

# Dialogue and Sound

by Siegfried Kracauer

<http://lavender.fortunecity.com/hawkslane/575/dialogue-and-sound.htm>

The term "sound" is commonly used in two senses. Strictly speaking, it refers to sound proper all kinds of noises, that is. And in a loose way it designates not only sound proper but the spoken word or dialogue as well. Since its meaning can always be inferred from the contexts in which it appears, there is no need for abandoning this traditional, if illogical, usage.

## *Introduction*

### **Early Misgivings**

When sound arrived, perceptive filmmakers and critics were full of misgivings, in particular about the addition of the spoken word, this "ancient human bondage," as one of them called it. 1 They feared, for instance, that speech might put an end to camera movement one fear at least which soon turned out to be unfounded.' To Chaplin a talking Tramp was so utterly unconceivable that he satirized conventional dialogue in both *City Lights* and *Modern Times*. As far back as 1928 the Russian studios had not yet introduced sound apparatus Eisenstein, Pudovkin, and Alexandrov issued a joint Statement on sound film in which dim apprehensions alternated with constructive suggestions. This Statement, still of the highest interest, was probably inspired and edited by Eisenstein. A student of materialistic dialectics, he acknowledged sound as a historic necessity because of its emergence at a moment when the further evolution of the medium depended on it. For with the plots becoming ever more ambitious and intricate, only the spoken word would be able to relieve the silent film from the increasing number of cumbersome captions and explanatory visual inserts needed for the exposition of the intrigue. On the other hand, Eisenstein and his co-signers were convinced that the inclusion of dialogue would stir up an overwhelming desire for stage illusion. Their Statement predicted a flood of sound films indulging in " 'highly cultured dramas' and other photographed performances of a theatrical sort. 113 Eisenstein did not seem to realize that what he considered a consequence of dialogue actually existed long before its innovation. The silent screen was crammed with "highly cultured dramas." "Misled by the fatal vogue of 'adaptations,' " said Clair in 1927, "the dramatic film is built on the model of theatrical or literary works by minds accustomed to verbal expression alone." It might be added that all these filmmakers and critics accepted sound later on, though not unconditionally.

### **Basic Requirement**

The pronounced misgivings in the period of transition to sound can be traced to the rising awareness that films with sound live up to the spirit of the medium only if the visuals take the lead in them. Film is a visual medium. [5] To cite René Clair again, he says he knows of people less familiar with the history of the movies who stubbornly believe some otherwise wellremembered silent film to have been a talkie; and he shrewdly reasons that their slip of memory should give pause to all those reluctant to endorse the supremacy of the image.' The legitimacy of this requirement follows straight from the irrevocable fact that it is the motion picture camera, not the sound camera, which accounts for the most specific contributions of the cinema; neither noises nor dialogue are exclusively peculiar to film. One might argue that the addition of speech would seem to justify attempts at an equilibrium between word and image, but it will be seen shortly that such attempts are doomed to failure. For sound films to be true to the basic aesthetic principle, their significant communications must originate with their pictures.

In dealing with sound, it is best to treat dialogue or speech, for that matter and sound proper separately. Especially in the case of speech, two kinds of relationships between sound and image should be considered. The first concerns the role they are assigned i.e., whether the messages of a film are primarily passed on through the sound track or the imagery. The second concerns the manner in which sound and image are synchronized at any given moment. There are various

possibilities of synchronization. All of them have a bearing on the adequacy of the spoken word to the medium.

## The Role of the Spoken Word

### Dialogue

#### PROBLEMATIC USES

What caused Eisenstein's gloom when he anticipated that the arrival of sound would generate a flood of "highly cultured dramas"? No doubt he feared lest the spoken word might be used as the carrier of all significant statements and thus become the major means of propelling the action. His fears were all too wellfounded. At the beginning of sound the screen went "speechmad," with many filmmakers starting from the "absurd assumption that in order to make a sound film it is only necessary to photograph a play." And this was more than a passing vogue. The bulk of existing talkies continues to center on dialogue.

Dialogue in the *Lead*. The reliance on verbal statements increases, as a matter of course, the medium's affinity for the theater. Dialogue films either reproduce theatrical plays or convey plots in theatrical fashion. This implies that they automatically turn the spotlight on the actor, featuring him as an insoluble entity, and by the same token exile inanimate nature to the background.<sup>8</sup> Most important, emphasis on speech not only strengthens this tendency away from camerallife but adds something new, and extremely dangerous. It opens up the region of discursive reasoning, enabling the medium to impart the turns and twists of sophisticated thought, all those rational or poetic communications which do not depend upon pictorialization to be grasped and appreciated. What even the most theatricalminded silent film could not incorporatepointed controversies, Shavian witticisms, Hamlet's soliloquieshas now been annexed to the screen.

