

Masterthesis im Schwerpunkt Film
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Hochschule für Bildende Künste Hamburg 2024

after 14 semesters
Written between January-March 2024
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Last year, Harmony Korine said: "But even then, the hard part now is just the idea of looking through a viewfinder and filming, like, people speaking at the table. All this dialogue always gets in the way. All these things that you don't really care about. I don't know." Two years ago, Jean-Luc Godard passed away at his own will. After giving world his earlier charming films, for which he became known and about which he later seemed to dis regard to the point of —

I'll start again.

Last year, Harmony Korine said: “But even then, the hard part now is just the idea of looking through a viewfinder and filming, like, people speaking at a table. All this dialogue always gets in the way. All these things that you don’t really care about. I don’t know.”¹ Two years ago, Jean-Luc Godard passed away at his own will. After giving the world his earlier charming films for which he became known and about which he later seemed to disregard to the point of abandoning except a few tender moments he reminisced, his repeating interest throughout his films, more so in the last forty years of his life was the relationship and riddle between language, speech and cinema. His films had always a self-reflective edge, a way of looking into itself and its medium, thinking about how cinema came to be the way it is.

This passion culminates in his project *Histoire(s) du Cinema* where he strongly feels that cinema’s potential was lost at several moments. These are the so-called deaths of cinema. Despite the gimmicky nature of this melancholic idea, it points towards the missed opportunities, the wasted possibilities. One of these deaths was marked by the transition from silent cinema to talkies in 1929. In his words:

1 Samantha Bergeson, “Harmony Korine Reveals Terrence Malick Wrote a Script He Wants Him to Direct”, Indiewire, 23 August 2023, <https://www.indiewire.com/news/general-news/harmony-korine-terrence-malick-wrote-script-to-direct-1234898783/>

"If we eliminate the dialogue, we don't know what's happening. With Lubitsch, we understood everything. It got lost with the emergence of dialogue and the whole power of language."² He believed an essential quality of cinema as an art was lost, or let's say, weakened with this mutation.

Why Was Cinema Born

Godard's (1930-2022) one other obsession, often mediated through this transition, was his repeated investigation into the question of why was cinema born and with which properties and qualities it's equipped as an art. The question works better to be an aesthetic one, rather than a technical one for which the explanations would be easily given, such as a series of progression of technologies, from camera obscure leading up to projection of series of stills, making the illusion of movement.

We search for questions that animate our understanding of our craft and art. Hopefully the right ones that work for us. Through time, we abandon the wrong ones. They are not so much intellectual ruminations (except when they are), but concern the nuts and bolts of making a movie. Thinking about these questions contributes to the difficult and

2 Stéphane Delorme & Joachim Lepastier, "Ardent Hope", *Les Cahiers Du Cinéma*, no. 759 (October 2019), trans. Srikanth Srinivasan & Andy Rector, <https://kinoslang.blogspot.com/2019/12/ardent-hope-interview-with-godard.html>.

never-ending task of figuring out what works and what doesn't. It seems that the question often asked was what can only cinema do. Especially the now obsolete discussion whether cinema is a seventh art on its own right, is useless to revive, but there's a sense in asking and reminding and returning to those essential questions such as how cinema is different than other arts. But don't get me wrong, what's at the stake is not the boring and task of deciding what kind of moving images are qualified to cinema, but more what are they to cinema as an art. Of course, this question would bring some qualities from other arts since cinema uses their means. Nevertheless, now over a hundred years old, cinema must contain some seeds of authentic means in its own power. Things that only it can do.

Back in 1896, cinema seems to be born with an already mature and almost divinatory set of interests. It is incredible that its evident fascinations are there from the beginning, from the first films of Lumiere brothers. Scenes of city life bustling in crossroads and squares, bustling circuses, lively parades, the launch of a ship into water, a gardener tending to a garden with a hose, agile acrobats, a sprawling family frolicking on a beach, children joyfully leaping into the sea, a train pulling into a station, the demolition of a wall, a family with a baby enjoying a meal outdoors, the grooming of a horse,

a mischievous child playing a prank on a gardener, and workers streaming out of factories. Human and animal bodies toiling and moving through spaces. It is as though the catalogue of Lumiere is an extensive film to come. And a pretty comprehensive one at that. These thematic fascinations may have drawn inspiration from painting and photography, yet what they all conspicuously share is an exuberant fascination with movement. In his 1971 book *The World Viewed*, Stanley Cavell (1926-2018) quotes Charles Baudelaire's (1821-67) book *Painter of Our World*:

In whatever attitude it may be caught, at whatever speed it may be running, a carriage, like a ship, derives from its movement a mysterious and complex grace which is very difficult to note down in shorthand. The pleasure which it affords the artist's eye would seem to spring from the series of geometrical shapes which this object, already so intricate, whether it be ship or carriage, cuts swiftly and successively in space.³

Could this be it? Grace. Well now, we are at the depths of spirituality. But there's something to it. This mysterious and complex grace derived from movements of bodies and things seems to be at the

3 Baudelaire, Charles. *Painter of Modern Life*. Translated by Jonathan Mayne (New York: Phaidon Press Limited 1965), 40.

center of cinema since its beginnings. Cinema has a close bond with movement. Or for that matter, a lack of it in the form of stillness. Can't all genres of early narrative cinema be traced back to these fascinations? Which undoubtedly inspired from everyday life. Heist films with their robbed trains, chase scenes in comedies, historical dramas, early forms of comedic entertainment such as slapstick. Movement of bodies and things were what animated them. The sheer delight of watching bodies running, chasing, slipping, falling and sometimes piling up.

