Preben Lerdoff Rye and Ann Elisabeth in *Ordet* (Carl Theodor Dreyer, 1954).

NINE THE VOICE THAT SEEKS A BODY

SCARS AND SUTURES Contemporary Western culture resolutely claims to be monistic, fiercely rejecting the dualistic idea of man split down the middle. The liberal, "emancipated" ideal becomes to reconcile the fragments of the self all within the body, considered as the homogeneous and unsplit habitat of the individual.

The sound film, for its part, is dualistic. Its dualism is hidden or disavowed to varying extents; sometimes cinema's split is even on display. The physical nature of film necessarily makes an incision or cut between the body and the voice. Then the cinema does its best to restitch the two together at the seam.

(Let's remark in passing that the notion of the voice as a separate and autonomous entity didn't arise with the invention of the gramophone and the telephone, devices that separate the voice from its source in the body. The idea of recording the voice is documented in ancient myths—Midas and Echo, for example—as well as in Rabelais's famous "Frozen Words").[1]

But isn't the talking picture precisely a form that reunites and reassembles, more than it cuts in two? If we're talking about cutting voice from body, shouldn't this apply more to radio or telephone than to cinema?

The answer is no. Neither radio nor telephone, nor their complement, the silent cinema, is dualistic. Isolating the voice as they do, telephone and radio posit the voice as *representative* of the whole person. And a character in a silent film, with her animated body and moving lips, appears as the part of the whole that is a speaking body, and leaves each viewer to imagine her voice. So in explicitly depriving us of one element, both radio and silent cinema cause us to dream of the harmony of the whole.

If the talking cinema has shown anything by restoring voices to bodies, it's precisely that it doesn't hang together; it's decidedly not a seamless match. Garbo's voice inspired prodigious amounts of

1. [In an oft-cited episode of the adventures of Pantagruel, the heroes traveling by boat in the northern seas hear shouts and noises of war. They figure out that these are the sounds of a battle that took place there months before during the cold season, and that the cold had frozen the sounds. The thaw has released them into the air. See *Le Quart Livre des faicts et dicts héroïques du bon Pantagruel*, 1548, chapters 60 and 61. *Trans.*]

commentary when it was finally heard in *Anna Christie*. From the finely chiseled beauty of her facial features no one could have imagined her voice would be so husky. Some critics even tried to attribute it to microphone distortion. But other stars also paid dearly when their own real voices were judged shrill and badly matched to their physiques, or, if you will, badly matched to the body-cum-voice that their silent films had let viewers dream about.

Indulging in a bit of ontogenesis, let us revisit the formation of the human subject. We are often given to believe, implicitly or explicitly, that the body and voice cohere in some self-evident, natural way, that becoming human consists for the child of "coming to consciousness," and that's just how it is. All the child has to do is put together the elements given to him separately and out of order. The voice, smell, and sight of "the other": the idea is firmly established that all these form a whole, that the child needs only to reconstitute it by calling on his "reality principle." But in truth, what we have here is an entirely *structural operation* (related to the structuring of the subject in language) of grafting the non-localized voice onto a particular body that is assigned symbolically to the voice as its source. This operation leaves a scar, and the talking film marks the place of that scar, since by presenting itself as a reconstituted totality, it places all the greater emphasis on the original non-coincidence. Of course, via the operation called synchronization, cinema seeks to reunify the body and voice that have been dissociated by their inscription onto separate surfaces (the celluloid image and the soundtrack). But the more you think about synchronization, the more aware you can become, as Marguerite Duras did, of the arbitrariness of this convention, which tries to present as a unity something that from the outset *doesn't stick together*.

This does not mean we should scorn those who seek an absolute co-incidence, who attempt scrupulously to reestablish the truth of original sound on original images, to recreate a totality. Such a quest partakes in those wild dreams of unity and absolutes that motivate people to tread the paths of creativity.

It's clear that if voice and body do not hang together in the sound film, the problem does not lie in some technical lacuna. Adding relief, smell, or touch wouldn't change anything, nor would higher-fidelity recordings or a more scrupulous localization of sound. It is as an inherent consequence of the material organization of cinema that the voice and body are at odds.