But when this course is followed, it is inevitable that out of the spoken words definite patterns of meanings and images should arise. They are much in the nature of the loving memories which Proust's narrator retains of his grandmother and which prevent him from realizing her crude physique as it appears in a photograph. Evoked through language, these patterns assume a reality of their own, a self sufficient mental reality which, once established in the film, interferes with the photographic reality to which the camera aspires. The significance of verbal argumentation, verbal poetry, threatens to drown the significance of the accompanying pictures, reducing them to shadowy illustrations. [9]

*Equilibrium*. Those aware of the theatrical effects of dialogue film and yet adverse to reducing the of verbal communications tend to err visage the abovementioned possibility of an equilibrium between word and; image as a workable solution. Allardyce Nicoll considers Max Reinhardt's film *A Midsummer Night's Dream* a case in point, and defends the latter's equal concern for "visual symbols" and "language" on the strength of an interesting argument. Shakespeare's dialogue, says he, addressed itself to an audience which, confronted with a growing language and still unaccustomed to acquiring knowledge through reading, was much more acutely alert to the spoken word than is the modern audience. Our grasp of spoken words is no longer what it was in Shakespeare's times. Reinhardt is therefore justified in trying to enliven the dialogue by supplementing it with an opulent imagery. This imagery, Nicoll reasons, mobilizes our visual imagination, thus benefiting the verbal communications whose stimulating power had long since subsided. "

The fallacy of Nicoll's argument is obvious. In fact, he himself seems to doubt its conclusiveness; before advancing it, he admits that one might as well condemn *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for assigning to the pictures on the screen a role apt to divert the audience from the appeal of Shakespeare's language. Well, exactly this is bound to happen. Because of their obtrusive presence the luxuriant images summoned by Reinhardt cannot be expected to revitalize the dialogue by stimulating the spectator's allegedly atrophied sensitivity to it; instead of transforming the spectator into a listener, they claim his attention in their own right. So the word meanings are all the more lost

on him. The balance to which the film aspires turns out to be unachievable.

Perhaps the most noteworthy attempt at an equilibrium between verbal and pictorial statements is Laurence Olivier's *Hamlet*, a film which breathes a disquiet that is much to the credit of its director. Olivier wants to transfer, undamaged, all the beauties of Shakespeare's dialogue to the screen. Yet endowed with a keen film sense, he also wants to avoid photographed theater and therefore plays up the role of the visuals and the significance of cinematic devices. The result is a tour de force as fascinating as it is exasperating. On the one hand, Olivier emphasizes the dialogue, inviting us to revel in its suggestive poetry; on the other, he incorporates the dialogue into a texture of meaningful shots whose impact prevents us from taking in the spoken lines.

During *Hamlet*'s great soliloquy the camera, as if immune to its magic, explores his physique with an abandon which would be very rewarding indeed were we not at the same time requested to absorb the soliloquy itself, this unique fabric of language and thought. The spectator's capacity being limited, the photographic images and the language images inevitably neutralize each other; "like Buridan's ass, he does not know what to feed upon and eventually gets starved. *Hamlet* is a remarkable, if quixotic, effort

to instill cinematic life into an outspoken dialogue film. But you cannot eat your cake and have it.

#### CINEMATIC USES

All the successful attempts at an integration of the spoken word have one characteristic in common: they play down dialogue with a view to reinstating the visuals. This may be done in various ways.

*Speech Deemphasized.* Practically all responsible critics agree that it heightens cinematic interest to reduce the weight and volume of the spoken word so that dialogue after the manner of the stage yields to natural, lifelike speech. [12] This postulate is in keeping with the "basic requirement"; it rests upon the conviction that the medium calls for verbal statements which grow out of the flow of pictorial communications instead of determining their course. Many filmmakers have accordingly deemphasized speech. Cavalcanti remarked in 1939: "Film producers have learned in the course of the last ten years that use of speech must be economical, and be balanced with the other elements in the film, that the style employed by the dialogue writers must be literal, conversational, nonliterary: that the delivery must be light, rapid, and offhand, to match the quick movements of the action, and the cuts from speaker to speaker."

Rend Clair's Paris comedies, for instance, meet these requests to the letter; the dialogue in them is casual, so casual in fact that their characters sometimes continue to converse while disappearing in a bar. For a moment you may still see them linger behind the window and move their lips with appropriate gestures an ingenious device which repudiates drastically the goals and claims of dialogue film proper. It is as if Clair wanted to demonstrate ad oculos that the spoken word is most cinematic if the messages it conveys elude our grasp; if all that actually can be grasped is the sight of the speakers.

