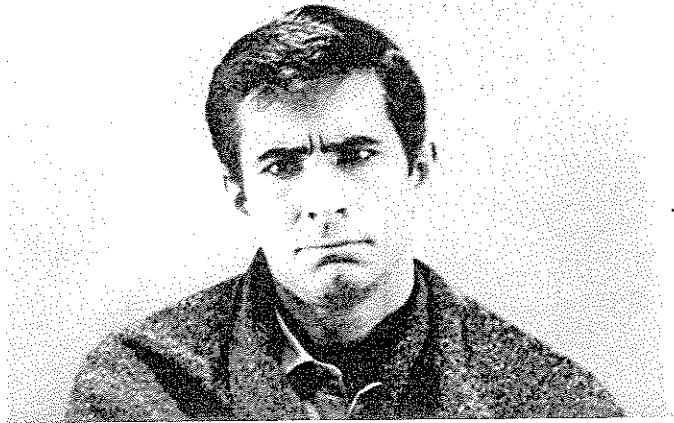




Janet Leigh and Anthony Perkins in *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960).



### THREE THE I-VOICE

Often in a movie the action will come to a standstill as someone, serene and reflective, will start to tell a story. The character's voice separates from the body, and returns as an *acousmètre* to haunt the past-tense images conjured by its words. The voice speaks from a point where time is suspended. What makes this an "I-voice" is not just the use of the first person singular, but its placement—a certain sound quality, a way of occupying space, a sense of proximity to the spectator's ear, and a particular manner of engaging the spectator's identification.

The French term for the word "voiceover" is "voix-off" (as if any voice could be "off"), and it designates any *acousmatic* or bodiless voices in a film that tell stories, provide commentary, or evoke the past. *Bodiless* can mean placed outside a body temporarily, detached from a body that is no longer seen, and set into orbit in the peripheral *acousmatic* field. These voices know all, remember all, but quickly find themselves submerged by the visible and audible past they have called up—that is, in flashback.

Obviously the cinema didn't invent the narrating voice. Just as film appropriated the music of opera and orchestra pit in order to accompany its stories, it also integrated the voice of the *montreur d'images* or picture presenter, from a much older tradition. Jacques Perriault's book *Mémoires de l'ombre et du son* describes these lantern slide shows of fixed views that toured through the countryside in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with texts designed to be read aloud; the programs were sometimes called "talking journals."

But we ought to go back even further. Since the very dawn of time, *voices have presented images*, made order of things in the world, brought things to life and named them. The very first image presenter is the mother; before the child learns any written signs, her voice articulates things in a human and linear temporality. In every master of ceremonies and storyteller as well as every movie voiceover, an aspect of this original function remains.

I have said that the point from which this cinematic voice speaks often seems to be a place *removed from the images*, away from the scene or stage, somewhat like the place occupied by the slideshow lecturer, the mountain climber commenting in person on his exploits.

As long as the film's voice speaks to us from this removed position of the picture-presenter, whether the narrator is physically present or recorded on the audio track, it does not differ essentially from the good old voice of the magic lantern show, the voice of the mother or father talking to the child they hold on their knees and who hears them overhead, their voices enveloping him like a big veil. The cinema might recall this strong and close presence of the parental voice, but perhaps on the other hand it causes us to lose opportunities for life, closeness, and the possibility of two-way communication.

The situation changes precisely when the voice is "engaged," to a greater or lesser degree, with the screen space, when the voice and the image dance in a dynamic relationship, now coming within a hair's breadth of entering the visual field, now hiding from the camera's eye. Think of the voice of Welles in the last shot of *The Magnificent Ambersons*: the microphone that appears in the empty screen points to the offscreen place where this narrator is speaking from. Were he to make the small step onscreen and reveal himself, this voice would play a significantly different role than that of a classical voiceover narrator. Between the point where the voice is "hiding out" and the point where it hazards its way into the image, there is no well-defined continuity; the slightest thing can make it tip one way or the other.

An I-voice is not simply an offscreen narrator's voice. Sound film has codified the criteria of tone color, auditory space, and timbre to which a voice must conform in order to function as an I-voice. These criteria are in fact full-fledged norms, rarely violated: dramatic norms of performance, technical norms of recording. They are far from arbitrary. If a film violates only one of them, we sense something amiss with the narration.