So back to our ontogenetic subject: at some point, the voice of the other as well as his own voice, gets anchored *somewhere* and doesn't move much from there. If there is a *somewhere* of the voice, a place that is the place of vocal production, is the cinema capable of filming it?

PLACING THE VOICE'S SOURCE At what point should it be said that someone's voice in a film is "offscreen"? The answer is, when it can't strictly be localized to the symbolic place of vocal production, which is the mouth; the answer is, when the mouth isn't visible.

I say symbolic, because otherwise vocal production—phonation—involves many other parts of the body: the lungs, muscles involved in breathing, the larynx, the brain, and so on. So it paradoxically appears that the human body does not have a specific organ for phonation in the way that the larynx is an organ for the regulation of breathing, for example.

If an actor's mouth isn't visible onscreen, we cannot verify the temporal co-incidence of its movements with the sounds we hear. Such audio-visual matching is the ultimate criterion for attributing the voice to a given character. We all know how crucial this factor is for the movies; dubbing is predicated on it in order to fool us. It functions not so much to guarantee truth, but rather to authorize belief.

The mouth may well be the first part of the human body that the movies ever shot in closeup. In a 1901 short by the British photographer James A. Williamson, *A Big Swallow*, the person who is the "big swallower" approaches the camera threateningly. His mouth opens as wide as a house to swallow up the camera, the cameraman, the image (which goes totally dark) and in a way, the spectator too. It's as if one

of the first challenges for the movies was to film this black hole, this dispenser of life, this cavity that threatens to devour everything.

The silent film spectator hung on every word from the lips of the star, even if she didn't really hear the voice that came from them. The origin of this oral fixation—for that's what it is—is no doubt the child's early relation to the mother's mouth. It is through the mouth that the child receives everything, eats, cries, vomits, and where it experiences some of its first identifiable bodily sensations.

The singing mouth was one of the first great subjects of the cinema. Filmed opera, with or without the sound of the voice, was one of the first film genres. But singing is one particular mode of vocal production. For singing, the entire body mobilizes around the voice and the modulating air column that emerges through the open lips. So here the outpouring voice is filmed for itself. On the other hand the spoken utterance, which conveys words, emotions, or a message, makes all the more apparent the *cinema's diversion of attention from the "whole" human being to just its voice*,[2] the absence of the body from what the mouth is saying, the voice's very denial of the body.

One could reasonably contest the idea that the mouth is the sole place to film as the source of vocal production. If filmmakers are attached to the mouth for filming the voice, this is also because it affords the most precise cues for synchronization.

SYNCHRONOUS MAN When you think about it, synchronism, this factor we hold to be so important for knitting the voice to the body, is a strange thing indeed. The word involves the dimension of time (it consists of the Greek roots for "together" and "time"). It allows us by reading a speaker's lips to verify whether the articulation of the words heard accords with the movement of the mouth. These movements are all that can be seen of vocal production, the rest being internal (glottis, vocal cords, lungs) or invisible (air column). We take this temporal co-incidence of words and lips as a sort of guarantee that we're in the real world, where hearing a sound usually coincides with seeing its source—with allowances for distance (e.g., thunder is not synchronous with lightning, because light travels faster than sound).

2. But not in Straub and Huillet's films, with their unique way of centering the actor's body around diction, and their insistence on direct sound.

So synchronism stresses the temporal dimension, for it seems that the *spatial* factors in voice and image are too uncertain. In fact the greatest arbitrariness does prevail with regard to space. The proof is that today's stereo sound can be played with complete spatial incoherence between what we see and what we hear, without bothering much of anyone except specialists. We rarely find in a film a closeup character and his voice far away (even though it's a lovely effect). On the other hand, we tolerate the opposite arrangement quite easily—characters in long shot with closely miked voices—in fact we welcome it, and it's just as unrealistic.

The prevailing conventions that allow the spectator to assume a voice belongs to a given body onscreen are thus quite variable. We don't need constantly to confirm this co-incidence visually, but it is important that now and then we can recognize the coded signs that guarantee it for us. If the person who's speaking suddenly turns away from us, we're not going to panic because we can't verify the synchronism; we take it on faith that the voice we continue to hear continues to belong to the character. The process of "embodying" a voice is not a mechanistic operation, but a symbolic one.[3] We play along in recognizing a voice that comes from an actor's body as *his*, even if we know the film is dubbed, provided that the rules of a sort of contract of belief are respected, much as with the tacit rules of editing that Bazin explored.

