

The cry of the owl: investigating decision-making in a contemporary feature film

Article

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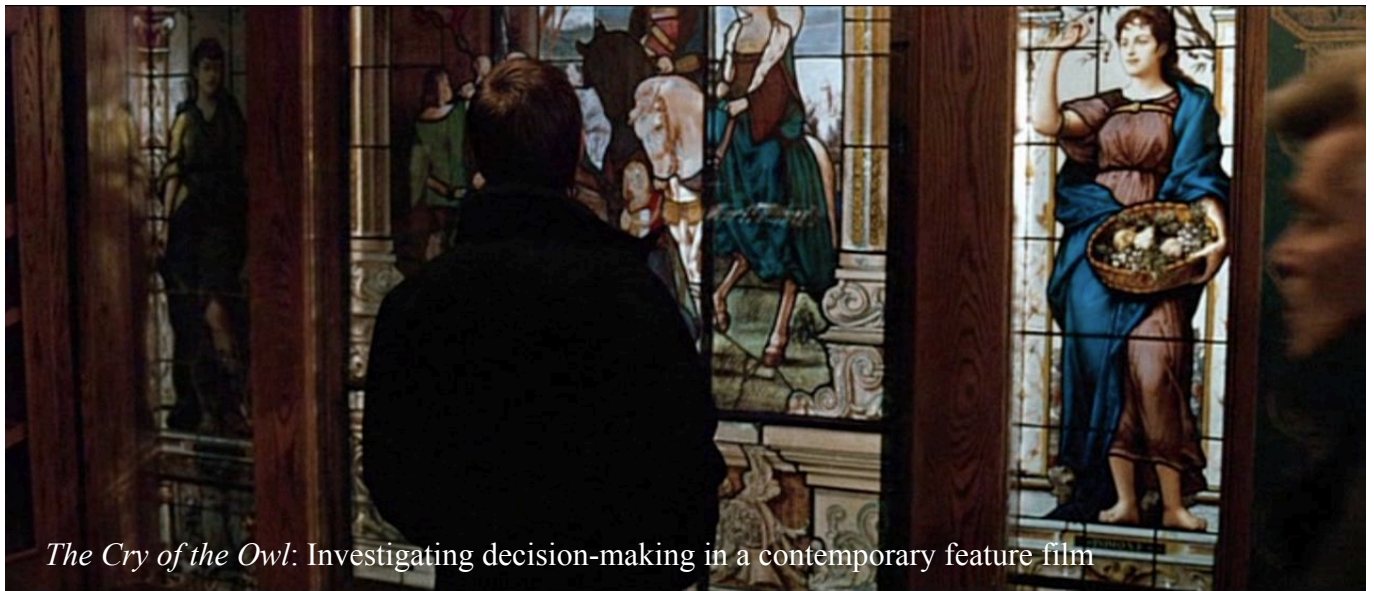
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The Cry of the Owl: Investigating decision-making in a contemporary feature film

Introduction:

At this point in ‘expanded cinema’ history, the definitional limitation of *mise en scène* as an old-fashioned tool – its almost fetishistic, quite unrealistic emphasis on the moment of the shoot in cinema, when the camera-take (as pen mark or brush stroke) transforms the scene – has become all too apparent. Where do pre-production and post-production – all the forms of preparation and montage – figure in this divine circuit of Romantic creativity? How can a theory of style or form in cinema – an aesthetic of cinema – ignore production design (in all its levels), picture editing and the construction of a sound track? (Martin 2011)

This passage appears in a recent article by Adrian Martin in *Screening the Past*, ‘Turn the Page: From *Mise en scène* to *Dispositif*’. The article is characterised by many of Martin’s great strengths: encouraging and inspiring to the reader, generous to the writers whose work he engages with, it draws on a wonderful range of reference, and provides further evidence of his commitment to varied critical traditions as well as to broadening the forms of cinema enjoying detailed scrutiny. This quotation forms my starting point in order to indicate the contemporary urgency of attempting to extend the terms and methods of style-based criticism, both as regards the range of subjects considered and the aspects of film form which are explored.

In recent work, I have attempted to phrase critical discussion in terms of ‘filmmakers’ choices’. There are a number of benefits to doing so, including moving the discussion beyond the narrowest definitions of *mise-en-scène* (not that these are as prevalent as the opening quotation suggests), enabling the incorporation of further elements of film style (or areas of decision-making), focussing on the relationship between the choices made and the work’s meanings, and preserving a healthy respect for the realities and practices of filmmaking. At least one strand of style-based criticism has maintained this emphasis, not least the work of V.F. Perkins, which has tended to discuss direction rather than *mise-en-scène*.¹ A further motive, from a personal point of view, arises from working in environments which aim to integrate the practice of filmmaking with critical, theoretical and historical approaches, enhancing the dialogue between critic and practitioner, and enabling students to move creatively between these different dimensions of their work.

The present article seeks to extend reflection on filmmakers’ choices by bringing the traditions of style-based criticism together with the insights that can be gained from engaging with filmmakers at work. By bringing into relationship two things which are often treated as distinct – production history and critical analysis – the discussion may be able to extend the subjects which criticism can appreciate as well as providing some insights into the creative process.

There is, of course, a tradition of important archival work on classic films of the past. Production histories have addressed individual films (*Vertigo* (1958), *Psycho* (1960), *Citizen Kane* (1941)) and broader scholarship includes Luz Bacher’s *Max Ophuls in the Hollywood Studios* and Bill Krohn’s *Hitchcock at Work*.² These studies often include interviews with members of the production team (though not the directors who, with one exception, predeceased the writing). In most cases the strength of the work is historical rather than critical, though some of this research has subsequently proved very revealing to critical enquiry. There have also been instances of writers following films in production. The contemporaneous nature of these projects has made it difficult to develop a critical perspective on the material, and the films followed have proved to be of limited interest: of all those Preminger directed, Ted Gershuny was unfortunate to find himself writing about *Rosebud* (1975), Lillian Ross witnessed another fractured experience when documenting *The Red Badge of Courage* (Huston, 1951) and Lindsay Anderson probably didn’t encounter Thorold Dickinson’s greatest work on *The Secret People* (1952). Ed Buscombe’s *Making Legend of the Werewolf* has explicitly limited aims: to provide for teachers ‘material showing [...] how films are planned, made and marketed’ (1976: 1). Charles Koppelman’s (2004) account of *Cold Mountain* (2003) contains some valuable material on the detail of that film’s post-production – in some respects exemplifying ideas previously expressed in Murch’s own *In The Blink of an Eye* – though it is equally concerned with the story of how what was then a semi-professional editing programme came to be used to make a \$80 million movie.³

This article attempts something more modest but also more focussed than the books just mentioned. It begins with close reading of a sequence, which is designed to stand alone – in several ways, as we shall see – and which concludes with a brief discussion of the relationship between this and a second sequence later in the film which makes use of the same location.⁴ The article then draws on

knowledge of the history of the film's production to explore some of the particular choices made in the construction of these sequences. My intention is that the critical account will give direction to the production history and discussion of filmmaking processes which follows.

