

# *Video essay: choosing death row songs*

Article

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Title: Choosing Death Row Songs

Keywords: licenced, music, production, history, choice

Vimeo link: <https://vimeo.com/828790081/bdf92af984>

[Prior to the point of publication, I will make the video public on Vimeo which will result in a shorter url: <https://vimeo.com/828790081>]

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Bio: John Gibbs is Professor of Film and Research Dean for Heritage & Creativity at the University of Reading. His publications include *Mise-en-scène: Film Style and Interpretation* (2002) and, co-edited with Douglas Pye, *Style and Meaning* (2005) and *The Long Take: Critical Approaches* (2017). His audiovisual essays have been published in *Alphaville*, *[in]Transition*, *Movie: a journal of film criticism* and *NECSUS*.

Written Statement:

This audiovisual essay draws on primary research into the production process to develop perspectives on creative choices, the factors that shaped them, and their consequences for audience experience and understanding. Using the methodology of the audiovisual essay enables the research findings to be articulated dynamically and experientially, making use of the formal potential of soundtrack, image, and duration in a way which brings both the filmmakers' journey and its implications for their audience to life.

In 2007-08 I followed the production of an adaptation of Patricia Highsmith's novel *The Cry of the Owl*, visiting the shoot on location in Canada, attending a producer conference during picture editing in London, and sitting in on different elements of the sound mix in Hamburg. I had detailed conversations with several of the filmmakers and recorded interviews with

writer / director Jamie Thraves before, during, and after production. I was given access to different versions of the script and to more than one rough cut.

My purpose was to investigate how the significant choices in the finished film – identified through critical analysis – came to be made.<sup>1</sup> Which were long-held designs? Which resulted from dynamic collaboration during production? Which consequential aspects of the film were a creative response to material realities and constraints? I published the results in written form in *Movie: a journal of film criticism* in 2012.<sup>2</sup>

For interesting reasons, the film had a rocky – indeed, remarkably unfortunate – distribution journey. It received a minimal theatrical release, and while it has been shown on network television it was chiefly consigned to be ‘straight to DVD’. (The cover of the UK DVD release features an image of a shadowy figure wielding an axe – there are no axes in the movie.) Then, and now, this seems a travesty for a thoughtful and complex film which deserved an audience. It also meant there was a limited academic readership for a novel production history of a film that few people had heard about.

In recent years I have moved to conducting most of my research in the form of audiovisual essays. Convinced that videographic approaches might address the research questions in different and revealing ways, I have returned to *The Cry of the Owl* (2009), focussing on a set

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<sup>1</sup> The first of two articles I published about the film, ‘Sleeping with half open eyes: dreams and realities in *The Cry of the Owl*’ (2010), offers a detailed analysis that restricts its observations to what can be understood by the audience of the film, without drawing on a comparison with Highsmith’s novel or on evidence derived from knowledge of the film’s production.

<sup>2</sup> The second article, ‘*The Cry of the Owl: Investigating decision-making in a contemporary feature film*’ (2012), examines the processes by which the film’s significant decisions came to be made, making full use of observations conducted on set and in post-production, but drawing on the critical investigation presented in the first to identify the most profitable lines of enquiry.

of choices (and constraints) around licenced music.<sup>3</sup> In a way that conventional written scholarship would struggle to do, the form of the essay, with its interruptions and repetitions, and the alternative versions it presents, is designed to evoke something of the experience of the filmmakers, provide insight into the ways in which meaningful decisions came to be made, and to give the listener an experience of how things might have played out differently. If the video essay also encourages cinemagoers who missed *The Cry of the Owl* first time around to seek it out, so much the better.

Acknowledgements: 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 very grateful to the friends and colleagues who have shared with me their responses to the film, to my writing on the film, and to this audiovisual essay.

## References

Garwood, Ian (2006) 'The Pop Song in Film'. In: Gibbs, John & Pye, Douglas (eds.). *Close-Up 01: Filmmakers' Choices, The Pop Song in Film, Reading Buffy*. London: Wallflower. New York: Columbia University Press.

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<sup>3</sup> For a further account of some of the complexities of negotiating licenced music, see Megan Joyce Toner's fascinating interview with composer and music supervisor Brian Reitzell (2016).

Gibbs, John (2010) 'Sleeping with half open eyes: dreams and realities in *The Cry of the Owl*', *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism*, 1, pp.1-17.

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