, suggests that *Borom Sarret* is “a *griot's* narrative,” and emphasizes the didactic role Sembène occupies as director: “As a screen-*griot*, he overpowers the corrupted role of the sto-



ryteller, taking advantage of the power of the moving images that enables him to manipulate his audience visually as an outgrowth of what the traditional storyteller could only do verbally” (264). Fofana also emphasizes Sembène’s own distinction between the original *griot* of African tradition and the professional *griot* of postcolonial Africa, noting that “Ousmane Sembène proudly appropriates the title of *griot* but draws a clear line of demarcation between the kind he considers himself to be and the current, postcolonial, cash-driven kind as represented in his early film *Borom Sarret*” (256). The popular appeal of cinema makes it an ideal medium for Sembène to retrieve and reinterpret the traditional role of the *griot*, and the director’s commitment to this project extends to the formal components of his work.

The significance of the *griot* figure in relation to *Borom Sarret*’s use of voice-over comes into clearer focus against the context of the wider acknowledgement of African cinema’s relationship to oral tradition, represented by Cham, Diawara, Niang, Pfaff, Green, and Thackway, among others. As these critics have shown, oral performance informs a diverse range of African films, straddling the canon of Sembène, Souleymane Cissé (Mali), Gaston Kaboré (Burkina Faso), and Djibril Diop Mambéty (Senegal), as well as less well-known directors such as Dani Kouyaté (Burkina Faso) and David Achkar (*Guinea*). Yet, the precise ways in which oral performance may influence the films in terms of enunciation remain largely unrecognized, with Manthia Diawara’s work on Kaboré and Cissé being the most notable exception. This is particularly surprising in the case

*It is the god-like third-person cinematic narrator that recalls the autonomous narrator in some African oral performances, the griot.*

of a film like *Borom Sarret*, whose prominent use of voice-over brings the issue of oral performance to the fore. Undertaking a close analysis of the film reveals the norms of oral performance in the formal relationships between the voice-over and other forms of diegetic speech, music, and ambient sounds. Thus, the remainder of this essay attempts to delineate the ways in which the voice-over in *Borom Sarret* operates as part of a reconfiguration of the enunciative strategies of oral performance.

The starting point for this analysis is Manthia Diawara’s inspiring work on the relationship between filmic enunciation and African oral performances. In his examination of Idrissa Ouedraogo’s *Tilai* (*The Law*, Burkina Faso, 1990)—one of the films of a wave of African films that attempted to represent a “precolonial” Africa—Diawara argues how the visual characteristics of the film (the static camera, in this instance) may inscribe the oral performer at the level of cinematic enunciation. Elaborating an argument he first made in relation to Kaboré’s *Wend Kuuni* (Burkina Faso, 1983) in “Oral Literature and African Cinema” (1989), Diawara

discusses how the climactic scene in *Tilai* distances the spectator from the characters’ psychological predicament, referring the viewer, instead, to the narrator’s presence:

At the end of the film, the poetic way in which Kougri picks up the rifle and shoots Saga brings together film history and the African oral traditions. Because the camera is static and the acting looks clumsy, the shot reminds us of early cinema. But the distance between the characters and the spectator, the refusal to let the spectator into the characters’ minds, is also a trait of the oral traditions. We know that we are being told a story by a third-person (the *griot* or the filmmaker), and every shot must be negotiated through that narrator. (164)

Diawara demonstrates how the static camera calls attention to the film’s discourse and, in turn, the *cinematic narrator* recalls the *griot*’s narrative strategies. Clearly, for Diawara, an indicator of oral narration is the storyteller’s tendency to draw attention to the act of narration itself, and these characteristics may be refigured at the visual level. In *Borom Sarret*, however, this refiguring of the oral performer’s techniques occurs at the aural level. While the subject of the film’s voice-over, that is, the protagonist, cannot be likened to the African *griot* (since he does not possess the social status of a *griot*), the formal organization of the voice-over, and in particular, its interaction with other aspects of the soundtrack, recalls the *griot*’s emphasis on the act of storytelling itself. This strategy allows Sembène to articulate his didactic narrative for the rural audiences to whom he exhibited his films—audiences well-versed in African oral aesthetics. Indeed, when taken as a whole, the various “voices” in the film (spoken voice-over, dialogue, diegetic sound and music) coalesce to create a kind of tone poem whose rhythmic organization and internal logic signal the presence of the *cinematic narrator*.