The cinematic I-voice is not just the voice that says "I," as in a

novel. To solicit the spectator's identification, that is, for the spectator to appropriate it to any degree, it must be framed and recorded in a certain manner. Only then can it function as a *pivot of identification*, resonating in us as if it were our own voice, like a voice in the first person.

Two technical criteria are essential for the I-voice. First, *close miking*, as close as possible, creates a feeling of intimacy with the voice, such that we sense no distance between it and our ear. We experience this closeness via the surefire audio qualities of vocal *presence* and *definition*, which manage to remain perceivable even in the worst conditions of reception and reproduction, even through the low-fidelity medium of the telephone.

The second criterion derives from the first: "dryness" or absence of reverb in the voice (for reverb situates the voice in a space). It's as if, in order for the I-voice to resonate in us as our own, it can't be inscribed in a concrete identifiable space, it must be its own space unto itself. All you have to do is add reverb in the mix to manipulate an I-voice; the *embracing* and *complicit* quality of the I-voice becomes *embraced* and *distanced*. It is then no longer a subject with which the spectator identifies, but rather an object-voice, perceived as a body anchored in space.

It's precisely this distinction that Hitchcock exploited with such finesse in *Psycho*. On one hand, there are the internal voices, object-voices that we understand to be heard by Marion during her drive to escape from Phoenix. On the other, there's the voice that's called internal but is really a subject-voice—I-voice—that belongs to the mother at the end of the film, superimposed on the images of a silent Norman sitting in his cell.

In the first of these two scenes, Marion (Janet Leigh) is at the steering wheel and is concocting a whole internal drama on what various characters she has spoken to must be saying: the head of the bank, her fellow secretary, and the millionaire whose money she has stolen. Their acousmatic voices, worried and then indignant, are heard over the image of Marion's face as she drives, as well as over shots of the

monotonous highway landscape. How do we understand that these voices resonate “in her head,” and not that they are voices calling up images of her as they talk about her? Because they conform to audio conventions that establish a sound as subjective, making it unrealistic. Which is exactly the opposite of an I-sound, since a “subjective” perception in a film is *objectivized* as such. In *Psycho*, the technical manipulations consist of a pronounced filtering, which makes the voices resemble telephone voices, as well as addition of reverb which incorporates them into an imaginary place, the place of her head, her imagination. Suppose we were able to take the elements of the mix, and edit the same voices to the same images but take away filters and reverb, so that the voices had the presence of an auditory closeup. I’d bet that there would be a completely different effect. No longer contained, the voices would now contain and order the image. Instead of their coming across as Marion’s inner hearing, the face of Marion might well be seen as the image evoked by the voices.

The second scene in question shows Norman (Anthony Perkins) sitting in his cell wrapped in a blanket, his face “neutral” like Marion’s, while the voice of the mother reels off a paranoid monologue. Internal voice of Norman, who we’ve been told identifies totally with his mother? More than that. The voice is close up, precise, immediate, without echo, it’s an I-voice that vampirizes both Norman’s body and the entire image, as well as the spectator herself. A voice that the image is inside of.

Note the parallel between the two scenes: same closeups of silent, rather expressionless faces, and same overlay, onto these faces of acousmatic voices. Nonetheless the voices function in opposite ways. The internal voices that fascinate Marion resonate in her head, whereas the embracing voice that speaks over the image of Norman resonates in us. It’s a voice in exile,<sup>1</sup> it cannot be reintegrated either into the dried mummy discovered in the basement, or into the inappropriate body of Norman Bates, this living body of her son whom she possesses from now on, unless somehow he were to master it in himself, circumscribe it, impose limits on it.

1. [Chion’s term here is *en souffrance de corps*: awaiting delivery of a body, with a body on back order; but it also carries the connotation of a body suffering, that something is missing. For an extended discussion, see chapter 9, *Trans*.]

We might call this an effect of *corporeal implication*, or involvement of the spectator’s body, when the voice makes us feel in our body the vibration of the body of the other, of the character who serves as a vehicle for the identification. The extreme case of corporeal implication occurs when there is no dialogue or words, but only closely present breathing or groans or sighs. We often have as much difficulty distancing ourselves from this to the degree that the sex, age, and identity of the one who thus breathes, groans, and suffers aren’t marked in the voice. It could be me, you, he, she.

