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Wasted Words

Michel Chion

The world is in motion and in chiaroscuro. We always see one side of things, always moving, always changing. Their shape dissolves into a shadow, sketches itself in the motion, loses itself in the darkness, or in the excess of light. And our attention is also in chiaroscuro. It comes and goes from one object to another, and focuses successively on the details and on the whole.

Films seem to have been invented in order to represent all of this. They show bodies in light and shadow, they leave objects and find them again, they isolate them with a dolly-in, or relocate them with a dolly-out.

There is only one element which film has not been able to treat this way, and which today still remains constrained to perpetual clarity and perpetual stability. We must always hear every word, from one end to the other, in order that no word be lost, that each word be understood one after the other. Why? What would it matter if we lost three words in what the hero says? Yet this has remained almost taboo for film. We are barely beginning now to learn to limit the clarity of dialogue.

Let us begin by remembering that silent film was not, in spite of its name, deprived of language. The latter was present on two levels: explicitly in the text of captions, which alternated with the images; implicitly in the very way these images were cut, shot, and edited to constitute discourses in which a shot or a gesture was the equivalent of a word or of a syntagma. "There is the house. Peter opens the door," they said.

This use of the intertitle represented a type of constraint, that of breaking the continuity of images, and it implied the conspicuous presence in film of a foreign body, of an impurity. But at the same time, it allowed a great deal of narrative flexibility: the intertitle could be used for locating the time and setting, as well as for summarizing part of the action, or for

giving a distancing opinion of the characters and, of course, to transcribe approximately the spoken dialogue.

In general, of course, the text gave only a summary, an interpretation of what was being said. It did not offer itself as an exhaustive transcription. This text could choose the direct style, but also the indirect style ("she tells him that . . ."). In short, it had at its disposal the entire narrative arsenal of the novel.

Sound put an end to all of this, at least in the beginning, when it reduced the text present in the film to a single formula: dialogue spoken in the present tense by the characters. And to this day, this is how most films function.

This development did not occur all at once. During a transition period of five or six years, various forms were tried and tested until nearly all films were based on dialogue.

In my essay *La Toile trouée*, about speech in cinema, I suggested distinguishing three uses of speech in films, which I termed *parole-théâtre*, *parole-texte*, *parole-émanation*: theatrical speech, textual speech, and emanation speech (Chion 1988, 92ff).

In theatrical speech, which is the most common case, characters exchange dialogue that is integrally heard by the spectator. In special cases, we can hear their internal voice in the present tense, analogous to a theatrical "aside." But in these cases, the text which has been heard remains one of the concrete elements of the action, powerless over the reality revealed by the image.

Textual speech is able to make visible in the images that it evokes through sound. That is, to change the setting at random. This great power is generally given only to certain privileged characters, in films which use this type of speech, and only for a very limited time. Rapidly, this image-creating mode of speech stands aside and is replaced by the type of speech spoken by the characters. The few examples of films using textual speech abundantly are famous: Sacha Guitry's *Roman d'un tricheur*, for instance, and certain of Woody Allen's films. However, brief moments of textual speech may be found in many films.

The third type of speech is even rarer. It's what we might call emanation speech, where speech is not necessarily completely heard and understood. In any case, this type of speech isn't tied to the heart of what might be called *action*, in a general sense. Speech becomes therefore an emanation of the characters, an aspect of themselves, like their silhouette: significant but not essential for the *mise-en-scène*.

In theatrical speech, *mise-en-scène* (in a general sense, from screenplay to editing by way of stage business, lighting, camera movements, and so forth) is conceived almost unconsciously—shall we say—in order to make the speech of the characters into the central action, in the process making

us forget that it structures the whole film. This explains the paradox according to which certain films which we remember as action films, like many American films, are actually nine times out of ten dialogue films, but which treat the dialogue as action. The most striking example is *Rio Bravo*, directed by Howard Hawks, but also the films of Alfred Hitchcock, in spite of his reputed contempt for dialogue.

The principle of talking while doing something, in classical cinema, helps to restructure the film according to and around speech. A door which is slammed, a cigarette which is lit, a camera movement or a reframing, everything can become punctuation, and therefore a heightening of speech. This technique makes it easier to listen to the text, while focusing attention on it.

In this type of cinema, even the moments when characters are not talking make sense precisely because they are moments of interruption in a verbal continuum. The *kiss*, for example, interrupts speech and breaks up the confrontation, thus settling the verbal impasse—an effect much more inherent to film than to theater or opera.

