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# AUDIO-VISION

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## SOUND ON SCREEN

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**PHANTOM**

**AUDIO-VISION**

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THE OTHER SIDE OF THE IMAGE

In Tarkovsky's final film, *The Sacrifice*, one can hear sounds that already seem to come from the other side, as if they're heard by an immaterial ear, liberated from the hurly-burly of our human world. Sung by sweet young human voices, they seem to be calling to us, resonating in a limpid atmosphere. They lead us far back to childhood, to an age when it felt as if we were by nature immortal. A spectator might hear these songs without consciously realizing it; nothing in the image points to or engages with them. It is as if they are the afterlife of the image, like what we'd discover if the screen were a hill and we could go see what

was on the other side. The closing credits inform us that they are traditional Swedish songs: hardly songs, more like invocations.

This is fairly typical of the sound of Tarkovsky's feature films: it calls to another dimension, it has gone elsewhere, disengaged from the present. It can also murmur like the drone of the world, at once close and disquieting. Tarkovsky, whom some call a painter of the earth—but an earth furrowed by streams and roads like the convolutions of a living brain—knew how to make magnificent use of sound in his films: sometimes muffled, diffuse, often bordering on silence, the oppressive horizon of our life; sometimes noises of presence, cracklings, plip-plops of water. Sound is also used in wide rhythms, in vast sheets. Swallows pass over the Swedish house of *The Sacrifice* every five or ten minutes; the image never shows them and no character speaks of them. Perhaps the person who hears these bird calls is the child in the film, a reclining convalescent—someone who has all the time in the world to wait for them, to watch for them, to come to know the rhythm of their returning.

The other side of the image is also found, in *Mr. Hulot's Holiday*, in that scene at the beach where what we see—awkward vacationers, with pinched expressions and cramped gestures—finds its diametric opposite in what we hear. The soundtrack conveys playing and shouting, with excited children, in a beautiful reverb-filled texture; the sound seems to have been collected on a real visit to a bathing beach. Basically characters in the image seem annoyed and those on the soundtrack are having fun. Which, as I have already pointed out, becomes obvious only when we mask out the image. What we then discover lurking just beneath the surface is an entire world of lively adults and children, hassling and yelling to one another; though never on screen, they are much more alive than those we do see. And on the screen the film's light is flat and two-dimensional, in the

indoor scenes as well as the exteriors, while the sounds of games on the beach reveal several nuanced and distinct depth planes.

So what we have here in *Mr. Hulot's Holiday* is two superimposed "ghosts," as Merleau-Ponty termed them: a ghost is the kind of perception made by only one sense.<sup>1</sup> (Of course, there is a part of the soundtrack—very specific sound effects—whose function is to give life to certain visual details and actions, and to give them a tangible reality on the screen.) These two ghost-universes are far from symmetrical. There is the world in the frame where we can identify things; Tati invites spectators in to point out gags to one another from our imaginary seats on the cafe terrace. Then there is the other world, that of sound, which is not named or identified. Children's or bathers' voices cry, "Go on, Robert!" or "Wow, is this water cold!" but no one in the image responds to the voices or acknowledges their existence. They literally and immediately engrave themselves in our memory, just as other phrases of this sort, registered and never named, may have imprinted themselves during childhood. One world is more ghostly than the other, and it's the world of sound.

What is the effect of this strange contrast? Does Tati's audiovisual strategy produce added value? That is, are we dealing with sound that enlivens the image, and deepens it in spatial terms? I don't think so, for in this particular case the image is not so malleable, and from the outset it contradicts the sonic environment too much.

So is it a matter of "counterpoint"? Literally speaking, yes, but counterpoint that isn't audio-viewed as such. No one ever notices or remarks on it; the ambient sounds of beach play are taken for natural atmosphere that oozes from the setting.

An effect, then, neither of added value nor counterpoint. In Tati's film as in Tarkovsky's *Sacrifice* we encounter a mysterious

effect of "hollowing-out" of audiovisual form: as if audio and visual perceptions were divided one by the other instead of mutually compounded, and in this quotient another form of reality, of combination, emerged.

Thus there are in the audiovisual contract certain relationships of absence and emptiness that set the audiovisual note to vibrating in a distinct and profound way. These relationships are what the present chapter sets out to describe.

#### A PHANTOM BODY: THE INVISIBLE MAN

It is no coincidence that one of the greatest early sound films was the one about *The Invisible Man*. The world's oldest stories tell us of invisible men and creatures; it was to be expected that the cinema, art of illusion and conjuring, would seize upon this theme with particular relish. Méliès is probably the one who inaugurated the trend in 1904 with his *Siva l'Invisible*. This trick film was imitated by other silent films; some were adaptations of H. G. Wells's novel *The Invisible Man*, published in 1897. It is easy to see why the talkies would give a big boost to the invisible man theme; and indeed, very soon after the coming of sound James Whale's wonderful film of 1933 achieved tremendous success.

