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Much from little

ABSTRACT

Witty pocket dictionary of cinematic language that uses two shots, juxtaposition, irony and the unreliable narrator to make us sense the poignancy and unrepeatability of reality.

KEYWORDS

serendipity
randomness
omniscience
juxtaposition
minimalism
dictionary

Serendipity brings some odd experiences: how could I, visiting Belgrade 50 years ago, encounter the only other Serb I knew in the world in an opera house foyer? More recently, how could I dream that my son was in distress, then discover two days later that he had had an accident on his motorbike? To a card-carrying agnostic these are disquieting experiences. *The Girl Chewing Gum* picks up on this unease by playing up the covert instability we suspect in the universe. Initially it does this by suggesting that a film director can call up miraculously specific people, vehicles and creatures to traverse a nondescript shot of a London street. Quite quickly you understand that all this faultless deployment of trivia is good-natured trickery: the long unbroken shot has had a narration added with hindsight, and you smile at the director's godlike ability to command traffic, birds and people to appear on cue so that each manifests some peculiarity of appearance or behaviour. Somewhere, ominously accenting its own futility, a burglar alarm rings on and on.

If you saw this film on TV, you would probably switch channels as soon as you had twigged. But persist, and the film takes you on an odd mental journey, because you become fascinated by the off-screen voice's commands. Four boys must cross screen from left to right, and one must turn to the camera and flap his arms. The man in the hat must take off his sunglasses and put them

in his pocket ... A man in a white boiler suit comes from the wrong direction; a van is called for and appears 40 seconds late. You ponder the director's flawed power caricatured here, but you also ponder the purpose of destiny to send all those cars, pigeons and elderly men to and fro like shuttles in a great loom. It is a 1970s repeat of what Mitchell and Kenyon revealed back when cinema was a new. Their footage is from so long ago that you cannot help feeling the poignancy of those never-to-be repeated moments enacted by people long dead. There is a particular rag and bone man sitting with his legs hanging off the side of his cart, his horse tripping momentarily, and there are factory workers making cheeky attitudes at the camera. Who are all these shadows, these people from a former universe caught for all time in a tableau of supreme randomness?

All over London, all over England, all over the world, all through time ... the camera reminds us that each person exists in his own state of grace as he unwinds the spool of his one and only life, insensible to the moment he inhabits. What else but film can make us think such thoughts?

Girl Chewing Gum is a film experiment that probably exceeded its makers' comprehension, for unconsciously (I believe) it proclaims that the universe will rain down coincidences without explanation and without predictable consequences. Actuality is a mystery; it will confront you with a friend who should be far away, or make you dream prophetically of your son's distress – coincidences that nobody would accept in a fictional story. Film footage lets us peer into the past while fiction film must meticulously fake a street scene's normality – be it a city backstreet for a Dickens story, a Bath crescent for Jane Austen or soldiers dying on the Somme. The fiction crew must go to endless lengths to fool us that their footage is authentic. Yet there is a surfeit of unremarked actuality accompanying us, 24 hours a day. Where do serendipity and coincidence belong in the fictional process? *Girl Chewing Gum* implies that randomness and coincidence are really the norm. Such things simply *are*; there is no director in control; things simply happen exactly as if mandated to do so, and the fascination the film shows with the repeating coils of time, and the particularities of place, appearance and behaviour seem to arise from the influence of nouveau roman writers like Robbe-Grillet and Michel Butor. Their technique, like minimalist music, dramatizes the mystery of existence by capturing small changes in the surface of things, changes that yield their resonances by a process of close and childlike scrutiny.

Some mysteries prove to have explanations: the director speaks of seeing Greek advertisements in the storefront, only to realize they were Perspex signs seen upside down and backwards. That is, we understand the world only slowly and by degrees, and we work from a flawed understanding that is easily destabilized. The director's voice, calling for a red Jaguar, a pigeon, three kids eating chips and a French woman might almost be God at work, rattling off the ingredients for an authentic city street. And this is only one of 500 million all over the world, each containing a dizzying simultaneity of events like those the film shows us.

Compelled to keep watching, you await revelation. Unexpectedly the diegetic street sound stops as a mother halts her children at the kerb: the scene goes silent, then sound resumes as she starts forward. Soon the director adopts a new role, confiding that he is shouting into a microphone at a location fifteen miles away and that he can see electricity pylons and trees. The genre has morphed into documentary, and the voice-over seems to be preparing us for a significant switch of scene, yet the Hackney street scene plays on.

The director calling from his remote location reports seeing a middle-aged man in a brown duffel coat with a dog. The man has a helicopter in his pocket (a *what?*). Nearby, says the narrator, is a blackbird in a tree with a nine-foot wingspan. Your mental images gag on the surreal; your mind does a backflip: you have been a child staring from a window and someone has made you swallow a tall tale.

No longer rigging reality, the narrator is juxtaposing realities – one, the street scene, running silently and visually under its own momentum; and the other, of the field and pylons, runs in the mind's eye from the narrator's description. We realize the director is describing how he recorded the narration we have been hearing. We are pushed into disbelief when told the burglar alarm is still ringing (when it has stopped), and when the sound cuts to silence as the mother pauses at the kerb. Omnisciently the narrator projects motives and backstory on to a young man in a dark coat – that he has just robbed a post office, and is nervously clutching a gun in his pocket and worrying about whether he will be recognized. The director/narrator has gone from ordering the specifics of a stream of humanity, to unreliably imposing thoughts and motives on a youth in the street, to freely imagining him as a figure of incipient drama.

When the picture cuts to a tree amid some fields and pylons, we see the very scene painted earlier through words in the narration. Against this bucolic calm we hear the Hackney street atmosphere complete with untended burglar alarm rattling away. As if searching for the origin of this street symphony, the camera does a 360 degree circle, panning over misty fields, a dark hedgerow and the blank functionality of electricity pylons until, until it reaches its starting point with the leafless tree at the centre of the screen, when both sound and picture abruptly stop.

The effect is to feel that one has just passed through a short and informal dictionary of cinematic language – all miraculously accomplished with two shots, two narrations, and two diegetic sound tracks. Each juxtaposition – of sound, intention, words and images – has produced a new awareness of cinema consciousness. We know them from our film-going, but John Smith has demonstrated them in a fresh, individual and witty manner that is quite unlike a lesson. We see what a wide spectrum of control and authority a film-maker wields from behind the camera, yet it is more than a technical experiment or exercise, because it stirs us into combat with the purpose and reliability of everything we saw and heard. We met the director as God, the director as teacher and guide, the director as a fabricator who imbibes his natural surroundings while developing a narrative. Then, drained of humanity, there was the empty field whose only witnesses were trees, shrubs, some distant horses and electricity pylons under a bland grey sky. We have been amused, instructed, disconnected, reconnected, made to wonder and question because none of what we see and hear is without the evidence of manipulation. *The Girl Chewing Gum* playfully turns the tables on us and walks us through the cinema's limitless possibilities: we see how cinematic narrative is intention realized through the tension generated by image and text, juxtaposition and manipulation. Seldom has so much been made from so little.

SUGGESTED CITATION

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Michael Rabiger worked in the British film industry as an editor, and then directed a number of BBC documentaries. He co-founded and chaired Columbia College's Film/Video Department in Chicago and founded the Michael Rabiger Center for Documentary. He has also authored widely used how-to texts, including *Directing: Film Techniques and Aesthetics* and *Directing the Documentary*, as well as *Developing Story Ideas*.

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