The tendency toward embedding dialogue in visual contexts is perhaps nowhere illustrated so strikingly as in that episode of *Ruggles of Red Gap* in which Charles Laughton as Ruggles recites Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. At first glance, this episode would seem to be about the opposite of a fitting example, for, in delivering the speech, Ruggles is not only fully conscious of its significance but eager to impress it upon his listeners in the bar. His recital, however, also serves another purpose, a purpose of such an immediate urgency that it outweighs the impact of Lincoln's words themselves. The fact, established by their rendering, that Ruggles knows them by heart reveals to the audience his inner metamorphosis from an English gentleman's gentleman into a self-reliant American.

In complete accord with this major objective, the camera closes in on Ruggles's face when he, still talking to himself, mumbles the first sentences of the speech, and then shows him again as he stands up and confidently raises his voice. The camera thus anticipates our foremost desire. Indeed, concerned with the change Ruggles has undergone rather than the text he declaims, we want

nothing more than to scan his every facial expression and his whole demeanor for outward signs of that change. The episode is a rare achievement in that it features a speech which so little interferes with the visuals that on the contrary, it makes them stand out glaringly. Things are arranged in such a manner that our awareness of the speech's content kindles our interest in the meanings of the speaker's appearance. Of course, this is possible only in case of a speech which, like Lincoln's, is familiar to the audience. Since the listeners need not really pay attention to it to recall what belongs among their cherished memories, they may take in the words and yet be free to concentrate on the accompanying pictures. Imagine Ruggles advancing a dramatically important new thought instead of reciting the Gettysburg speech: then the audience would hardly be in a position to assimilate the simultaneous verbal and pictorial statements with equal intensity.

Speech Undermined from Within. When first incorporating the spoken word, Chaplin aimed at corroding it. He ridiculed speeches which, had they been normally rendered, would infallibly have conveyed patterns of languagebound meanings. The point is that he did not render them normally. In the opening sequence of *City Lights* the orators celebrating the unveiling of a statue utter inarticulate sounds with the grandiloquent intonations required by the occasion. This sequence not only makes fun of the inanity of ceremonious speeches but effectively forestalls their absorption, thus inviting the audience all the more intensely to look at the pictures. In the feeding machine episode of *Modern Times* Chaplin attains about the same ends with the aid of a gag which works like a delayedtime bomb. When the inventor [salesman] of the machine begins to explain it, his whole performance is calculated to trap us into believing that he himself does the talking; then a slight movement of the camera makes us abruptly realize that his sales talk comes from a record player. As a joke on our gullibility this belated revelation is doubly exhilarating. And naturally, now that the man whom we believed to be the speaker is exposed as a dummy, a leftover from mechanization, we no longer pay attention to what the phonograph is pouring forth but turn from naive listeners into dedicated spectators. (In two of his more recent films, *Monsieur Verdoux* and *Limelight*, Chaplin has reverted to dialogue in theatrical fashion. From the angle of the cinema this is undeniably a retrogression. Yet Chaplin is not the only great artist to have suffered from the limitations of his medium. One grows older, and the urge to communicate pentup insight precariously acquired sweeps away all other considerations. Perhaps Chaplin's desire to speak his mind has also something to do with his lifelong silence as a pantomime.)

Groucho Marx too undermines the spoken word from within. True, he is given to talking, but his impossible delivery, both glib like water flowing down tiles and cataclysmic like a deluge, tends to obstruct the sanctioned functions of speech. Add to this that he contributes to the running dialogue without really participating in it. Silly and shrewd, scatterbrained and subversive, his repartees are bubbling selfassertions rather than answers or injunctions. Groucho is a lusty, irresponsible extrovert out of tune with his partners. Hence the obliqueness of his utterances. They disrupt the ongoing conversation so radically that no message or opinion voiced reaches its destination. Whatever Groucho is saying disintegrates speech all around him. He is an eruptive monad in the middle of selfcreated anarchy. Accordingly, his verbal discharges go well with Harpo's slapstick pranks, which survive from the silent era. Like the gods of antiquity who after their downfall lived on as puppets, bugbears, and other minor ghosts, haunting centuries which no longer believed in them, Harpo is a residue of the past, an exiled comedy god condemned or permitted to act the part of a mischievous hobgoblin. Yet the world in which he appears is so crowded with dialogue that he would long since have vanished were it not for Groucho, who supports the spectre's destructive designs. As dizzying as any silent collision, Groucho's word cascades wreak havoc on language, and among the resultant debris Harpo continues to feel at ease.

