

## The Word on Film

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Let me begin by explaining my title, "The Word on Film." It is not to be taken as meaning the lowdown on cinema, but as an attempt to assess the role of dialogue in the movies, where it has been generally miscast. Often it has been given a stellar part in a film that could not support it; at other times it has been assigned a mere supporting role in films that could have greatly profited from more extensive use of its talent. The result appears to have been that people who ought to know better have viewed the spoken word in movies with suspicion, condescension, indeed hostility; while other people have been pleased to regard the film as an infant that has learned to talk in the natural process of growing older—what the child is saying, however, as long as it makes rudimentary sense, is of no great import. My own point is that the word in the cinema—contrary to the opinion of those who consider it ancillary or downright negligible, if not indeed subversive of the true powers of the art—is, in fact, of primary importance, and must be nurtured and developed rather than subordinated and downgraded. I insist that film as it has or will come to be is a fully audiovisual medium rather than a visual one like painting, sculpture, or silent movies; and that, as such, its voice has to be as good as its movements and vision.

If I now turn to an attack on my film criticism by Professor Edward Murray in his book, *Nine American Film Critics: A Study in Theory and Practice*, it is not because I consider either my criticism or Professor Murray that important. But it was his remarks that spurred me on to compose this essay, and Mr. Murray, as only begetter, is entitled to his place on the threshold of my discussion. He writes:

It is doubtful whether any responsible film critic or theorist would agree with Simon that the word is equal in significance to the image. Sound has greatly extended the reach of film as art; speech allows the filmmaker to reveal character in greater depth and to explore theme in more detail than was possible in the silent-film period. But to say that sound is now an integral part of film is not to argue that word and image are of equal importance. Film is still . . . a basically pictorial medium. If this were not so, then why does Simon himself say that "dialogue conveys only a fragment of what happens in a film"?

Here let me interject that fragments come in all sizes and degrees of importance: the Venus de Milo and the Victory of Samothrace are also fragments, but rather more important and satisfying to the Louvre than the missing parts would be to the institution that might acquire them.

But to return to Mr. Murray, who, as one would have guessed, proceeds to agree with those "opponents" of mine who have "charged" that I am "more of a literary critic than a film critic," and offers as evidence that I seldom or never cite film theorists, whereas literary references are "such a conspicuous feature" of my writing. I could answer that the literary figures I am apt to quote write immeasurably better than the film theorists Mr. Murray lists as unquoted by me: what is more relevant, though, is that I abhor most theorists and take a dim view of theory itself, which is why I implore you to take what follows also with an appropriate number of grains of salt.

The pejorative *literary*, as applied to a film or film critic of a supposedly literary bent, is one of the keys to our problem. This hostile use of *literary* antedates questions of film and has been hotly debated in the realm of the fine arts, which, according to most modernist painters, sculptors, and art critics, had to be freed of "literary" content. It is probably from this source that film inherited its antiliterary—and, by extension, antiverbal—bias, yet what may apply to the fine arts is irrelevant to film. For a painting, clearly, is not based on a script; films, however, even those preconized by the most antiliterary elements, are so based. The screenplay may be a very poor

piece of literature—as it frequently is—nonetheless, a piece of literature it is. Hence *literary* seems like a highly self-destructive term of opprobrium.

But similar accusations are hurled from other embattled positions as well. One of them is the historical or, better, historicist position. This view is based on the fact that film was for a long time silent, which resulted in the early film theorists' concerning themselves with silent films. But even some of the later and still very influential ones, like Arnheim, Panofsky, and others, grew up in the silent-film era, formed their cinematic tastes from silent pictures, became sentimentally involved with them, and resented the coming of talkies almost as much as did silent-screen stars with squeaky voices. Thus the concept of film as a visual medium was formulated and accepted at a time when it could not have been any other kind of medium, any more than a carriage could have been horseless before the invention of the automobile. So if Rudolf Arnheim speaks of the sound film as a "radical aesthetic impoverishment," the real reason for this discontent may be nothing more than psychological: in his youth, films were silent, and both his older years and his attitude toward film in them may have been less glowing—hence the alleged impoverishment.

There is, again, the so-called purist position. Thus Erwin Panofsky, the distinguished art scholar whose essay, "Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures," is still a much anthologized and revered landmark of film theory, argued:

A moving picture, even when it has learned to talk, remains a picture that moves and does not convert itself into a piece of writing that is enacted. Its substance remains a series of visual sequences held together by an uninterrupted flow of movement in space . . . and not a sustained study in human character and destiny transmitted by effective, let alone "beautiful" diction.

And, Panofsky continues, "the sound, articulate or not, cannot express any more than is expressed, at the same time, by

visible movement; and in a good film it does not even attempt to do so." This position is by no means a forgotten curiosity dating back to the 1930s. Panofsky himself revised the essay several times over the years without taking out these remarks; the very same ideas—or should we properly call them sentiments?—are still echoed in important quarters today. Only quite recently I had an argument with Maximilian Schell in which he insisted that not for nothing was the medium called motion pictures, and that what we remembered, what we carried with us from a film, was certain images, not bits of dialogue. As he kept reiterating his point, I could not help thinking, "Play it again, Sam!"—the line that, with the song that goes with it, is what I remember most vividly from *Casablanca*—even if it does not occur quite like that in the film.