Employing the dubbing technique pioneered in the ethnographic films of Jean Rouch (who himself was compared to *griots* by Paul Stoller), Sembène shot *Borom Sarret* without synchronous sound. This choice gave him the flexibility to take his camera on location, and add all the dialogue and other sounds at the post-production stage. As a result, all of the actors’ voices heard in the film are, in effect, forms of voice-over, and Sembène makes little attempt (for either artistic or technical reasons) to disguise this fact. Therefore, while Sembène’s camera is firmly located in the centre of a poor district of Dakar, the sense of documentary realism evident in the visuals is not actually reflected in the soundtrack. Having only a few scenes with the ambient hustle and bustle of the street, the soundtrack

is dominated by a set of fundamental sound types: diegetic and non-diegetic speech (Modou, the *griot*, the passengers, a *Muezzin*’s call to prayer); music (Senegalese folk music played on *xalam* which is a small lute often played by *griots*, European baroque/classical music); and sound effects (the horse’s hooves, the bells and squeaking wheel on Modou’s cart, the policeman’s whistle).

The close interaction of these various dimensions of the soundtrack roots the protagonist’s dialogue within the material reality of his social circumstances, and constantly reminds us how these very circumstances shape his verbal reflections on the urban surroundings. At the same time, there are barely any variations in the timbre of the different elements of speech; all the diegetic and non-diegetic voices heard are recorded in a similar fashion, whether they are part of the on-screen spoken dialogue, or the interior monologue that dominates much of the film. As a result, it can be difficult, upon first viewing, to distinguish between the dialogue spoken within the film’s diegesis and the *borom sarret*’s voice-over. This blurring of diegetic and non-diegetic voices undermines the illusion of dramatic realism sustained within the visual dimensions of the film, constantly calling attention to the discursive process of the cinematic medium, and in turn, the *cinematic narrator*.



The precise manner in which the film signals this narrator may be understood via Mary Ann Doane’s work on the use of the voice in relation to space in the cinema. Recalling the three “looks” of cinema determined by Laura Mulvey, Doane considers how the voice operates in relation to the three types of cinematic space: the diegetic space, the visible space of the screen as receptor of the image, and the acoustical space of the theater or auditorium (39). Doane continues by pointing out that “[d]ifferent cinematic modes—documentary, narrative, avant-garde—establish different relationships between the three spaces” (40). Just



as Mulvey demonstrates how classical cinema discourse attempts to disguise the “look” of the viewer and the “look” of the camera, leaving only the diegetic characters’ looks at each other (248), Doane points out that,

The classical narrative film ... works to deny the existence of the last two spaces in order to buttress the credibility (legitimacy) of the first space. If a character looks at and speaks to the spectator, this constitutes an acknowledgment that the character is seen and heard in a radically different space and is therefore generally read as transgressive. (40)

*Borom Sarret* achieves this transgression via its voice-over’s unstable situation within the heterogeneous soundtrack. Here, the voice-over undermines the illusion of the diegetic space by drawing attention to the second and third spaces, which, in turn, reveal the process of cinematic narration in a manner that recalls the self-conscious narrative strategies of the *griot*. Kozloff asserts that “films often create the

sense of character-narration so strongly that one accepts the voice-over narrator as if he or she were the mouthpiece of the image-maker either for the whole film or for the duration of his or her embedded story. We put our faith in the voice not as created but as creator” (45). In *Borom Sarret*, the unmasking of the cinematic process spotlights the *cinematic narrator*—not the first-person voice-over narrator—as the (*griot*-like) author-god of the film. In this sense, the film consciously undermines the spectator’s tendency to accept the voice-over as the voice of the film author, signaling the existence of the film’s authorship in a space beyond the voice-over.