*Shift of Emphasis From the Meanings of Speech to its Material Qualities.* Filmmakers may also turn the spotlight from speech as a means of communication to speech as a manifestation of nature. In *Pygmalion*, for instance, we are enjoined to focus on Eliza's Cockney idiom rather than the content of what she is saying. This shift of emphasis is cinematic because it alienates the words, thereby exposing their material characteristics. 14 Within the world of sound the effect thus produced

parallels that of photography in the visible world. Remember the Proust passage in which the narrator looks at his grandmother with the eyes of a stranger: estranged from her, he sees her, roughly speaking, as she really is, not as he imagines her to be. Similarly, whenever dialogue is diverted from its conventional purpose of conveying some message or other, we are, like Proust's narrator, confronted with the alienated voices which, now that they have been stripped of all the connotations and meanings normally overlaying their given nature, appear to us for the first time in a relatively pure state. Words presented this way lie in the same dimension as the visible phenomena which the motion picture camera captures. They are sound phenomena which affect the moviegoer through their physical qualities. Consequently, they do not provoke him, as would obtrusive dialogue, to neglect the accompanying visuals but, conversely, stir him to keep close to the latter, which they supplement in a sense.

Examples are not infrequent. To revert to *Pygmalion*, it is the type of Eliza's speech which counts. Her manner of expressing herself, as recorded by the sound camera, represents a peculiar mode of being which claims our attention for its own sake. The same holds true of those parts of the dialogue in *Marty* which help characterize the Italian-American environment; the bass voice in the coronation episode of *Ivan the Terrible*; the echo scene in Buñuel's *Robinson Crusoe*; and the lumps of conversation tossed to and fro in *Mr. Hulot's Holiday*. When in Tati's admirable comedy, one of the most original since the days of silent slapstick, Hulot checks in at the reception desk of the resort hotel, the pipe in his mouth prevents him from pronouncing his name clearly. Upon request, he politely repeats the performance and, this time without pipe, enunciates the two syllables "Hulot" with so overwhelming a distinctness that, as in the case of his initial mutter, you are again thrust back on the physical side of his speech; the utterance "Hulot" stays with you not as a communication but as a specific configuration of sounds.

"There is something peculiarly delightful," says Ruskin, ". . . in passing through the streets of a foreign city without understanding a word that anybody says! One's ear for all sound of voices then becomes entirely impartial; one is not diverted by the meaning of syllables from recognizing the absolute guttural, liquid, or honeyed quality of them: while the gesture of the body and the expression of the face have the same value for you that they have in a pantomime; every scene becomes a melodious opera to you, or a picturesquely inarticulate Punch." This is, for instance, confirmed by the song which Chaplin as a . . . waiter improvises in his *Modern Times*: a hodgepodge of melodious, if incomprehensible, word formations, it is both an attractive sound composition in its own right and an ingenious device for attuning the spectator perfectly to the pantomime which the involuntary rhapsodist is meanwhile performing.

And of course, Ruskin's observation accounts for the cinematic effect of multilingual films. A number of them, partly semidocumentaries, were produced after World War II. G. W. Pabst's *Kameradschaft* and Jean Renoir's *La Grande Illusion*, both bilingual, anticipated this trend which grew out of the tribulations of the war when millions of ordinary people, cut off from their native countries, intermingled all over Europe. In the Rossellini film *Paisan*, which reflects most impressively the ensuing confusion of mother tongues, an American G.I. tries to converse with a Sicilian peasant girl; he soon supplements unintelligible words with drastic gestures and thus arrives at an understanding of a sort. But since this primitive approach is not achieved through the dialogue itself, the sounds that compose it take on a life of their own. And along with the dumb show, their conspicuous presence as sounds challenges the spectator empathically to sense what the two characters may sense and to respond to undercurrents within them and between them which would, perhaps, be lost on him were the words just carriers of meanings. The theater which hinges on dialogue shuns foreign languages, while the cinema admits and even favors them for benefiting speechless action.

Emphasis on voices as sounds may also serve to open up the material regions of the speech world for their own sake. What is thought of here is a sort of word carpet which, woven from scraps of dialogue or other kinds of communications, impresses the audience mainly as a coherent sound pattern. Grierson coins the term "chorus" to define such patterns and mentions two instances of

them: the film *Three cornered Moon*, in which the chorus or carpet consists of bits of conversation between unemployed people queuing up in bread lines; and *Beast of the City*, a Hollywood film about the Chicago underworld, with an episode which features the monotonous wireless messages from police headquarters. "It went something like this: 'Calling Car 324 324 Calling Car 528 528 Calling Car 18 18,' etc., etc. . . . Now these "choruses" may be inserted in such a way that it is they rather than the synchronized visuals which captivate the spectator should one say, listener? Being all ear, he will not care much about what the pictures try to impart.