The sound film made it possible to create the character through his voice, and thereby give him a wholly new dimension and a completely different presence. In Whale's film he is rather talkative, even bombastic, as if intoxicated by the new talkies. His loquaciousness might also reflect the filmmakers' desire to give Claude Rains (who does not visibly appear until the very last shot—the rest of the time he's completely covered in clothing and bandages) some room to show off his acting.

The impact of *The Invisible Man* stems from the cinema's dis-

covery of the powers of the invisible voice. This film is a special case: compare it to the invisible voice in a contemporaneous film like Fritz Lang's *Testament of Dr. Mabuse*. The speaking body of Wells's hero Griffin is not invisible by virtue of being offscreen or hidden behind a curtain, but apparently really *in* the image, even—and above all—when we don't see him there.

This situation has fairly humorous cinematic consequences, for example, when the camera accompanies the protagonist's ascent of a large empty staircase by means of a tilt. It's as if the camera, incapable of seeing Griffin, insists nevertheless on framing him and keeping him in the field of vision. At the same time, we understand that this camera movement is informing us that he is going upstairs; it is an index of the filmmakers' knowledge of *mise-en-scène*, of how to film the motion of the hero even in his very invisibility.

So Griffin is a singular form of "acousmètre" (see below): along with the other invisible voices who would populate the sound cinema he shares certain privileges and certain powers, particularly a surprising ability to move around, to slip through the traps set for him. If he ends up caught and defeated, it's only because it snowed and his footsteps are visible in the snow as he imprints them.

Another major characteristic he shares with cinema's other invisible voices is that his downfall and death are linked to his return to the common fate of visibility. In the film's final, disconcerting image, Griffin is dying in his hospital bed; at first we can only pinpoint him by his voice and a dent in the pillow. But since the substance that hides him ceases to act when he dies, he gradually takes visual form, by means of two overlapping superimpositions. First we see a death's head appear, then it is filled in with the flesh of the face fixed forever—the face seen for the first time only when Griffin is no more. The idea comes from Wells,

but the film has a beautiful way of exploiting it, by depicting a death in reverse. In the film, becoming substantial for the eye means meeting with the common fate of corruptible beings, and to leave an impression on film is to be stamped with the seal of death that film places on those it captures.

Although Griffin is invisible, the screenplay doesn't construct his body as immaterial; he can be nabbed. His invisibility is really the only trait that allows him to escape the servitude common to the human condition. He has other constraints that visible beings do not have: he must go naked when he does not want to be seen, hide in order to eat (since the food he takes in remains visible until completely digested), and so on. Everything in this character, from the disguise he must assume when he wishes to appear without giving himself away, which makes him look somewhat like a seriously wounded man, to the complaints he makes during his frequent tirades to say that he's cold or hungry or sleepy, everything shows us that what we have here is not a flying superhero but a suffering body, a "phantom" body whose organic character is accentuated rather than subtilized. Thus, when he handles objects and opens doors he demonstrates his invisibility but also makes a show of his lowly human condition of having to do everything himself, with no telekinetic power. And when he wraps himself up in a blanket to get warm, we are frightened to see that the blanket marries the contours of a nothingness, but this nothingness—which speaks—is a form that makes us feel cold.

The sound film would not often recapture the strangeness and above all the conviction with which this half-embodied voice was elaborated in *The Invisible Man*. But it did continue to develop a form of "phantom" character specific to the art of film, and to which we owe some of the greatest films of the thirties to seventies: the *acousmètre*.

## THE ACOUSMETRE

The *acousmètre* is this acousmatic character whose relationship to the screen involves a specific kind of ambiguity and oscillation that I have analyzed extensively in *La Voix au cinéma*.<sup>2</sup> We may define it as neither inside nor outside the image. It is not inside, because the image of the voice's source—the body, the mouth—is not included. Nor is it outside, since it is not clearly positioned offscreen in an imaginary "wing," like a master of ceremonies or a witness, and it is implicated in the action, constantly about to be part of it. This is why voices of clearly detached narrators are not *acousmètres*. Why invent such a barbarous term? Because I wish not to be limited to terms for voices or sounds but rather to explore an entire category of *characters* specific to the sound film, whose wholly specific presence is based on their characters' very absence from the core of the image.