But emanation speech, in which speech is relativized and decentered in relation to the film, is the rarest case, and sound film has barely used it, for complex reasons which we will attempt to evoke. Still, we find emanation speech, for instance, in the films of Jacques Tati, and in another manner in the films of Tarkovsky and Fellini, as well as in isolated sequences of other films.

In one way, these three types of speech could be used in silent films: textual speech, theatrical speech, and also emanation speech, since characters spent a lot of time talking and much of what they said was not translated. The content of their speech, therefore, did not force the *mise-en-scène* and the interpretation to value it word for word. With sound, this freedom disappeared little by little. While increasingly adopting and subtly restructuring itself around theatrical speech, film was aligning itself on the model of a verbal and linear continuum.

Filmmakers were conscious of this risk, and many tried, from the very beginning of the talkies, to relativize speech, in other words to try to inscribe it in a visual, rhythmic, gestural, and sensory totality, in which it would no longer remain the central and determining element.

We are aware that this question has many aspects: technical, historical, aesthetic, linguistic. Let us make clear that for some time now it has been possible to achieve a “verbal chiaroscuro,” either through direct sound or by post-synchronization. By verbal chiaroscuro I mean an image of human speech, in which at one moment we understand what is said, and at another we understand less, and at times nothing at all.

It has been possible for a long time, for example on a shoot, to take two simultaneous recordings of the same voice, one clearly defined, the

other less so. Then, by mixing, it is possible to move continuously from one to the other and back. However, this is done quite rarely. I am not suggesting that this process can be carried out without technical difficulties. Yet the preservation of dialogue intelligibility involves no greater technical difficulties.

For the time being, it will be most helpful to review various isolated attempts at relativizing speech, primarily during the early years of sound cinema.

Rarefaction

The simplest approach involves rarefying the presence of speech. This is what René Clair attempted, notably in *Sous les toits de Paris* (1930). In principle, this option allowed the conservation of many of silent film’s visual values, but it also involved two problems: on the one hand, situations must be specially created in order to explain, more or less artificially, the absence of the voice; on the other hand, we sense a feeling of silence and emptiness between the few spoken sequences, which begin to sound like a foreign body within the film. For example, this is what we feel in the dialogue scenes of one of the few modern films which adopts René Clair’s ideas. I am speaking of Stanley Kubrick’s *2001, A Space Odyssey* (1968), where speech is concentrated in just a few localized scenes.

Proliferation and Ad Libs

The second method achieves a similar effect by using a contrary approach: by accumulating words, by superimposing them, and by proliferating speech, lines annul each other, or rather annul their influence on the structure of the film. Many characters talk at the same time, quickly link their replies, or say things of “no importance.” In his film *La Tête d’un homme* (1933), filled with various sound experiments, Julien Duvivier tried to treat one of the scenes on the model of a collective chattering, a proliferation of speech surrounding an event: in this case the breakdown of a car, simulated by the police in order to allow a suspect to escape, so that they can follow him to the culprit.

In this scene from *La Tête d’un homme*, the relativization of speech is reinforced by the counterpoint between speech and the image, which doesn’t show the speakers. But when we see Duvivier’s film in its totality, we feel that this scene is not integrated fluidly into the rest of the film, which treats dialogue in a more traditional fashion. Later, filmmakers will employ this process only for specific types of scene, especially meal scenes, during precise moments. These moments resemble imitations of

the theater, when the text calls for "crowd noise," with a large number of ad libs.

This process is especially clear in the eating scenes from Jean Renoir's *La Chienne* (1931), Ingmar Bergman's *Hour of the Wolf* (1968) and Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979). In all three films, the meal scenes in question involve particular moments which break with the rest of the film, and last only a few seconds. Later we will see how Federico Fellini has generalized this concept in a particularly personal manner.

Mixture of Languages and the Use of a Foreign Tongue

Some isolated films have relativized speech, simply by using a foreign language not understood by most of the spectators, or sometimes by mixing various languages, which is to say they relativize languages with respect to each other.

In *Anahatan* (1953), Josef von Sternberg uses Japanese actors who speak in their own language, and who are neither subtitled nor dubbed; the voice-over of a narrator—Sternberg himself—summarizes the story and the dialogues, and distances us from the characters. As in a silent film, we need the help of a second text in order to understand what the characters are saying.

In *Et la lumière fut* (1989), Otar Iosseliani does the same thing with African characters. In a scene from *Death in Venice* (1971), on the beach of the Lido, Luchino Visconti uses the situation (an international beach for rich foreigners) in order to mix languages: Hungarian, French, English, Italian. The same thing occurs in Jacques Tati's *Playtime* (1968) and in certain of Fellini's films.

