

**PAULA QUIGLEY**  
Trinity College Dublin

# The man giving orders: *The Girl Chewing Gum*

## ABSTRACT

*While this film clearly invites a 'modernist' reading, Jean-François Lyotard's distinction between the modern and the postmodern as having to do with their respective attitudes to the visible and the discursive fields, opens up the possibility of considering the figural activity at work in the film.*

## KEYWORDS

Jean-François Lyotard  
Thomas Docherty  
modernism  
postmodernism  
figural  
voice-over

The most striking aspect of this film is of course the relationship between sound and image or, more precisely, between the voice-over narration and the action it initially appears to direct. Immediately inviting consideration of issues to do with authorship and authority (of the male narrator over the images, but also that of the sound-track over the image-track) the film appears to engage with an essentially 'modernist' cinematic sensibility, if we understand modernism in its established sense as the desire to demystify the 'illusionism' of mainstream narrative cinema, in so doing facilitating a more critical relationship to what we see and hear. In this context, foregrounding the mechanisms by which mainstream cinema generates its illusions is key to their repudiation. This understanding of cinematic modernism has been entrenched in film studies since Peter Wollen's seminal 1972 essay detailing the seven cardinal sins of narrative cinema versus the seven cardinal virtues of 'counter-cinema', best exemplified by Godard's post-1968 film practice.

Central to this operation is a Brechtian separation of elements, Godard's strategic severing of sound and image or voice and body being a case in

point. As such, Smith's short film can be understood on one level as a witty participant in the modernist resistance to the coincidence of what we see and what we hear typical of mainstream cinema. Voice-over narration is a very particular permutation of this relationship however. Though most associated with markedly different film styles (that is, documentary and film noir) its role in both is roughly similar: the authoritative (or otherwise) certification of the seen. In highlighting the tension between voice and image or, to borrow other terms, between discourse and figure, Smith's film encourages another perspective, a point of view that could perhaps best be described as *postmodern*, not necessarily in the sense of coming after modernism, but rather in terms of how it engages certain incipient tendencies within modernism itself.

The terms 'discourse' and 'figure' support Jean-François Lyotard's distinction between a modern sensibility and a postmodern 'mood'. In *Moses and Monotheism* (1939), Freud identifies the Jewish *Bilderverbot*, the prohibition against making an image of God, as crucial to that cultural history. This had far-reaching effects for 'it meant that a sensory perception was given second place to what may be called an abstract idea – a triumph of intellectuality over sensuality' (quoted in Lyotard [1984] 1989: 72). Following Freud, Lyotard argues that the transition 'from eye to ear' (Lyotard [1984] 1989: 82) (that is, the transition from the pagan worship of idols to a blind faith in the word of an invisible God) establishes the foundations of western modernity, which is predicated upon the 'exclusion of the visible' (Lyotard [1984] 1989: 72). Modernity then is where the 'visible' and the 'readable' become opposed, in the sense that 'things' become 'signs' to be deciphered, and the figural – that which resists erasure in the service of abstraction – is foreclosed. In this context, the postmodern is that which attends to the figural other in the space of representation.

Thomas Docherty, in turn, extends this argument to cinema, which he argues is profoundly informed by this bias. Despite being a 'primarily visual art' (Docherty 1996: 153), the prevalence of an essentially modernist attitude means that a discursive principle is given priority over the figural activity of the film and, consequently, attention to the visual is diverted to an emphasis on the aural. This determines the dominant attitude to cinema where an exploration of the voluminous space of cinema is subordinate to a narrative, linear temporality (Docherty 1996: 151). Interestingly, Docherty finds in certain examples of film noir evidence of a nascent postmodern resistance to this modernist sensibility. Docherty suggests that the shadows that deepen noir's distinctive *mise-en-scène* signal the presence of a sensuous, voluminous space whose existence can never be entirely contained by the discursive authority of the voice-over. In this resistance to discourse Docherty detects 'an incipient postmodern appeal to the priority of figure' (Docherty 1996: 166). Similarly, my suggestion is that the way in which Smith's film foregrounds an excessive obedience of image to voice attests to its inherent insubordination and gestures towards the figural activity at work in the film.