We can describe as *acousmètres* many of the mysterious and talkative characters hidden behind curtains, in rooms or hide-outs, which the sound film has given us: the master criminal of Lang's *Testament of Dr. Mabuse*, the mother in Hitchcock's *Psycho*, and the fake Wizard of Oz in the MGM film by that name; and innumerable voice-characters: robots, computers (Kubrick's *2001, A Space Odyssey*), ghosts (Ophüls's *Tendre ennemie*), certain voices of narrators that have mysterious properties (Mankiewicz's *Letter to Three Wives*, Welles's *Magnificent Ambersons*, Sternberg's *Anatolian*, the beginning of Preminger's *Laura*, Bertolucci's *Tragedy of a Ridiculous Man*, but also Raul Ruiz's *The One-Eyed Man* or the beggar woman in Marguerite Duras's *India Song*).

Fiction films tend to grant three powers and one gift to the *acousmètre*, to the voice that speaks over the image but is also forever on the verge of appearing in it. First, the *acousmètre* has the power of *seeing all*; second, the power of *omniscience*; and third,

the *omnipotence* to act on the situation. Let us add that in many cases there is also a gift of *ubiquity*—the acousmètre seems to be able to be anywhere he or she wishes. These powers, however, often have limits we do not know about, and are thereby all the more disconcerting.

First, this voice that speaks over the images can see everything therein. This power arises from the notion that in a sense the acousmètre is the very voice of what is called *primary identification* with the camera. The power manifests itself vividly in stories of the harassing phone caller whose “voice” sees everything—for example, John Carpenter’s *Murder on the 43rd Floor*. The second power, omniscience, of course derives from the first. As for the third, this is precisely the power of *textual speech* (see chapter 9), intimately connected to the idea of magic, when the words one utters have the power to become things.

I shall call *paradoxical acousmétres* those deprived of some powers that are usually accorded to the acousmètre; their lack is the very thing that makes them special. There are such “partial” acousmétres in *India Song* and *Anatahan*. Also in two of Terence Malick’s films, *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven*, the female narrators do not see or understand everything in the images over which they are speaking.

An inherent quality of the acousmètre is that it can be instantly dispossessed of its mysterious powers (seeing all, omniscience, omnipotence, ubiquity) when it is *de-acousmatized*, when the film reveals the face that is the source of the voice. At this point, through synchronism, the voice finds itself attributed to and confined to a body. Why is the sight of the face necessary to de-acousmatization? For one thing, because the face represents the individual in her singularity. For another, the sight of the speaking face attests through the synchrony of audition/vision that the voice really belongs to that character, and thus is able to capture, domesticate, and “embody” her (and humanize her as well).

De-acousmatization consists of an unveiling process that is unfailingly dramatic. Its most typical form occurs in detective and mystery films, when the “big boss” who pulls all the strings—a character we haven’t seen but only heard, and perhaps glimpsed the shoes of—is finally revealed. This unmasking occurs, for example, in Aldrich’s *Kiss Me Deadly* and Terence Young’s *Dr. No*.

Pascal Bonitzer has noted that the de-acousmatization of a character generally goes hand in hand with his descent into a human, ordinary, and vulnerable fate. As long as we can’t see him we attribute all-seeing power to the voice; but once inscribed in the visual field he loses his aura. De-acousmatization can also be called embodiment: a sort of enclosing of the voice in the circumscribed limits of a body—which tames the voice and drains it of its power.

The acousmètre’s person seems to inhabit the image, by its nature blurring the boundaries between onscreen and offscreen. But it can maintain its particular status only as long as this onscreen-offscreen distinction prevails in a meaningful way. The acousmètre’s existence by no means constitutes a refutation of the onscreen-offscreen duality; quite to the contrary, it draws its very force from the opposition and from the way it transgresses it.

Logically enough, recent modifications in cinematic space—transformed as it has been by multitrack sound and a wrap-around “superfield,” which problematize older and simpler notions of onscreen and offscreen—are putting the acousmètre on shakier ground. And in fact, the recent cinema has fewer of them.<sup>3</sup>

#### SUSPENSION

In Imamura’s *Ballad of Narayama* the son, who is carrying his mother to the mountains so she can die according to proper custom, has paused along his way, and he stands drinking water at a spring coming out of a rock. He looks around and suddenly

freezes: his mother seems to have vanished into thin air. At this moment the spring we continue to see flowing nearby abruptly ceases making any sound: auditively, it has dried up. This is an example of suspension.