To make a fetish out of the term *motion* or *moving picture* strikes me as an oversimplification. It is a term that describes the type of pictures a kind of camera could take as opposed to those of an earlier type of camera; it does not pretend to define or limit the uses to which film can be put. Even if you are stupid, arrogant, and untalented enough to mount your camera on a tripod in front of the Empire State Building and keep shooting for several hours, the result is a motion picture, though the building does not make the slightest attempt to compensate for the stationary camera by dancing a jig. More to the point, Susan Sontag, in her essay, "Theatre and Film," has answered Panofsky with a question, a very pertinent question: "What then of the films of Bresson and Godard, with their allusive, thoughtful texts and their characteristic refusal to be primarily a visual experience? How could one explain the extraordinary rightness of Ozu's relatively immobilized camera?"

What, we must ask ourselves, are the purists bemoaning? The great director, René Clair, wrote in 1950 that "speech and sound, adding the element of reality to the film presentation, have made the viewer lose the feeling of dream that the sight of the silent shadows created in him." The theme of regret at the coming of sound runs through Clair's entire book, *Cinema Yesterday and Today*, and, because this collection of texts

spans more than half a century, through Clair's entire creative life. It is evident that the director of such masterpieces as *Le Million* and *A Nous la Liberté*, which might have worked as well without their minimal verbal content, was concerned with the claim of the dream on us, with making life, or at least that part of it that could be captured between the beginning and end of one of his films, as idiosyncratic and whimsical as a dream. Harsh realities are not totally absent from Clair's work, but the aim is to transform them into something lyrical and palliative like a happy reverie. Not necessarily a bad aim, but not one to which all cinema can or should subscribe.

If what lurks behind Clair's championing of wordless cinema is the dream, what hides behind Panofsky's position is something slightly different and comes out in praise for "early melodramas [that] had a highly gratifying and soothing quality in that events took shape, without the complications of individual psychology, according to a pure Aristotelian logic so badly missed in real life." And when he goes on to praise various types of genre films, Panofsky makes clear to me that he speaks for those intellectuals, often but not always associated with the academy, for whom the movies are a mode of escape from intellect, from the rigorous forms of daily mental discipline—an escape abundantly provided by melodramas, farces, Westerns, thrillers, and the rest. To invoke Aristotelian logic, or any other prestigious or modish nomenclature, is only a way of legitimizing, of making respectable, that "soothing and gratifying quality" associated with movies as a flight from "the complications of individual psychology."

It is well to consider here that one's sociopolitical and philosophical views may also cause one to opt for a cinema in which words are subordinate. Thus Panofsky writes, "It is the movies, and only the movies, that do justice to that materialistic interpretation of the universe which, whether we like it or not, pervades contemporary civilization." How sharply this tone of resignation to materialism contrasts with that of the Italian essayist and critic, Nicola Chiaromonte, who wrote in a 1965 essay entitled "Theater in Utopia," from an idealist-elitist point of view, "The tendency to underestimate inner life and

moral phenomena is one of the salient characteristics of modern barbarity, as well as one of the most obvious effects of the cinema on the psychology of the masses." The problem with the cinematic image, for Chiaromonte, is that "it cannot render thought, consciousness, or ideas, for the simple reason that the camera cannot catch these modes of reality, but, rather, their material and external aspects."

The interesting thing to note here is that both the reluctant advocate of materialism and its aristocratic opponent perceive the cinema as essentially visual, but draw from its visualness different conclusions. This agreement within opposition becomes even more arresting when we consider the following pair of statements. First, Chiaromonte again, denying the validity of the word on film:

What is certain is that the spoken word cannot be replaced. The recorded word, the word of the cinema, the word of radio, the word of television not only lack a living presence, but are not real words; they are something else, something entirely different. They are artificial words, part of an artificial language valid for everybody and for nobody at the same time. The word accompanied by a living presence, on the other hand, is not only a clear word, which reaches us free of mechanical diaphragms; it is also, above all, an authentic word, addressed to us in particular and in the concrete, not in the general and the abstract. It is addressed not only to our ear but to our spirit, to our mind, to our consciousness, and it is therefore the only word capable of conveying a fullness of meaning.

By now, we see, Chiaromonte has conceded a verbal facility to the film, but only to deny its vitality and trenchancy vis-à-vis the theater. This strikes me as only a more sophisticated version of the old theater person's argument against the movies—that what people want to see is flesh and blood, not celluloid—a theory that gets its conclusive refutation by the simple comparison of box office takes at cinemas and so-called legitimate theaters.

While Chiaromonte chastises the film for trying to talk yet being inherently unable to do it well, René Clair exults in the

film's ability to talk superlatively without recourse to words: "I believe," he wrote in 1923,

that the film is only at the beginning of its conquest of the inner world. The succession of images, infinitely supple, now as precise as a phrase in literature and now as vague as a phrase in music, will make possible the expression of the most complex feelings and the remotest sensations. Will not the film be able to suggest to the general public more easily than the word the things they cannot understand or accept in the theories of Freud or the novels of Proust?

