MEDIA FIELDS
J O U R N A L

Sonic Interstices

Essayistic Voiceover and Spectatorial Space in Robert Cambrinus's *Commentary* (2009)

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A crucial tool for the articulation of subjectivity in first-person and essayistic nonfiction cinema, voiceover has had an overwhelmingly negative reception in documentary film theory. Following Michel Chion's discussion of the "acousmêtre" (an acousmatic voice which is not-yet-visualised) in fiction cinema,[1] documentary voiceover has predominantly been described as inhabiting an extra-diegetic space, from which it comments on the diegesis, thus controlling the spectator's reading of the film and imposing unequivocal meanings that distort the indexical truthfulness of the images and the authenticity of the witnesses' words. Its extra-diegetic positioning has been indicated as the primary cause of its supposed authoritarian and even threatening features. The argument is thus summarized by Pascal Bonitzer: "voice-off represents a power, that of disposing of the image and of what the image reflects, from a space absolutely other with regard to that inscribed in the visuals. Absolutely other and *absolutely indeterminate*. In as much as it arises from the field of the Other, the voice-off is assumed to know: this is the essence of its power."[2]Theorists who agree with Bonitzer opine that voiceover derives its authority from its particular positioning: "It is precisely because the voice is not localizable, because it cannot be yoked to a body, that it is capable of interpreting the image, producing its truth."[3]

If one pauses to consider documentary voiceover spatially, however, things are much more complicated than this. The extra-diegetic space from which a voiceover speaks is not a wholly separate plane, which interacts with the diegesis in a univocal, one-dimensional, or linear manner. Layering and stratification (not only of sounds, but also of the meanings that are produced by the voiceover's engagement with the visuals and the soundtrack) are more credible spatial models to give account of the interaction between voiceover and diegesis. Reciprocal imbrication also comes to mind, for as much as the voice may seem to control the frame, this can equally be said to frame the voice. There are yet other ways of thinking spatially of nonfictional voiceover; here, I propose to explore in particular the interstitial space that it creates between the text on which it comments and the audience it addresses. In first-person and essayistic nonfiction, this sonic space becomes the place from which the spectator may establish a relationship with the speaking subject and negotiate between the superimposed commentary and the images that are commented upon.

In the communicative situation set up by an essay film, two figures acquire particular prominence: the enunciator and the receiver. A concise examination of their features is a preliminary step towards the articulation of an argument on the spatial deployment of voiceover in the essay film. My argument will then be substantiated through a reading of a specific case study: Robert Cambrinus's HD video, *Commentary* (2009).

Essays are heretic texts of problematic definition; however, we concur in thinking of them as expressions of a subjective critical reflection, which is not offered as anonymous or collective, but as originating from a single authorial position, here discussed in terms of enunciation theory.[4] The essay's enunciator, who overtly says "I" and often admits to his/her position as director, usually appears in the text as a narrator who shares a voice and, often, a body with the empirical author.[5] The relationship between author, enunciator, and narrator, however, is never unproblematic. The essay film, in fact, tends to self-reflexively probe not only its subject matter, but also subjectivity and authorship.
Because the essay's enunciator is not a generalized authority, but a subject who speaks for herself, takes responsibility for her discourse, and overtly embraces her contingent viewpoint, it follows that she does not speak to an anonymous audience. The argument of the essay film addresses a real, embodied spectator, who is invited to enter into a dialogue with the enunciator, to follow his/her reasoning, and to respond by actively participating in the construction of meaning. Hence, the essay film is a fragile

field, for it must accept and welcome the ultimate instability of meaning, and embrace openness as its unreserved ethos. The problematization of authorship is demanded by the essayist's aim of extending authorship to the audience. Rather than "pretend to discover things," as in Montaigne's famous passage, thus camouflaging a perfected and closed reflection as an open-ended process of uncovering, the essayist asks many questions and only offers few or partial answers.[6] These are allowed to emerge somewhere else: in the position of the embodied spectator. It is around this textual structure, which translates into a constant address of the I/essayist to the You/spectator, that the experience of the essay film materializes, and our impression of being summoned to participate in the construction of essayistic meaning is achieved.

While the strategies for the construction of subjectivity and address of the audience are multiple, voiceover is a privileged tool in essayistic documentary making. In the essay film, however, the location of the voice outside the diegetic space does not automatically establish the absolute authority of the enunciator; rather, it is a precondition for the problematization of both subjectivity and truth. The concept of interstice may be usefully deployed to explore this point; interstitiality is relevant to the essay film in multiple ways, and first of all to its positioning with respect to industry and genre. Here, I am mostly concerned with textual and extra-textual interstitial spaces in which reflection is articulated and communicative negotiations are established and played out. The interstice may also be seen with Gilles Deleuze (where he writes of Jean-Luc Godard's 1976 *Ici et ailleurs*) as spacing "[b]etween two actions, between affections, between perceptions, between two visual images, between two sound images, between the sound and the visual: make the indiscernible, that is the frontier, visible."[7] The interstice, or "vertigo of spacing," to use an expression of Blanchot, is for Deleuze a void that is a radical calling into question of the image, a "differentiation of potential" that produces something new.