Such an endeavour presents a number of methodological challenges, including some which result from the qualities of access, immediacy and integration which in other ways make the project attractive. Observation inherently brings with it problems, not least the 'observer's effect' or 'paradox': the recognition that the act of observation has an impact on the phenomenon observed. Moreover, a film production involves so many people working simultaneously that a team of observers couldn't be present while every decision was being taken; even if this were possible, aspects of the subjective dimension of those decisions would inevitably remain veiled to the observer. One advantage of the directed enquiry that results from grounding the production history in the analysis of a particular sequence is a more precise focus: this is an enquiry which doesn't claim totality, but which is fashioned to explore particular decisions through a range of sources of information about the making of the film.

The director of *The Cry of the Owl* (2009) is a long-standing friend of mine, and ours is a film friendship: we go to the cinema together, discuss films, he has read the work of writers in the tradition to which I belong. This history of discussing cinema makes the exploration of decision-making easier, but creates a danger that a shared framework may shape or presuppose some of its findings. The friendship raises questions of impartiality, but it also makes the enquiry possible: it facilitated my visits to the production and created the opportunity for a series of conversations, spaced over a number of years, of a kind which a more formal interviewer / subject relationship could not provide.

A more significant problem may be that writing about a film in the knowledge of the makers' intentions raises questions of *critical* impartiality. How can one see the film clearly without prior knowledge short-circuiting the viewing experience and act of interpretation? Critics, especially those who work on a sequence in detail or a film for long periods, have parallel problems: those of losing perspective, and of the inevitable deviation from the experience of someone coming to the film for the first time. Similarly, it is difficult for the viewer who has read the novel in an adaptation, such as this, to appreciate the experience of the viewer who does not share these preconceptions. In this case the dilemma is particularly acute as I had a strong sense of how certain sequences were designed to be understood before experiencing the completed film.

In the research and writing, I have tried to find a number of ways of capturing the response of the disinterested viewer and respecting the kinds of response the film makes available: attending screenings with different audiences, inviting friends and colleagues to watch and discuss the film, pausing a screening to record moment-by-moment response.

Nevertheless, it is impossible to escape the effect of these experiences – knowledge of events in the film's production, knowledge gained from the earlier viewing, or from the reading of the source novel – once one has had them. However much we might try to put aside what we have learnt, or to achieve awareness of the contexts which shape our response, there is a residual difficulty of our not knowing quite how our attention has been shaped, and what this might cause us to notice or to ignore.

The structure of the article embodies a further attempt to

ameliorate this problem. The critical account is presented first – drawing on the evidence available to every viewer, without seeking to support the argument with knowledge arising from observations made on the shoot or during post-production – in the hope that the reader will judge this a persuasive account of the meanings, strategies and achievements of that part of the film. Only then does the article proceed to introduce insights derived from scripts, rough-cuts, on-set / in studio observation and interview.

Emphatically, the idea is not to validate the critical reading by knowledge of what the filmmakers felt themselves to be doing, but rather one of becoming more densely informed about the decision-making processes, as critics, historians and, perhaps, practitioners. Success in these areas can only be appraised by the reader, but my hope is that you will feel that the benefits of the encounter outweigh the problems generated by the nature of project.

Sequence analysis: Dinner for two

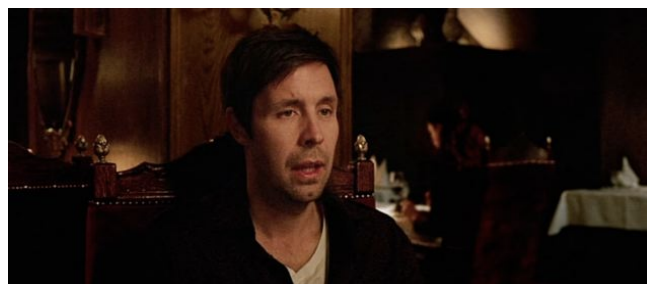
The sequence which provides the anchor for the ensuing discussion occurs 27 minutes into the film and shows events that take place during the evening that Robert Forester (Paddy Considine) and Jenny Thierolf (Julia Stiles) share after she has sought him out at work. From a close-up of a disconcerted Robert at the end of the encounter in the car park outside Lavigne Aeronautics, we cut to a head and shoulders shot of Jenny in a restaurant.



The depth of field is shallow but we can see another diner in the distance frame right and, in sharp focus, the brass detailing on the back of her chair; to the left, details of the restaurant can be observed: wood panelling, an ornate light fitting in the form of a candelabra, an upholstered seat-back. The fixtures and fittings contrast strongly with modernity of Robert's workplace in the preceding shot. Jenny is wearing red lipstick, which she hadn't been in the previous scene. We can hear the background sounds of the restaurant.

Jenny: Why did you pick me? My house? I'm curious. I'd really like to know.

She looks up and out of frame left (toward Robert, the next shot will confirm) as she refers to herself and her house, but then looks around, in every direction except at Robert, until a very brief flick of her eyes after she has finished speaking, before the cut.



In the reverse, a shot of similar scale, Robert is sitting in front of a pillar; we can see further wood panelling, a gilt-edged mirror, another diner in the distance. He is wearing a black shirt, open to reveal a white v-necked t-shirt. He is unshaven, as usual. Robert faces Jenny, but looks in her direction only intermittently as he speaks, blinking several times, looking down and glancing right and left.

Robert: (breathes in, deeply) Well, I was ... uh ... I was just driving around in my car and I saw you on your porch – you were beating a rug, I think. And then, uh, you went inside, and I just felt I had to come back and see you again.

When we return to the first set-up of Jenny, part way through this explanation, she watches Robert steadily, only looking down once, very briefly. She is still looking at him as the film cuts to a two-shot. This gives us a broader view



of the restaurant. While Jenny sits forward, fork in hand, Robert sits back, his arms resting on the chair's, one hand tapping at a knee. It does not look as though he has made much headway on his dessert. He looks away across the restaurant, turning his head away from the camera, then up in the air, then at Jenny, but with his head back, almost down his nose. There is a pause. The film cuts back to Jenny.

Jenny: You know, I've been thinking a lot about the other night. I think you wanted me to catch you. [As she says this, Jenny looks directly at Robert on the phrases 'the other night' and 'to catch you'. A cut to Robert.]

Robert: (exhales) What? [Robert tries to chuckle at this. A cut to Jenny.]

Jenny: I think you did. [She looks at him quite calmly.]

Robert: Why would I want you to do that?

Jenny: I don't know. A cry for help maybe?

The film cuts again to Robert. He shakes his head slightly, looks back at her, doesn't answer, looks down and half shakes his head again. After a beat or two we hear a sound bridge to the first words of the question he asks outside. 'So, does your boyfriend know you're out with me tonight?'