As opposed to film as a barbarous demotic art form that, even with words, cannot speak profoundly, we encounter here film as a blessedly democratic genre speaking with simple, wordless directness to the general public. Since it can be argued that children, aborigines, and the mentally retarded can deal with pictures more easily than with words, those who want film to be a mass art naturally espouse its pictorial and kinetic, rather than verbal and intellectual, aspects.

Yet in all this I smell that to me rather malodorous creature, the inveterate theoretician. For whereas it is indisputable that simple images are easier than complex words, and probable that simple images are easier than simple words, who says that filmmakers can, or want to, deal only with simple images? The images in a film like *Persona* are as complex, allusive, and elusive, as arduous to explicate as the words in any modern novel or poem, let alone movie. The general public would much sooner embrace the words in most movies, no matter how thick and fast they might come off the soundtrack, than the often arcane or abstruse imagery of Bergman's film. Furthermore, there are poetically pregnant utterances in certain films that may function satisfactorily on the lower level of general comprehension, and sublimely on the higher one of minds equipped to deal with symbol, metaphor, double entendre, irony, and the like. And for all that the great age of American film comedy may have been a nonverbal one, it would be precarious to argue that the verbal comedy of Fields, the Marx brothers, and the rest was very far behind.

But there is yet another source of hostility to words on film that is the exact opposite of that of the weary intellectual eager to get away from his daily discursiveness. I refer to the position of the anti- or nonintellectual, the person who is defeated by words, fears and abominates them, and looks to the movies as an alternative to verbalization. I do not wish to put the blame for the new antiverbalism on the movies alone; it is a tremendous symptom of the general falling off of our culture on levels as diverse as language study in the universities and the ability of people, students or others, to express themselves in speech or writing, indeed, to comprehend what they read. If one compares the lyrics of popular songs of the twenties, thirties, and forties with those of the fifties and beyond—or, roughly speaking, the pre- and postrock lyrics—one will experience fully the recession of the word. Similarly in the avant-garde theater, the word has faded into the background; more revealingly perhaps, the comparison of boulevard plays by Behrman and Barry with those of Neil Simon and his ilk epitomizes the waning of verbal proficiency.

It would be an oversimplification to trace this general de-verbalization to a single cause, cultural, social, economic, or political. But its effects are felt across the board; in the cinema, which doubtless is one of the many culprits, no less than elsewhere. And, of course, there is a vicious circle: if the movies contribute to the hebetude of those who absorb them, they, in turn, will become stultifying filmmakers in an ever-worsening progression. And with the coming into existence and growing popularity of underground cinema with its very limited budgets, the silent film with perhaps a little pop music, as it were, taped onto it has once again come into favor.

Moreover, the overwhelming preponderance of abstract art, as well as certain trends in "serious" music, deemphasizing representational or "human" elements, have spilled over into film to the further detriment of the word—at least as coherent dialogue. In this respect it is worth noting that even a big-budget, more or less establishment filmmaker like Robert Altman has tended to conceive of dialogue as a kind of verbal wallpaper of which one is supposed to be only generally or

subliminally aware, without actually deciphering more than a modest fraction of it. It seems to me that abstract art of almost all kinds partakes of anti-intellectualism or game playing, whether practiced by disenchanted intellectuals or enchanting ignoramuses, and so we are back to the question of the debasement of cinematic dialogue as part of the overarching disrepute and desuetude of the Word. When Alexandre Astruc coined his famous definition of a personal cinema as the product of a *caméra-stylo*, a camera functioning as a fountain pen, he prophesied even more than he described: what the pen used to be in the hands of occasional illiterates, the camera, often literally handheld, has become in hordes of illiterate hands—a gobbledygook of images with or without words.

It is time, however, to return to Edward Murray's original charge, that according to me the word on film is equal in significance to the image. He bases his accusation on the following passage from my book *Ingmar Bergman Directs*:

I take film to be a totally visual and totally aural medium—in this ambidextrousness lies its glory—and I consider utterly mistaken and nostalgic the sentimentality of those exalters of time past who would put the silent film above the sound, or in any other way minimize the importance of the ear in the enjoyment of film. Although I would not slight the functions of the other senses, I do think vision and audition are the ones by which we communicate best and the most. To the extent that film can make untrammelled use of both those avenues of communication, it can absorb us more masterfully and variously (though not, therefore, more importantly) than any other art, including the theater, whose visual discourse is somewhat more limited. Now, though a filmmaker who masters the visual possibilities of cinema is to be admired, the true lord of the medium is he who controls equally sight and sound, whose word is as good as his image, and, above all, who can manipulate the two in such a way that they reinforce each other and perform in unison or harmony, contrast or counterpoint, at the filmmaker's beck.

All right, then, I plead guilty: I did and do say that image and sound are equally important to the film. But to evaluate this

statement, we must first try to reach a fuller understanding of what is meant by the words *equally important*. Let me say it right out: I am not a statistician, and I cannot reduce film to 50 percent images and 50 percent sounds, which latter would then have to be further subdivided into words and other kinds of sound. Nor am I a horse trader, with the horrible gift of haggling attributed to that profession; so, if someone were to say, "How about images 60 percent, and words 40 percent?" I might go along with him, although I could not settle for less. And even then two questions would immediately present themselves. First, how do you arrive at those figures? And, secondly, can you determine actual importance by any such mathematical means?