On account of its complete self-awareness as an essayistic text—which may be seen in its metalinguistic, reflective, discursive approach and in its deliberate exploration of issues of authorship, voiceover, and enunciator/audience communication—*Commentary* is an exceptionally productive case study that may help us to think spatially about essayistic voiceover. A 15-minute non-fiction piece, *Commentary* stems from, and is a revisiting of, Cambrinus's own fictional short *The Good Muslim*, also shot in 2009 on HD video. The non-fiction consists of the superimposition of the

director's voice over the fiction; in postproduction, he delivers a commentary that is a parody of a new documentary "genre": the expert commentaries added as bonus features to DVDs of both canonical masterpieces and popular box-office hits. Irony is, evidently, one of the registers invoked by Cambrinus's voice. However, much more is at stake in this commentary, which results simultaneously in a documentary take on the making of *The Good Muslim*; in an essayistic reflection on cinema as a medium, and on religion, identity, family, aging, and love; and in a first-person investigation of autobiographical themes. Cambrinus's voiceover ultimately shares very little with the critical commentaries that it parodies. While being completely distinctive, it is rather analogous to the voiceovers in essay films such as Marguerite Duras's *Aurélia Steiner* (1979), Chris Marker's *Sans soleil* (*Sunless*, 1983), Harun Farocki's *Arbeiter verlassen die Fabrik* (*Workers Leaving the Factory*, 1995), and Thom Andersen's *Los Angeles Plays Itself* (2003)—films in which the director delivers a commentary that carries out a thoughtful reflection on a series of themes, while also establishing a direct communication with the spectator. The usefulness of Cambrinus's film as a case study is that it does all this while also reflecting on the nature and potential of voiceover commentaries.

The good Muslim in question is Khalil, an Iraqi Muslim who lives with his family in London. His old mother, who suffers with dementia, is in a nursing home, something that meets the profound disapproval of the young men who run the local mosque. Khalil's story is one of progressive loss of cultural and personal identity; his child speaks English without an accent, and his wife has become westernized in her appearance. What's more, his mother does not recognize Khalil, and keeps telling him that, unlike him, her son does not have a beard. Eventually, Khalil decides to make one last attempt and shaves before visiting his mother, who this time unexpectedly responds that her son has a beard. However, she partially recuperates her memory at the sight of a toy lion in the hands of her grandchild; mistaking him for her son, she warmly expresses her love to him.

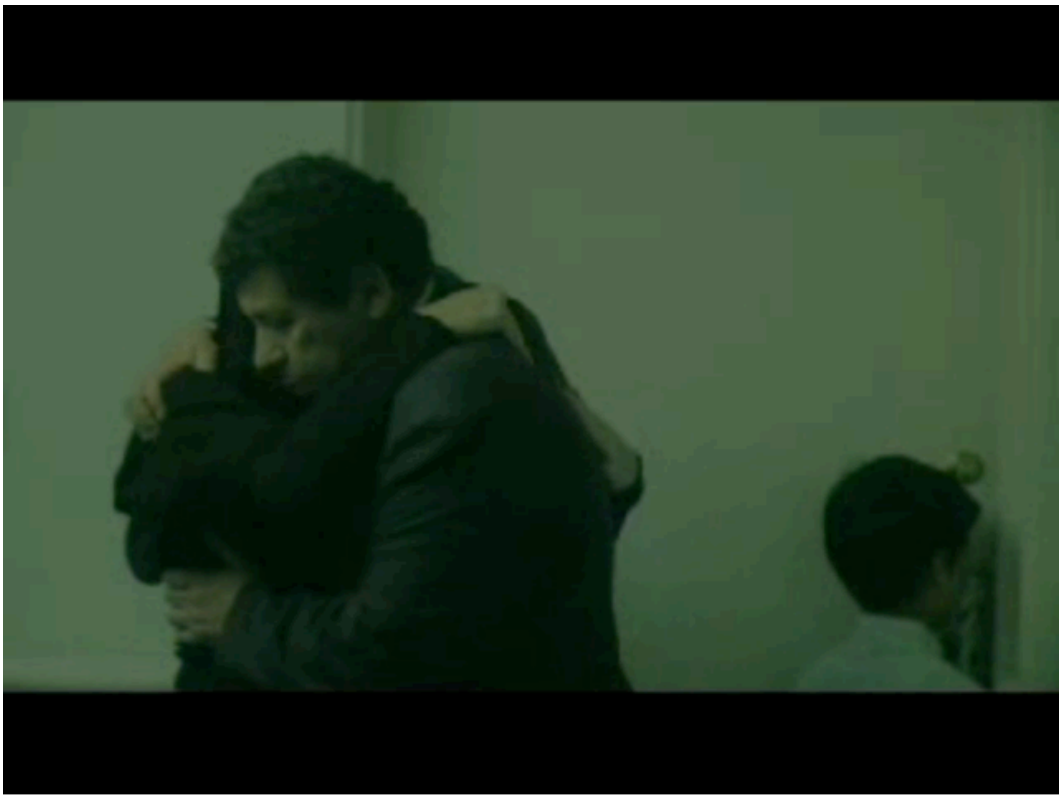
Commentary makes no alterations to the visual track of *The Good Muslim*, apart from replacing the film's title; it is the new soundtrack, which consists of the director's voice speaking over the original visuals and soundtrack, that transforms the film into another text, in a relationship that one could look at, with Gérard Genette, in terms of palimpsest, and thus of hypotext vs. hypertext.[8] The hypertext, which was screened at festivals of shorts and of independent cinema, presents problems of categorization and is interstitial