Suspension is specific to the sound film, and one could say it represents an extreme case of null extension. Suspension occurs when a sound naturally expected from a situation (which we usually hear at first) becomes suppressed, either insidiously or suddenly. This creates an impression of emptiness or mystery, most often without the spectator knowing it; the spectator feels its effect but does not consciously pinpoint its origin.

Now and then, as in the dream of the snowstorm in Kurosawa's *Dreams*, suspension may be more overt. Over the closeup of an exhausted hiker who has lain down in the snow, the howling of the wind disappears but snowflakes continue to blow about silently in the image. We see a woman's long black hair twisted about by the wind in a tempest that makes no sound, and all we hear now is a supernaturally beautiful voice singing.

An effect of *phantom sound* is then created: our perception becomes filled with an overall massive sound, mentally associated with all the micromovements in the image. The pullulating and vibrating surface that we see produces something like a noise-of-the-image. We perceive large currents or waves in the swirling of the snowflakes on the screen surface. The fadeout of sound from the tempest has led us to invest the image differently. When there was sound it told us of the storm. When the sound is removed our beholding of the image is more interrogative, as it is for silent cinema. We explore its spatial dimension more easily and spontaneously; we tend to look more actively to the image to tell us what is going on.

Kurosawa has a fondness for suspensions; he also used them in *Ran*—for example, in the scene in Hell, a terrifying, mute battle, accompanied only by composer Takemitsu's music.

Often just one audio element of the soundscape is "suspended," with the result of heightening one moment of the scene, giving it a striking, disquieting or magical impact: for example, when crickets suddenly stop chirping. Generally suspension relies on the film's characters not noticing nor alluding to it. (An altogether different effect arises when it is the plot situation itself that logically leads to silence, for example a noisy crowd that calms down.)

At the end of Fellini's *Nights of Cabiria*, the prostitute with a heart of gold played by Giulietta Masina believes she has finally found her Prince Charming in a traveling salesman (François Périer). They go for a romantic walk together at sunset in the woods next to a cliff. The spectator experiences a vague anxiety about what is going to happen: we will discover that all the man wanted was Cabiria's money and that he was planning to push her over the cliff to her death. Where did our premonitory anxiety come from? From the fact that over this magical landscape not a single birdsong is heard.

Here, suspension functions according to such a common audiovisual convention (sun-dappled woods = birdsongs) that to perturb it is all that's needed to generate strangeness (Fellini, unlike Kurosawa, has not begun the scene with tweeting). Chabrol also used this device in his fantasy-film *Alice ou la dernière fugue*. The lovely woodland landscape through which Sylvia Krystel moves as a traveler between life and death is often emptied, sucked from within by the suspensive silence that reigns there, and by the absence of natural murmurings of birds or wind—an absence that only exists as such because we hear over these images the heroine's voice and footsteps.

In *Rear Window* the scene mentioned earlier is based as much on an effect of suspension as on telescoped extension: not only do the killer's steps resonate differently in the silence that has come over the sequence but the whole city and the courtyard seem to be holding their breath as well.

"VISUALISTS" OF THE EAR, "AUDITIVES" OF THE EYE

Sound and image are not to be confused with the ear and the eye. We find proof of this in filmmakers who infuse their images with what may be called the auditive impulse. What does this mean? Cinema can give us much more than Rimbaudian correspondences ("Black A, white E, red I"); it can create a veritable intersensory reciprocity. Into the image of a film you can inject a sense of the auditory, as Orson Welles or Ridley Scott have. And you can infuse the soundtrack with visuality, as Godard has. What does it mean to be a sound-thinker, if it's not a matter of sensations addressed literally to the ear?

From Scott's very first film, *The Duellists*, one can note the English director's passion for making light flutter, vibrate, murmur, twinkle on all kinds of occasions. In *Legend* we see spots of moving and glistening light in undergrowth where leaves are blowing in the wind. *Blade Runner* has the headlights of flying vehicles, which ceaselessly sweep through the interior of an apartment of the future. In the New York of *Someone To Watch Over Me* steam springing from an infernal underground perpetually under pressure forms a halo of shifting whiteness behind the characters. Then there is the nightclub's strobe-light show hacking the scene into ultrarapid microperceptions. We get the feeling that this visual volubility, this luminous patterning is a transposition of sonic velocity into the order of the visible.

I have said elsewhere that the ear's temporal resolving power is incomparably finer than that of the eye; and film demonstrates this especially clearly in action scenes. While the lazy sphere thinks it sees continuity at twenty-four images per second, the ear demands a much higher rate of sampling. And the eye is soon outdone when the image shows it a very brief motion; as if dazed, the eye is content to notice merely that something is moving,

without being able to analyze the phenomenon. In this same time the ear is able to recognize and to etch clearly onto the perceptual screen a complex series of auditory trajectories or verbal phonemes.

