

AUDIOVISUAL ESSAYS

Music and Point of View in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*

When Alfonso Cuarón was preparing to direct *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (2004), he proposed a new approach to the series. 'I felt very strongly that the third film should be told from Harry's point of view' (quoted in McCabe 2018: 97). Clarifying this decision, Cuarón explained that he had no intention of creating a succession of subjective shots; rather, he would structure the story around Harry's growing awareness. In the resulting film, Harry appears in nearly every scene, and each important twist is disclosed only when Harry discovers it.

Cuarón's distinction between point of view as a type of subjective shot and point of view as a way of organising story information around a single character is important, but the term carries even more implications – implications that can help us better understand the complex construction of Cuarón's movie. In film studies, two influential accounts of the term's nuances are George M. Wilson's discussion of epistemic distance, reliability, and authority (1986: 4-5), and Douglas Pye's consideration of the spatial, temporal, cognitive, evaluative, and ideological axes of point of view (2000: 8-12). While creating this video, I took particular inspiration from Deborah Thomas's argument that point of view includes an 'attitude or orientation' toward the characters and their world,



producing a sense of detachment, sympathy, or condemnation (to list only a few possible attitudes) (2000: 20). Even though the film presents its story events as Harry encounters them, it produces a surprising amount of detachment from its likable but error-prone protagonist.

One of the most powerful tools for managing our relationship with Harry and his world is the music, composed by John Williams. As the accounts of Wilson, Pye, and Thomas would suggest, music contributes to point of view in various ways: shaping our evaluations of various characters, expressing sympathy for their emotional states, and managing the overall sense of epistemic distance. In particular, Williams uses leitmotifs to guide our interpretation of the unfolding events – sometimes reliably (as when an inspiring musical theme connects two scenes of flight), and sometimes unreliably (as when a distinctive three-note motif tricks us into thinking that the mysterious dog is an omen of doom rather than an

ambiguous ally in animal form). It may seem odd to describe an auditory technique in terms of a 'view', but including music within point-of-view studies has the distinct advantage of steering us away from an overly spatial conception of point of view. As Pye explains, 'We are not in several *places* at once [...] but responding in various ways at the same time' (2000: 13). In any given scene, the spatial organisation may favour Harry's perspective, but the music may hint at plot developments that Harry cannot predict and at thematic connections that he can never recognise.¹ To experience Cuarón's film is to experience a lightly ironic relationship with a character who remains sympathetic and understandable even though he misreads almost every clue he sees.

<https://vimeo.com/459186604>

PATRICK KEATING

Works cited

McCabe, Bob (2018) *Harry Potter Page to Screen: The Complete Filmmaking Journey*, updated edition. New York: Harper Design.

Pye, Douglas (2000) 'Movies and Point of View', *Movie*, 36, 2-34.

Thomas, Deborah (2000) *Beyond Genre: Melodrama, Comedy, and Romance in Hollywood Films*. Moffat: Cameron & Hollis.

Wilson, George M. (1986) *Narration in Light: Studies in Cinematic Point of View*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

1 After completing the first draft of this video, I discovered several other audiovisual essays addressing music in the Harry Potter films. See the video's closing credits for details. I particularly benefited from Sideways, 'Harry Potter and the Musical Secrets of the Marauder's Map', *YouTube*, 29 December 2019.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8FQcuENRhJw&ab_channel=Sideways