Narrative Commentary over the Dialogue

In certain films, a narrative voice-over partially covers the dialogue spoken by the characters, thus relativizing the dialogues and their content. For example, this technique is used in Max Ophüls's *Le Plaisir* (1952).

Submerged Speech

Selected scenes in certain films are based on the idea of a "sound bath," into which conversations dive and then surface again. With this method, the filmmaker uses the situation itself as an alibi, either in a crowd situation or a natural setting, to reveal and then conceal the words, thus relativizing human speech while locating it in space.

In Tati's *Les vacances de Monsieur Hulot* (1953), the sound bath in which speech is immersed is itself often made of speech, but of heavily

reverberant speech that is difficult to understand and whose sources are usually invisible: in this case, children playing and screaming, never seen throughout the film.

Loss of Intelligibility

Sometimes there is not only a flux and reflux of speech, in the sonorous totality, but precisely the localized awareness of a loss of the voice's intelligibility, which we continue to hear by itself.

In his first sound film, *Blackmail* (1929), Hitchcock tried a famous experiment with the loss of the voice's intelligibility, in order to express the subjectivity of the heroine. The previous night, she had killed a man who tried to rape her, and now she fears that her guilt will be discovered. She hears a neighbor speaking about the crime; in her chatter we hear only the word "knife," the weapon of the crime. This attempt at a "close-up" of a word, like the close-up of a face, was very courageous, but it remained quite isolated. Even Hitchcock himself repeated the experiment only once or twice, in *Rope*, for example.

What is the problem with this approach? In this blurring of the voice, speech is transformed into a sonorous haze interrupted by only a few clear passages. We thus hear only a technical process, instead of a subjective experience. Notice that the visual equivalent of the same process, where haze is used to express loss of consciousness, has become an established rhetorical figure.

One aspect of the problem lies in the particularity of our auditory attention, as compared to our visual attention. As easy as it is to eliminate something from our field of vision, by turning our head or closing our eyes totally or partially, it is quite difficult for the ear, and cannot be done in the same selective manner. Even the sounds that we don't listen to actively, our ears listen to nonetheless, inscribing the sound on our brain as on a tape recording, whether we listen to the sound or not—even in our sleep or under hypnosis.

In a few scenes of *M* (1931), Fritz Lang also attempted a transition from verbal clarity to verbal haze, but more as a dramatic process for linking scenes, with no reference to a notion of subjectivity. In this example, the two scenes are linked by the idea of the sonorous haze, moving first from clear to hazy then from hazy to clear. Here we have the equivalent of the optical process. The loss of intelligibility is the result of three factors. The first two are acoustic: the voices become more distant and increase in reverberation. The third is a psychological factor: a character becomes nervous and talks in a confused fashion. However, this process requires an extreme psychological situation, and cannot be used at random.

Decentering

In conclusion, we will cite a more subtle mode of relativizing speech, which does not touch on the acoustic nature of speech, but which uses the entirety of the *mise-en-scène*. In "decentering," the clarity and intelligibility of the text remain untouched, but the *mise-en-scène* is not centered on speech, and therefore doesn't induce us to listen to the dialogue. Speech goes one way and the rest goes the other way. In Fellini's *Casanova* (1976) or in Tarkovski's *Stalker* (1979), for example, we understand almost everything acoustically, but the cutting and the interpretation don't emphasize the content of the lines. The impression is completely strange and novel.

Had I been able to see *Nashville* (1975) again (unavailable in France at this time), I would have liked to show how Robert Altman achieves a similar effect in a different manner. Regarding the relativization of speech in this film, Rick Altman has written a very interesting and suggestive article, containing fascinating developments on this topic (Altman 1991a).

Of course, by decentering I don't mean what is traditionally considered as subversive deconstruction, for example in the films of Jean-Luc Godard. In my opinion, what Godard does with the text in many films does not involve this notion of decentering. For Godard, even if the text is more or less hidden by other sounds or by heavy reverberation, speech remains the center of attention, the main structuring element. Godard is like a little boy, who derives pleasure from doing the opposite of what others are doing. Yet by accomplishing the opposite, he succeeds only in reproducing and reinforcing the familiar dialogue-centered structure, but in an inverted fashion.

What we might call *decentered speaking cinema*, making heavy use of emanation speech, is something else again—a decidedly polyphonic cinema. We find prefigurations and examples of this not only in the films of certain auteur directors, but also in contemporary action films and special effects movies. In the latter, the use of varying sensory effects and the presence of certain sensations and rhythms create the feeling that the world is not reduced to the function of embodying dialogue.

In a certain sense, this new decentered speaking cinema is like the silent cinema, but with the sound. It could give rise to the third period of narrative cinema.

Historical Speculations