in more than one way: because of its utterly non-commercial format, in terms of both length and genre, and because of its positioning as intermediary between *The Good Muslim*, its hypotext, and the audience. Heretic on account of conception, format and commitments, it is reflective and self-reflexive, and presents a strong enunciator who, speaking through an I-narrator, directly addresses his audience and engages it in a reflection that simultaneously pertains to a small, marginal film and the cinema as an art form and as a medium.

Commentary borrows from the growing "genre" of bonus DVD contents the deconstructing attitude towards its hypotext, which is analyzed in terms of creative process, image-construction, technical solutions, aesthetic choices, aims, and meanings. The enunciator takes the shape of a candid and somewhat disenchanted narrator, who introduces himself as director Robert Cambrinus and proceeds to uncover, one by one, the secrets of the making of the film, either pointing out its shortcomings—among these, a shaky camera, the necessity to make do with available props and homemade sets, the loss of the last sequence—or else revealing its intended meanings. While the

commentary sheds light on the creative process and on the film, it also disillusions, in as much as it points to failings that impinge on the artistic accomplishment. The disillusionment extends to the medium itself and to its expressive limitations; however, *Commentary* also powerfully transcends the limits it emphasizes, and thus demonstrates the communicative and expressive potentials of voiceover in the cinema, and in the essay film in particular.

Questions of truthfulness and sincerity are at the core of the reflection. The attitude of disclosure vis-à-vis the creative process and its difficulties gives way to apparently anecdotal digressions, which become increasingly personal and autobiographical. Such digressions go to the core of Cambrinus's probing of his identity both as a Viennese who studied in the States and now lives in London, and as a man with a Master's degree from MIT and a Ph.D. in Economics, who at some point decided to retrain as an actor. His personal choices, relationship with his cultural roots, childhood memories, identification with his father, and problematic relationship with his mother are all mirrored by the fictional matter, as well as by the film's broad reflection on cultural identity and loss in contemporary Europe. While the narration begins on a note of self-possession and unproblematic identification ("Hi, I'm Robert Cambrinus, the director of this film!"), the commentary increasingly opens up areas of uncertainty, insecurity, even misrecognition. Doubts are introduced and left hanging; finally, a personal revelation about the withdrawal of maternal love in adult age exposes the director's own pain and loss of personal identity as the true subject of the two films. This moment helps to explain why *The Good Muslim* required a hypertextual commentary, as if the second text consisted in a self-inflicted, compulsive repetition of a trauma.



The probing of identity runs parallel to the deconstruction of authorship; the certainties of the director/narrator, indeed, become shakier as the film unfolds. When commenting on the last sequence, he no longer seems in control of his cognitive position, as suggested by the following statement: "What struck me is that this story might be read as a metaphor for a mother who does not recognize the child she once raised." At this point, the film no longer belongs to the director, but to the spectator; and the director discovers he is the subject of his own film. The voice now changes topic and, trying to conceal the emotion, returns to comment directly on the images. Cambrinus, however, has one more confession to make: the film was not meant to end on the sentimental images of the mother telling her son, via her grandchild, that she will always love him; another scene was shot, but because of a failure of the camera, the footage was lost. Thus, the final declaration of maternal love is doubly misplaced: because it does not reach its intended target, and because it was not supposed to be the final word in the film. After this disclosure, the enunciator recuperates his ironic detachment, and delivers the funniest line of the short when he says, on the closing titles, that a version of the film without commentary will be included

in the DVD as bonus feature. However, the irony too is misplacement. Indeed, this is an emotional moment; the film is ending, and it's time for the enunciator to bid farewell to his audience. He begins by saying that he hopes that the spectator enjoyed the film, but leaves the sentence unfinished, thus suggesting the enunciator's disbelief in his film's ability to reach its target and to please its audience.