Jenny seems more at home in this setting than Robert, both in terms of how relaxed she is and of her appearance: she is eating steadily and is fully engaged in the conversation, carrying into this scene much of her authority from their first meeting; her lipstick is noticeable in a film where her character often doesn't wear make-up, her dark green top sits well with the surrounding colours, yet she stands out from her background, which provides dark empty middle ground before the panelling and (electric) candelabra behind. Robert, on the other hand, looks deeply uncomfortable

and rather too informally dressed for plush surroundings. He is less well defined than Jenny: his black shirt merges with surrounding shadows, his background more immediately behind him, and by comparison cluttered. He looks less potent here than anywhere else in a film already notable for how out of place its protagonist appears.

The scene makes two ways of thinking about this conversation available. One foregrounds Robert's discomfort as he is forced to account for his motives as a prowler. Having broached the subject, Jenny asks direct questions, and looks plainly at him as she listens to his answers. His inability to respond at the end of the conversation presents him as unwilling to countenance her interpretation of his behaviour, but unable to counter it. We may think Jenny is right when she proposes that Robert wanted to get caught: this is the logic of his trajectory toward the house across the three prowling scenes. In the other, the scene can be read sceptically toward Jenny as well as Robert. The film has established a context for doing so: her decision to invite Robert into her home when she discovered him outside seems so perverse (if not simply dangerous) that it colours our view of her subsequent behaviour.

The restaurant, its atmosphere hushed and the service silver, seems more appropriate for a romantic dinner than as a venue in which to offer Robert counseling on his depression, and related pathologies. Indeed, we may be a bit surprised that this is what Jenny had in mind as a setting in which they could 'talk some more, that's all'. (The elision between this sequence and the one which preceded it means that we do not witness the process by which they end up at this particular restaurant, but it is difficult to imagine Robert volunteering two or three courses here, no matter how penitent he might be feeling.) That this is dessert implies that the conversation has covered other subjects for most of the meal, suggesting that Jenny has ambitions for the evening beyond the opportunity to quiz Robert about his behaviour. We have no reason to disbelieve her when she says she has been thinking a lot about their previous encounter.

When Jenny explains the motive for her opening questions – 'I'm curious, I'd really like to know' – she momentarily appears bashful as she looks about herself, before looking briefly at him: she could almost be fishing for a compliment, or at least pondering what he finds so compelling about her. Stiles' performance invites these kinds of interpretation while also offering her character's behaviour as the spirited tackling of a subject which risks unpleasantness and embarrassment.

In the second half of the conversation Jenny advances her explanation for Robert's actions, one which avoids the most disturbing conclusions she might draw. 'I think you wanted me to catch you', she ventures with a flash of the eye and a fraction of a smile, a burst of energy introduced into the conversation, then meets his snort of disbelief with a countering perspective which implies she knows best: 'I think you did'. This suggests not only that she feels she has the measure of him – that he isn't a threat – but also that she is confident of being able to help him recognise the unacknowledged feelings that shape his behaviour. Is she falling into the trap of starting a romance with a flawed or unreliable man because she is attracted by the idea of curing and restoring him through the relationship?

In the following scene, which takes place outside the restaurant, Robert tries to puncture the atmosphere by asking about Greg, the sound bridge making this motive particularly clear, as his line cuts through an awkward pause.

Robert: So, does your boyfriend know you're out with

me tonight?

Jenny: We've, um, we've broken up, actually. Well, it's sort of a trial separation, for a month or so. He asked me to marry him, and it's weird but I instantly knew that I didn't want to. And then I thought, 'If I don't want to marry him, why am I still with him?'

Robert: Well, you'll probably feel better after some time apart. You'll get back together again, I'm sure.

Jenny: No. I've decided it's over.

Robert: Oh.



This scene is played in a single take, a steadicam shot which picks up the two characters as they leave the awning at the entrance of the restaurant and moves in front of them, the camera letting the characters catch up to give us a balanced view of each. They walk side by side, slowly, talking. They are not positioned especially close to one another, and both have their hands in their pockets, but the matching posture (coupled with the framing) suggest sympathy. The conversation resembles the variety in which two people are getting to know each other, where reflection on previous relationships is part of the game. This may be how Jenny experiences it, although Robert's contributions to the discussion can be understood as designed to forestall intimacy.

The complexity of the moment is partly articulated through the handling of background detail. As the two walk away from the restaurant, the film makes eloquent use of the characteristics and associations of its exterior. The restaurant can be seen to be called La Castile Manor, and the further elements of décor now apparent include stone lions, lanterns in the form of braziers and stained glass windows, prominent over Jenny's shoulder through the main body of the shot.

Providing a good example of use of the widescreen frame celebrated by Charles Barr in 'CinemaScope: before and after' as 'gradation of emphasis', details are incorporated in the frame without their significance being insisted upon (1963: 18). As we attend to the action and dialogue of the characters – able to scrutinise posture and behaviour in the balanced two shot as we accompany them through space – the film simultaneously makes available other kinds of insight and information.

In the closing moments of the shot, Jenny comes to a halt when she declares that she is sure her relationship with Greg is over, but Robert walks on a couple of paces, turning to face her. The camera slows and pans left to accommodate Robert's continuing movement, turning away from the entrance of the restaurant to view him against the background of the highway, Jenny falling out of the shot.

At this point, several elements are brought into a new relationship. The camera's movement has come to an end, as has the companionable view of the two together, the



characters now separated by the border of the frame. Until this point, the décor associated with Jenny has been dominant: the mise-en-scène she selected for the evening has continued to play out in the frame. Now, the rich designs of the restaurant are replaced by six lanes of concrete, under sodium lighting. Passing cars announce themselves on the soundtrack.

The film has already established Robert's investment in idealised imagery; now it begins to imply that Jenny's commitment to romance in the personal sense may be one aspect of a world view dominated by the Romantic. 'We were meant to have this conversation, you and I', she pronounced on the occasion of their first meeting. 'It was meant to be', she later maintains, in the face of the evidence, as Robert tries to get rid of her. Now it is Robert who is aligned with quotidian, modern reality while the film leaves Jenny in the magical, if frail, setting of the restaurant's surroundings. If Robert was drawn to an idealised vision of Jenny in the house in the woods, it's worth remembering whose 'dream house' it was in the first place.



In choosing La Castile Manor, Jenny is responding to some of the same qualities of ambience that makes Ernie's, in *Vertigo*, the perfect venue for Gavin Elster and Alfred Hitchcock's purposes. Where *Vertigo* begins its scene with a track in toward the stained glass doors of the restaurant, excluding sidewalk and street and preparing the audience for the genteel world within, this restaurant scene concludes with a track away, opening our sense of the wider world, drawing attention, at its end, to a modern urban reality which extends beyond the carefully crafted tradition of the restaurant's interior.

Returning to La Castile

When the characters are seen leaving the restaurant for a second time the similar use of the steadicam to follow their movement highlights the contrast with the first scene.

No longer do the two walk slowly side by side: Jenny marches quickly ahead, Robert two or three yards behind. We pick up the shot abruptly, cutting to them in a similar position in relation to the restaurant but without the sound bridge smoothing the gap between this and the previous action. We also see Jed Wyncoop (Nicholas Campbell) hurry out of the door behind them, which interrupts their movement and brings the shot to a premature end.



