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The tragedy of the unreliable narrator in *The Girl Chewing Gum*

ABSTRACT

As a short experimental work about the constructedness of the cinematic image, the film expresses anxieties about our inability not only to control filmic representation, but to impose order in our everyday lives. The film further reveals a pressing desire to turn our lives into movies – and a sadness that results from that impossibility.

KEYWORDS

unreliable narrator
dialectic
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The American independent film-maker Jim Jarmusch once referred to the collection of short films in his movie *Coffee and Cigarettes* as 'little live-action cartoons' (Raskin 2002: 44). In many respects, John Smith's experimental short *The Girl Chewing Gum* embraces this description – a disembodied, off-screen 'director' attempts to animate his real-life, on-screen minions in exaggerated, often cartoonish fashion. Indeed, many cartoons self-reflexively break cinema's fourth wall by allowing the invisible animator to take control of the action (e.g. *Duck Amuck*), and, like Smith's film, are about the revealing of the apparatus of cinema; they destroy the illusion of the animated diegesis by introducing the human creator into the scene. *The Girl Chewing Gum* offers an inverse – a 'director' who attempts to foist a narrative onto a scene over which he has no control. *The Girl Chewing Gum* exposes cinematic artifice in its parody of the often futile, and certainly absurd, authority of a film director.

And, in employing the unreliable narrator as the primary device for undermining the director's power, it exposes the dialectical delight and heartbreak of the cinematic experience: the joy and fantasy we see on-screen are almost always a distant fiction.

The Girl Chewing Gum operates through a variety of double-voiced tensions, set up primarily through the relationship of image and sound. At first, the authoritative voice-over of the off-screen director matches the actions of his 'actors'; pedestrians dutifully cross the street and execute gestures according to the narration. Within moments, however, we recognize the purposelessness of the directions, and gradually, the director's orders become absurd and even impossible, with the narrator claiming to spot 'a blackbird with a wingspan of about nine feet'. The misdescription of action by Smith's narrator echoes Luis Buñuel's use of the *faux-raccord* (false match), an attempt to 'approximate the surrealist concept of the spark or shock to be created from the juxtaposition of disparate realities ... through the manipulation of purely cinematic elements: time, space, and movement' (Lyon 1973: 48). As Smith's narrator foists his own fiction upon a non-fictional reality, the film creates a collision of 'disparate realities' – the everyday activities of pedestrian life on this block in London, and the commanding, but removed, voice of the directorial auteur. As the causal 'match' between audio and visual diverges over the course of the film, and the collision between the two becomes more confrontational, the 'spark' produces comedy – it is a twist in the cinematic joke. 'The film thus mocks', says Murray Smith, 'the all-seeing, all-knowing pretensions of the traditional "voice of God" nonfiction narrator' (2009: 13). But the film mocks more than that: as the narrator's direction becomes increasingly ridiculous – redundantly demanding timekeeping from a clock – the extent to which the voice-over is a fiction becomes inescapable, calling into the question not just the narrational device, but the very status of directorial authority.

The dissonance between the authoritative voice-over and the visuals that are not, in fact, obeying its commands, calls out the cinematic image as a construct – even a farce. The director's impulse to impose order on the world is revealed as futile, and he grasps at more outrageous spectacles to maintain control (a man with 'a helicopter in his pocket'), a wry comment, perhaps, on popular cinema's reliance on empty spectacle to captivate audiences. The desperation of the narrator leads to absurdity, revealing the director's power grab over the 'real world' as a joke. It is a funny joke, full of twists; but the stark reminder that cinematic narrative is a fantasy, a world we cannot penetrate from the theatre's seats, carries with it an element of loss – the tragic consequence of this joke.