He then just thanks us not for watching but, intriguingly, for listening, thus recognizing that *Commentary* is a film of sound.
It is voice, indeed, that makes the film, and voice that transforms the fiction simultaneously into a documentary on the filmmaking process, an essay on the cinema and on communication, and an exploration of autobiographical themes. Cambrinus, a trained actor and voiceover artist, modulates his voice in a complex delivery that goes from humorous banter to cruel self-analysis, from an expert, detached tone to intimate dialogue, from irony to emotion, from wordiness to silence. Far from being an example of didactic and authoritative voice-of-god, *Commentary*'s voiceover is a supple tool that linguistically uses affect to produce intellectual and emotional results, provoking reflection and establishing a dialogue with the audience.
But what is the relationship that is established between enunciator and spectator? And how can we think of it spatially? In perceptive and experiential terms, the enunciator is on the same plane as the audience, because he is here spectator of his own film, and watches the images with us at the same time as us; the effect is strengthened by the quality of the voiceover, which does not sound studio-recorded, and is therefore suggestive of a private, intimate dialogue. In cognitive terms, of course, the enunciator knows more than the spectator, and guides him or her in the analysis of the film. However, he constantly debases himself by displaying doubts about the film's true meanings and his characters' motivations and feelings, attracting attention to his shortcomings, and highlighting mistakes and problems with the shooting.

Cambrinus, however, does not search for an easy or false identification with his audience. While he positions himself on the same level as us, he also recognizes that he is the author and we the spectators; during a sequence set in a mosque, he explicitly comments on our exclusion from the image. On the other hand, he acknowledges the spectator's freedom to read meanings in his film, as well as the little control he has over that process. Thus, the enunciator's voiceover simultaneously frames and is framed by the film; he is both the origin and content of the enunciation—and he both knows it, and makes the spectator aware of it. It is this paradoxical differential that is

repeatedly emphasized by the film. *Commentary* doesn't just add a layer of sound and meaning to *The Good Muslim*; through the voiceover's linguistic and sonic performance, it also attracts the spectator's attention to (and indeed creates) the crevices between all textual elements and communicational figures. Unlike standard DVD bonus commentaries, which understand themselves in terms of an unproblematic superimposition of a layer of information and exegesis, Cambrinus's film sets out to deconstruct and undermine, to highlight gaps and differentials. What the voiceover brings out, ultimately, is a series of interstices—between fiction and documentary, hypotext and hypertext, empirical author and narrator, and space of the diegesis and space of the enunciator.

The carving of these interstices, while producing a "vertigo of spacing," is empowering for the spectator. The interstices are shaped by the speaking voice as spaces of thought, and thus as gaps that enable reflection. Cambrinus's film exemplifies that the function of essayistic voiceover is to insert a distance, to carve a space not only between enunciator and enunciation, but also between spectator and text. This is the space from which meanings are not authoritatively established, but are radically called into question, offered to the spectator's reflection, and opened up to the new.

Notes

1 Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 17-29.
2 Pascal Bonitzer, *Le regard et la voix* (Paris: Union Générale d'éditions, 1976), 33. Emphasis in the original.
3 Mary Ann Doane, "The Voice in the Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space," *Yale French Studies*, 60, 'Cinema/Sound' (1980): 33-50 (42).
4 In spite of the difficulties that emerge when applying enunciation theory to the cinema, as a consequence of the complexity of filmic language and of its multiple levels of signification, the study of the relationships between textual and extra-textual figures is certainly in order when analyzing the communicational contexts activated by films in which an "I" figure addresses a spectator directly. For a thorough examination of the essay film form and its textual commitments and communicative structures, see Laura Rascaroli, *The Personal Camera: Subjective Cinema and the Essay*

Film (London: Wallflower, 2009).

5 This structure may be complicated by the presence of multiple narrators—as is typical for instance of Chris Marker's cinema.

6 Montaigne, as he claimed, wrote not in order to "pretend to discover things, but to lay open my self." See Michel de Montaigne, *The Essays of Montaigne*, trans. Charles Cotton, third edition. (London: Printed for M. Gillyflower, et al., 1700), 254.

7 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image,* trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 180.

8 Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, trans. Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 5-6. The original soundtrack remains in *Commentary*, but the volume is lowered and the words are often indistinguishable, as they are covered by the louder sound of the director's voice.

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