Let me illustrate with a hypothetical example. Suppose we had a film in which an adolescent girl obediently and more or less mutely performed everything her father demanded, odious or onerous as some of the tasks were. Suppose, furthermore, that her face never betrayed any hostile feelings. This goes on for perhaps thirty minutes; then, quite unexpectedly, the girl confronts her father and says, "I hate you!" Only she does not say that exactly; she says it in a few more highly original words, well chosen but not beyond the vocabulary of an adolescent, and not out of proportion to what she has been subjected. She says it forthrightly and compellingly. The words would take some thirty seconds of painfully sobering screen time. How would one reckon the half hour of dismal experiences *shown* versus the thirty seconds of cathartic outburst *spoken*? Surely you cannot say that thirty seconds goes into thirty minutes sixty times, and that our stretch of film is therefore sixty parts visuals to one part words. Yet no more could you say that the actions of the thirty minutes merely lead up to that climactic ejaculation, merely set it up, and are thus quite unimportant compared to it.

Someone shrewd or perverse enough might, of course, claim that if the filmmaker were truly gifted, he would not need to make the girl say anything; he could suggest it more powerfully through certain looks and gestures. But is this true? In the notes to Jean-Paul Sartre's lecture, "Theater and

Cinema" (for which, as with Aristotle, only the notes are available), we read: "Speech is the clearest gesture; that is, the clearest representation of the act is speech." I am not quite sure what Sartre meant by this, but I take it to mean that our fictitious bit of film can express through words just how long, to what degree, and against what inner and outer pressures the girl's hatred for her father has been welling up, and what she now proposes to do about it, or what compensation, if any, she is willing to settle for. Her words can then be assessed in the light of the events that precede and follow them, but we need this "clearest gesture" or "clearest representation" to understand fully and evaluate what the actions permitted us only to sense and sympathize with. Then, too, the girl may do nothing about it; everything may go on as before, even though the relationship may be utterly changed after the full awareness that torrent of words swept out into the open. To quote that sensible book by Stephenson and Debrix, *The Cinema as Art*, it is a case of "visuals and sound . . . reinforc[ing] one another. The combination can be more powerful than the sum of the two would be."

If I say then that I would not want my supposititious film to have lacked either the incidents preceding the outburst or the outburst itself, what can I honestly conclude from that? Only that images and words are, for all practical purposes, equally important. And we must bear in mind that if the happenings before the verbal eruption were badly shown, the words, however excellent, could not redeem half an hour of ineffectual film. Likewise, if the words were banal, derivative, verbose, or out of character, the most graphic or suggestive action would be marred by them. Still, the captious defender of visuals *über alles* might contend that if the girl had just uttered a simple and searing "I hate you!" accompanied by good acting, camera work, background music, and what have you, those plain, unliterary words would suffice to yield first-class filmmaking. Not so, I say. Unless the girl is a halfwit or an utter simpleton—which could also be quite moving, but does not happen to be the case in my scenario, or, for that matter, in most scenarios—we are going to judge her sensibility, her

sensitivity and humanity, by her ability to express herself in words that have freshness, flavor, poetry in them; whether we like it or not, a hero or heroine has to appeal to us physically and verbally, which is to say erotically and intellectually, thus affirming the simultaneous importance of the seen and the heard.

Here let me explain my view of the place of film in the context of the performing arts. I perceive these arts as a scale extending from poetry (which, we tend to forget, was meant to be recited), the most verbal and least kinetic, all the way to the dance, the most kinetic and least verbal. Bunched together at the center between these extremes are two middle arts: theater, which is somewhat nearer to poetry; and cinema, which is closer to dance. I mean by this that the more obvious emphasis in theater is on words, because the stage restricts the possibilities of movement and action; and that the more immediate emphasis in films is on such movement and action, because the camera can go everywhere, move in every conceivable way—and what it cannot do, the film lab can. Nevertheless, I wish to underline my contention that these different stresses, however significant, are only external differences between theater and film, determining what type of situation or story is best suited to each genre, but not meaning that the theater can dispense with action or that the film can afford to be cavalier about dialogue. Let the theater forget to put actions on stage, and it becomes a kind of poetry recital, a nice enough thing in itself, but not theater; let the film forget about the expressive power of words, and it becomes a kind of pantomime or dance, with much of the dancing done by the camera and editing. That, too, may be nice to watch, but it does not live up to the highest potential of film.

To put it another way, we are proceeding along a scale of arts where, at one end, the flesh has become totally word, while at the other, the word has become totally flesh; that is, poetry and dance. But the peculiar greatness of theater and film lies in the fact that they are jugglers with both these techniques or strategies—that they can make deed and word, action and comment, image and idea flow into each other.

merge and separate again, proceed parallelly or alternatingly, and reflect on each other in a variety of ways, from overlapping to counterpoint. Both have a chance at what Wagner wanted opera to be: a *gesamtkunstwerk* or total work of art, subsuming all the other arts. Film, though, has the best chance of all three to be all-encompassing, but only if it remembers the importance of words and allows them their due.

In this context, it is useful to quote Orson Welles's remarks to Francis Koval in a 1950 interview for *Sight and Sound*.

You all seem to start from the article of faith that a silent picture is necessarily better than a sound one. . . . What I mean to say is that you always overstress the value of images. You judge films by their visual impact instead of looking for content. This is a great disservice to cinema. It is like judging a novel only by the quality of its prose. I was guilty of the same sin when I first started writing about the cinema. It was the experience of filmmaking that changed my outlook.