Having Wyncoop thrust forward along this trajectory, disrupting the echoes of the earlier occasion, suggests that his explosive appearance is a violent response to the events of that evening, answering Jenny's dispatch of her relationship with his son and adding to Robert's growing awareness of the far-reaching consequences of his intervention in Jenny's life, a perception he began to develop in this setting earlier in the film.



The dramatic potential of the location is again deftly deployed. The ornamentation of the restaurant, including the stained glass windows, is prominent in a single of Jed as he advances toward Robert, the camera backing in front of him; Robert, in responding to Jed's call, is drawn toward this backdrop. Now it is Jenny, as she looks back at the confrontation, who is shown in relation to the road.

Wyncoop Sr's first appearance in the film, in the previous shot, occurs while Robert is contemplating the detail of one of windows in the restaurant's foyer. It represents a nobleman and lady riding, surrounded by attendants on foot, and Robert looking at the window is juxtaposed with Jed's entrance, in a carefully orchestrated long take. On learning Jed's identity, which he overhears in a conversation with the receptionist, Robert hides till Jenny joins him and then hastily withdraws. Chivalry is the sentiment least embodied in

this behaviour, but it is ironically evoked in the fight between the men moments later: just before Robert fights back, lunging into Jed and driving to the floor, the film cuts to a long shot from the side, an angle we have not seen before, accentuating the width of the widescreen frame through a darkened foreground, and presenting the conflict against a row of the brazier lanterns. The image pictures the fight as joust, in a tilting lane, and as performance on a floodlit stage. After the cowboy fight at the river we now have a tournament. Or we would, except for the scrappy, nasty fight which ensues, paying no heed to notions of honour or fair play.

In other respects, the fight is directed to foreground Jenny's experience of the encounter: we cut to her breathless reaction as Robert is winded by Jed's opening punch. The camera tracks into her face as Robert begins to fiercely respond, and we move with her as she rushes to break up the fight. She is sworn at by Jed when she helps him to his feet.



These events encourage Jenny to ask herself some questions about Robert and his violent tendencies – that she is now viewed in front of the roadway helps to articulate the collapse of her romantic illusions. But Robert, who loses control of his actions for a time, is pulled away from reality here, back toward La Castile – a point on the trajectory of the second half of the film where the melodramatic elements of the story have overtaken his life. Even the noises of the passing cars, which in the earlier sequence and elsewhere in the film provided a grounding in reality, buzz past frantically: they have become movie cars, with more audibly in common with Greg's truck when it pulled Robert over, than ordinary traffic. This play with differences through similarity, an important aspect of the film's strategies of blocking, space, décor and narrative structure, gives us pause at the trajectory Robert has travelled.





Rough cut: 14th March 2008

It is revealing to compare the first restaurant scene as it appears in the finished film with an earlier version, from a cut dating to 14th March 2008, one of many ‘drafts’ which emerged before picture editing was completed. Of several differences, the most immediately apparent is that the sequence begins with a complex camera movement, traveling through the restaurant, before we get close to the table or the conversation.

The shot opens with the view reproduced above, then sweeps around the pillar, ‘through’ the table of another diner, past a second table of diners and finishes as a waiter

contrast to the hushed backdrop against and into which the characters speak in the final version. Even without the elegant opening shot, the 14th March version emphasises the atmosphere, contributing to the way in which this version draws out the romantic qualities of the situation.

Finally, the scene is composed almost entirely of alternative takes, reminding us of how many possible scenes could have been constructed from the material. It concludes with a close-up of Robert, the axis of which is unusually close to the line, in which he says nothing but appears to be unable to dismiss Jenny’s suggestion about his actions being a cry for help.



delivers dessert to Jenny and Robert, cutting to a close-up in which Jenny thanks the waiter. It makes for a visually complex and rather flamboyant opening to the sequence.

The 14th March cut doesn’t contain the first half of the finished scene and therefore doesn’t include Jenny’s questions – ‘Why did you pick me? My house? I’m curious. I’d really like to know’ – nor Robert’s response. Instead, Jenny’s acknowledgement of the waiter is followed by a long pause before she addresses her first comment to Robert, during which we see Robert looking disinterestedly at the table, and then some of the two-shot which forms the bridge in the middle of the scene in the release version. We also see Jenny lick her finger thoughtfully, looking at Robert, before she advances the line – ‘You know, I’ve been thinking a lot about the other night’, in a take in which the line is delivered marginally more slowly, with greater stress on the word ‘lot’. These details enhance Jenny’s romantic ambitions at the expense of the awkwardness of the encounter and the interrogation of Robert’s behaviour.

Our awareness of the wider restaurant is greater in the rough cut. The tracking shot reveals a hubbub of other diners; diegetic music (source music) in the form of background jazz provides a relaxing underscore to the scene, in



On location: Day 7 of the shoot (Sunday 4th November 2007)

The shot which opens the scene in the rough cut was invented on location (it was not in the storyboard), taking advantage of the steadicam and operator which were required for the scenes outside. The 14th March cut incorporates only part of the take: in its entirety, the camera swings around to show the man who appears to be sitting opposite Jenny in the opening framing (through the composite image suggested by the mirror) in the distance, where he can be seen to be dining on his own. The opening image and the conclusion present Jenny as involved in a romantic



confection, in which the object of her attention is anonymous and interchangeable; at the same time, the closing image parallels Robert with this solitary figure in black. Writer / director Jamie Thraves conceived of the shot as a means of inviting a critical perspective on the evening that Jenny has planned, illustrating her romantic sensibility and offering a sceptical viewpoint on events. It was jokingly referred to as an ‘Ophuls shot’, in terms of movement and décor (particularly the mirror), but equally in terms of offering the audience a distinct view to that available to the characters, in its dramatisation of Jenny’s romantic fantasy.



The shot of Robert looking right past the camera was one of several views of both characters composed in this way; Michael Spicer, the film’s camera operator, enthusiastically talked about these shots as being one of a series of ‘brave choices’ that Thraves had been taking. In the finished film, this kind of set-up was used for another restaurant conversation – the scene in the diner when Robert tries to extricate himself from his relationship with Jenny, which, like the return to La Castile Manor, invites comparison with this sequence. These variables – of performance, eyeline and camera position – were partly thought about in terms of modulating the directness of Julia Stiles as a performer, one of the qualities which director, actor, and other crew discussed withholding for particular moments in the film. Jenny becomes a character who looks very directly at other people, when other characters, and especially Robert, have trouble meeting her gaze.

One of the shots where the play with the distinction between ‘fantasy and the prosaic’ – as it was phrased in the meeting of key personnel around one of the restaurant’s tables which began the day – is most developed is the steadicam long take outside the restaurant which concludes the first sequence. A major challenge of execution was the timing of movement, dialogue and camera so that all arrived at the end of the drive at the critical point in the conversation to make possible the reframing with the highway. In reality, the restaurant is surrounded by a large parking lot, so lighting and viewpoint had to be controlled to disguise this fact, and to naturalise the characters’ walk to the street. The stained glass windows visible behind Jenny were given extra illumination from within the dining room.