For example, at the end of *2001*, there is the breathing of Dave, the escaped astronaut; we perceive it as loudly and immediately as he hears it inside his space suit—and yet we see him lost in the interplanetary void like a tiny marionette. But this breathing manages to make of this faceless, faraway puppet, floating in the void or in the middle of machines, a *subject* with whom we identify through auditive mimesis.

The effect of corporeal implication also occurs in David Lynch’s *Elephant Man*, in the scene where the elephant man is first ushered into Dr. Treeves’s office. The monster still has his mask on and we haven’t yet seen his features. He stands paralyzed before the doctor who presses him with questions. But we hear his breathing and his painful swallowing, with a presentness that only he could also hear, and we feel his fear in our own body. This is an example of a scene whose point of view is created entirely by sound. This farthest limit of the I-voice doesn’t even involve a voice (the elephant man hasn’t spoken), but of a pre-vocal expression, even before the air in the airway rattles the larynx. . . .

**THE MASTER OF THE HOUSE** Thus, in order to take possession of the spectator and the images and even the characters, the voice has to avoid that which designates it as a tangible object. Otherwise the spectator would become conscious of the identification process by perceiving its contours, its identity. Pascal Bonitzer characterized this effect of “dis-illusion” or distancing of the I-voice: “To encounter the body of

the voice (its grain, as Barthes puts it), this physical chaff of meaning, is to encounter . . . the subject fallen to the status of object, unmasked . . . so that we end up *hearing* this voice."<sup>2</sup> To avoid being thus encountered as a body, the voice must, as I have said, move to the foreground, without reverb. It must also not be *projected*—contrary to public speech which in order to be effective must resonate in the space the orator is addressing.

Why, in the films of Sacha Guitry and Jean Cocteau, are the directors' voiceovers so noteworthy in this respect? Their voices, even while assuming the classical role of narrator or I-voice, break convention in flaunting their singularity, and as *projected voices*. Instead of speaking neutrally and pretending not to know it speaks to an auditorium, the unusual acousmètre of Cocteau himself in *Les Enfants terribles* or Guitry in *Le Roman d'un tricheur* is overtly aware of its elocution, its articulation, its timbre, the *distance* that separates it from us. Although this acousmètre might say "I," it still doesn't permit us to identify with it. Cocteau's voice in Melville's *Les Enfants terribles* sounds more like an author giving a speech than like the ordinary movie narrator. The same goes for Guitry's which addresses us in a declamatory fashion, as if to hear itself speak. The voice does not allow itself to be assimilated as an internal voice or even an everyman's voice. A certain neutrality of timbre and accent, associated with a certain ingratiating discretion, is normally expected of an I-voice. Precisely so that each spectator can make it his own, the voice must work toward being a *written text that speaks* with the impersonality of the printed page.

If we hear a voiceover listening to itself talk, the image of a body and of a person gets in the way of identification. It palpably takes its seat between the image and us; instead of leading us into the image, it sticks us onto it. The false cinematic I-voices of Cocteau and Guitry are a strange phenomenon. At the same time that they carry the narration, they weigh it down with their corpulent presence. You have to get by them to enter into the story, but they won't let you go, like an indiscreet Master of the House who insists on accompanying you everywhere you move.

**THE DAY THE ACOUSMÈTRES DOUBTED** The day the acousmètres had doubts, when they no longer behaved like voices that knew and saw everything . . . Can we pinpoint when that happened in film history? Can't we say that alongside commanding, intimidating, all-seeing acousmètres in the sound cinema, there has always been another species of doubting acousmètres, deprived of thorough and omniscient knowledge? Sternberg's voice in *The Saga of Anatahan* is of this sort, with its way of saying "we" and its partial knowledge in relation to the images it accompanies. Such voices are still not codified to this day; they seem to have no clear status. What we can say at this point is that a kind of detour in the voiceover as the representation of the Other's/Master's knowledge can be detected in a number of films since the 1970s.

In Bertolucci's film *Tragedy of a Ridiculous Man*, the internal voice of the main character Primo elicits doubt—the more perversely so since it was added onto the soundtrack by the director largely after the fact, ostensibly to clarify but in reality to complicate.<sup>3</sup> No doubt the voice makes it plain that the story is from Primo's point of view (since a character's internal voice in a scene he appears in does place the scene in his perspective). But by being heard over images this "narrator" couldn't have seen, the voice produces a more disconcerting effect than with Sternberg. At least in *Anatahan* we know what the voiceover pretends not to know or really doesn't know. With Bertolucci the boundaries—and even the object—of this knowledge are completely obscured.