Koval, who admits to being startled by such opinions from the man who made *Citizen Kane*, a film of extraordinary visual impact, reports these further Wellesian comments:

Take a picture that has become a classic, and deservedly so: *La Femme du boulanger*. What have you got there? Bad photography, inadequate cutting and a lot of happenings which are told instead of shown. But there is a story and an actor—both superb—which makes it a perfect movie. The story is not even particularly "cinema." I think I could make a play out of it in one evening, if I wanted to.

And Welles concludes, "It is really more a combination of human factors and basic ideas that makes a subject worth putting on the screen."

While one need not agree with every syllable of this—very probably Welles relished being a counterirritant to the critical consensus—there is much common sense in these observations, and I only wish their maker had borne them in mind when he went to work on some of his subsequent films. It is

certainly instructive to note how many of the world's influential, and often great, filmmakers were theater people before, and frequently even after, they came to the movies: Sergei Eisenstein in Russia; Welles and Kazan in the United States; Sir Carol Reed in England; Abel Gance, Marcel Pagnol, and Jean Cocteau in France; Pabst and Murnau in Germany; Sjöström, Stiller, Sjöberg, and Ingmar Bergman in Sweden; Luchino Visconti and Lina Wertmüller in Italy—to name only the most salient. So it might be wise to bear this in mind before writing essays on the differences between theater and cinema, real though some of them may be. Let me add a further name to my list: that of a man who, though he did not come to the movies from the theater, was always a devotee of it, later directed stage productions, wrote plays, used great stage actors in his films, and indeed made the theater, or theatricality, the main theme of a number of his pictures. You will have guessed that I refer to Jean Renoir.

What theater and film have in common is the bisensory approach: reaching us neither just through the eye, like painting or architecture, nor just through the ear, like music or, to a large extent, poetry, but through both senses. To be sure, this presents certain risks. Nothing is more loathsome about that less than prepossessing medium, television, than certain commercials in which a voice declaims in stentorian tones the very same message that is written out on the screen, as if the sponsors were terrified of missing out on the deaf and blind segments of the audience. This redundancy is the archetypal trap into which the sound film can fall: making what is heard an unnecessary duplication of what is seen. Clearly it is tautological to have a man fumbling for a keyhole in the dark declare how hard it is to find a keyhole in the dark—unless the point is that he is a crashing bore—yet much filmmaking is just that dedicated to supererogation. Or, perhaps, just that boring. But dialogue can achieve wonders if the man complains in a well-lighted hall: we realize with a pang that he is going blind. Or the man may complain about the difficulty of finding the keyhole even as his key slips almost instantaneously into the lock, and we realize with amusement that he is a petty

malcontent. Or he may start complaining before he has even reached the door, in which case we recognize him in a flash as an inveterate pessimist, always assuming the worst. These, then, are a few of the ways in which words and visuals become more powerful in combination than either of them could be alone.

Yet the interplay between visual and verbal elements need not always be as trickily out of sync as that. Let me cite some other examples of interaction between sight and sound from recent movies, not even particularly great ones. In Dino Risi's *Profumo di donna* (rather badly Englished as *Scent of a Woman*), there is the following sequence. The blinded ex-officer hero who abominates the pity people show for his infirmity sits on a restaurant terrace and awaits the return of his seeing-eye boy, whom he sent off to find him a suitable prostitute. While the boy is away looking, our hero pretends to be reading the newspapers. The boy finally settles on a woman in a run-down café; as the prostitute rises to go home and wait for her client, a shabby old man in the café looks up from his paper and jovially exclaims, "*Buon lavoro!*"—good work! Risi now cuts to the hero on the terrace reading a socialist-labor publication—we can make out the banner: *IL LAVORO*. We have here a complex audiovisual pun: the socialist-labor orientation of the paper is contrasted with the dubious, capitalist-oriented labor of the whore. Nevertheless, even a down-at-heel old-timer, both biologically and economically out of the running, smilingly approves her kind of work, gives it his vicariously pleased benediction. Meanwhile the socialist workers' notions are wasted on the blind aristocrat who, even if he could read them, could not appreciate them. What the film seems to be saying here is that one person's work is another's pleasure; that grave notions of the nature and rights of labor may fall on blind eyes not only among sightless aristocrats but also among sighted proletarians.

Now, it may be pointed out in opposition that "*Buon lavoro!*" is not great dialogue (true), and that its place could have been taken just as well by an intertitle (false). An intertitle would have been a visual element, no different from the name

of the newspaper in the hero's hand. But it is precisely by going from a spoken and heard *lavoro* to a printed and seen (or, in the hero's case, unseen) *lavoro* that we are tipped off about the difference between kinds of labor, and all the sad, funny, of simply matter-of-fact implications of that difference. The old man's comment could, of course, have been omitted altogether, but only to the appreciable impoverishment of the film.