The filmmakers, fearing this substance was lost, often returned to it in the form of mantras. For example, something observed by D.W. Griffith (1875-1948) a year before his death, also repeatedly echoed by Jean Marie Straub (1933-2022) in various occasions, was his formulation of "beauty of moving trees in the wind". The full quote goes almost like an elegy as follows: "What the modern movie lacks is beauty—the beauty of moving wind in the trees, the little movement in a beautiful blowing on the blossoms in the trees. That they have forgotten entirely. (...) The moving picture is beautiful; the moving of wind on beautiful trees is more beautiful than a painting."⁴

4 D. W. Griffith in Ezra Goodman, *The Fifty-Year Decline and Fall of Hollywood* (New York: Simon and Schuster 1961)

Plus, don't the most clicked videos on TikTok or Snapchat or certain Twitter/X accounts which accumulate videos, snippets of daily lives all around the world, still exhibit an attraction and bear witness to our fascination with movement? Cats do have a mysterious and complex grace in their movements. So do how mozzarellas are made or how food to be served for more than 500 people is cooked, avalanches, crocodiles, 3d-rendered liminal spaces, two spiders fighting, horses, carpets being deep cleaned, an old Mid-century table being renovated. We watch most of these snippets with sound off. We usually know nothing about why, when, who of these videos but we watch. We are at the pleasurable command of watching for the sake of watching⁵ and I say that in a good way.

A Few More Things Specific to Cinema

Henri Langlois (1914-77) attributed the birth of modern narrative cinema to D.W. Griffith, who established the laws and lays the foundations of an unknown art, definitively torn from the limits of what he called as the primitive cinema, by:

adding to the inner rhythm of the images,
to that of the movement of time, born of the
cutting and succession of shots, that caused

⁵ Thanks to Julia Tielke who had gifted me this phrase six years ago.

by the last metric of the images in shots of variable intensity, according to the distance of the camera in relation to what we see on the screen. And this is how a new rhythm is born caused by the changes in the dimension of the image, and from the coexistence of these three rhythms is born the notion which is the essential mark of the seventh art: that of montage.⁶

In terms of depth, which is spatially connected by and in fact enabled by the mysterious grace of the moving trees in the wind, he talks how Griffith introduced an element that all the directors who came before him knew it but didn't utilize:

Cinema was the art of movement. Cinema is a surface. Cinema is a screen on which a work is shown, this work being a surface. There's no relief. All the primitives before Griffith had created a movement on the surface. The images would succeed one another like somebody walking. Whereas Griffith, by multiplying, by giving the shot a metric value, in terms of language, created relief. The film would move not only from left to right, but from the background to the foreground, and the other way around, the images thus being multiplied. And he made it with a Pathé camera, with the same film as anyone's, and with his brain.

6 Henri Langlois, *Ecrits de cinéma (1931-1977)*, ed. Bernard Benoliel and Bernard Eisenschitz (Paris: Flammarion, 2014), 501.

So as early as 1910s, what's specific to modern narrative cinema were charted out: movement, depth, editing. Langlois here evokes relief for describing the creation of such multiplying volume in the frame, relief being a method of painting that concerns moulding, carving, or stamping in which the design stands out from the surface so as to bring volume in an otherwise two-dimensional destination. Robert Bresson (1907-99): "The end is the screen, which is only a surface. Submit your film to the reality of the screen, as a painter submits his picture to the reality of the canvas itself and of the colours applied on it, the sculptor his figures to the reality of the marble or the bronze."⁷

I Do Have A Thesis

Right there, this loss of something essential to the art of cinema will be the main pillar of the upcoming pages. As all throughout the history of cinephilia love lists, I am going to a list mode to give an overview of what will come:

- ◊ The question what cinema is equipped with as an art is important. Three elements can be noted for their specific alliance with cinema: movement, space, editing. Cinema concerns filmed space

⁷ Robert Bresson, *Notes on Cinematography*, trans. Jonathan Griffin (New York: Urizen Books, 1977, 7.

and movement of human bodies and objects in it. Two huge and other cardinal things to omit within the scope of here: time, which can be conceived as a function of movement, and montage.

- ◊ I'll argue a bulk of today's narrative films suffer from a loss of the capabilities of cinema. Many reasons can be pursued for this. But for me it relates to loss of a sense of space and movement, which in return relates the necessities and habits of talking films, of speech, of dialogue.
- ◊ There will be titbits from the history of the transition from silent cinema to talkies. How it was shocking, fast and painful. How filmmakers dealt with it. How just in two years silent cinema was obliterated and became a relic of past, scraping through for its life in revival houses.
- ◊ Synchronization of sound and image was itchy for what it would bring and it happened.
- ◊ Today's mainstream narrative films suffer from a lack of spatial expression and sound sounding what's seen and dialogue is used to make sure what's happening is understood. This is naturally a drawback in capabilities and potential of cinema. Today's cinema is a product of that dominance of the voice and the text it carries. And a guaranteed clear delivery at all costs.
- ◊ There are films that go against this dominance, restore a strong sense of space and explore new

relations between voice and image/sound.

