

quip or a telling glance.

It's true that *The Plagiarists* introduces numerous red herrings—what, for instance, is going on with that small white boy who's occasionally seen peering through the upstairs railing at Clip's house?—that are abruptly discarded without resolution, but it's hard to call out the film for incoherence when there's so much follow through in the realm of its ideas. This is a rigorous film concerned with questions of cultural appropriation, learned behavior, and the very texture of life in our content-saturated present (a feeling not exclusive to urban centers), but one with the good humor and wisdom to disguise itself as something far more familiar. ♦



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ABOUT THE FILM

Co-written by experimental filmmakers James N. Kienitz Wilkins and Robin Schavoir, *The Plagiarists* is at once a hilarious send-up of low-budget American indie filmmaking and a probing inquiry into race, relationships, and the social uncanny. A young novelist (Lucy Kaminsky) and her cinematographer boyfriend (Eamon Monaghan) are waylaid by a snowstorm on their way to visit a friend in upstate New York and are taken in by the kindly yet enigmatic Clip (Michael “Clip” Payne of Parliament Funkadelic), who puts them up for the night. But an accidental discovery months later recasts in an unnerving light what had seemed like an agreeable evening, stoking resentments both latent and not-so-latent. Exhilaratingly intelligent and distinctively shot on a vintage TV-news camera, *The Plagiarists* is a work whose provocations are inseparable from its pleasures.

TRT: 76 min

In person: James N. Kienitz Wilkins

The Plagiarists by Carson Lund

The following article was originally published by Slant Magazine, March 29, 2019

Tyler (Eamon Monaghan) and Anna (Lucy Kaminsky), the ambitious but self-defeating white hipster couple from Philly at the center of *The Plagiarists*, run into engine issues on their drive to visit a friend in snowy upstate New York. While bickering over the matter on the side of the road, they meet an amiable black man, Clip (Parliament Funkadelic’s William Michael Payne), who offers to take the pair in while they wait for a mechanic. The film’s setup—combined with its boxy, interlaced Betacam SP shooting format—immediately evokes a feel-good mumblecore from yesteryear, perhaps even a palliative of racial unification that would hypothetically conclude with the couple’s realization that nothing cures an ailing relationship quite like a trip to the country and a privilege check.

That it’s something altogether uncannier is no surprise given the film’s pedigree. Directed under the name of Peter Parlow, *The Plagiarists* is actually the work of co-writers James N. Kienitz Wilkins and Robin Schavoir, collaborators on several uncategorizable film and audio projects and accomplished avant-gardists in their own right. *The Plagiarists*’s artists-on-a-rural-retreat premise recalls that of Schavoir’s *The Jag*, while its serpentine, discursive form, which knowingly flirts with the possible character-centric indie it might have become even as it spins out in increasingly curious directions, is sprung from the same searching intelligence that Wilkins brings to bear on his more openly essayistic experimental films.

Though hearkening back to a stale narrative form, *The Plagiarists* quickly asserts its connection to the zeitgeist as Tyler, Anna, and Clip begin chatting over Yuenglings and cheap red wine (“Menage a Trois” reads the suggestive title on the bottle). Tyler’s an aspiring filmmaker but workaday cinematographer, and he’s scheduled to be back in the city for an Evian gig the following morning, a job Anna admits “could end up paying our rent for the next couple months.” Much conversation is had about the particulars of shooting advertising content as opposed to personal art, and at one point the discussion leads to questions of video fidelity, since Tyler’s been contracted to deliver footage in 6K RED RAW even though he displays a giddy fondness for old video technology and even namedrops Dogme 95. Coincidentally, Clip keeps a closet full of dusty early broadcast equipment, including, it’s implied, the very camera model on which *The Plagiarists* is being shot.

This detailed consideration of the nuances of visual language is echoed in the film’s second half by a preoccupation with verbal and written language. Anna is an aspiring novelist and shares her boyfriend’s lack of inspiration in her chosen discipline, though unlike him has failed to find a profitable avenue for her work. She communicates her professional anxieties with Clip, who, in addition to showing support, launches into an effusive, poetic monologue about his childhood that reawakens her creative juices. When *The Plagiarists* jumps ahead to summer, however, abandoning Clip entirely to focus on Tyler and Anna’s return trip to visit their friend, the monologue that lives on so vividly in Anna’s imagination is suddenly undercut by a surprise revelation: It was plagiarized, word for word, from a bestselling novel that she’s reading—a monument of literary solipsism whose identity is best withheld so as to preserve the potential comic value of its unveiling.

The Plagiarists’s final act focuses on the rift that develops between Tyler and Anna over their differing responses to this befuddling new information, which the former insists is either unprovable or trivial and which sparks for the latter something of an existential crisis. Allison (Emily Davis), the off-the-grid bohemian who finally gets to see her city-dwelling friends after their midwinter setback, acts as mediator to this debate, in addition to providing something of a postscript in the film’s final scene, a monologue about the differences between film and literature that’s itself revealed to be plagiarized—in this case from an even more hilarious source. To realize this, one must pay close attention to the credits, which also expose the film’s cheeky non-diegetic music to be culled entirely from low-cost stock websites. In a way, *The Plagiarists*’s credit roll is as crucial to decoding the film’s slippery meaning as any of the material within the film proper—itself something of a formal innovation.

What keeps all this playful self-reflexivity and misdirection afloat is the film’s genuinely engrossing writing and acting, surface pleasures that coexist alongside Wilkins and Schavoir’s self-conscious distancing tactics. The script is littered with references to the current moment, touching on everything from Airbnb and Blue Apron to buying shares in Facebook and listening to film criticism on NPR, and when there’s not some greater insight to be found, there’s at least a spot-on cultural observation told through a snarky