Let us advert now to another example of a quite dissimilar nature: two consecutive scenes from *Salut, l'Artiste!*, a film by Yves Robert. The hero, played by Marcello Mastroianni, is an Italian bit player eking out a humdrum existence in French theater, movies, television, commercials, nightclubs, and still more peripheral regions of show business. Besides troubles with his finances and children, he has perennial problems with women: his ex-wife, his mistress, and a passing parade of all the others he lusts for. In one of this fine but by no means extraordinary film's loveliest scenes, Mastroianni and his mistress, played by the incomparable Françoise Fabian, are walking along the sandy seaside of Cabourg. It was supposed to have been a weekend of reconciliation and rekindling of a love our hero has been foolishly jeopardizing. The sky, however, is overcast; the beach, cold, gray, deserted. The man tries to blame his accumulated failures on the Italian accent that makes him a sempiternal stranger in France, but his companion points out that he would be a stranger anywhere, even in Rome. Certain actors are said to have a presence, but what he has, fundamentally, is an absence: "*Quelle absence tu as!*" she tells him. "*Tu n'es personne pour personne!*" ("What absence you have! You are nobody for nobody!") Ungrammatical, but wonderfully right.) The hero's anguished face and oversolicitous tone convey both his awareness that he is prevaricating and his histrionic inadequacy; the woman's tormented gaze and her leaning toward him suggest how much she still loves the man she must leave. Sight—the cheerless surroundings, moody camera angles, nervous cutting—and sound—the exchange of words between a sadly mendacious lover and still more sadly truthful mistress—combine into a sovereign vision

of despair. But the clinching effect is achieved by the next shot, in which the disaffected lovers are seen brunching in a deserted hotel dining room. Outside, the beach is as drained of color as before. In the foreground, at an open glass-paneled door, a middle-aged waitress, with her back to the camera, is gazing out at the sea. Farther back, at an ideal lovers' table by the plate-glass window, sit our hero and heroine. They, too, look bleached out; neither of them speaks nor stirs. The only movement is that of the drapes straining in the breeze at the open door. The waitress and the drapes seem full of yearning; the lovers, empty. It is a devastating image that scores largely through its silence after all those heated or weary or remonstrating words of the preceding scene. This is the reverse of Yeats's "Speech after long silence"—silence after long speech—and it took a speaking cinema to make silence become eloquent in the movies.

In the introduction to his Hitchcock book, François Truffaut enunciated what he calls "the cardinal rule of the cinema: Whatever is *said* instead of being *shown* is lost upon the viewer." This and similar notions are based on the assumption that word and image are two separate entities, a concept at least as fallacious in my opinion as the debunked old notion that form and content are discrete aspects of a work of art. I think it is mandatory for us to comprehend that sight and sound, image and word, function as two eyes do in our head, giving us the kind of depth perception we would not have with a single Cyclops eye. Nevertheless, Truffaut's statement oversimplifies even the concept of "shown." Take the nurse's account of a summertime orgy on the beach from Bergman's *Persona*; Pauline Kael has rightly recognized that it is "one of the rare, truly erotic sequences on film." This is a case of no flashbacks intruding on pure narration: nothing is shown except the excitement of the nurse as she tells the story, and the slightly insidious savoring of it by the listening actress. There is a strange, unstated erotic bond between the two women held together by the shared narrative. You do indeed see something on screen, only it is not an enactment of what the words describe. The orgy becomes real enough through the

aptly written and delivered words, but what is *shown* is the effect of the words on these two women in their resembling nightgowns: a naive nurse spilling her secrets to her uncannily silent patient who takes it all in like a cat—a cat not so much lapping up milk as swallowing a canary. We are made to perceive subtle, indirect connections between the narrative and the relationship of the two women.

It should be obvious, though it isn't to many people, that the word, by being put on screen, becomes something more than, or at any rate different from, a word on paper, or even a word on the stage. The printed word may be highly evocative, but its evocativeness functions solely in terms of what the reader brings to it. The word in the theater is accompanied by some gestures and trappings, but these gestures are limited by the distance between the actor and the audience, just as the trappings are modest compared to what the cinema can surround the speakers with. On screen, the word performs, as it were, in concert with faces in closeup that can be exceedingly, even unbearably, near to the viewer; or with backgrounds that can be an actual jungle full of assorted perils; or with a convincing piece of trick photography that can make everything from deeply hidden private fantasies to the farthest reaches of outer space come palpantly alive. The word gains unprecedented richness from its context, but it pays back the debt by interpreting the images with poetic or psychological, historical or philosophic insights such as no image in painting or still photography can benefit from.

In a recent book by Professor Frank D. McConnell of Northwestern University, *The Spoken Seen: Film and the Romantic Imagination*, we find among much that is pretentious, windy, even absurd, some perfectly sensible descriptions of the profound and necessary interaction of image and word on film. "No other art," McConnell writes, "is able to register with quite the same immediacy the solidity and the clutter of the human universe, and at the same time the awful fragility of the words we speak to each other amid that clutter." Except for the solecism "each other" where "one another" is meant, this is a very good evocation of one aspect

of the relation of words to their on-screen ambience. But the obverse is equally true and important: the ability of the right words to triumph over the surrounding clutter and give meaning to the universe. In film's greatest moments, however, both ends are achieved simultaneously: the awareness of our verbal, indeed existential, fragility; and the revelation of the strength that comes from understanding and acceptance.

