

Acropolis Cinema and
Laemmle present:



August 30-September 2, 2019 ~ Ahrya Fine Arts

ABOUT THE FILM

When a young white couple's car breaks down after a weekend getaway, they're helped by an older black man who inspires them with his creative wisdom. When they discover six months later that the words he spoke might not be his own, they're horrified, fixating on his "crime" while forced to confront the originality of their own lives. Written by James N. Kienitz Wilkins and Robin Schavoir, *The Plagiarists* is a dramatic comedy about the clash of money and culture, reality and desire, race and identity. It's a social satire about who has the privilege to say what in today's world. (KimStim)

76 min | U.S. | 2019

James N. Kienitz Wilkins and Paul Dallas on *The Plagiarists* by Vadim Rizov

The following is an excerpt of an interview originally published by Filmmaker Magazine

Filmmaker: Normally, doing an interview about a film, I'd be talking with the director. Maybe he's just not available. But obviously, James, you're credited as the editor and DP, *and* you're the co-writer. There's not a ton of names in the end credits, it's clearly a small production. How was labor was divided over the course of the project?

James N. Kienitz Wilkins: Beyond the directorial figure, a crucial person who's missing in this conversation is Robin Schavoir, a long-time collaborator. We made *The Republic* together and at this point have almost a permanent screenwriting relationship. So, more than any of the other credits that I have personally, the most important one is the co-writing credit. It was shot very, very close to the script. That was the intent from the beginning. And, from a technical perspective, how everybody related to the camera was written into the script.

Paul Dallas (Producer): A lot of the discussions while we were starting to make the film, and all during it, were about the nature of collaboration in the filmmaking process. There's a fair amount of lip service given to it by filmmakers after the fact, when they've completed projects. But the industry is, by nature, very hierarchical. I think in some ways, this film was an attempt to figure out a different, much more collaborative system in making a film from the ground up.

Filmmaker: James, you have a very strong voice and preoccupations that come back regularly, like being concerned about the technical mechanics of filmmaking, or your relationship to the camera and how that physically mediates what's seen. Do you worry about that?

Wilkins: It's not that I *worry* about it, it's more that I think about it. I find it very hard, and I know Robin does as well, to accept wholecloth, as one's inheritance, the right to make movies, or art, or anything, and have it received by the world. So, yeah, we're going to talk about privilege. I mean, I know that's a hot topic these days. I think it runs at a lot of different sort of registers, not necessarily just being technically privileged. There's a lot of presumptions. What does it mean to have a specific type of set of obsessions that are then rewarded, in a way, for being repeated? But I think there's a difference between

voice and brand. It's a very fine difference, and it's harder and harder to distinguish in this culture that hammers the idea of becoming a brand as an economic smart move. I mean, Knausgård is a prime example. I haven't read the *My Struggle* cycle, but I've read a number of his other books—the ones about his unborn daughter, the seasonal series that he wrote and a number of his articles. I think he's a very important writer, but I also see the side of this saturation that's occurred as well. He's become a ripe figure for satire. The really funny thing is that the things that he's most famous for now, the *My Struggle* series is, like, 20 years old. It took him an incredibly long time for it to get translated and actually become an international bestseller. As a man, he is light years ahead of the brand that we're familiar with at this very moment.

Filmmaker: [There's] really specific stuff [in the film] that represents a kind of anxiety about making money and branding. Some of this is obviously baked into the film itself. I'm wondering if you had any discussions about how specific you could get, and to what extent you're kind of detailing a world that you're familiar with, but that just isn't seen in this level of detail on screen—maybe because people don't want to talk about it, because it can get kind of gross?

