

Back to Voice: on Voices *over, in, out, through*

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“Dubbing is crude and naïve”, writes Bresson in *Notes sur le cinématographe*. “Unreal voices, inconsistent with the movement of the lips. Out of sync with the lungs and the heart. Coming ‘from the wrong mouths’”. Bresson is one filmmaker (Jacques Tati is another) who has always insisted on a certain realism of sound. In this respect, he was deeply influential on the most innovative *New Wave* filmmakers. Note, however, that he mentions not only the mouth and lips but also the lungs and heart. Although he insisted on realism, he never made a fetish of directly recorded sound; rather, he stubbornly insisted on meticulous post-synchronization of carefully mixed and orchestrated tracks. Why? Precisely because he drew a distinction between *the voice and the mouth*. If one looks at the mouth, it is easy (and takes no effort) to see that something is being said. But the voice involves the whole body, including the heart and lungs, which cannot be seen.

In order to pursue this theme further, one needs to be wary of such terms as *voice-over* and the like, which are altogether too dependent on the visual and, as such, surreptitiously extend the hegemony of the eye, with the inevitable consequence that the ear is mutilated: film, we are told, is primarily images, which “strike the eye” and “orient vision.” The advent of direct sound recording in televised news reports, ethnographic documentaries, and propaganda films, together with the wild enthusiasm for the essential immediacy of the audiovisual (Jean Rouch and Jean-Marie Straub, quickly copied but poorly understood), led people to pattern sonic space after visual space, which served to guarantee its

veracity, to authenticate it. In fact, however, the two spaces are heterogeneous. A more precise description of each is required, along with terminology for specifying their interactions. [...]

In terms of images, the distinction between on-screen and off-screen occurrences, while no doubt useful for writing a screenplay or critically analyzing a film, is not subtle enough for a theory of missing objects because there are different types of off-screen events. Some objects are permanently missing (either because they are unrepresentable—for instance, to take the standard example, the camera that cannot film itself filming the scene—or taboo, such as the prophet Muhammad in *The Message* [Moustapha Akkad, 1977]), while others are temporarily out of sight, hence subject to the familiar alternation of presence and absence, of Fort Da, to use the Freudian metaphor. The possibility of eternal return is greeted by the spectator with either horror or relief. These are not the same, even if they happen off-screen.

The same on-screen/off-screen distinction that is already of dubious value in discussing the visual is altogether too crude for analyzing voices. Broadly speaking, the term *voice-over* refers to the voices of off-screen speakers. But this really depends on a distinction between sound that is synchronized and sound that is not: the voice is reduced to its visual stand-in, which is itself reduced to the configuration and shape of the lips. The *voice-over* is then identified with an absence in the image. I favour the opposite approach: voices should be related to their effects in or on the image.

I will use the term *voice-over* narrowly to describe an off-screen voice that always runs parallel to the sequence of images and never intersects with it. For example, in a documentary about sardines, the voice-over can say whatever it likes (whether it describes sardines or slanders them makes no difference); it remains without measurable impact on the fish. This voice, superimposed on the image after the fact and linked to it by editing, is a purely metalinguistic phenomenon. It is addressed (both as statement and delivery) solely to the viewer, with whom it enters into an alliance or contract that ignores the image. Because the image serves only as the pretext for the wedding of commentary and viewer, the image is left in an enigmatic state of abandonment, of frantic disinheritance, which gives it a certain form of presence, of obtuse significance (Barthes' third meaning), which (with a certain element of perversity) can be enjoyed incognito, as it were. To see this, mute the sound on your television and look at the images left to themselves.

Voice-over of this kind can be coercive. If, speaking of sardines, I say that "these grotesque animals, driven by a suicidal compulsion, hasten toward the fisherman's nets and end their lives in the most ridiculously way imaginable," the statement will contaminate not the sardines but the gaze of the spectator, who is obliged to make what sense he can of it despite the obvious disparity between what he sees and what he hears. The voice-over narrative, which coerces the image, intimidates the gaze, and creates a double bind, is one of the primary modes of propaganda in film.