During the shoot Thraves was keen not to invite comparisons with Hitchcock, which the Highsmith adaptation made likely – in fact, he instructed the unit publicist not to refer to Hitchcock in the press pack or press releases: ‘I just knew it would be an easy tag for this film’. In respect of the comparison made earlier in the article, *Vertigo* was not a direct model, but it is a film which Thraves knows well and in a recent interview he spoke about equating Jenny’s character with Scottie (James Stewart), as ‘someone who is looking for death’, Donald Sutherland’s character in *Don’t Look Now* (Roeg, 1973) also being a point of reference.⁵ Throughout, Thraves has been keen to acknowledge the influence of the work of a range of filmmakers. At the time

of an interview recorded in the summer of 2005, he had devoted weeks to studying *In a Lonely Place* (Ray, 1950), a film which embodies the kind of complexity which he was keen to achieve in *The Cry of the Owl* – and in which one major dynamic concerns trust, not being able to be sure about another character’s motives, gestures and behaviour, – and *Lone Star* (Sayles, 1996), selected because it was ‘a contemporary thriller that was really well constructed’. Thraves encouraged Julia Stiles to watch *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (Ophuls, 1948) as part of her preparation for the film, and discussed with her the relationship between



Lisa’s account of events and the camera’s view in the moving in scene near the film’s opening. He had given copies of *You Only Live Once* (Lang, 1937) to some of the key collaborators – certainly Luc Montpelier (cinematographer), Matthew Davies (production designer) and David Manion (1st AD), perhaps others too – together with George M. Wilson’s chapter on the film in *Narration in Light* (1986). Manion had an article on *In a Lonely Place* with him on location. Some of the decisions concerning decor in the film – including the distinctions between Robert’s and Jenny’s backgrounds in the scenes shot at La Castile – were partly inspired by the account in *Mise-en-scène: Film Style and Interpretation* of the organisation of décor in relation to character in *Imitation of Life* (Sirk, 1959), in turn a favourite film of Thraves’.

A subsidiary point, then, for this bringing together of production history with the interpretation of film style, is that Thraves drew on the work of some of the writers in the tradition of mise-en-scène criticism to develop his sense of how film can work expressively. Coupled with his own close scrutiny of films and filmmakers, this had fed into the ways in which he developed the style of the film, and he felt this had significantly enriched his approach since his first feature, *The Low Down* (2000). Interpretations of *Letter From an Unknown Woman* – the famous paired shots of Stefan’s return home with different women, discussed by Wilson and others – were an encouragement to think about patterns across a movie, and especially as an inspiration for the ways in which scenes can answer one another. If these are influences, however, I hope the critical discussion at the beginning of the article demonstrates that these have been internalised: Thraves has recognised this level of construction and made it his own – or rather, made it the film’s. Speaking of these matters in the 2005 interview, he remarked: ‘Obviously, I want to find my own strategies [but what’s important is to] understand the concept of strategy’.

Other collaborators on the film were open to such an approach, and ready to discuss their work in relation to traditions of filmmaking and film criticism. Several of the crew had studied at Ryerson as part of their training; Claire Welland (production manager and line producer) recalled studying French Cinema with Robin Wood at York University, Toronto. The ambition to make resonant choices in creating the film’s visual style can be indicated, inversely,

by Luc Montpellier's concept of 'Justification Theatre', which is a humorous way of warning against post-hoc rationalisations which might deceive filmmakers into thinking they were taking telling decisions when this wasn't in fact the case.

Stephen Lynch, key make-up artist, spoke about a number of aspects of his work, including the way in which his make-up design was coordinated with the work of cinematographer Luc Montpellier and production designer Matthew Davies to suggest heightened beauty and picturesqueness in some of the film's views, which would then be counterpointed by other perspectives. Central to this design was the distinction between the image of Jenny in the window of her house and the more prosaic reality apparent once the camera gets inside. Later conversations with Matthew Davies confirmed the complexity of this dialogue and the detail of its expression through his department: particular choices around wallpaper for Jenny's kitchen, for example, which appeared differently when seen from a distance or viewed up close; working with Montpellier on designing practicals into the set, associating warm pools of tungsten light with Jenny where Robert tended to be lit by greenish fluorescents. That these key personnel were collaborating on the look of the film is not surprising – it's an integral part of their roles – but the extent to which all were engaged in a shared conceptual endeavour, that was at the heart of the film's approach to its material, and the ways in which they developed these thematic and stylistic patterns both in concert and through their specific areas of expertise was very impressive. Of the scenes shot at La Castile, Lynch spoke of his approach to Jenny for the first meal, the extent to which her cheeks might appear flushed, and the extent to which the character might be wearing make-up, from the perspective that 'it's more of a date for her than for him'.

The encounter with the vengeful Jed Wyncoop was originally to have taken place in a shop. (A copy of the script dated October 1st 2007, has this as a daytime scene in a store, with the fight taking place in the parking lot outside, but by the time of the Full Pink Script of 28th October, the scene has moved to La Castile.) The setting was rethought in pre-production, in other words, and money saved by reducing the number of locations across the film was spent in better dressing the location for the exterior views of Robert's house. But in addition, staging the sequence at the restaurant provides the possibility of repetition and contrast, and the gradual exploitation of the potential of its décor.

I asked the director when he had worked out the blocking for Jed's first appearance, which features the close view of the chivalric window. His reply was, 'before lunch'. When this moment was being shot, three of the film's producers who were on set that day were tucked around a corner in the restaurant watching the action on the video assist. There was some discussion about the timing of the action within the take, Antoine de Clermont-Tonnerre expressing concern that there might be too much of a pause in action of the single take before Jed's entrance, but Thraves was committed to the pacing. My interpretation is that he wanted to ensure that the window 'played' in the spectator's experience of the scene, before moving on to the next turn of the narrative.

Part to whole

The 'Ophuls shot' never made it to the final cut because its presence created some unexpected problems. One response which it provoked was that it seemed strange that having just met outside Robert's work the two should be ensconced in an expensive restaurant – a disjunction which the shot,

with its wider view of the diners and decoration strongly accentuated. But it also didn't fit in with the film's formal strategies – it looked out of place. Considering the rest of the movie, it is atypical: more flamboyant, not motivated by an action of a character, much more 'editorial' in its approach. The shot also had a different pace from the rest of the scene – as is clear from even the part of it which appears in the 14th of March cut.

It is a complex and illuminating shot, but the final version of the scene has its own advantages, including beginning by interrogating Robert more directly. The spare style of the finished film brings other benefits, and by choosing a different opening for this scene, grand gestures through camera movement could be reserved for very particular situations. Perhaps the most important conclusion to draw at this stage concerns the way in which the best laid plans – or, in this case, the most imaginative inventions – have to work in the service of the whole, and in the context of the whole, or they become a liability.