Cinema, Art of Space

Eric Rohmer (1920-2010) wrote an 1948 article called "Cinema, Art of Space". He talked about how "space would seem to be the general form of sensibility most essential to film, given that film is a visual art."⁸ Evaluation together with theater, he also touched on how cinematic space is defined by "the narrowness of its visual surface and by the breadth of its place of action. The director must therefore determine not only the interior of each shot according to a certain spatial concept but also the total space to be filmed: The coming and going of the train in Buster Keaton's *The General* depicts a very precise spatial obsession."⁹

Following his example of Buster Keaton (1895-1966), let's take comedy. The expression of each director gives rise to different relationships to the spaces used in comedy films. A rough comparison between three comedians by Manny Farber (1917-2008) in passing remarks in one interview¹⁰, would yield some aha statements: Charlie Chaplin (1889-1977) hero commands space around him. The frame

8 Eric Rohmer, *The Taste For Beauty*, trans. Carol Volk (Cambridge:Cambridge University Press, 1989), 19.

9 Rohmer, *ibid.*, 19.

10 Manny Farber & Patricia Patterson, interviewed by Richard Thompson, *Film Comment*, Vol. 13, No. 3, May-June 1977 (New York: Film Society of Lincoln Center 1977)

is omnipresent. Everything that happens around happens inside it. It is almost the space dissolves around Chaplin's hero. Compare it with Laurel (1890-1965) and Hardy (1892-1957) where two characters are going and back, sometimes leaving completely the frame. While in Buster Keaton, similar to Chaplin, things happen strictly inside the frame and a sense of control about the frame can be felt. But he doesn't obsessively adapt the frame to himself. All of these give us a different vision of the world.

So, a work of cinema is where the elements like space and movement are organized so that it forms an image, a vision. Whose vision? That of the filmmaker. Strictly talking, that's one of the things mainstream narrative cinema suffer. This loss comes with dullness of organization of movement and space, and in turn reflects hollow visions. So many works we are watching have no soul behind them, no vision binding, condensing and concentrating it together, no voice to be heard.

They have no spatial form or sensibility or concept that corresponds to the elements conveyed in the film. They are crowded with dialogue that needs to be clearly delivered. Sounds indicate what's seen and dialogue is used towards making sure what's happening is grasped. My argument is the arrival of talking films and the dominance of speech over

not only image but other elements of sound had this seed that flowered towards this dullness. Visually flat scenes are presented with dialogues that bear a relation to hardly any spatial or sonic concept of the film or to the total space of where it is being filmed.

It wasn't always like this. For example, right after the advent of sound cinema, there was an era of some works from the heights of 1930s and 1940s Hollywood cinema which generated a balanced and masterful amalgamation of dialogue, action, camera movement —add more elements like costume, décor and we have what will be later called *mise-en-scene*.

Perhaps it'd be good to open up a little bit more what I mean by *mise-en-scene*, that elusive and still many-faceted word. Shots make scenes and scenes make up the film. Shots consist of different parts like costume, light, props, camera work, and these parts are in relation to each other and serve a coherent purpose. This purpose is often difficult to name and define, and usually relates to a feeling. But it is definitely informed by, but not limited to, the emotional content of parts.

In each craft and art, artists are presented with a set of problems and their works are results of this problem-solving. Everybody does whatever works. However, the workflows artists execute pertains to their style and to the whole of the work, rather than

being a set of standardized procedures. They must be decisions which reflect a vision. These choices then would be meaningful in the whole of the work and reflective of the intention of the artist.

It feels that the main problem in mainstream narrative films became the problem of delivery. Films are opportunities to expose dialogue, the distinct filmic elements serving characters talking. Complex blocking is abandoned for the modes of what the American film scholar David Bordwell (1927-2024) calls "walk and talk", "sit and deliver", "stand and deliver" in a new style which he calls "intensified continuity" defined by rapid editing, free-ranging camera and reliance on close shots. These two solutions seem to emerge as two hegemonic solutions to the delivery of dialogue.

No doubt that this is fueled and strengthened by industrial leanings. The practice of coverage and the secure standardization of delivery of a film from script to screen ensures a steady of flow at the assembly line. This would explain how in mainstream narrative cinema and series there are established and standardized solutions to problems. However, this trend is not limited to mainstream narrative cinema and series but can even be observed in arthouse films.

Now I am not against people sitting and talking.

Hannah Arendt: "Nobody can think unless he stops."¹¹ As long as it is part of a vision, thrusting also by internal necessities of what's there inside the film. The problem for me is the lack of imagination and resulting drop in artistry. The easy way out became to cover all necessities of narrative cinema with a line of dialog, which is a good deal easier than figuring out ways that motivate body movement, expressions, angles and lighting to convey nuances of behavior and character. The works became hollow and vain and broad.

How The Silents Were Wiped Out

Perhaps today this transition is hard to imagine. But to give its due, I'd like to spare some time to go back into how the shift came so abruptly. Looking back at the past now, everything seems to be turning out the way they are supposed to, but the pace and intensity of this change is remarkable.

In two years, silent cinema was replaced by sound films. This is unprecedented in its speed. It became a relic of past, exhibited in revival houses and practiced more rarely. Langlois talks about the effort to make a repertory theater which would be dedicated to showing silent films, which he says proved in vain.