Much Italian cinema, and Fellini in particular, synchronizes voices to body more loosely. In Fellinian extremes, when all those post-synched voices float around bodies, we reach a point where voices—even if we continue to attribute them to the bodies they're assigned—begin to acquire a sort of autonomy, in a baroque and decentered profusion. On the other hand, there are films in which voices are synchronized precisely, screwed tight onto their bodies. Then you get *synchronous man*, direct and human. At the end of Dreyer's *Ordet*, the madman Johannes pronounces before the body of Inger the words that are

3. [Chion's term translated here as "embodying" is *mise-en-corps*, putting-into-a-body, the spectator's attachment of a voice to a body. *Trans.*]

supposed to bring the young woman back to life. Dreyer could have filmed this scene in either of two ways. He could have shown the face of Inger when the offscreen words of Johannes are heard, or the camera could remain on Johannes as the latter declaims the words of life.

The first solution would be more magical—Johannes's voice would function as an acousmatic voice with all the power of acousmêtres. The second solution keeps things in the human dimension—Johannes is nothing but a man, and the words have no power other than by the grace of God. This is the solution Dreyer chose. In the entire film, vocal production is filmed directly, head-on, with very few offscreen voices. Speech draws on the symbolic force of "embodied" language here, not on the black magic of disembodied voices.

There is in *Ordet*, however, one moment that does feature an acousmatic voice. This moment does not involve Johannes (who is only a man), but Inger, the young mother, before her ill-fated birth pains. We see her in the house quietly humming to herself. Her contented humming continues over an unexpected cut that carries us outdoors into the countryside where we see for a brief moment one of the men walking. And it's as if, just for an instant, the whole outside world were placed under the protective wing of her voice. Such is the sole moment in *Ordet* of acousmatic, gentle magic.

NAILING AND RIGGING Marguerite Duras coined the idea that the contemporary cinema stringently requires voices to be *nailed down* to bodies. It's this nailing, which is for her a form of cheating, that she tried to break with in *India Song*.[4] Here she unfastened the voices and allowed them to roam free. "Nailing-down" nicely captures the rigidity and constraint in the conventions that have evolved for making film voices appear to come from bodies.

What we might call an *ideology* of nailing-down is found for example in the French and American film traditions. More than others, these cinemas seem obsessively concerned with synchronization that has no detectable "seams."

So this nailing-down via rigorous post-synching: is it not there to

4. [Duras' and Chion's term is "vissage," literally screwing-down or screwing-in. *Trans.*]

mask the fact that whatever lengths we go to, restoring voices to bodies is always *jerry-rigging* to one extent or another? As is, ultimately, this localization of voices onto bodies that we learn to do, starting with the voice of the mother.

Several of the very first spectators of talkies were aware of this effect. Alexandre Arnoux, for example, went to London to gather first impressions of the new sound movies and wrote for French readers:

> Right at the start the general effect is rather disconcerting. Since the loudspeaker installed behind the screen never changes its locus of sound propagation, the voice always comes from the same spot no matter which character is speaking. The synchronization is perfect, of course, but it confuses and annoys the listener. If this annoyance is analyzed, it is soon seen that by the very fact that it has been achieved, the concordance of lip movements and spoken syllables strengthens our demands for credibility and forces us to locate the sound in space—in fact, makes this absolutely indispensable. Otherwise, we are faced with a strange comedy in which the actors are closely miming the lines with their mouths, while a mysterious ventriloquistic chorus leader, rigid and motionless [behind] the center of the screen . . . takes charge of the audible part of their silent speeches.[5]

What would Arnoux have said about everything that's permitted today, all the novel techniques orienting sound in space less realistically than ever? But we now know how the sound film developed—along the lines of establishing tolerances, approximations.