We might speculate that the "blind" voice or the voice with partial sight may be the voice of the excluded third party of the primal scene. Excluded isn't the right word, because the primal scene exists *only for that person*, who is at the heart of it. I'm thinking of Marguerite Duras and her *Ravishing of Lol V. Stein*, the matrix of a whole series of literary and filmic works with blind or semi-blind voices who do not see or know all. The phenomenon usually involves women's voices, while (it must finally be said) *most acousmètres are masculine*. Female acousmètres in classical cinema are rare—for

2. Bonitzer, *Le regard et la voix*, p. 42–43.

3. See "Entretien avec Bernard Bertolucci" in *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 330 (December, 1981), pp. 24–33.

example in Mankiewicz's *Letter to Three Wives*; even here, the wives' voices are also in the third person with respect to the husband and the "other woman."

On the other hand, some more recent permutations of the voiceover in films ranging from Terence Malick's *Days of Heaven* to Claude Lelouch's *Les Uns et les autres*, convey a man's side (even though the voice in *Days of Heaven* is that of a young girl) in the way they perturb the acousmètre's customary omnivoyance and mastery, and derive perverse effects from doing so.

In *Days of Heaven*, the voiceover again belongs to a third party, the outsider to a couple—the hero's younger sister. Her voice plays an unusual game of hide-and-seek in terms of her knowledge about the adult world of sexual relations and violence. (In his debut feature, *Badlands*, Malick had already attempted to bring new poetic power to the voiceover, breaking conventions of narration to destructure the spectator's point of view.) In Lelouch, the voiceover is more naively twisted, so to speak, in its relation to the narrative. The author-director had one of his actors, Francis Huster, not only play his on-screen role, but record the film's explanatory commentary, as well as speak the credits aloud, and even overlay simultaneous translations of sequences in foreign languages (i.e., in scenes with letters being read), and even provide the voice that emerges from loudspeakers in concentration camp scenes! Rarely has there existed a film voice so entirely dispossessed of a place; the least we can say is that it serves as an all-purpose acousmètre.

Why would this diversion, or even degeneration, of narration be more marked in the position of the voiceover than in any other narrative element? Precisely because the voiceover is constitutive of the narrative's *subject*—in the double sense of "what happens" and "whom it happens to"—because it asks the question of the knowledge and desire of this subject, of its/his *point of view*. For very different reasons in the films of Bertolucci, Malick, and Lelouch, the place from which the acousmètre speaks, the authority or the desire that it/he embodies, are all messed with, perturbed, to some extent.

This isn't by chance, but really a sign of the times, an era when telling a story exposes the teller more than it used to. These three directors may be making crafty attempts to "hide the story they tell," to cite the excellent phrase of Uziel Peres.<sup>4</sup>

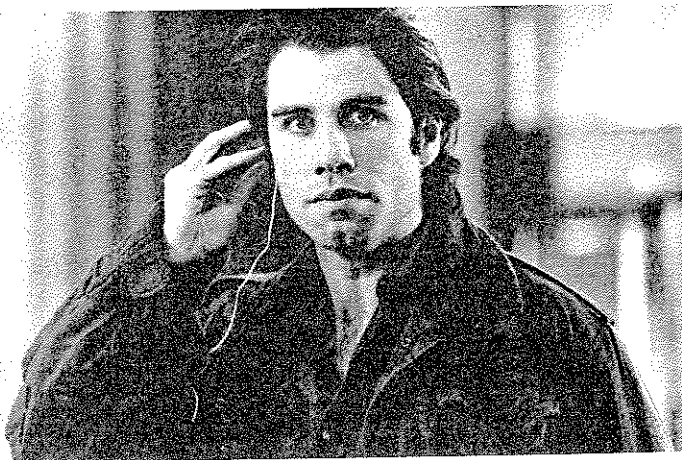
All this issues from a "bizarre" period of the cinema in which we have witnessed a marked increase in the number of films, stories, and directors that juggle their options. And let's not forget those like Raul Ruiz, who are proposing really new solutions, other than what is dictated by habit and convention. A film like *The Hypothesis of the Stolen Painting*, in its manner of parodying the Master-of-the-House-like tone of voiceover commentators, and of playing two voices, two knowledges against each other, is overtly built on a subtle play with the traditional position of the acousmètre, and it invites the spectator openly and frankly into the game.<sup>5</sup> More and more frequently the acousmètre is becoming a complicated, calculating being. The cinema of each period gets the acousmètre it deserves.