This is the level at which a director like Godard operates: one might call it the "voice-over degree zero." In *Leçons de chose* (the second part of *Six Times Two / Sur et sous la Communication* [Jean-Luc Godard and Anne-Marie Miéville, 1976]), the sudden intrusion of a shot of a marketplace (an intrusion that is as violent as it is sudden, since like all of Godard's images it is totally unpredictable) is immediately baptized "fire" by the soundtrack. This is justified in part by a play on words (*flambée des prix* is French

for "skyrocketing prices", hence the connection to the image of the marketplace, but *flambée* also means "blaze", hence the connection to the soundtrack), in part as a response to the intrusiveness of the image and the enunciation of the word, retroactively re-marking the violence. One sees the same thing in *Here and Elsewhere* (*Ici et ailleurs*, Jean-Luc Godard and Anne-Marie Miéville, 1975) with the sequence on "how to organize an assembly line." With each new image, Godard's voice hollowly repeats the words: "Well, this way... like this... but also like that." In relation to the "one-by-one" sequence of images the voice plays the same role as quotation marks in a text: it highlights but also distances.

By contrast, I will use the term, *in voice* to refer to a voice that participates in the image, merges with it, and has material impact on it by way of a visual stand-in. If my commentary on sardines has the effect of leaving the poor fish stranded in their mere presence as sardines, my voice has a totally different effect if, in the course of a live report, I ask someone a question. Even if that question is spoken off-camera, my voice intrudes upon the image, affecting my interlocutor's face and body and triggering a furtive or perhaps overt reaction, a response. The viewer can measure the violence of my statement by the disturbance it causes in the person who receives it, as one might catch a bullet or a ball (or other small-"a" objects), to one side or head on. This is the technique used by Joris Ivens and Marceline Loidan in *How Yukong Moved the Mountain* (*Comment Yukong déplaça les montagnes*, 1976). It is also the technique of horror films and of the "subjective" films of Robert Montgomery. One also sees it in the now somewhat outmoded technique of having a voice put familiar questions to the characters in a film, who halt their action long enough to respond. Think, for example, of Sacha Guitry's paternalistic attitude toward his "creations," or the complicity between the narrator and characters in films from Salah Abouseif's *Between Heaven and Earth* (*Bayn el samaa wa el ard*, 1959) to Luís Berlanga's *Welcome Mr. Marshall!* (*Bienvenido Mister Marshall*, 1953).

The *in voice* is the focal point of a different but just as redoubtable form of power. What is presented as the emergence of truth may well be merely the production of discomfort in the guinea pig forced to answer questions as the viewer looks on. There are at least two other kinds of voices: those spoken “within” the image, either through a mouth (*out voice*) or through an entire body (*through voice*).

The *out voice* is basically the voice as it emerges from a mouth. It is projected, dropped, thrown away: one of various objects expelled from the body (along with the gaze, blood, vomit, sperm, and so on). With the out voice we touch on the nature of the cinematographic image itself: though flat, it gives the illusion of depth. Both the voice-over and the in voice emanate from an imaginary space (whose position varies with the type of projection equipment, configuration of the theatre, placement of loudspeakers, and the location of the spectator). By contrast, the out voice emanates from an illusory space, a decoy. It emerges from the filmed body, which is a body of a problematic sort, a false surface and a false depth. It is a container with a false bottom, with no bottom at all, which expels (and therefore makes visible) objects as generously as Buster Keaton’s taxis can disgorge regiments. This filmed body is made in the image of the barracks in *Cops* (Buster Keaton, 1922) or of the church in *Seven Chances* (Buster Keaton, 1925).

The out voice is a form of pornography in the sense that it fetishizes the moment of emergence from the lips (stars’ lips, or, in *Dishonored* [Josef von Sternberg, 1931], Marlene foregoing lipstick before the firing squad). Similarly, porno films are entirely centered on the spectacle of the orgasm seen from the male side, that is, the most visible side. The out voice gives rise to a “material theatre” since it is central to every religious metaphor (passage from inside to outside with metamorphosis). To grasp the moment of emission of the voice is to grasp the moment when the object *a* separates from the partial object. [...] There is a pornography of the voice comparable in every way to the pornography of sex (abusive use of interviews, mouths of political leaders, and so on). Clever writers have woven stories around this theme (such as Daniel Schmid’s *Shadow of Angels* [*Schatten der Engel*, 1976], in which a prostitute is paid to listen, and *Pussy Talk* [*Le sexe qui parle*, Claude Mulot, 1975], in which a woman’s vagina expresses its insatiable appetite).

Finally, a *through voice* is a voice that originates within the image but does not emanate from the mouth. Certain types of shot, involving characters filmed from behind, from the side, or in three-quarter view or from behind a piece of furniture, screen, another person, or an obstacle of some sort, cause the voice to be separated from the mouth. The status of the through voice is ambiguous and enigmatic, because its visual stand-in is the body in all its opacity, the expressive body, in whole or in part. •

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