Conversely, some kinds of rapid phenomena in images appear to be addressed to, and registered by, the *ear that is in the eye*, in order to be converted into auditory impressions in memory. Ridley Scott takes pleasure in combining large and resonant sound expanses with a teeming visual texture. The former can very easily turn into visual memories (of space), while the latter will leave the impression of something heard.

We can think also of that great auditive oriented director Welles, who cultivated rapid editing and dialogue, and whose films leave the impression in the spectator's memory of a superabundance of sound effects. Curiously, careful videotape screenings reveal that the soundtracks are not as profuse as they seem. *Citizen Kane* and *Touch of Evil* certainly do sometimes present localized contrasts of audio planes (foreground-background) and some echo effects on the voices, but these do not suffice to explain the intensely auricular, symphonic memory that the whole of Welles's work leaves us with. This quality suggests rather a *conversion* in memory: impressions of speed are produced most obviously by the flow of speech and fast overlapping of voices, but also—above all—by the visual rhythm.

Is there such a thing as "visualists of the ear," the opposite of "auditives of the eye"? Perhaps Godard, in that he loves to edit sounds as shots are edited (with cuts), and in that he loves to make these voices and noises resonate in a reverberant and tangible space, such that we sense a real interior with walls: the hospital room in *First Name Carmen*, the café in *Masculine-Feminine*, the classrooms in *Band of Outsiders* and *La Chinoise*. Now these acoustical effects of reverberant and prolonged sounds often

leave us a memory that is more visual than auditory. For example, I have always remembered Bresson's film *A Man Escaped*, which I saw very young, as being full of immense vistas inside prisons. It took seeing the film again many years later to realize that in the director's usual manner the frame was always rigorously restricted. A cell door, a few steps of a flight of stairs, part of a landing: these were the longest shots he allowed himself. It was admirably, obsessively executed sound—of echoing footsteps, guards' repeated whistles and shouts—that engraved these Piranesian images into my childhood memory.

If we extend this idea far enough, we might conclude that everything *spatial* in a film, in terms of image as well as sound, is ultimately encoded into a so-called visual impression, and everything which is *temporal*, including elements reaching us via the eye, registers as an auditory impression. This might be an oversimplification. Nevertheless a phenomenological analysis of cinema need not fall under the hypnotic spell of technology. Materially speaking, the cinema uses auditory and visual channels, but this is not why it must thereby be described as a simple sum of "soundtrack" plus "image track." Rhythm, for example, is an element of film vocabulary that is neither one nor the other, neither specifically auditory nor visual.

In other words, when a rhythmic phenomenon reaches us via a given sensory path—this path, eye or ear, is perhaps nothing more than the channel through which *rhythm* reaches us. Once it has entered the ear or eye, the phenomenon strikes us in some region of the brain connected to the motor functions, and it is solely at this level that it is decoded as rhythm.

My basic thesis on transsensorial perception applies not only to rhythm but to perceptions of such things as texture and material as well, and surely to language (for which such a perspective is gaining wide recognition).

The eye carries information and sensations only some of which can be considered specifically and irreducibly visual (e.g., color); most others are transsensory. Likewise, the ear serves as a vehicle for information and sensations only some of which are specifically auditive (e.g., pitch and intervallic relations), the others being, as in the case of the eye, not specific to this sense. However—and I insist on this point—transsensoriality has nothing to do with what one might call intersensoriality, as in the famous "correspondences" among the senses that Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Claudel and others have celebrated. When Baudelaire evokes "parfums frais comme des chairs d'enfant, doux comme des hautbois" (perfumes fresh as baby skin, sweet as oboes), he is referring to an idea of intersensoriality: each sense exists in itself, but encounters others at points of contact.

In the transsensorial or even metasensorial model, which I am distinguishing from the Baudelarian one, there is no sensory given that is demarcated and isolated from the outset.<sup>4</sup> Rather, the senses are channels, highways more than territories or domains. If there exists a dimension in vision that is specifically visual, and if hearing includes dimensions that are exclusively auditive (those just mentioned), these dimensions are in a minority, particularized, even as they are central.

When kinetic sensations organized into art are transmitted through a single sensory channel, through this single channel they can convey all the other senses at once. The silent cinema on one hand and concrete music on the other clearly illustrate this idea. Silent cinema, in the absence of synch sound, sometimes expressed sounds better than could sound itself, frequently relying on a fluid and rapid montage style to do so. Concrete music, in its conscious refusal of the visual, carries with it visions that are more beautiful than images could ever be.