Another element which was cut between the 14th March and the end of picture editing is a scene which was intended to re-introduce the audience to Robert, after his first appearance prowling outside Jenny's house. Here is how the Full Pink Script of 28th October 2007 imagines the action, supplemented with some frame grabs of the scene as it appeared in 14th March cut:

EXT. STREET – MORNING

Robert's car sits parked in a suburban street in front of a small house. A football falls out of nowhere and lands on the hood with a loud clunk, the car alarm bursts into action, lights flashing. The ball bounces onto the ground, two BOYS (8 and 10) stand in the street looking sheepish, one BOY puts his hand on his face and winces like he knows he could be in trouble. We follow the feet of a MAN as he steps out of his door and walks down a path, the feet reach the ball on the front lawn, a hand bends down to pick it up, we follow up the body to reveal ROBERT, he points and clicks his electronic key, the alarm goes off, he turns to the BOYS. Robert holds up the ball. The BOYS stare at him blankly. ROBERT smiles.

ROBERT
Go long. Go long.

Robert prepares to pitch the ball as if in a game. Neither boy knows how to react. ROBERT looks a little awkward. A DOG who lies outside the house next door to ROBERT'S house slowly yawns and appears to be watching the proceedings. ROBERT lowers his arm.

ROBERT
Here.

ROBERT holds out the ball. One of the BOYS takes it and the carry on playing.

[...]



The football scene was partly excised because it was felt the exchange with the children didn't work as well as had been hoped, but also because a view of Robert emerging from his house in the small town made him appear too much part of the community, at a point of the film in which his outsider status needed to be established. Looking closely, we can see that the idea of a double introduction to Robert of the kind which features in the structure of the finished film – night time and daytime, threatening and unthreatening – is also embodied within the sequence: this is the planned daytime introduction, and it constructs a path of hesitation for the viewer between finding Robert a threatening character (his identity and his response to the football withheld, his initial bearing toward the boys rather sinister) and being friendly – albeit ineptly so. The sequence shares the emphasis on the awkwardness of his interactions with others that characterises the film's early scenes – the exchanges with his landlord Kolbe (R.D. Reid), the embarrassment of the first scene with his boss, Jaffe (Karl Pruner) – here Robert is unable even to make a connection with the boys. The film's deployment of humour in relation to the failure of communication, and the misjudgment of tone, is also consistent with these moments of the movie.⁶

Editor David Charap took advantage of the omission of the scene to create a suggestive cut across the divide created by its absence. Screen direction and the sense of the car's movement are maintained between the car's departure at the end of the first prowling scene and its appearance in the first daytime shot, on Robert's journey to work. The result is a fleeting impression that he has travelled straight from the forest to the office, increasing the sense of transience which is important to the new arrangement, and implying that there is nothing in Robert's life between work and his night time activities in the woods.

At the same time, losing the football introduction to Robert (and postponing the scene with Kolbe which originally followed from the encounter with the children – more on this below) has implications for another early sequence: the exchange near the water cooler with Mr Jaffe and the group of distinguished visitors. This action played beautifully in a long take, but as it is now our first opportunity to meet Robert in the daytime an incentive arises for a close-up treatment, and the close views of the second half of the action have an impact on the emphasis of the character's awkwardness, and the emphatic discomfort of our encounter with him.

ADR

Among the advantages to historian and critic of having access to a cut of the film from picture editing is that it can foreground choices in the later stages of post-production, such as grading or the construction of the soundtrack. As one of the frames to the left indicates, the 14th March rough cut has subtitles indicating where ADR (variously, alternative dialogue recording or automated dialogue replacement) lines will be added. These subtitles don't refer to lines which need to be replaced because of problems with the location sound; rather, they indicate points where new dialogue will be added. Some of these uses of ADR are pragmatic: in the dialogue mix, for example, time was spent changing what Jed Wyncoop says to the receptionist at La Castile, to find a phrase which convincingly explained why he would be visiting a restaurant while his son was missing (necessary, now that the scene no longer takes place at the cash desk of a shop). However, the use of ADR in the film's post-production also provides examples of the filmmakers seeking to enhance and develop the film's themes and ideas,

in new ways and in response to the situations created by enforced changes to original plans.



This frame is from another rough cut, dated 7th April 2008, and shows part of the confrontation that takes place between Robert and the detectives in the hospital corridor. In this version, as in the finished film, we watch Detective Anderson (Arnold Pinnock) say, ‘Look Mr Forester, I understand you’re hanging onto this notion that Greg Wyncoop is alive, but ...’. At this point we cut to a reverse shot of Considine and we hear Pinnock’s off screen voice continue ‘... come on ...’ before, in the rough cut, the ADR subtitle completes the sentence with ‘get real’. In the finished film, the ADR line has become, ‘but, come on, wake-up!’. Both ‘get real’ and ‘wake-up!’ are appropriate in the context of the argument between the detectives and Robert about whether Greg is alive, and help to make the scene a convincing exchange. At the same time, they are conceived to speak to the wider metaphorical structure of the film which pictures Robert toppling into a dream, or a movie, at the film’s midpoint.⁷ With this in mind note, too, the difference

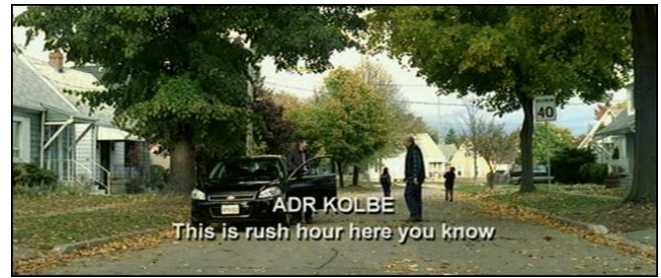


in colour between this frame and an equivalent from the finished film. Here we can see part of a related strategy where the footage has been graded to enhance the blue-green which increasingly characterises the murky world of the fiction as Robert’s life spirals out of control.



This view of the street, with the boys in the distance, was shot to appear at the end of the football scene, which is where it appears in the 14th March cut. Originally, Kolbe crossed the street maintaining that the boys had deliberately thrown the ball onto Robert’s car – ‘That was no accident, you know. No, they did that on purpose. You can’t trust those kids.’ – succinctly introducing Kolbe’s character and

providing a bridge into the conversation between the two men about the house.



In the finished film, this first encounter with Kolbe appears later than was originally envisaged, after the second prowling scene. The shot is retained, but with an ADR line from Kolbe, ‘The peace and quiet driving you crazy yet?’ (over the previous shot) ‘This is rush hour here, you know.’ (over this) replacing the comments about the boys. (The frame above is from a cut dated 7th April.) Such play on the opposition between small town and city is strengthened by the return to the set up at the end of the conversation, as Robert drives off, the receding boys still visible. In the final structure of the film Robert is destined for the first scene at the divorce lawyers rather than heading to work: the view down the length of the quiet street now cuts to stock footage of an equivalent perspective of a city thoroughfare, the movement of the American football thrown in the middle distance replaced by a stream of traffic passing left to right at a junction. In these ways, late changes in post-production develop another of the film’s structures.