4. [Uziel Peres is an Israeli film maker who in the '70s and '80s directed melodramas inspired by Sirk and Chabrol. *Trans.*]

5. On this film, see *Le Champ aveugle*, Pascal Bonitzer, ed. (Paris: Cahiers / Gallimard), pp. 107 ff.



Jennifer Salt in *Sisters* (1972) and John Travolta in *Blow-Out* (1981), two films by Brian de Palma.



## FIVE THE SCREAMING POINT

A woman is taking a shower. Someone rips open the shower curtain, waving a knife. Dramatic pause, then the woman screams her head off. We can easily recognize Hitchcock's *Psycho*, de Palma's *Blow-Out*, and countless other horror films. Since the cinema first discovered women screaming, it has shown great skill in producing screams and stockpiling them for immediate and frequent deployment.

This is why we can say that the plot of de Palma's *Blow-Out* is clearly rigged. It gives the viewer the mistaken impression that you can't find a good scream when you need one for a movie sequence like the one I've just described.

At the beginning of *Blow-Out* we are in effect watching the classic scene, shot with a subjective camera, showing the stalker who enters a bathroom, pulls a knife, throws open the shower curtain to reveal the woman . . . But the action stops there, for the scream that comes from the actress's mouth is a pathetic yelp. The lights go up in the screening room. It was a sex-and-violence movie, for which hero Jack (John Travolta) is supposed to provide the sound effects. The scream heard was what the actress herself produced during the take, and she wasn't cast for her terrific voice. It falls to Jack somehow to obtain a convincing scream to synch to the image. Meanwhile, the film in progress seems to stop at this point of suspense, before the knife's entry. That's how the plot of *Blow-Out* begins.

Actually Jack promptly forgets about the problem as he leaves work. He walks into the park at night with his Nagra, to augment his sound library with some nature sounds, especially wind—not to find a scream. An accident he witnesses and whose sound he happens to record draws him into a politics-gangsters intrigue. Getting involved despite some good advice to the contrary gives him the excuse to remain deaf to the appeals of his boss: "So when are you going to get me the scream?"

What is the flamboyant finale of *Blow-Out* leading up to, cleverly

arranged so that everything—the Liberty Bell celebration, the great peal of church bells, a magnificent fireworks display, and the characters themselves—converges on the moment the killer slits the throat of Jack's girlfriend Sally? What is this prodigious narrative machine directed toward—where the entire sky is afire—if not the scream of the woman stabbed? Jack gets a recording of this scream, since he had wired Sally, supposedly for protection, with a micro-transmitter that allowed him to monitor and follow her.

This isn't Jack's first horrible mistake. In the past an investigator whom he had equipped similarly died because of him. Jack's unconscious has arranged once again for him to place Sally into a perilous position. The sole result is that he is enabled to record remotely from her mouth the scream he's been after (and which he "missed" with the investigator's death because of a technical difficulty). In a conventionally right-thinking film, the author would "hold on" to the scream in order to feed the emotion of his own story, as opposed to the story of the film-within-the-film. The honesty of de Palma's film lies in the notion that on the contrary, Jack will take this scream to his satisfied mixer ("now, that's a scream!"). This allows the film-within-the-film to be completed, after which *Blow-Out* itself just ends too, as if this whole intrigue were only a monstrous parasitic outgrowth around a professional anecdote, a duty the hero is endlessly trying to discharge.

In truth this scream, about whose credibility the characters make such a fuss, is less important as an object. What's more important is the *point* where it is placed in the story: it becomes a sort of ineffable black hole toward which there converges an entire fantastic, preposterous, extravagant mechanism—the celebration, the political crime, the sexual murder, and the whole film—all this made in order to be consumed and dissipated, in the unthinkable and instantaneity of this scream.

So let us define the *screaming point* in a cinematic narrative as something that generally gushes forth from the mouth of a woman, which by the way does not have to be heard, but which above all

must fall at an appointed spot, explode at a precise moment, at the crossroads of converging plot lines, at the end of an often convoluted trajectory, but calculated to give this point a maximum impact.<sup>1</sup> The film functions like a Rube Goldberg cartoon mechanism full of gears, pistons, chains and belts—a machine built to give birth to a scream.