On the surface, this use of speech seems to go against the grain of the medium by disregarding the visual contributions. And yet it is cinematic by extension. The voice patterns brought into focus belong to the physical world about us no less than its visible components; and they are so elusive that they would hardly be noticed were it not for the sound camera which records them faithfully. Only in photographing them like any visible phenomenon not to mention mechanical reproduction processes outside the cinema are we able to lay hold on these transitory verbal conglomerates. The fact that they palpably form part of the accidental flow of life still increases their affiliations with the medium. An excellent case in point is *Jungle Patrol*, a Hollywood B picture about American combat fliers in New Guinea. This film culminates in a sequence of terrific air fights which, however, are not seen at all. What we do see instead is a loudspeaker in the operations hut hooked in to the planes' intercoms. As the illfated fights take their course, different voices which seem to come from nowhere flow out of the radio set, forming an endless sound strip. To be sure, we grasp the tragic implications of their blurred messages. But this is not the whole story they are telling us. Rather, the gist of it is the constant mutter itself, the fabric woven by voice after voice. In the process of unfolding, it sensitizes us to the influences of space and matter and their share in the individual destinies. .

#### EXISTING THEORIES

. . . The problem is: what do the varying relationships between image and speech imply for the latter's inadequacy or adequacy to the medium?

It might be best to take a look at the existing theories first. Most critics hold that, for an integration of sound into film, much, if not all, depends upon the methods of synchronization. This is not to say that they would ignore the significance of the role assigned to speech; as has been pointed out above, they usually repudiate the ascendancy of dialogue in favor of films in which speech is kept subdued. But they practically never think of establishing a meaningful connection between that role and the manner in which words and visuals are synchronized. And their emphasis on synchronization techniques indicates that they take them to be the decisive factor.

This bias goes hand in hand with the tendency, equally widespread in theoretical writings, to follow the example of the Russians, who not only championed counterpoint and asynchronism when sound arrived but plainly assumed that both procedures are inseparable from each other. In their joint Statement of 1928 Eisenstein, Pudovkin, and Alexandrov declare: "*Only a contrapuntal use of sound in relation to the visual montage piece will afford a new potentiality of montage development and perfection.*"<sup>18</sup> And somewhat later Pudovkin remarks: "It is not generally recognized that the principal elements in sound film are the asynchronous and not the synchronous." He and Eisenstein took it for granted that asynchronism inevitably calls for a contrapuntal handling of sound and, conversely, the latter for asynchronism. Presumably it was their obsession with the montage principle which made them believe in the supreme virtues of this particular combination, blinding them to other, equally rewarding possibilities. The reader need hardly be told that the Russian doctrine entails, or at least encourages, the no less untenable identification of parallelism with "synchronism."<sup>20</sup>

Even though, thanks to three decades of talkies, modem writers in the field are more discerning than the authors of this oversimplified doctrine, they continue in a measure to endorse the latter's insistence on the cinematic merits of asynchronous sound and its contrapuntal use. And Pudovkin's main argument in support of his proposition is still fully upheld. He defends asynchronism

counterpoint, for that matter on the ground that it conforms best to real life conditions, whereas cases of parallelism, says he, materialize much less frequently than we are inclined to think. To prove his thesis he constructs the example of a cry for help from the street which stays with us as we look out of the window, drowning the noises of the moving cars and buses now before our eyes. And what about our natural behavior as listeners? Pudovkin describes some of the ways in which our eyes happen to wander while we are following a conversation. We may go on watching a man who has just finished talking and now listens to a member of the party; or we may prematurely look at a person all set to answer the actual speaker; or we may satisfy our curiosity about the effects of a speech by scanning, one by one, the faces of the listeners and studying their reactions [22]

All three alternatives . . . are drawn from everyday life; and all of them represent at least borderline cases of asynchronism, with word and image being interrelated in contrapuntal fashion. The gist of Pudovkin's argument is that this type of synchronization is cinematic because it corresponds to our habits of perception and, hence, renders reality as we actually experience it.

### A NEW PROPOSITION

No doubt the theories presented here carry much weight. Yet they suffer from two shortcomings. First, they attribute to the methods of synchronization independent significance, even though these methods are only techniques which may serve any purpose, cinematic or not. Second, they plead for contrapuntal asynchronism on the ground that it reflects faithfully the manner in which we perceive reality. What accounts for the cinematic quality of films, however, is not so much their truth to our experience of reality or even to reality in a general sense as their absorption in camera reality visible physical existence.

How dispose of these shortcomings? Let us proceed from the following observation: Any filmmaker wants to canalize audience attention and create dramatic suspense as a matter of course. Accordingly, he will in each particular case resort to such methods of synchronization as he believes to be the most fitting ones. Supposing further he is a skilled artist, his choices are certainly "good" in the sense that they establish the narrative as effectively as is possible under the given circumstances.