Wilkins: I feel like no matter what, if you're making a movie in your time, you're going to be making some sort of representation of that time. So, then it's a question of how much you want to call out—I guess, yeah, the gross aspects. I think there's a lot of self-mythologizing that people engage in by ignoring that stuff, you know? Why do you want a 6K camera, if you can't afford it, let's say. Like, what is actually happening? To me, it's a question of almost basic analysis, Socratic questioning or something. Not even necessarily critique, just like, "Well, why?" Some of the answers are probably pretty obvious: "I want to have a calling card, or I want to look good, or I don't want to look bad, or I want to get hired." I don't even look down upon that stuff, because we all need to make money, but it's when you start to get into these cycles of delusion, where [the reasoning is] ignored or you're substituting and making excuses, frankly—that's, to me, when it becomes funny.

Dallas: One of the things James and I often talk about, and one of the things I've loved about many of his short films, is this idea of what it means to address the moment that you live in, and how does art do that? I find myself so often disappointed when I look at younger filmmakers who are, let's say, overly beholden to previous modes of filmmaking, and whose work, when they finally get into the position to make a feature film, reflects the '80s or '90s movies that they loved, and are this weird kind of nostalgic filmmaking, that doesn't really say much about today or the world we live in but says a lot about their childhood. All of the references in the film [are contemporary]. The film that was made was, as James says, the script that was written. It was a beautiful process in that respect. There were a few moments in which we added tiny, surgical references to what was happening while we were making the film, to slightly turn that up a little bit more in terms of relating to what's in the ether right now.

Filmmaker: [I have question about] filming the monologue: Has Clip ever done something like that before? Could he look off camera and see the text if he needed to refresh his memory?

Wilkins: Our intent was that, at a certain point, the monologue becomes transparent. We wanted to start by segueing naturally into him just saying stuff, and then you were like, "Oh shit, a monologue's happening." I'm glad you thought about that, because I

think it's impossible not to—in that four minute stretch, or however long it is, we were hoping to have a shift in how you receive it. He's reading it from a teleprompter. He's a performer, but he's not an actor. He's never done that before. He's in George Clinton's Parliament Funkadelic collective. He's been in it, in the van, since he was 16 years old. So, there's this crazy ease about him and his charisma; he's been onstage since he was a child. But that kind of textual performance is a new thing for him, which I really liked. Maybe this harkens back to my short features, but I like seeing people dealing with words, trying to digest them.

Filmmaker: My other question is about the citations. By virtue of the mirroring structure of the monologues, you're encouraged to start questioning where that second one is coming from as it goes along. Immediately after it ends, you have the citations right there on screen. That title card does confirm something that you might be suspecting as a viewer, and it tells you right away, but you have to catch it. I guess you could've not shown your work, I suppose, and just told people afterwards.

Wilkins: On a very simple technical point, if there weren't citations, then we would be the plagiarists, you know? We were hoping to tease what exactly plagiarism is. It's a reminder that not all of it was penned by me and Robin.

Dallas: I think it's acknowledging how we internalize all of this media that we are encountering minute by minute nowadays. All of us are very familiar with the way in which things are quoted and not attributed.

Wilkins: Issues of attribution aren't a new beast to flog. We've been dealing with this a lot, and that's all fine and good and I think it's super relevant still, but the little twist that I'm particularly interested in across the board is not whether or not each of us, as humans in this time, are a lost muddle of references, but how do we assess it? The thing that makes movies powerful is that they don't stop for you. A film studies major can analyze a movie frame by frame, but that's their prerogative and most people don't do that. It also doesn't necessarily mean anything, because looking at a movie frame by frame is different than watching the cumulative effect of a movie. So, what does it mean to have a barrage of information that you only partially get? Even if you're able to look it up, even if it's cited at the end, it doesn't necessarily mean what it means in the context of time, you know? That, to me, is the manipulative core of speech. You can't press pause and say, "No, that's bullshit." So, a very vapid assessment of film versus literature can take on depth if you're steamrolled by it. You could find yourself agreeing, and then the question of whether or not it's plagiarized becomes a necessary parallel concern. ♦

Coming Soon to Acropolis:

- *In My Room* (Ulrich Köhler, 2018)—September 20 at Echo Park Film Center



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