



curated by  
TRANSGRESSIVE NORTH

in partnership with  
TradFest and  
Filmhouse Edinburgh

*Supported by Creative Scotland  
and Film Hub Scotland, part of  
the BFI's Film Audience Network*

## Play Me Something

Timothy Neat

Scotland (1989)

One of the great, unsung gems of Scottish cinema, Timothy Neat's *Play Me Something* is a deeply significant film for Scottish and international folk culture in a number of key respects.

*Play Me Something* is deeply meaningful firstly as an *event*, in bringing together such a remarkable cast of characters. The film's casting gives it the feeling almost of a cultural conference of some of Scotland's most distinctive voices (along with England's Berger and Switzerland's Mohr); a forum for discussion which indeed, given its focus on orality and cross-cultural dialogue, perhaps it is. When and where else, can you find Hamish Henderson, John Berger, Margaret Bennett, Liz Lochhead, Tilda Swinton, Jean Mohr and Charlie Barron all in one place?

The film is also remarkable for the tactful sense of allegory that informs its commentary on European narratives of modernisation. Folk culture in *Play Me Something* has, to borrow a phrase from James Clifford, both 'roots' and 'routes'. Whilst the film evokes not one but two cultural localities - Barra airport (in itself a symbol of 'routes' from the local to the international) and Bruno's hometown in the Italian mountains – each is simultaneously a locus of authentic culture and a departure point for travel and encounter. *Play Me Something* thus paints folk culture (Scottish and Italian) as simultaneously bounded and local on one hand, and mobile, active and international on the other. There is little sense here of a reservation politics, of salvage, or of looking backwards at a disappearing, Edenic authenticity. Rather, folk culture is traveling, dialectical and alive.

Perhaps one of *Play Me Something's* most significant achievements, however, is its treatment of orality and storytelling. On a literal level the film thematises the power of oral storytelling as a medium both transportive, and possessing the power to bind together a group of disparate individuals. Over the course of the film the stranded travellers at Barra airport loosen up, cosy up, engage, and draw together, magnetized by Berger's story. What is truly remarkable about *Play Me Something's* invocation of storytelling, however, is how the film *renders* orality; how it uses the cinematic medium to enact and embody the oral performance of a story. This raises the interesting question of translation, of how a film might attempt to transpose a story from an oral medium into a cinematic medium. What might be lost? What might be gained?

Faced with 'translating' an oral story, many directors choose to stage a literal enactment in the manner of a flashback, where the film cuts away from a depicted narrator, whose voice is heard over the story's opening sections, before fading out to cede primary diegesis (storytelling control) to the film's visual narrative. Such cinematic attempts to translate oral mediums are haunted, however, by the way in which film 'freezes' its content into a definitive, hard-edged, 'discrete' form. Whilst in oral traditions, stories and songs pass from one voice to another, being subtly reshaped and rearticulated in each performance in a manner that could be described as profoundly democratic. A song or a story can be held and shaped by anyone who sings it; is that sense of democracy - of many hands and many voices, of stories passing from teller to teller - impossible to achieve in a film?

*Play Me Something* suggests otherwise. Whilst the film itself is hard-edged and (unless recut or remixed) appears in exactly the same form every time it is screened, Neat generously allows space within the film's construction for its story to appear differently to every viewer. Rather than following the conventional device of enacting an orally-told story like a flashback, Neat gives us different layers of information, none of which ever provide the whole picture, thus leaving each of us the space to 'join the dots' and complete the picture in our own way, through our individual imaginative engagement.

The film can be seen almost like a musical round or a fugue, with different, visually-distinct layers placed in counterpoint to each other. In the first instance we hear Berger's words (and in the earlier stages of the film, we see him too – a mesmerizing storyteller in his own right). Berger's story takes place primarily in Venice, and thus Neat shows us documentary footage of Venice, and of a communist festival celebration similar to the one that Bruno and Marietta attend. There is enough concordance between the place and events Berger describes and those we are shown on screen to stimulate the imagination, but not enough to pinpoint or define how *exactly* those things happened or how they looked; that is left to our imagination, as indeed it would be with a story told orally, were we too sitting in Barra airport listening to Berger first hand.

A second layer of footage intercut throughout the film, this time in black and white, shows us what is presumably Bruno's home in the Italian mountains. We don't see Bruno himself, and the footage shows us details, not wholes, again leaving us free to determine how exactly the footage fits into the world of the story. Most playfully of all, throughout the Venice documentary footage are intercut brief glimpses of black and white photographs (taken by John Berger's regular collaborator Jean Mohr) of characters we assume to be Bruno and Marietta. The photos provide brief, fleeting moments of lucid insight, but once again leave our imagination free to fill in the details beyond the static, fleeting images we are shown.

The different layers of the film stimulate and orientate our imagination in a similar manner to that in which an oral storyteller would, were we listening to him or her first hand. And yet they leave us, the audience, free to provide the ultimate visualization ourselves. Thus whilst the 'telling' of *Play Me Something's* story remains the same each time the film is shown, its reflection in the imaginations of its audience (and thus – arguably - its ultimate form) changes with every subsequent screening. We could therefore argue that *Play Me Something* IS able to achieve something of the soft-edged, communal essence of oral story form, which changes shape depending on who is experiencing it. Like a story, the film simultaneously makes room for our own individual imaginations whilst bringing us together, for a moment in time, as a community.

**Jamie Chambers / [www.folkfilmgathering.com](http://www.folkfilmgathering.com)**