I use the expression *screaming point* to emphasize that it's not so much the sound quality of the scream that's important, but its placement. And this place could be occupied by nothing, a blank, an absence. The screaming point is a point of the unthinkable inside the thought, of the indeterminate inside the spoken, of unrepresentability inside representation. It occupies a point in time, but has no duration within. It suspends the time of its possible duration; it's a rip in the fabric of time. This scream embodies a fantasy of the auditory absolute, it is seen to saturate the soundtrack and deafen the listener. It might even be unheard by the screamer.

In films like *Psycho*, the original *King Kong*, *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, *Blow-Out*, and part of *The Towering Inferno*, it's amazing to consider the extravagant luxury of the means devoted to the screenplay and production mobilized in order for everything to be lost and spent in a woman's scream. Nothing is spared in order to reach the screaming point. Twenty-story gorillas are invented, a thousand-foot-tall building is set ablaze, deluges of fireworks, symphony orchestras, the most ingenious and sophisticated details of production . . . For, in these films, at a certain moment, all disparate plot lines converge and break at this moment that quickly dissipates and passes, this moment of the woman's scream. As in the monstrous social rite of potlatch, nothing is too elaborate or far out if it will lead to a successful scream.

Why a woman's scream? Is this a phenomenon endemic to a cinema of sadists, who get off on the spectacle of a woman as prey to terror? Yes, but: we might also speculate that for men, the woman's scream poses the question of the "black hole" of the female orgasm, which cannot be spoken nor thought. In the very films that are

1. This notion can be applied to silent films as well as sound film.

constructed upon this scream as the absolute in terror and pleasure, the scream is not strongly eroticized, despite the frequently sadistic nature of the situation; this would tend to thwart the male climax. What it embodies, rather, is an absolute, outside of language, time, the conscious subject.

Why can't a man's scream give expression to this absolute just as well? This is what Skolimowski's aptly-named film *The Shout* tries to do. The film prepares us for quite a while to hear an awe-ful magic shout, the secret weapon of a sorcerer (or pseudo-sorcerer) played by Alan Bates. This shout occurs finally toward the end of the film. The director yelled it himself and then subjected it to electronic manipulation.

It is impressive, all right, but simply in a different league than the screaming point. The gender emphasis is already built in to the two terms in English for these wordless cries—we tend to call the woman's cry a scream, and the man's cry a shout. Skolimowski/Bates's cry is a shout of power, exercising a will, marking a territory, a structuring shout, *anticipated*. If the shout has something bestial to it, it's like the identification of the male with the totemic animal. The most famous example of this is Tarzan's call, fabricated in the 1930s from multiple animal cries; a phallic cry which the male uses to exhibit himself and proclaim his virility.

The woman's cry is rather more like the shout of a human subject of language in the face of death. The screaming point is of a properly human order. Perhaps Marguerite Duras has created the only exception, in having a man emit a scream that's neither a Tarzan's, nor a Beast's, nor a sorcerer's cry—the scream of the Vice-Consul in *India Song* and in *Son Nom de Venise*.

The screaming point, in a male-directed film, immediately poses the question of *mastery*, of the mastery of this scream.

The question of the means and power used to obtain the scream is posed outright in a famous scene in *King Kong* (1933). On a ship making its way toward Skull Island where the gorilla resides, a sadistic film director makes heroine Fay Wray try out some screams in a

screen test, prepping her by describing the horror of the monstrous beast. Usually where a filmmaker constructs a good story full of complications in order to draw things out to a screaming point, he makes sure to show how the screaming point can escape the very person orchestrating it in the story; the character can only give himself the illusion of being Master. With Hitchcock, de Palma, or in *King Kong*, it is clear that the man is but the organizer of the spectacle, the producer of this extravaganza, but that the screaming point ultimately is beyond him, just as it is beyond the woman who issues it as the medium.

The man's shout delimits a territory, the woman's scream has to do with limitlessness. The scream gobbles up everything into itself—it is centripetal and fascinating—while the man's cry is centrifugal and structuring. The screaming point is where speech is suddenly extinct, a black hole, the exit of being.

All of cinema, this omnivorous and diverse art, is thrown into the operation of this mechanism, this strategy of obtaining a screaming point in which the insane mobilization of resources justifies and even loses itself.