11 Hannah Arendt, *Thinking Without A Banister* (New York: Schocken 2018), 358.

Is there any instance of this in any art where the old form is terminated by the new one at this speed? There were many instances of artists being able to be old-fashioned. For instance, Johann Sebastian Bach died while being seen as creating music that was regarded as old-fashioned with respect to the emerging and mainstream music at the time. Nevertheless, he magnificently excelled. Orson Welles: "... silents are wiped out. That's like giving up all watercolors because somebody invented oil paint."¹²

This shows yet another instance of the huge presence of the industrial machine behind making films. Langlois believes that film industry, like haute couture, "can only survive in perpetual renewal, often artificial, sometimes arbitrary, intended to artificially make its products out of fashion in order to clean up the market."¹³ A cleaning to such an extent that he points out the transition was a stock market coup by Warner Brothers alone to refresh and renew the public's attention and interest in going to films at the time of the Great Depression. This is confirmed by Allan Dwan (1885-1981) who remarks that something stimulating was needed around that time, otherwise they were beginning

¹² Peter Bogdanovich and Orson Welles, *This is Orson Welles* (New York: Harper Collins 1992), 10.

¹³ Langlois, *ibid.*, 222.

to lose the audiences. He continues: "People would rather stay home and listen to the radio than spend money to go to pictures. So, talkies did stimulate the box office. It was one of the new gimmicks that brought people back, and they went along with that for quite a long time until TV came along; and they've had to look for other gimmicks—color and wide-screen. But they've never regained their big adult audience."¹⁴ However, Langlois puts forth that this perpetual change prevents cinematographic art from enjoying the serene periods experienced by the other arts: "When, after exploring new avenues, you reach equilibrium and dominate the subject matter, you have to give up taking advantage of it to go deeper. Anyone who dares to do so is seen as a finished man. He's buried alive, just as so many great filmmakers were and still are in their prime."¹⁵

Godard notes a similar but bleaker note on why the transition was necessary towards circumventing the powers of the silent films: "My thesis is that the words of the silents were greater than the words of the talkies. It was therefore necessary to reduce it. It came at the time of the New Deal, Roosevelt and Hitler. From the first screenings of the silent film, the talkie was ready. Gaumont had the device. But the

¹⁴ Peter Bogdanovich, *Who the Devil Made It: Conversations with* (New York: Ballantine Books 1997).

¹⁵ Langlois, *ibid.*, 222.

public chose the silent over the talkie. In Paris, at the first screening of the talkie, no one came."¹⁶

Godard is perhaps right in his mood at detecting the great absorbed energy of the silent era but his analysis is factually at fault. Two reasons: The arrival of sound produced a sharp upsurge in movie attendance, at least in the US. It jumped from 50 million a week in the mid-20s to 110 million in 1929. The other reason is that he's underestimating the limits of the technology at the time when he says that there's a mystery surrounding the invention of cinema with sound, that there was no reason for it be silent at the beginning, it could have had sound.¹⁷ The impossibility for this stem from two technical reasons: 1) The recording of sound in a good quality (audible in a hall) and the amplification of sound would have to wait until the late 1920s with more developed speakers, which were once acoustical and mechanical and went electric. 2) There was a synchronization problem which still takes some time to figure out even today with syncing across the camera and devices. First cameras were hand cranked. Meaning, an operator had to crank it for it

16 Jean-Luc Godard: Documents, ed. Nicole Brenez, David Faroult, Michael Temple, James Williams, and Michael Witt (Paris: Éditions du Centre Pompidou 2006), 330.

17 Jean-Luc Godard & Youssef Ishaghpour, *Cinema: The Archaeology Of Film And The Memory Of A Century*, trans. John Howe (Oxford: Berg Publishers 2005), 104

to be shot. This leads to different frames per second. Sound cinema had to wait until they were able to tie film and sound so people's voices matched their lips.

How Filmmakers Came To Terms With It

It is partly funny to read how the prominent filmmakers of silent cinema are also outwitted. For someone like Chaplin or von Sternberg who were in the epicenter of the film industry, the change seems to come at an abrupt pace. They seem to be articulating their observations of this event like a bystander discovering what's happening. For example, Chaplin in his autobiography: "But a month later M.G.M. produced *The Broadway Melody*, a full-length sound musical, and a cheap, dull affair it was, but a stupendous box-office success. That started it; overnight every theatre began wiring for sound. That was the twilight of silent films."¹⁸ This is somewhat unimaginable now. Or perhaps until it happens the next time. In two years, silent cinema was obliterated and relegated to the exclusive cinemas and revival houses.

The resistance to sound cinema from the prominent filmmakers is remarkable. To be more accurate, their concern was rather with talking cinema and how introduction of speech/voice/dialogue would affect

¹⁸ Charlie Chaplin, *My Autobiography* (London: Penguin 2003), 321.

films. The resistance mostly originates from a set of different reasons.

Chaplin had a strong hesitation going into sound films. The one reason which is important also for the scope of what I've been saying is his observation that: 1) "Movement is near to nature, as a bird flying, and it is the spoken word which is embarrassing. The voice is so revealing it becomes an artificial thing, reducing everybody to a certain glibness, to an unreality."¹⁹ 2) "Dialogue, to my way of thinking, always slows action because action must wait upon words." For Chaplin, the viscosity of silent film was artistically higher than a sound film: "Action is more generally understood than words. The lift of an eyebrow, however faint, may convey more than a hundred words."²⁰ Chaplin also notices this has an implication for acting towards shrinking, and so does Godard: "But today, I think that because films have dialogue, precisely, and the dialogue is this sort of dialogue, acting has taken a great step backwards and atrophied. I believe there are few actors who free themselves and use this freedom to assist or participate in the directing or the dialogue."²¹

19 Richard Meryman, "Ageless Master's Anatomy of Comedy", *Life*, March 10, 1967, 92.

20 Charlie Chaplin, "A Rejection of the Talkies (USA, 1931)", in Scott Mackenzie, *Film Manifestos and Global Cinema Cultures* (Los Angeles: University of California Press 2014), 568.