*Borom Sarret*’s voice-over belongs to a protagonist who is clearly a social type as opposed to a complex character. This is established during the film’s opening sequences, in which Modou’s monologue determines an overt, heightened relationship between the protagonist and his social environment. Traversing what is clearly a familiar path, Modou offers a series of reflections on the individuals he meets on a daily basis. We learn that a regular punter never pays for his lifts, offering only a handshake. Later, Modou admits that he ignores beggars, demonstrating a necessary social indifference that, nevertheless, both accentuates and belies his own destitution. At points, Modou’s prediction of the events we are about to see demonstrates their routine nature (such as the recurring fare-dodging handshake), but it also allows the protagonist to “confide” in the audience, allowing him an apparently free route of expression and providing an uninhibited outlet for his own observations regarding the world around him. However, any confidences shared are in fact moderated by the interplay between the voice-over, the music, and ambient sounds, constantly reminding us that this protagonist is Sembène’s construction; a social type who enables the film’s critique of modern-day Africa. Early on in the film, Modou’s observations are accompanied by repetitive music, performed on the *xalam*, which forms an insistent presence on the soundtrack. Played to a beat of three, the music is sometimes accompanied by the squeak of the cart’s broken wheel, which creates a kind of cross-rhythm (a rhythmic construction idiomatic of numerous forms of traditional West African music). Modou’s voice-over sits at the top of these sonic layers; a position that seems to imbue it with the highest narrative authority, but whose agency is constantly undermined by its interaction with these layers. This reminds us that his voice functions, more than anything else, as a part of a constructed soundtrack that constantly reveals its own cinematic illusions, including the seemingly shared confidence between the protagonist and the viewer.

This relationship between the voice and the other sounds becomes even more complex during the scene where

Modou meets the actual *griot* in the film. Here, the *griot*’s vocal performance is synchronized with the musical track, which retains the *xalam* and remains in the same idiom. This creates the sense that the *griot*’s voice is principally an aesthetic component of the soundscape, carefully assembled by Sembène throughout the course of the film. The effect is heightened by the fact that the *griot* performs in Wolof (the principal native language in Senegal) and his words are mediated through the *borom sarret*, whose interior monologue provides a French translation of his own inference of the *griot*’s words. The *griot* tells the protagonist that he is of noble lineage, and that although he may be enslaved in his current life, he will always be safe in the knowledge that noble blood runs through his veins. Bowled over by this, Modou gives him all his money, and goes back to his cart empty-handed. The voice-over’s dual function, as an aesthetic aspect of the film’s soundscape and as an articulation of the protagonist’s inference of the *griot*’s persuasive performance, reifies the point that more than an individual character, Modou is a social type in the service of a didactic purpose. Because of Modou’s inference of the *griot*’s performance, he is exploited. The interaction of speaking positions presented here serves to explore the range of social forces exerted on the protagonist, and the social injustice he represents. Moreover, the distancing effect achieved by the voices’ emphatic incorporation within the overall sound mix continues to unmask the second and third spaces of the voice, ultimately calling attention to the presence of the didactic, *griot*-like narrator.

Having consistently undermined the conventional uses of the voice in the first three-quarters of the film, *Borom Sarret* then transgresses its own formal pattern via two further shifts in the use of sound. The first disruption occurs once the protagonist agrees to visit the plateau. Here, the eclectic soundtrack gives way to a rather pompous orchestral arrangement of the “Bourrée” from Handel’s Flute Concerto Op.5 No.1 (mistakenly attributed to Mozart in several analyses of this film). As Handel’s take on the seventeenth century French dance is heard over an aerial pan of the wealthy neighborhood, the voices of the film’s characters momentarily disappear, giving way entirely to the *cinematic narrator*, whose presence is now generated through the somewhat sardonic four-way comparison between the low town/*xalam* music and the high town/baroque music.