The revealing of the artifice of cinema similarly exposes the limitations of cinematic representation to offer depth beyond surface depictions. The guiding voice-over dictates the defining attributes of the 'characters'– 'the man rubbing his eye', 'the man with the bag of chips', 'the girl chewing gum'. In the early part of the film, the careful way in which these directions match the visuals fuels our trust in the director; only as he veers away from these surface markers into descriptions unconfirmable by the visuals – 'the man with the walking stick is going home', 'the naughty boys', 'this young man has just robbed the local post office' – does our faith in his authority begin to wane. Our awareness of the made-up descriptions fuels the humour – we delight in witnessing the construction of the fiction. At the same time, however, we become further removed from our engagement with the film's content; we watch the construction of a film, not the film itself. Again, the joy in this

experience necessitates a loss, a distancing that occurs through the removal of the viewer from a layer of cinematic engagement.

The narrator's commands to his 'actors' further explores the contemporary impulse to impose not just order, but *cinema* on the world. Becoming bored with the quotidian directions of his 'actors' physical activities, the narrator adds psychological drama to his descriptions, assigning the role of nervous burglar to a man in a trenchcoat, and going so far as to describe the man's mental state as 'trying to remain calm' despite his sweating palms. Like a kid playing God, the narrator imagines what life would be like if it were always a movie. Thus, Smith's narrator begins to ascribe causality and psychology to his 'characters' in an effort to craft a compelling narrative. For Smith's narrator, it is not enough to simply describe the exterior actions of his subjects, but to be truly cinematic, he must place them in a dramatic narrative space deserving of a movie. To find order in the world, we seek a uniquely cinematic kind of narrative, blending the dramatic power of image and sound.

In this sense, *The Girl Chewing Gum* prefigures the trend towards the 'Broadcast Yourself' age of YouTube and reality TV. In examining the drama of the *Big Brother* reality TV series, Murray Smith notes that 'there is clearly a sense in which these people are engaged in "self-dramatization," "playing up" aspects of personality for the sake of the show' (2009). He adds that such inventions are

> a feature of most nonfiction filmmaking – at root because it is a feature of life itself. We do not have to be in front of a camera to recognize that there are occasions when, consciously or not, we may dramatize (act out, exaggerate, heighten) our personalities or present ourselves in very different ways depending on context.
>
> (Smith 2009: 21)

While Smith is describing those performing *for* the camera, it equally applies to being *behind* the camera. The effect of turning the camera on a non-fictional scene too dramatizes the context, turns unsuspecting citizens into heroes and antagonists, and we thus see our narrator attempting to craft a cinematic experience out of this everyday slice of life. Life is better when it is cinematic, the beginning of this film suggests, and our contemporary obsession with broadcasting the everyday – online, on TV – seems to underscore this proposition.

As *The Girl Chewing Gum* draws to a close, however, the 'director's' attempts to impose an orderly, cinematic narrative on the world is revealed as an exercise in futility. He becomes distracted with an explanation of a building's architectural history before finally admitting that he is not even present at the scene depicted on-screen, but in a field at Letchmore Heath (if we can believe that). It is the ultimate absurd twist in this long joke, though perhaps more bittersweet than funny.

The narrator's failed attempts to bring cinema to this East London intersection reveal a sadness, and in the final shot we realize there is, perhaps, one truth in all of this – he is indeed at Letchmore Heath, and everything earlier has been a lie. The imperative to create a fully realized cinematic experience out of the goings-on of average English passers-by hits a dead end, and the constructedness of the image is all that is left. We have been watching the making of a film that does not exist, by a director who grasps for control but loses it. The director has no authority, and we have been the butt of his joke. The realization is both absurdly funny and heartbreaking.

At its core, then, the film expresses anxieties about our ability to impose order on a chaotic world, and questions cinema's status as a mechanism for doing so. The melancholy ending reveals the extent of the fiction of this filmic construct, while also acknowledging our willingness to accept the illusion for the sake of narrative security. It reminds us that as much as we want our lives to resemble movies, as much as we want to occupy and shape the film frame, we, like this narrator, are always at a distance from the cinematic image. The movie ends, the lights come up and we re-emerge, like the crowd outside the Odeon in Smith's film, just average people: a child with his mother, a man in a raincoat, a young woman clutching something in her pocket on her way home.

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