21 Jean-Luc Godard, *Introduction to a true history of cinema and television*, ed. & trans. Timothy Barnard (Montreal: caboose 2014), 134.

The slowing down of the action was also an observation shared by Jean Epstein (1897-1955) in his 1947 article "Pure Cinema and Sound Film":

In the silent era, cinema could only represent the visual aspect of movement. The stake was then to express everything, the objective and the subjective, as much as possible through the image alone. Subtitles thus became the main enemy that had to be excluded from films because they were not a view, strictly speaking, and because they introduced words, the elements of another mode of expression, of another language, set to the much lower speed of another system of thought than thought through visual representations. In a few seconds of presence on the screen, a moving image shows as though simultaneously a hundred qualities of a thing and the action of this thing, as well as the cause, the goal, the result, the circumstances of this action. To describe this almost instantaneous spectacle, speech – which has to make analytical choices between substantives, verbs, adjectives, and has to assemble them logically into subjects, direct, indirect, defining objects, or adverbial phrases; into main, coordinated, parenthetical, relative clauses – uses at least a few minutes, that is, at least sixty times as much time. Even then, this verbal description always proves to be marred by mistakes and gaps, inaccuracies and aloofness. An image, even with few events, kindles a much richer and quicker mental life

than a cluster of words might fuel in the same amount of time. Hence this impression of slowness, which surprised us in the first sound films around 1928.²²

A New Dramaturgy

Of course, silent films were never really silent at all. "Except at the very beginning, or in film libraries, or when the pianist had caught a bad flu."²³ There was always at least a pianola or an upright piano; sometimes an organ; sometimes a 150-piece orchestra. The bigger productions even had live sound effects produced from behind the screen. And it is not that in silent films people didn't speak. They spoke a lot. But since now there had to be voices corresponding to people who are speaking, a new dramaturgy had to be found. Langlois: "With the advent of sound film came the problem of how to construct the film with regard to talking pictures, and how to divide dialogue according to movement. A new dramaturgy was born, yet to be discovered, explored and established."²⁴

What were the filmmakers point out as pitfalls? The cautions were mostly relating for the loss of

22 Jean Epstein, *Critical Essays and New Translations*, ed. Sarah Keller & Jason N. Paul (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press 2012), 356-357.

23 Chris Marker, *Silent Movie* (Ohio: The Ohio State University 1995), 15.

24 Langlois, *ibid.*, 611.

cinema for its specificity (Eisenstein and co.) and its universalism (Chaplin). The filmmakers like Epstein also pointed out a dullness and hollowness which I will touch below soon.

Sergei Eisenstein (1898-1948), Vsevolod Pudovkin (1893-1953), and Grigori Alexandrov (1903-1983) wrote a statement in 1928.²⁵ Later it is dubbed as a manifesto, it starts with: "The dream of a sound film has come true." It partly reads like a letter to the Soviet authorities at the time to keep up with the pace of the developments. A concern they were right about: they'll have to wait one year after the publishing of their statement for the first sound-stage to inaugurate. Their caution was synchronization of sound and image. For Stanley Cavell, the idea of synchronization has to do with "the absolute satisfaction of a craving for realism, for the absolute reproduction of the world".²⁶ In other words, images affirming sound and sound affirming images. They argue that the appearance of sound is employed in an incorrect direction towards hindering its development as an art destroying all its present formal achievements by which they mainly mean those of montage.

25 Sergei Eisenstein, "Appendix A. A Statement on the Sound-Film by Eisenstein, Pudovkin, and Alexandrov", *Film Form* (New York: Harvest/HBJ Book 1949), 257.

26 Cavell, *ibid.*, 147.

They also warn that there will be a commercial exploitation of it in which "sound recording will proceed on a naturalistic level, exactly corresponding with the movement on the screen, and providing a certain 'illusion' of talking people, of audible objects, etc.". This tendency, they prophesize, will ossify itself into "an epoch of its automatic utilization for 'highly cultured dramas' and other photographed performances of a theatrical sort."

Seeing the arrival of sound as a way out of impasses already present in cinema, namely subtitle and explanatory pieces (for example, certain inserted close-ups) that burden the montage composition and retard the tempo, they call for sound to be treated as a factor divorced from the visual image. They call for contrapuntal sound, or in other words, sound's distinct non-synchronization with the images.

