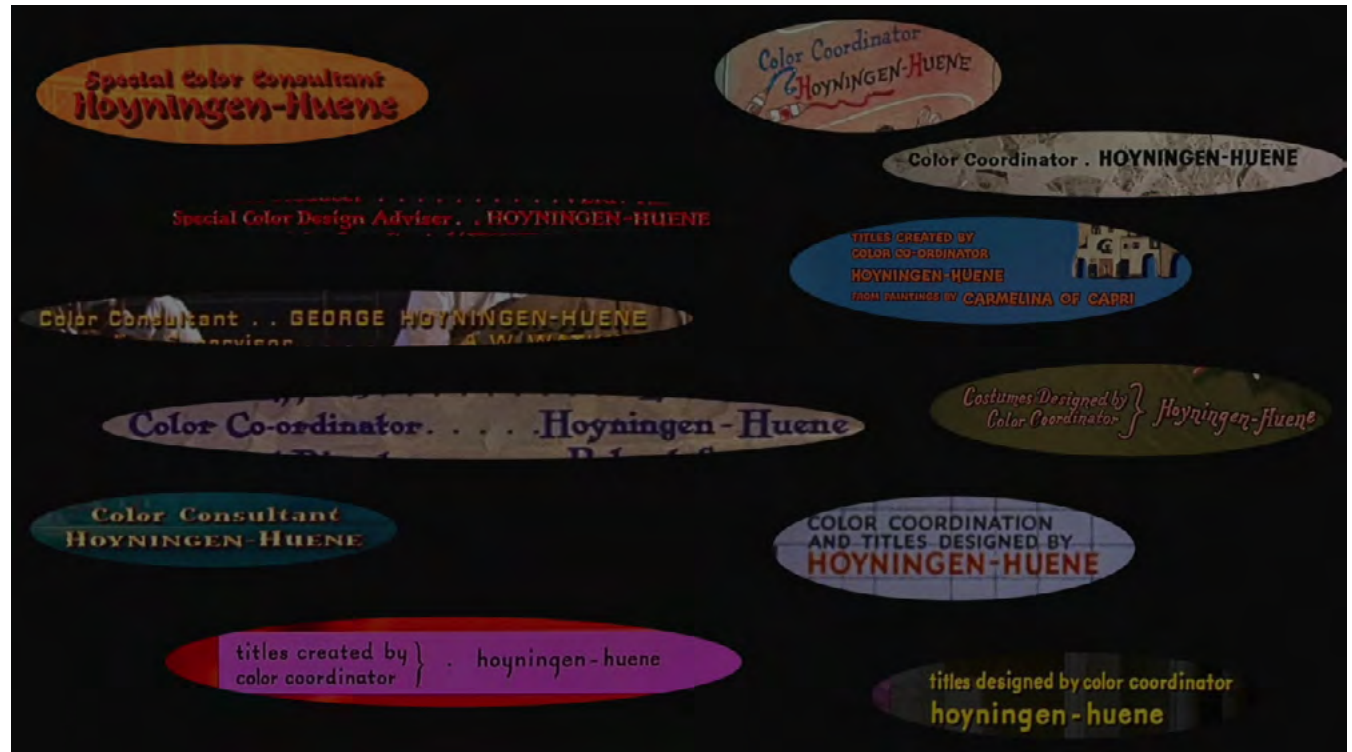


THE POLITICS OF CLOSE ANALYSIS

Tracing the threads of influence: George Hoyningen-Huene and *Les Girls* (1957)

The audiovisual essay has become a dynamic format for illuminating people and labour in film, especially those who might have gone unnoticed or unappreciated. To give just a few examples of work in this area, we can look to audiovisual essays by Ian Garwood (2014), John Gibbs & Suzana Reck Miranda (2018), who have brought attention to the background performances of musicians and their critical contributions to particular Hollywood films, while others highlight the contribution of women editors (Pearlman), or steadicam operators (Bird 2020), or sound designers, as in Liz Greene's focus on Alan Splet's work on *The Elephant Man* (2020). Like these examples, this video essay seeks to uncover a background contribution, one that is mixture of visible and invisible, and to argue for their place in an appreciation of visual style.