As the strains of Handel are faded low into the mix, Modou’s voice-over returns, praying to God and the saints for protection. The music then fades out completely and the familiar pattern of the cart’s squeaking wheel and bells returns; drumming is then heard briefly, until all these sounds are brought to a stop by the punctuation of the policeman’s whistle; a shrill, disconcerting and pragmatic sound which

marks the troubling reality of Modou’s predicament. Following the confiscation of his cart, the protagonist returns to the low town and reflects on the misfortune he has encountered during the morning. At this point, a further abrupt (and surprising) transition of narrative voice occurs. Having led us to believe that the European music represents the plateau, Sembène then introduces an emotive orchestral rendition of Mozart’s “Ave verum corpus” to accompany Modou’s monologue. By this point, the monologue has become emotional and highly personal, in contrast to the indifferent tone that marked Modou’s earlier observations. The music also encourages the spectator to empathize with the protagonist as an individual, and as a result, his typical aspects are undermined. This is achieved via a departure

*Borom Sarret achieves this transgression via its voice-over’s unstable situation within the heterogeneous soundtrack.*





from the transgression that called attention to the second and third spaces of the voice, and a return of sorts to the conventions of classical cinema. Disguising the marks of the *cinematic narrator*, Mozart's strains emphasize the dramatic impact of the protagonist's words. The order of the film's soundtrack is then partially restored upon Modou's return to his home in the low town, as the predominant sounds, marked by the *xalam*, return (without the squeaking cart wheel, of course) and the protagonist faces the practical reality of feeding his family.

Having called attention to the second and third spaces of the cinematic voice throughout the film, Sembène deploys the conventional disguise of these spaces in the end as a transgressive aesthetic strategy in itself. The effect is to promote a dual function for the character of Modou; as a social type standing for the millions of destitute individuals in postcolonial Africa, and as an individual experiencing intense emotion in the face of poverty and injustice. Modou, finally, finds his own personal voice.

*Borom Sarret's* transgressive and self-reflexive voice-over should be seen in the context of a cinema so closely associated with oral cultures. Through refiguring and appropriating the norms of both classical (Hollywood) cinema and African oral narration, the (third-person) *cinematic narrator* behind Modou's voice-over acts as a *griot*-like agency within a diverse range of sonic strategies throughout the film. In this context, our understanding of the voice-over and the issue of "who speaks for whom" must take account of African cinema's self-conscious location within the fissures between various oral traditions of the continent and a modernized, industrial culture.

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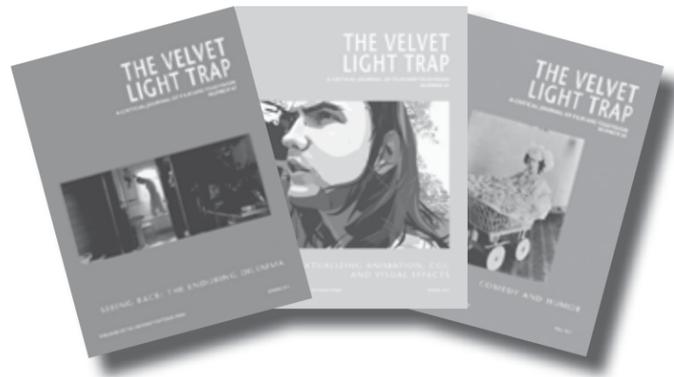
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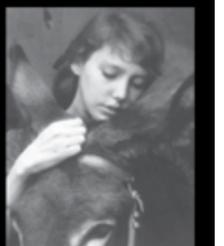
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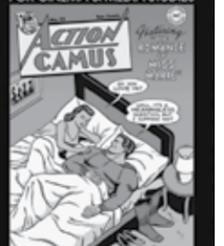
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