ADR lines are incorporated into the soundtrack during the dialogue premix, and the level of the dialogue mixed together with the other premixed tracks (fx, foley, score, other musical cues) in the final mix. The scene of Jenny’s death is one where the balance of elements is especially important – between our involvement in Jenny’s experience and distance from her actions, including leaving the consciousness of the character. In the visual field, the extremes of that balance can be represented in the two interjections of the branches of the willow tree into the frame, first in a quasi-point-of-view shot looking up toward the sky, later in the other direction, dropping into the top of the frame as the camera reaches the end of its movement upwards and away,



and by the movement from the close-up on Jenny's face to the distant view of her body, the crane shot first evoking her bewilderment and finally coming simply to view her from afar. As Thraves explained when working on the dialogue premiss of this passage: 'I want it to be as violent, as vocal as possible, in contrast to the music'.



The performance here had been partly inspired by a conversation with special effects coordinator on the film, Brock Jolliffe, who had suggested that bleeding to death feels similar to drowning. Julia Stiles had recorded the ADR tracks of Jenny's increasingly desperate breathing – with this direction of drowning in mind – but these were supplemented by further tracks of similarly distressed breathing performed by (post-production) sound assistant Thekla Demelius. Sound re-recording mixer Ralph Thiekötter blended these together to achieve the finished effect.

Jenny's 'Death Row song' – Louis Armstrong's recording of 'A Kiss to Build a Dream On' by Kalmar, Ruby and Hammerstein – begins as source music in the kitchen (with appropriate acoustic qualities and aural location) before becoming non-diegetic as Jenny steps outside of the house, the sound becoming fuller in quality and spreading across the surround. In the indicative musical cues prepared in the picture edit, the final beat was timed to coincide with the cut to Robert at the police station, and this was replicated in the final mix, completing our removal from Jenny's presence, dropping us straight into a situation where the cause and consequences of that death were under scrutiny; desolating but not without a trace of grim humour, the transition evokes the abruptness of the end of a life.

Death row songs

In the film, play is made of the 'death row songs' nominated by the two main characters and both appear on the soundtrack in important situations: Jenny's accompanies her final scene, as we've just seen, and Robert's plays out at the end of the film. Scrutinising such a song for what it means for character and for film is rightly the sort of thing we do as spectator or critic. The production was able to secure the rights to what had long been scripted to be Jenny's choice, but the process by which Robert's death row song came to be determined provides a revealing instance of the filmmakers responding creatively to material constraints.

In the March 14th version, Robert tells Jenny his 'death row song' would be 'To be alone with you', by Bob Dylan. 'It's a very overlooked song', he adds. In the scene in the



finished film we aren't looking at Robert when he announces his choice, but instead look at Jenny as she responds. This change made it possible to defer the identification of the song until after the point at which picture editing was completed. (Such eventualities were anticipated in the shoot, where a point was made of having enough of Julia



Stiles' reaction shot to make such a change possible.)

In the dialogue premiss, Ralph Thiekötter lined up a whole set of ADR lines that Paddy Considine had recorded, ready to drop in. It was possible to hear Robert deliver, in quick succession: 'Blue Valentines', Tom Waits; 'The old man's back again', Scott Walker; 'Get behind me', Scott Walker; 'Real Life', Joan as Policewoman

Once it was clear that it was not going to be possible to secure the rights to the Dylan song, the leading candidate became 'Blue Valentines'. Director and producers were all enthusiastic, the company which handled the rights had agreed clearance; all that was missing was permission from the singer / songwriter himself. A fax had been sent to Waits, which was apparently the only way of getting in touch with him, but the days were counting down until the film had to be locked off. This was hastened by the latest date at which the film could be considered for the 2008 Toronto film festival, and a print had soon to be despatched from Hamburg where the later stages of post-production were taking place.

Three options were taken into the final mix, to give the maximum opportunity for a positive reply from Waits. While everyone was agreed about 'Blue Valentines', there was some difference of opinion about the next best option. 'Real Life', by Joan as Policewoman, was to be the final choice, and also appears earlier in the film, played on Jenny's stereo in the second prowling scene. If you look closely, the other contender – 'The Old Man's Back Again' – is acknowledged in the credits, though it doesn't feature on the soundtrack.

A song's meanings will be modulated or shaped by the context of its appearance in a film.⁸ Will an audience comprehend a lyric in relation to the dramatic situation it accompanies? Will the feelings engendered by the music become more important than the words? It is revealing to play the end of the film silently, calling up some of these songs in succession on iTunes to judge their effect.

'Blue Valentines' is very appropriate thematically – even down to the reference to Philadelphia – conjuring a future of regret and self-reproach for Robert. On the other hand, the

chorus of 'Real Life' becomes resonant in relation to the film's concern with the effect of fantasies upon reality, and the characters' attempts to call attention to themselves outside of others' misconceptions, though the most pertinent lines appear some way down the credit roll and might only be appreciated by the most dedicated audience members. 'To be alone with you' is much more upbeat, and both in tone and lyric plays ironically against Robert's situation. 'The Old Man's Back Again' brings a thumping energy in its bass line, and also evokes the idea of the return of things that had been thought escaped, though concern about how the audience would understand its lyrics counted against it.

The throaty quality of Waits' voice echoes Louis Armstrong's, suggesting a parallel between Robert and Jenny through their choice of death row songs, but the eventual solution also implies a correspondence. That Robert chose as his favourite a song we know to be one that Jenny also listened to – if we know the song and have recognised it, or if we've come back to ponder the matter – indicates something that the two have in common, contributing to a suggestion the film develops in various ways that Robert and Jenny might actually have been well matched, if they could have escaped from the fantasies which coloured their vision and shaped their behaviour. The choice of 'Real Life' may also encourage us to understand Jenny's reaction to Robert's choice of song, in the earlier scene, slightly differently: she lifts her head, gives a nod and a half smile in response to Robert's off-screen line, which suggests pleasure and approval at the choice (and that he has joined in the game) – if we've registered the song as one she listens to, then it's possible to attribute a deeper understanding to this gesture, where Jenny believes she recognises something of an affinity between them. Such an interpretation would be more widely accessible if the song had happened to be a better known track – but the broader point remains.

'Real Life' brings a further quality to the film, available

to any listener: it is the only song of these leading contenders to be sung (or written) by a woman, where all the other options are emphatically male – and male in a way that Robert is not: cool, flamboyant, excessively masculine in Waits' case. The choice of a female musician balances the end of the film in a way which wouldn't would be achieved by any of the other options, and shapes our concluding perspective on Robert.

A four point conclusion:

1. On being surprised. We may realise that the choice of popular music to be incorporated in a film's soundtrack is likely to be constrained by budget or permissions, but the implications of this can surprise us as viewers, and as critics. Such is the vivid impression of the world that film creates, we remain incredibly credulous viewers (and even more so listeners). I spent two days observing the shoot around the location for Robert's house without realising the extent to which the neighbourhood had been dressed. The decor of Robert's house had been extensively distressed, for example, and a white picket fence with a range of evergreen shrubs had been established between Robert's and Sam's houses, important to the way in which Robert (and our) initially distant relationship to Sam develops. It wasn't until the production designer Matthew Davies pointed out some of this labour to me on a later occasion that I realised what I had been taking for granted. I have sat inside 'Robert's house', the interior wrapped in protective cardboard, while the director and the costume designer discussed costumes for later scenes at the end of the shooting day, but in my mind's eye the set which we see in the movie has moved in and taken up residence.