This audiovisual essay is the first step towards building a portrait of George Hoyningen-Huene and his work in cinema. Although he worked on a small number of films over the course of a decade, Huene's work as color-consultant/color-coordinator/costume designer and more, represents the kind of essential creative contribution to filmmaking that has generally been sidelined or forgotten in appreciations of film



style. The potential depth of his influence on the films, and perhaps more significantly, on the people with whom he worked, registers most forcefully in the quality of his production work detailed in archival materials – the letters, memoranda and notes addressed to his collaborators. The principal aim of this audiovisual essay is to bring to light Huene's meticulous design of colour, alongside his composition of action, props, lighting and costuming, that can be found in these materials, using *Les Girls* (Cukor, 1957) as a case study.

Les Girls was chosen because it offers the richest resources in the holdings relating to Huene in the George Cukor collection held by the Margaret Herrick library in Los Angeles. Triangulating his influence on this film is undertaken through the combination and layering of materials available – archival documents and the reference points evoked therein, interviews with Cukor and the detail of the film itself. This approach is not without its difficulties or dangers; avoiding

collapsing the connection between an idea or reference and the film itself is a chief point of concern. As John Gibbs points out in his critical account of filmmaking processes, any effort to link production history and style-based criticism faces a number of challenges, not least the risk of presenting evidence of decision-making as a foregone conclusion of the achievements of the finished film: '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' (2011: 81). While Gibbs avoids this by starting with stylistic interpretation, on this occasion, the principal aim of foregrounding Huene's work and influence meant that I started with his notes and looked for the traces of his ideas, and how they might have shaped the work of others, in the finished film. Any interpretation of the relationship between archival material

and film has to be understood as just that, an interpretation. The archival material also offers a lop-sided view of his input, given that the documents are principally Cukor's and so don't contain his replies to Huene. Interviews are extremely useful in this regard, as Cukor himself gives a great deal of credit to his collaborator, consistently stating the degree to which Huene's approach underpinned his colour films (even with the suggestion that this was not limited to the films on which Huene worked) in multiple interviews. The close nature of their working relationship is also confirmed in Ronald Haver's book on the making and restoration of *A Star is Born* (1954), in which the art director Gene Allen recalls the integration of his and Huene's work with their director: 'George Huene and I began working with him on every shot, every angle; we were always right there. And we were all learning' ([1988] 2002: 134). *Les Girls* was the third collaboration between the three men (and Huene and Allen's fourth).

The understanding of film style as a collaborative endeavour is central to arguing for recognition of Huene's work. The gesture of uncovering a person previously sidelined or forgotten is emphatically not one that carries with it an attempt to replace one idea of authorship with another. Rather, the argument that his contribution should be considered crucial to the film's achievements and therefore pertinent to our aesthetic evaluation, is an effort to further develop an understanding of aesthetic achievement as produced through collaboration, and that any recognition of the artistry of filmmaking should be shared among a larger group than has been traditionally acknowledged.

Acknowledgements:

My thanks to John Gibbs, Liz Greene, Lisa Purse, Douglas Pye and the reviewers for their extremely helpful feedback and advice at various stages of work on the audiovisual essay. Archival research conducted at the Margaret Herrick Library was made possible by funding from The Carnegie Trust.

Watch the audiovisual essay here:

<https://vimeo.com/740289237>

Lucy Fife Donaldson

Lucy Fife Donaldson is Senior Lecturer in film studies at the University of St Andrews. She is a member of the editorial boards of *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism* and *MAI: Feminism and Visual Culture*, the author of *Texture in Film* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), and co-editor of *Television Performance* (Red Globe Press, 2018), and the 'Moments in Television' collection (Manchester University Press).

Works cited

- Bird, Katie (2020) 'Feeling and Thought as They Take Form: Early Steadicam, Labor, and Technology (1974-1985)', *[in]Transition: Journal of Videographic Film & Moving Image Studies*, 7.1.
- Garwood, Ian (2014) 'How Little We Know: An Essay Film About Hoagy Carmichael', *[in]Transition: Journal of Videographic Film & Moving Image Studies*, 1.3.
- Gibbs, John (2011) 'The Cry of the Owl: Investigating Decision Making in a Contemporary Feature Film', *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism*, 3, 80-93.
- Gibbs, John & Suzana Reck Miranda (2018) 'Playing at the Margins', *[in]Transition: Journal of Videographic Film & Moving Image Studies*, 5.2.
- Greene, Liz (2020) 'The Elephant Man's Sound, Tracked', *NECSUS*, Autumn.
- Haver, Ronald ([1988] 2002) *A Star Is Born: The Making of the 1954 Movie and Its 1983 Restoration*. New York: Applause.
- Pearlman, Karen (2019) 'After the Facts', *[in]Transition: Journal of Videographic Film & Moving Image Studies*, 6.4.