Take the final words of *The Seven Samurai*, one of the masterpieces of Akira Kurosawa and world cinema. Of the seven samurai defending the farmers, only three have survived. Standing on a bridge and looking down at the peasants blithely back at work in their rice paddies, Kambei, the wise leader of the samurai, remarks, "We've lost again." Shichoriji, the jolly extrovert, looks puzzled. Kambei explains: "Those farmers are the winners. Not we." As he turns and looks up, the camera tilts with his gaze up the burial hill and comes to rest on the four mounds with the dead men's swords stuck into them. I quote from the screenplay: "The samurai theme comes in over the planting music, as the wind blows up the dust among the mounds." Kambei's head movements are symbolic: when he says that *we*, i.e., the aristocratic samurai, have lost again, he looks literally and figuratively down at the farmers. When he explains that it is they who have won—in the sense that they have survived, that their kind will always survive—he turns to the four warrior graves and looks up at them. The glorious fighters can be looked up to even in death. Yet all the samurai, dead or alive, are losers: the heroic age yields to the age of the common man. Though the spirit of those noble dead is more exalted than the very flesh of these living nonentities, it is for the nonentities that the heroes gave their lives. Even if the last words proclaim the defeat and passage of grandeur from the earth, the samurai's music—their spirit, their memory—supersedes that of the peasants. It is a deeply ambivalent ending across which, significantly, the wind blows up dust. The wind, the cosmos, continues indifferent to peasant and samurai, survivor and casualty, human life and death. Is the end all bleakness then, or is there hope in that wind stirring among the graves? Re-

member Paul Valéry's *Le Cimetière marin*: "*Le vent se lève! . . . Il faut tenter de vivre!*"

This ambivalence, or ambiguity, created by the interplay of word and image can occur just as easily in a great comic film. Consider the ending of Fellini's *The White Sheik*. The newlyweds, Ivan and Wanda, have become reconciled and are about to be rushed off with a large group of tourists to a quick audience with the pope. Wanda assures Ivan that her dalliance with her dream hero, the White Sheik, was platonic; she has remained "pure and innocent." Ivan is vastly relieved, and both young simpletons cry for joy. Through her sobs, Wanda tells Ivan: "Now . . . *you* are my White Sheik." All would be well if Ivan did not catch his bride's face lighting up as she looks in another direction. But Ivan's worry is allayed when he sees what Wanda is looking at: the statue of an angel atop the colonnade. As the pair are marched off on the double, there is a closing long shot of the piazza in front of St. Peter's, the procession climbing up the steps to the papal audience, and the statue of the angel. What, then, do Wanda's last words mean: "Now . . . *you* are my White Sheik"? Has Wanda given up her romantic fantasies to accept her funny-looking husband as her hero? Then why, as she says them, does she look up beatifically at another creature of fantasy? Perhaps Wanda's schoolgirl romanticism is incurable—even the fact that she clings to the term "White Shiek" may substantiate this. But perhaps the angel is only a symbol of Wanda's childlike innocence; and calling a homely husband "White Sheik," the sincerest tribute of love.

Suggestive ambiguity, however, is only one of many ways in which the word, the literate word, makes its contribution to the cinema. Let us recall that desideratum on which Alexandre Astruc put his finger in the already mentioned "Caméra-Stylo" essay: "The fundamental problem of the cinema is how to express thought." And so I ask you to consider that in becoming talkies, the movies did not merely learn how to speak, they also began to learn how to think. No doubt, certain simple ideas could be expressed through images alone, but let us not fool ourselves into believing that the thought

content of, for example, *Intolerance* or *The Battleship Potemkin* even approaches that of, say, *The Rules of the Game*, *The Children of Paradise*, *L'Avventura*, or *Winter Light*. Still, the spoken language of the cinema need not be of a highly intellectual or belletristic sort; what is certain, though, is that it is the best means of expressing thought. Words are, in fact, the appropriate accompaniment for one of the finest and most important things the film has to offer: the closeup. A closeup, to be sure, can be accompanied by mere silence, or just background music, or certain significant sounds, and still be enormously effective. But the most natural, expressive, and profound coupling available to film is the expressions of the human face seen in infinitesimal detail combined with what that face, or head, is saying. Or, if the lips are not moving as we hear the words, what that head is thinking. Yet even before cinematic words acquire meaning, they are a human voice, and, as Jean Renoir asked in *My Life and My Films*, "Is not the human voice the best means of conveying the personality of a human being?" It is a two-way street: not only does the voice combined with what it is saying comment on the face, but also, as Béla Balázs long ago reminded us in his *Theory of the Film*, "the mute play of the features" can make us realize in the middle of a character's discourse "the difference between this [mute] soliloquy and the audible conversation."

It is a well-known fact that most silent-screen acting was exaggerated: excessive gesturing and mugging, indeed posturing, in an attempt to compensate for the missing words. This became particularly offensive in the closeup, when delicate, subtle, or nascent and inchoate feelings had to be conveyed by overexplicitness. Such overstatement obviously worked best in farce, melodrama, and spectacle, and that may well be why these genres came to dominate the silent screen. Even the best attempts to get beyond these genres—for example, Murnau's *Sunrise*—were doomed to look like farce and sentimental melodrama, partly because the acting style dictated the basic characterizations of the actors, and partly because silent scriptwriters had to deal in broad, sweeping strokes and simple, elemental themes. It is highly probable that what makes

film suspect in certain quarters to this day, what makes even certain film reviewers wonder whether it is really an art, has to do with its having begun as a medium condemned to primitivism by its lack of sound. Today's prejudice was yesterday a plausible judgment.