But are they for that reason also necessarily "good" in a cinematic sense? Their adequacy to the medium obviously depends upon the "goodness" of the narrative which they help implement. Does the narrative grow out of verbal or visual contributions? This is the question. The decisive factor, then, is the role which speech plays within the contexts under consideration. If speech is in the lead, even the most knowing filmmaker cannot avoid synchronizing it with the images in ways which disqualify the latter as a source of communication. Conversely, if the visuals predominate, he is free to avail himself of modes of synchronization which, in keeping with the cinematic approach, advance the action through pictorial statements.

An interesting fact emerges at this point. As I have emphasized, the existing theories usually recommend a contrapuntal treatment of asynchronous sound, while cautioning against parallel synchronization. Now it can easily be shown that my new proposition corroborates these theories up to a point. In case verbal communications prevail, the odds are that the imagery will parallel them. The reverse alternative speech being deemphasized greatly favors counterpoint, which stirs the visuals to become eloquent. Eisenstein and Pudovkin were of course not wrong in advocating a contrapuntal use of sound. But from the present viewpoint they did so for the wrong reasons. .

## Sound Proper

### About the Nature of Sounds

Sound this term meaning exclusively noises here can be arranged along a continuum which extends from unidentifiable to recognizable noises. As for the former, think of certain noises in the night: they are, so to speak, anonymous; you have no idea where they come from. At the opposite pole are sounds whose source is known to us, whether we see it or not. In

everyday life, when we hear barking, we immediately realize that a dog must be around; and as a rule we do not go wrong in associating church bells with the sound of chimes.

Those puzzling noises which the night is apt to produce attune the listener primarily to his physical environment because of their origin in some ungiven region of it. But what about the many identifiable noises at the other end of the continuum? Take again chimes: no sooner does one hear them than he tends to visualize, however vaguely, the church or the clock tower from which they issue; and from there his mind may leisurely drift on until it happens upon the memory of a village square filled with churchgoers who stream to the service in their Sunday best. Generally speaking, any familiar noise calls forth inner images of its source as well as images of activities, modes of behavior, etc., which are either customarily connected with that noise or at least related to it in the listener's recollection. In other words, localizable sounds do not as a rule touch off conceptual reasoning, languagebound thought; rather, they share with unidentifiable noises the quality of bringing the material aspects of reality into focus. This comes out very clearly in scenes where they are combined with speech. It could be shown above that in the great dialogue scene of [Orson Welles's](#) *Othello* the intermittent footfalls of Iago and the Moor, far from increasing the impact of the dialogue, help shift audience attention to the protagonists' bodily presence.

---

In sum, as Cavalcanti once put it, "noise seems to bypass the intelligence and speak to something very deep and inborn." This explains why, in the era of transition to sound, those addicted to the silent staked their last hopes on films that would feature noises rather than words. So Eisenstein in a 1930 talk at the Sorbonne: "I think the '100% alltalking film' is silly. . . . But the sound film is something more interesting. The future belongs to it., According to René Clair (who, incidentally, did not share Eisenstein's illusions about the future), the connoisseurs' preference for noises then rested upon the belief that, as material phenomena, they evoke a reality less dangerous to the images on the screen than the kind of reality conveyed by the all-out talkie. Nothing would seem to be more justified than this belief. Sounds whose material properties are featured belong to the same world as the visuals and, hence, will hardly interfere with the spectator's concern for the latter.

Yet is the filmmaker really obliged under all circumstances to emphasize the material characteristics of the sounds he inserts? Actually, he is free to divest certain sounds of their natural substance, so that they no longer refer to the physical universe from which they flow; disembodied entities, they then assume other functions. As a matter of course, this possibility involves exclusively localizable noises.

### **Reliance on Symbolic Meanings**

Indeed, localizable noises often carry familiar symbolic meanings. And if the filmmaker capitalizes on these meanings in the interest of his narrative, the noises yielding them turn from material phenomena into units which, much like verbal statements, serve as components of mental processes.