If we are not professionally inclined to think about the ways in which soundtracks are constructed, it is easy to be caught up in the compelling auditory experience of the fictional world, and to respond while failing to recognise the



choices and elements involved. How often do critics talking or writing about performance consider the extent to which a vocal performance, even for a main character, might be constructed in post-production? Such design is not something that most audience members recognise, and while it is part of a technological discussion – among practitioners, obviously, but also in writing by practitioners and in instructional writing around different roles and technologies – it has much less regularly become part of a critical dialogue.

2. As a critic interested in ideas of aesthetic coherence, and the idea of an artwork being a complex whole, in which the parts influence each other in intricate patterns and mutually-inflecting structures, I probably should not have been struck as I was at the extent to which the film is an organic entity during its production. Making one change may mean adjustment in many other areas: if you re-stage the fight with Wyncoop Snr at the restaurant, the money saved can be used for dressing another location, and the resonance of repetition can be developed. Once you say goodbye to the football scene, it implies different choices for how you introduce Robert in the daytime. Changing a death row song can have a range of different implications, each of which may have advantages and drawbacks. As some of these examples indicate, this process isn't necessarily negative – it may provide the impetus for further creative solutions.

3. One of Luc Montpellier's observations was that filmmaking is the interaction of 'spontaneity and vision'. I understand this to mean that success is dependent on having a very strong sense of what you are trying to achieve, but equally, being open and alive to the circumstances of the moment: the unexpected, the work of colleagues, the dynamic of the situation. To quote Thraves, on a similar line: 'With [...] good planning comes the ability to become spontaneous'.⁹

Filmmaking is a long and varied process. Some aspects require the director and other participants to make decisions in the moment, responding to feeling and intuition, and others involve great skills of distanced, critical awareness. Film criticism and theory has tended to celebrate some directors for their rigorous planning – most famously, Hitchcock – and others, typically Renoir, for their spontaneity. A more accurate view might be to regard these directors as exemplifying different points on a continuum, one in which we recognise tendencies rather than absolutes, and that all successful filmmakers are able to encompass both ways of working.¹⁰ I suspect great filmmakers have the ability to move between the two ends of this spectrum at the appropriate moments, sometimes with great rapidity. Different artists have found different strategies for achieving such a duality of perspective: on a shoot Wong Kar Wai has been known to sit some distance from the action (perhaps even in another room) watching the video assist, while cinematographer Christopher Doyle, also operating the camera, is physically and emotionally in the heart of the action (Greenhalgh, 2005). Walter Murch has written about the strategies he has developed to enable appropriate space for the less conscious aspects of editing process, as well as ways of keeping an analytical distance from the image, and maintaining the clearest possible awareness of the emerging structure of the whole.

If what Montpellier says is especially true of the shoot, where so many elements are being arranged under enormous pressures of time and budget and so much is dependent on the developing creative interaction of the key personnel, it is also true of other filmmaking activities. To be too wedded to one's preconceived ideas, no matter how

brilliant they were in the planning, or in the first stages of their execution, spells disaster. One of the things that impressed me in my observation of different parts of post-production was the continual aliveness to the material, the commitment to keep working the major themes through the piece, to developing expressive patterns. Some precious moments were dropped from the leaner film which emerged from post-production but throughout picture editing new relationships can be constructed and understandings made possible, and right up to the balance of the final mix, the construction of the soundtrack presents opportunities for new ways of keeping the complexities of the film alive. If your vision is clearly set out at the beginning, and if you can look freshly at your material without being overtaken by preconceptions, over-familiarity or the disappointment of things that didn't work, then you have the space to keep experimenting, keep responding, and to keep enriching the material. Until the print has to be sent to Toronto, anyway.

4. As the structure of this article implies, I remain committed to criticism based on knowledge available to any member of the audience. The buck stops with the film itself, and anything we might want to claim about the film needs to be arguable from the evidence of our eyes and ears, from the experience of viewing the film and from its material features which we can return to in discussion. A filmmaker's claims about what a film might mean are as open to testing through the process of critical debate as any other account of the work.

At the same time, engaging with the processes of production can enhance our critical skills: the more comprehensive our awareness of the processes of filmmaking, the better we can become at recognising where choices have been made and what the potential dimensions of choice might be. Following a production in the way I have been able to is an unusual opportunity, but one which provides insight into issues and practices which have more general application. The compelling illusion of film means that it can be very valuable to spend time finding out about the craft which constitutes the filmmakers' art.

If this project is partly about bridging the gap between the work of historian and critic, and perhaps challenging the distinction at the same time, another feature of its trajectory is to recognise the limits of distinguishing between pragmatic choices and ones which are expressive. One of the key perceptions of style-based criticism has been to suggest that in the most interesting films the choices taken by filmmakers achieve several things at once.¹¹ The evidence examined here provides examples of solutions to problems which answered a pragmatic issue of plotting, pacing or character development at the same time broadened thematic structures, or developed expressive patterns, revealing depths of character or situation.

It was very exciting to be witness to discussions – on location, in a producer conference during picture editing, in audio post-production – which were as much about the thematic as the mechanical. Or rather, they encompassed the mechanics of the thematic, brilliant suggestions in which there was no clear distinction between the practical and the profound. In this sense my adventures with the film shared something of the emotion which Jon Halliday must have felt when he visited Sirk and found someone keen to talk about Brecht and Euripidean Irony – there was a real pleasure in sitting in on the work of filmmakers who were operating at the level of ambition and complexity that students of film hope to find in the films they watch.

John Gibbs.

My thanks to the makers of *The Cry of the Owl*, who were wonderfully welcoming and consistently generous with their time and ideas. I am also grateful to the friends and colleagues who have shared with me their responses to the film, and to some of the arguments in this article.

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¹ See for further discussion, Gibbs 2006: 5-7, and for example, Perkins' article 'Moments of Choice', reprinted [here](#).

² Auiler 1998, Bacher 1996, Carringer [1985] 1996, Krohn 1999, Rebello 1990.

³ Anderson 1952, Buscombe 1976, Gershuny 1980, Koppelman 2004, Murch 2001, Ross 1953.

⁴ It is also complemented by a companion piece, an article '[Sleeping with half open eyes: dreams and realities in *The Cry of the Owl*](#)', in the first issue of *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism*, which provides a more extended analysis of the film, and a broader interpretative context for the claims made for the significance of the decisions under discussion here.

⁵ Interview, 25th October 2011.

⁶ For a discussion of these elements in the finished film, see Gibbs (2010: 5) available [here](#).

⁷ For a discussion of these elements in the finished film, see Gibbs (2010: 10-11, 15) available [here](#).

⁸ For a full discussion, see Garwood 2005.

⁹ Interview, 18th August 2005.

¹⁰ Bill Krohn's work has done much to challenge the legends that have grown up around Hitchcock's working practices.

¹¹ This is the logic of much writing in early *Movie*; the leading exponent of this discussion is V.F. Perkins, and chapters 5 & 6 of *Film as Film* its most advanced expression.