Still, most contemporary advocates of pure cinema would not go so far as to wish to throw out sound altogether. Even a film like Antonioni's lamentable *The Passenger*, whose climactic sequences have either no dialogue or the barest minimum, contains other scenes full of verbiage, highflown and ludicrous as it may be. So I wonder what measures they have in mind when they insist on the lesser importance of dialogue: how would they want to delimit its scope and keep it in its subservient role? The two manifest ways in which you can keep dialogue down are to make it sparse or to make it worse. By worse, as I see it, they would mean less literary, less noticeable. This is plainly correct in some cases. In Stanley Kubrick's *2001*, where one of the points is the contrast between mankind's tremendously expanded horizons and its obsolete, bureaucratic and constricting vocabulary, the flattening out of language is a legitimate—though still, I insist, literary—device. Again, a film about very simple folk or taciturn professional soldiers rightly eschews Jamesian or Wildean dialogue. But even films about tight-lipped private eyes, for instance, profit appreciably when the tight-lipped dialogue comes out of Raymond Chandler or Dashiell Hammett.

I must content myself here with one example of the difference the quality of language can make when all other elements are as nearly as possible alike. There is a moment in Ingmar Bergman's latest film, *Face to Face*, when the young woman psychiatrist, played by Liv Ullmann, who has been hospitalized after an unsuccessful suicide attempt, exclaims from her bed to her solicitous doctor friend and quasi-lover, played by Erland Josephson: "Do you think I'm crippled for the rest of my life? Do you think we're a vast army of emotionally crippled wretches wandering about calling to one another with words we don't understand and which only make us even more afraid?" The switch from the first person singular to the

first person plural in this *de profundis* constitutes the simplest way of showing the uncertain boundaries between personal failure and universal collapse. In Bergman's preceding film, *Scenes from a Marriage*, the closing sequence has Ullmann and Josephson married and in bed together. Only they are no longer married to each other, as they once were, but to new partners; and even this bed they share as sporadic lovers belongs to some distant acquaintance. A nightmare has awakened Marianne in the middle of the night and leads to an intimate conversation with her ex-husband: "Johan!—Yes, my dear.—Do you think we're living in utter confusion?—You and I?—No, the whole lot of us." The conversation gropes along in the dark for a while, then Marianne asks again: "Johan . . . —Yes?—Have we missed something important?—All of us?—You and I." The scene is incomparably more affecting than its counterpart in *Face to Face*, yet the device used in the dialogue is a distinctly literary one: incremental repetition, derived from poetry and consisting of a refrain that is not repeated verbatim, but with some small yet significant variation. Here the refrain is reversed: a universal *we* is first mistaken for a personal one; then, with almost identical diction, a private *we* is mistaken for a generalization. The effect—call it literary or cinematic—is a powerful rapprochement of the problems of the principal characters with those of people everywhere.

And what about the question of quantity? Is dialogue, in the interest of good filmmaking, to be used only sparingly? The dialogue in some of the world's great films is not only highly literate but also profuse. The just quoted *Scenes from a Marriage* is a case in point; mind you, the English subtitles, copious as they are, represent extensive and not always judicious pruning of the Swedish. But almost all of Bergman's films have at least long sequences brimful of words; take only the magnificent scene in *Winter Light* where Ingrid Thulin speaks the letter Gunnar Björnstrand is reading. The camera is stationary, Thulin barely moves her face, and there is only one cutaway from the relentless closeup. But there are torrents of words. Yet, for me, this is one of the most moving scenes in

cinema, closely followed by other Bergmanian monologues delivered by his marvelous actresses.

And what of the bursting verbal screenplays of Jacques Prévert (notably that for *The Children of Paradise*), rightly adduced by Orson Welles, in the already quoted interview, as pinnacles of French filmmaking; or of the other extremely "talky" French films, like those of Pagnol, Duvivier, and many others? Consider a film like *Monsieur Vincent*, the only successful filmed hagiography, which owes so much more to Jean Anouilh's prodigally articulate scenario than to Maurice Cloche's decent but conventional direction. In eastern Europe especially, words often seem to tumble off the screen in heaps; I mention only three emblematic directors: the Hungarian István Szabó, the Pole Andrzej Wajda, the Czechoslovak Hynek Bočan. The American screwball comedies of the thirties, one of Hollywood's most satisfying achievements, depended as much on the nonstop verbal wit of their writers as on the charm of their actors. What, for instance, do we remember of *The Philadelphia Story*? Certainly not the mise-en-scène, but Hepburn and Grant and the bright rataplan of their crackling exchanges. Yet good, abundant dialogue works not only in comedy; though atmosphere, acting, and direction were all exquisite in David Lean's *Brief Encounter*, it is the eminently verbal screenplay of Noel Coward that kept the sentimental story on its consistently dignified level.

But rather than multiply examples let me close with one last remark from Ingmar Bergman to the editors of *Chaplin*: "Whatever is visible or audible—image and sound—that's what affects me most." And that, I think, when combined artfully by a master filmmaker, is also what affects us most.

1976