Clearly, at one level the ironic separation of voice and image can be construed as a modernist parody of the notion of director as dictator as well as the voice-of-god omniscience most associated with the (British) documentary tradition. This is confirmed just over two minutes into the film when we hear the narrator order the hands of the clock to move and is underlined by the impossibility of having pigeons fly across the screen at his command (Figure 6b). This ironic stance is sustained for the duration

of the first shot (Figures 1-19d) as the voice-over becomes more divorced from the image ('I am shouting into a microphone on the edge of a field near Letchmore Heath, about fifteen miles from the building you are looking at' (Figure 18a)) and more fanciful ('In the distance I can see a middle-aged man in a brown duffel-coat. [...] I think he's got a helicopter in his pocket' (Figure 18b)). But Smith's film makes itself available to something else besides satire; it opens towards the figural in implicitly acknowledging the fundamental – postmodern – resistance of the image itself to discursive containment. In short, the authority of the narrator is undercut by the insistent specificity of the *mise-en-scène* itself, whose existence cannot be reduced solely to its narrative significance.

From the outset, the image overflows with (narratively) extraneous elements. In the opening segment for instance, the voice-over orders the trailer to be moved slowly to the left and the little girl to run across the road (Figure 1). Before that happens though, a flock of pigeons fills the screen. Immediately following the little girl's appearance, two women and another child walk across the road, unremarked. Likewise, several people appear before the next notable walk-on, 'the old man with white hair and glasses' (Figure 2). Buses, cars, birds, the shadowy figure behind the window of Steele's, all of these thicken the visual field, but from a discursive point of view they are redundant, 'extras'. Even those who are made 'significant' resist being reduced to recognizable social ('a boy and his mother' (Figure 14a)), racial ('the negro with the briefcase and the newspaper' (Figure 15a)) and/or generic ('This young man has just robbed the local post office ...' (Figure 19a)) types, simply by being themselves. In this sense, while the eponymous girl chewing gum does seem to follow orders – she walks across the screen from left to right as instructed – she is characterized by a certain indifference, an irreducible singularity that defies complete discursive control. Perhaps this is why the film is named in her honour; in all her ineluctable specificity she personifies the persistent tension between a discursive imperative and the fundamental – what we might call figural – resistance of its material.

If the first shot confronts the 'radical alterity' (Docherty 1996) of the visible, the second and final shot (Figure 20) confronts the figural other in the space of representation itself. Unlike the first shot, where time is fractured in a recognisably modernist mode (see Figures 14 and 18), this shot lets go of time in favour of an exploration of space. The 360° pan of what may or may not be the Letchmore Heath referred to earlier (Figure 18a) is neither significant nor satirical. Its mute materiality, situated in three-dimensional space, attends to the voluminous depth of the visual field itself and in a postmodern sense attests to the failure of the discursive principle in face of the figural activity of the film.

It is a mistake to simply oppose the terms 'modern' and 'postmodern' however. For Lyotard, 'A work can become modern only if it is first post-modern. Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant' (Lyotard [1979] 1984: 79). Likewise, discourse and figure cannot be easily separated, the one works within and against the other. Nor can figural activity be restricted to figurative representation alone. In foregrounding the relationship between sound and image, Smith's film offers the opportunity to explore the tension between these registers: the discursive and the figural, or the semiotic and the sensual. In so doing, it situates itself on the cusp of an incipient post/modern sensibility.

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## SUGGESTED CITATION

Quigley, P. (2012), 'The man giving orders: *The Girl Chewing Gum*', *Short Film Studies* 2: 2, pp. 151–154, doi: 10.1386/sfs.2.2.151\_1

## CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Dr Paula Quigley is a Lecturer in Film Studies at the School of Drama, Film and Music, Trinity College, Dublin. Her research interests include: film theory and philosophy; film and gender; contemporary European cinema; Hollywood cinema; avant-garde and experimental cinema.

E-mail: pquigley@tcd.ie

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