This was still something reiterated in 1947 by Epstein who points out the dullness introduced from the exact synchronicity of sound and image:

Still, this double use, synchronous and equivalent, of image and speech necessarily produces an impression of dullness, boredom, emptiness in the minds of the spectators-auditors who are neither so distracted nor so narrow-minded that they need simultaneously to see what they hear and hear what they see in order to understand it. For the eye and the

ear not to result in a vicious pleonasm when they contribute to putting a datum together, the work assigned to every sense should be quite different. In his memoirs, Casanova considers as an instance of the most serious stupidity the fact of a lover saying "I love you" to the woman loved. Yet this is a mistake nine films out of ten make in nine shots out of ten.²⁷

For him, images lost its "profound and fleeting unspeakable quality" and were crushed by "the slow, heavy and rigid system of speech" which in turn resulted in cinema losing some of "its fundamental originality, its primordial quality, its ability to create or follow a very swift movement of thought."²⁸ I think he goes one step further and discerns speech as the heavy culprit among the other two elements that produce sound in film (noise, music). Observing in his elegant prose that "the image was reduced to the role of mouthpiece, connective tissue, responsible only for ensuring the connection between words"²⁹, he clearly states that "asset value of speech, as it appeared in cinema some twenty years ago and as it still rules today in many films, undercuts all the other values of image and sound, forcing its own approach on them".

Michel Chion (1947-) was also cognizant of what he

²⁷ Epstein, *ibid.*, 362.

²⁸ Epstein, *ibid.*, 358.

²⁹ Epstein, *ibid.*, 358.

called as a hierarchy in perception.³⁰ There are not all the sounds including the human voice but there are voices and everything else. And the presence of a human voice is superior to other sounds in every audio mix.

I'll return to Chion later. But first, what does Epstein suggest for an antidote? I'd say a certain tension is what he suggests. In the form of a splitting of sound from image, an unmatching of sound and image:

The play of image and sound, of sight and hearing, may and should also achieve a sort of two-part counterpoint, in the harmony of more complex significations, which evidently constitute the true art of a language involving two registers of expression. It is useless for a man shown arriving to say "I'm coming."³¹

But also a certain contradiction, a falsehood:

"A certain degree of contradiction between image and speech, of falsehood between the eye and the ear, thus seems necessary for a shooting script to offer the opportunity for an intellectual exercise captivating enough, and for an illusion of reality convincing and moving enough. The rule does not only hold true for the public, in fact: all actors know that the sincerity of a character, the pleonasm of synonymous

30 Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, edited and translated by Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press 1999), 5.

31 Epstein, *ibid.*, 363.

words and gestures, make parts difficult, flat, unrewarding, whereas the deception within a character whose action, face, and voice find themselves perpetually diverging makes for "golden parts."³²

In another direction but similar manner, this "falsehood" also echoes what Rohmer suggested in 1948 in a piece called "For a Talking Cinema" for *Les Temps modernes*, argued: "There are not enough lies in cinema, except perhaps in comedies."³³

So What Now?

"Something about the silents is lost forever," said Marguerite Duras. And now we are left with "the unavoidable realism of direct dialogue".³⁴ Or are we? Well, I don't think so. Michel Chion explains this vulgarism by the loss of voices in silent films as dreamed voices, resulting in real voices heard coming into conflict with the imaginary voices that everyone could dream to their heart's content. The disappointment, for him, comes from the disruption of the spectator's freedom to imagine them in her own way.

We are of course at the point of no return. I feel better not to be in the wailing melancholy, giving

³² Epstein, *ibid.*, 363.

³³ Rohmer, *ibid.*, 32.

³⁴ Marguerite Duras, *Marguerite Duras* (Paris: Editions Albatros 1975), 80.

the usual recipe of the purity of origins, the infinite promise of invention at its initial pure and innocent state. Not that they don't have truth. But after all, we don't make it as we please or under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. Even back in the days, Chaplin had to admit that "sound made characters more present."³⁵ Or Epstein was furious at the pleas to go back, saying that "However, one can no longer support this image being silent or continuously accompanied by the flow of music: the artifice and deception of these are shocking."³⁶

It could be even said that this exploration in the voice-image relations is still an ongoing task both in narrative and experimental filmmaking. There are and were films that explore a new voice-image relations, advocate a different combination of image and sound and propose a distinct vision. These relativized speech through abundance of speech, overlapping dialogues or turning speech into indistinct mumblings.

Jacques Tati

Tati was the filmmaker that planted the idea of this thesis in his singular approach to speech. In *Playtime*

³⁵ Chaplin, *ibid.*, 360.

³⁶ Epstein, *ibid.*, 358-9.

(1967) and *Traffic* (1971), it's sometimes impossible to understand the lines. Either because dialogues are muffled or they just mumble. It's almost like in the Youtube videos where people talk sounding a language to show how a language sounds like to those who don't know.

We can understand in Tati's films they're talking in French/Dutch/English, can understand their intonations and cadences, but not their content. And it doesn't really matter. On contrary, this ambiguity gives Tati to direct attention to complete visual and sound gags, which are obviously what he cares for. The use of voices cements his vision.

In *Traffic*, the multiplicity of languages originates from the premise: the automobile fair takes place in the Netherlands and a French team needs to deliver a camp car ordered by an English patron. Indistinct mumblings are just enough to discern the languages. But they're devoid of signification.

Andre Bazin claims in his article about *Monsieur Hulot's Holiday* (1953) that Tati's soundtrack is never indistinct and his artfulness consists in destroying clarity with clarity.³⁷ The dialogues are not at all incomprehensible but are insignificant, and their

37 Andre Bazin, *What is Cinema?*, trans. Timothy Barnard (Montreal: Caboose 2009), 42.

insignificance is revealed by this very clarity.