René Clair playfully uses sound this way when he shows the main characters of his *Le Million* scrambling for the jacket which they believe to harbor the coveted lottery ticket. Instead of resorting to "synchronous" sound, he synchronizes the scramble with noises from a Rugby game. These commentative noises virtually parallel the actual fight and at the same time relate contrapuntally to it. Evidently they are intended to establish an analogy between the visible fight and an imaginary game; their purpose is to ridicule the seriousness of the scramble by making the participants look like Rugby players who toss the jacket about as if it were, a ball. Assuming the asynchronous ball noises really implement Clair's intentions, they affect us not so much through their material qualities as through their function of signifying a Rugby game, for that matter. It is their symbolic value which counts. In consequence, they do not induce the spectator closely to watch the pictures but invite him to enjoy an amusing analogy which has all the traits of a literary aperçu. In fact, what the sounds try to suggest might have been imparted by words as well. The whole scene is problematic cinematically because it culminates in a jocular comparison which, being imposed from without on the images of the scramble, inevitably obscures their inherent meanings. Add to this that

the commentative noises may not even fulfill the function which Clair assigns to them; it is doubtful indeed whether they are specific enough to be necessarily associated with the idea of a ball game. Not all identifiable sounds are familiar to all the people; nor can all such sounds be localized with absolute certainty. Perhaps, many a spectator, unable to grasp the significance of the Rugby noises, will find them merely bizarre. . . .

Sometimes, especially in theatrical adaptations of stage dramas, the symbolic potentialities of familiar sounds are exploited in a crude manner palpably inspired by venerable stage traditions. As the tragic conflict approaches its climax, the surge of human passions is synchronized with the sinister noises of a storm outdoors. Raging nature, suggested by these asynchronous actual sounds, is thus made to parallel the impending catastrophe in gloomy interiors for the purpose of intensifying audience participation. Such a use of sound will hardly ingratiate itself with the sensitive moviegoer. It rests upon the premise of a closed universe in which natural events correspond to human destinies a notion incompatible with camera realism, which presupposes the endless continuum of physical existence. Moreover, the attention which the spectator must pay to the symbolic meaning of the storm noises preempts his concern for the meanings of their material characteristics. Because of its emphasis on mental reality the whole arrangement is not likely to benefit the pictures.

Another possibility in a similar vein is the following: the howling storm denoting an upheaval of nature may be synchronized, counterpointwise, with shots of peaceful family life in order to forewarn the audience that malevolent forces are about to invade that world of peace. Yet while in the example discussed just above, the storm noises convey a meaning which can easily be grasped, paralleling the obvious meaning of the soaring human passions, these very same noises are well nigh unintelligible when they relate contrapuntally to pictures whose significance strongly differs from theirs. The reason is that the symbolic content of identifiable sounds is too vague to serve, by itself alone, as a basis for the construction of analogies or similes. It is highly improbable that a spectator immersed in the peaceful images on the screen will conceive of the howling storm as an ominous portent. Perhaps he will believe the discordant storm noises to be sheer coincidence an explanation, by the way, which would at least do justice to the preferences of the medium. But be this as it may, one thing is sure: the symbolic counterpoint aspired to falls flat. Sound used contrapuntally must relate to the synchronized images in an understandable way to signify something comprehensible.

So much for sound symbolism. Filmmakers have resorted to it only sporadically. What they usually feature is not so much the symbolic meanings of recognizable noises as the material properties of sounds, identifiable or not. The subsequent analysis bears exclusively on sounds in the latter sense.

### **Role**

Sounds in their capacity as material phenomena do not weaken the impact of the juxtaposed pictures. This all but self-evident assumption implies that the role which sounds are made to play in a film is a negligible factor. Speech and sound proper differ radically in that the former's dominance blurs the visuals, whereas the occasional dominance of noises is of little consequence. Supposing shrill screams or the blasts of an explosion are synchronized with images of their source and/or its environment: much as they will leave their imprint on the spectator's mind, it is unlikely that they will prevent him from taking in the images; rather, they may prompt him to scrutinize the latter in a mood which increases his susceptibility to their multiple meanings are not the screams and the blasts indeterminate also?

One might even go further. Sounds share with visible phenomena two characteristics: they are recorded by a camera; and they belong to material reality in a general sense. This being so, camera explorations of the sound world itself can be said to lie, by extension, in a cinematic interest. Flaherty, who was loath to entrust the spoken word with any important message, extolled the contributions of "characteristic" sounds: "I wish I could have had sound for *Nanook*. . . . It takes the hiss of the wind in the North and the howls of the dogs to get the whole feeling of that country." 2'

Now, filmmakers have at all times used closeups and other devices to exhibit the innumerable phenomena which comprise camerareality. So the late Jean Epstein's proposal to penetrate the universe of natural sounds in a similar manner would seem to be quite logical.