It feels to me that his distinctive treatment of voices serves an alienating and non-humanistic quality, mentioned also by Serge Daney: “as a non-humanist filmmaker, Tati is logically fascinated by the human species.” Deprived of signification of their dialogues, it’s as though humans and their environments are under a humorous scrutiny. Though a benevolent one that nevertheless puts them at a distance from the usual familiarity of their common actions.

Parsi (2018) by Eduardo Williams

Eduardo Williams’s (1987-) *Parsi* introduces us with a footage of a casual free floating 360-degree camera together with a soundtrack of some sorts of a repetitive text which uses “seems like” and jazz on it. Some examples:

Seems like you’re coming from a distance,

Seems like the first time,

Seems like I’m alone,

Seems like you’ve stopped loving me,

Seems like I’m writing a poem,

Seems like yesterday

Seems like a railroad crossing

Seems free

Seems like melting

Seems like we've got nothing to lose

A few minutes later into the film, only changing colors as images follow this soundtrack. As the camera zooms out, we are present with the density of camerawork with its shaky and jerky movements and ever-moving state and the continuing speech.

Perhaps much easier for someone who speaks Spanish, it felt like a bombardment for me. A few minutes later, I felt the overabundance of spoken words worked its way towards intelligibility rather than being understood. The rhythm of the speech and the playful and simple structure of the text, which concerns sight ("seems like") in a way reminiscent of cinema itself, had withdrawn from its signification without retracting from the film's value.

His Girl Friday (1940) by Howard Hawks

Howard Hawks (1896-1977) is perhaps a strange candidate for he essentially excelled at what we today call the classical sound cinema of Hollywood. In fact, it wasn't so initially. The advent of talkies took one and a half year of unemployment for Hawks who was a prominent filmmaker at the silent era, because

they said he knew nothing about dialogue.³⁸ Coming from silent films, he was aware that “motion is far more interesting than just talking” and that “other people depend purely on lines”. That they have no motion in the thing at all.³⁹

Langlois remarks that Hawks, at the advent of talkies, “tackled it [dialogue] head-on, without cheating. He immediately got to the heart of the matter: the construction of cinematic drama based on the role of speech and sound in life.”⁴⁰ He says that Hawks’ work has an almost abstract bareness that consists of the essential: “The truth of dialogues, the truth of situations, the truth of subjects, of environments, of beings, a dramaturgy born of an interlocking of facts, words, sounds, movements, situations, just as one assembles an engine. ... Dialogue: what we say, what we are, what we do. How he insists on dialogue and speaking. On the meaning of dialogue, the construction of dialogue, the flow of dialogue.”⁴¹

And I think his treatment of dialogue mainly in *His Girl Friday* refrain from throwing a fast-paced dialogue in front of his audience and by it serves a strange purpose through excess. This overabundance and

38 Richard Schickel, *The Men who Made the Movies* (New York: Atheneum, 1975), 38.

39 Schickel, *ibid.*, 67.

40 Langlois, *ibid.*, 610.

41 Langlois, *ibid.*, 611.

especially overlapping dialogues do contribute to missing out some parts. It is almost a systemic treatment of dialogue where the unnecessary is said in the beginning and end of a dialogue and we are delivered the germ of the dialogue towards the middle. On top of this, actors and actresses overlapping dialogue, spoken in lower tones of voice. Plus, several conversations run simultaneously.

It works almost towards erasure of what's unnecessary, what's empty talk. But not through subtraction but addition, crowding, overabundance.

Le Quattro Volte (2010) & Il buco (2021) by Michelangelo Frammartino

We have two instances of such endeavors in the works of Frammartino (1968-). The first film is his debut *La Quattro Volte* or *Four Times*. Though without any dialogue, it's a more natural instance of that direction since it concerns mostly animals. It is almost humans are in the world of these animals. The stillness and silence reign the film where almost a non-humanistic world springs out.

The second instance is with his latest film, *Il Buco* or *The Hole*. It centres on discovery and exploration of the caves of Pollino in southern Italy in August 1961. This is more an example in which we can feel the tension of lack of speech since there are groups

of people, a shepherd, some villagers at the center of it. Two things are discovered gradually: it's a period piece and we don't hear what's talked when there's talk. The wide shots he uses work towards this way. There's a sharp choice, extremely conscious and with clarity. This choice is reflected in the sound of the film as well. Throughout the film, atmosphere noises suffocate the cave diggers gathering at the train station at dawn. After their arrival at the cave, the scientists playing games at the camp fire are indistinct. Diving deep down at the cave, the echoes of their voices swallows what they're talking about. Naturally, stillness and calamity converge towards at meditation and elevation.

Sound Cinema Invented Silence

Well, there's no point of yearning for a golden age. We are at the audio-visual era where we are far away from that transition that it's almost irrelevant at the age of streaming, Twitch, AI and games.

Sound with all its forms became the half of what cinema is. Though rare, there are filmmakers who treat it with its worth and think about sound cinema in its specificity. One example is Bresson, who also gave this section its title. He underlined the creative possibilities introduced by sound, remarking that the eye in general is superficial whereas the ear

profound and inventive: "A locomotive's whistle imprints on us a whole railroad station."⁴² Or he writes: "A cry, a noise. Their resonance makes us guess at a house, a forest, a plain, a mountain; their rebound indicates to us the distances."⁴³

This is also echoed by Carl Dreyer (1889-1968) just after a few years of the advent of sound cinema, in 1933, when he was warning that one needs to strive to create a realistic space as well as sound: "While I am writing these lines, I can hear church bells ring in the distance; now I perceive the buzzing of the elevator, the distant, very-far-away clang of a streetcar, the clock of city hall, a door slamming. All these sounds would exist, too, if the walls in my room, instead of seeing a man working, were witnessing a moving, dramatic scene as background to which these sounds might even take on symbolic value."⁴⁴ This prophesy is partly realized through the works of Bresson especially with his isolated, sharply pointed and carefully selected atmospheric noises.

Lucrecia Martel (1966-) is the other important example. Echoing what Bresson wrote, she remarks that the third dimension in cinema is given by sound. She states that sound waves transmit in a more

42 Bresson, *ibid.*, 39.

43 Langlois, *ibid.*, 611

44 Carl Dreyer, "La Vrai Cinéma Parlé", *Cahiers Du Cinema*, no. 127, January 1962, 30.

direct way and we are surrounded and immersed by it in cinema. You can close your eyes but closing your ears doesn't do so much. In her words: "Sound is the only truly tactile dimension of the cinema. It is the only way in which the cinema physically touches the spectator. Audio frequencies are experienced through the entire body." This makes sound also the most intimate tool since sound can penetrate us as a corporeal element. This was also voiced by Bresson as well: "sound defines space on film. A voice treated like a sound effect seems to give the screen an extra dimension. People who experimented with 3D cinema were barking up the wrong tree. The third dimension is sound. It gives the screen depth; it makes characters seem tangible. It makes it appear that one might walk amongst them."⁴⁵

Eric Rohmer, around the time he wrote his aforementioned article "Cinema, Space of Art", had written another article called "For A Talking Cinema". Almost indicative of the films he'll shoot in the coming thirty years, he writes that he sees speech as an integral part of both life and cinema: "I show people who move and speak."⁴⁶ His work is a witness to word being not used to transmit information but as a revelation of world and character. The dialogue

⁴⁵ Robert Bresson, Positif interview by Michel Ciment, collected in *Projections* 9, ed. Michel Ciment & Noel Herpe, trans. Pierre Hodgson (New York: Faber & Faber), 7-8.

⁴⁶ Rohmer, *ibid.*, 80.

that fills Rohmer's films and its banalities, intricacies and lies, reveal the interior of his characters as much as their silent glances and physical hesitations. They, as he wished in his article, are "dialogues that are truly made for the film in which they are to be spoken".⁴⁷

Stanley Cavell asserts the voice has spells of its own and the reality of the ineffable and unsayable now can be approached by sound cinema. It's the sound cinema that explores the silence of movies via the release from the synchronization of speech with the speaker. The talkies gave us "the clumsiness of speech, the dumbness and duplicities and concealments of assertion, the bafflement of soul and body by their inarticulateness and by their terror of articulateness" and the task is to "discover the poetry in speech". This won't be similar to the poetry of poetry, but "the poetry of synchronized speech arises from the fact that just that creature, in just those surroundings, is saying just that, just now."⁴⁸ He thinks speech in a binding tension with silence and he believes that dialogues that work work "because they provide natural occasions on which silence is broken, and in which words do not go beyond their moment of saying; hence occasions on which silence naturally reasserts itself."⁴⁹

47 Rohmer, *ibid.*, 81.

48 Cavell, *ibid.*, 150.

49 Cavell, *ibid.*, 150.

Cavell also talks how a world of sight is a world of immediate intelligibility and how sound breaks that intelligibility: “the advent of sound cinema broke the spell of immediate intelligibility—a realistic renunciation, given the growing obscurity of the world.”⁵⁰ Similarly, Jonathan Glazer remarks that sound is interpretive in way the pictures aren’t.⁵¹ Sounds we hear are complex and one can interpret them differently, which lends an interpretative experience.

In some of her public speeches, Lucrecia Martel proposes a vision of narrative contrary to what she calls hegemonic narrative which preconditions us our gaze and its obsession into looking forward and future. In her proposed vision, narrative is almost an education in the perception of time and space that distances us from future and spoilers, and presents cinema as an immersive present experience. She also talks about how gaze is conditioned directionally whereas listening opens us up to all directions as waves of sound surround us. She half-jokingly proposes this openness of listening makes us humble.

Langlois excitedly announced in one of his interviews circa 1970s that we are standing on the brink of an audio-visual era. The introduction of lightweight and sensitive

⁵⁰ Cavell, *ibid.*, 151.

⁵¹ Jonathan Glazer from “‘The Zone of Interest’ Director Jonathan Glazer” from IndieWire’s Filmmaker Toolkit, 10 January 2024.

sound equipments and its consequences for direct sound thrilled him. Embracing interference which nowadays seemed to be severely eliminated for a clean sound, he continues: "What used to be called interference was actually the vibration of sound, the echo of sound, the multiplicity of sound. We don't speak in an absolute silence, but in a silence filled with noise. This vibration is the truth, the reality of sound, and I believe this is going to be the big thing in tomorrow's cinema."

Epstein was talking about the generosity of camera and why not also that of sound recorder:

The essential generosity of the cinematographic instrument –like that of all noble instruments, which transform and multiply the power of our senses– consists in enriching and renewing our conception of the universe, making its ways of being accessible to us, that looking and listening cannot directly perceive.⁵²

In all these last passages spanning across sixty years which makes a half of cinema's lifetime, the buzz of burning excitement can be heard. There's still so much to do.

⁵² Epstein, *ibid.*, 465.