Epstein's general idea was to break down, by means of sonic slow motion, complex sound patterns into their elements. In his *Le Tempestaire* he thus details the various noises of which a violent storm consists, synchronizing them with remarkable shots of the ocean. The film, an experiment as ingenious as it is fascinating, extends the cinematic approach into the region of sound in such a way that the acoustic revelations and the pictorial communications reinforce rather than neutralize each other. Epstein himself accounts for his procedures in this film as follows: "Like the eye, the ear has only a very limited power of separation. The eye must have recourse to a slowing down. . . . Similarly, the ear needs sound to be enlarged in time, i.e., sonic slow motion, in order to discover, for instance, that the confused howling of a tempest is, in a subtler reality, a manifold of distinct noises hitherto alien to the human ear, an apocalypse of shouts, coos, gurgles, squalls, detonations, timbres and accents for the most part as yet unnamed." In analogy to slowmotion movements these unnamed noises might be called "sound reality of another dimension."

## Notes

1. René Clair, *Réflexion faite: Notes pour servir à l'histoire de l'art cinématographique de 1920 à 1950* (Paris: Gallimard, 1951), 141.
- 1947), p. 205.
2. Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler* (Princeton: Princeton University Press,
3. Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, ed. and trans. Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1949), pp. 257-59.
4. Clair, *Réflexion faite*, p. 116.
5. See, for instance, Georges Charensol, "Le Cinema parlant," in Marcel L'Herbier, ed., *Intelligence du cinématographe* (Paris: Editions Corrèa 1946), 170; Mortimer J. Adler, *Art and Prudence: A Study in Practical Philosophy* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1937), p. 541; Ernest Lindgren, *The Art of the Film* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1948), p. 106.
6. Clair, *Réflexion faite*, p. 43.
7. Alberto Cavalcanti, "Sound in Films," *Films*, 1, No. I (November 1939):29.
8. See Hanns Eisler, *Composing for the Films* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), p. 77. Clifford Leech, "Dialogue for Stage and Screen," *Penguin Film Review*, no. 6 (April 1948):100, likewise rejects stage dialogue because "the epigrams, the patterned responses, the set speeches need the ceremonial ambiance of the playhouse and the living presence of the player."
9. René Barjavel, *Cinéma total: Essai sur les formes futures du cinéma* (Paris: Les Editions Denoel 1944), p. 29, remarks that the imagination of the spectator watching a dialogue film "builds from the words showered down on him and replaces the images on the screen by those which the dialogue suggests to him." See also Clair, *Réflexion faite*, pp. 146, 150, 158, 188.
10. Allardyce Nicoll, *Film and Theatre* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1936), pp. 178-80.
11. Cf. Balazs, "Das Drehbuch oder Filmszenarium," in *Von der Filmidee zum Drehbuch* (Berlin 1949), p. 77.
12. For instance, Balazs, *ibid.*, pp. 76-77; Rudolf Arnheim, *Film* (London: Faber and Faber, 1933), p. 213; Leech, "Dialogue for Stage and Screen," pp. 99-101.
13. Cavalcanti, "Sound in Films," p. 31.
14. Cf. Horst Meyerhoff, *Tonfilm und Wirklichkeit: Grundlagen zur Psychologie des Films* (Berlin: B. Henschel, 1949), pp. 75-76; Arnheim, *Film*, p. 213.
15. John Ruskin, *Praeterita: Outline of Scenes and Thoughts Perhaps Worthy of Memory in My Past Life* (London: R. HartDavis, 1949), p. 106.

16. Forsyth Hardy, ed., *Grierson on Documentary* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1947), pp. 11516.
17. I am indebted to Mr. Arthur Knight for having this film brought to my attention.
18. V. I. Pudovkin, *Film Technique and Film Acting*, trans. Ivor Montagu (New York: Lear, 1949), p. 143; also Eisenstein, *Film Form*, p. 258.
19. Pudovkin, *Film Technique*, p. 157.
20. Arnheim, *Film*, p. 251, cautioned against this confusion as early as 1930.
21. For instance, K. Reisz, *The Technique of Film Editing* (London and New York: Focal Press, 1953), passim.
22. Pudovkin, *Film Technique*, pp. 15960; part 2, pp. 8687.
23. See Cavalcanti, "Sound in Films," pp. 3637.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
25. So Clair in 1929; see his *Réflexion faite*, p. 145.
26. Quoted by Dwight Macdonald, "The Soviet Cinema: 1930-1938," *Partisan Review*, 5, no. 2 (July 1938):46.
27. Clair, *Réflexion faite*, p. 145.
28. Arthur Rosenheimer, Jr., "They Make Documentaries," *Film News*, 7, no. 6 (April 1946):10, 23. At the beginning of the sound era, Walter Ruttmann in his *Melody of the World* delighted in recording the din of traffic, the screech of a saw. These reproductions were as many discoveries.
29. Jean Epstein, "Sound in Slow Motion," in Gideon Bachmann, ed., *Jean Epstein, 1897-1953: Cinemages*, no. 2:44.