Finally, why should we care at all about jerry-rigging, nailing-down, dubbing, synch sound, playback, or ventriloquism? Well, sometimes it matters and sometimes not. In the burlesque strain of film comedy—e.g., Chaplin, Laurel and Hardy, and the Marx Brothers—when we call it jerry-rigged, nothing ontological is at stake. These films often play on the very situation of the human being as a dislocated body, a puppet, a burlesque assemblage of body and voice. If we stop believing for

5. In *Pour Vous*, 1929; quoted by René Clair in *Cinema Yesterday and Today*, R. C. Dale, ed., Stanley Appelbaum, trans. (New York: Dover, 1972 [1970]), p. 128.

a moment in the unity of the body with the voice, it is "serious" dramatic movies whose effect is more readily threatened.

Ordinarily, the goal of dubbing is to outfit a body with an "appropriate" voice. Another use of dubbing occurs more rarely, for it produces a profound malaise: constructing a monster with a completely inappropriate voice (in terms of sex, age, facial features, or expression). This idea has been tried mostly in horror films, giving a hoarse and vulgar voice for example to the little girl in *The Exorcist*. Among monsters created this way we can also cite Giton in Fellini's *Satyricon*, that silent ephebe who pronounces only a single word in the entire movie, in a low, obscene voice; or similarly, the masked bellboys in *Lola Montes*, with their bestial voices. Comedy also has occasionally found amusement in exchanging male and female voices. In *Singin' in the Rain*, there's the famous sequence during a screening of an early talkie getting calamitously out of synch. But in general, filmmakers avoid prolonging this effect since the laughter it produces subsides quickly.

So we easily accept the dubbing of a voice onto a body as long as realist conventions of verisimilitude regarding gender and age are respected (a woman's voice goes with a shot of a woman, an old man's voice with an old man's body). On the other hand, spectators don't easily tolerate a voice dub of the opposite sex or markedly different age onto the body represented onscreen.

THE VOICE OF ANOTHER The idea of dubbing was born with the sound film itself. When Hitchcock made his first talkie *Blackmail* in 1929, it had been conceived as a silent film. He decided to adapt it for sound by shooting several additional scenes. His main actress, Anny Ondra, was German and spoke English badly. So he had her "dubbed," while shooting, by "an English actress, Joan Barry, who did the dialogue standing outside the frame with her own microphone, while Miss Ondra pantomimed the words."[6] He directed Anny Ondra while listening to Joan Barry through headphones. Hitchcock's inventiveness is well known, yet he wasn't alone at the time in employing this

6. F. Truffaut. Collab., Helen G. Scott, *Hitchcock* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967), pp. 46–47.

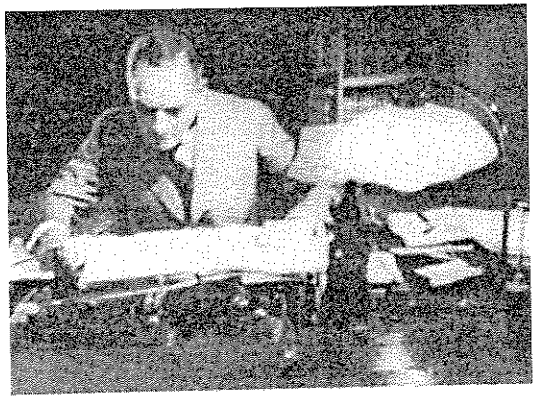
technique of using the *voice of another* on the set.

The voice of another, of a double, is the theme of *Singin' in the Rain* (1952). The story is well known: Gene Kelly and Jean Hagen are a famous star couple of silent movies; then along comes sound. Oops—Jean Hagen has a shrill, nasal, piercing voice. What to do? Donald O'Connor finds the solution. Without the audience knowing it, Jean Hagen will be provided by the charming voice of Debbie Reynolds, Gene's girlfriend. The film makes a big splash at the gala premiere, the audience shouts for Jean and demands to hear her sing onstage in the flesh. To save her, Debbie Reynolds is asked to be Jean's live voice-double, hiding behind the stage curtain while the actress mouths the song. But Gene, Donald, and the producer get a sudden inspiration. They raise the curtain and unveil to the audience Debbie singing behind Jean. An astonishing shot reveals the two women, one behind the other, with the two microphones lined up, both singing with this single voice that wanders between them looking for its source. The audience understands and attributes the voice to its true body. Jean Hagen slips out, and Gene Kelly wins the audience's affection for Debbie. The voice carries the day in this strange contest where men, those who decide whether to raise or lower the Mabusian curtain, play at being masters of the voice.

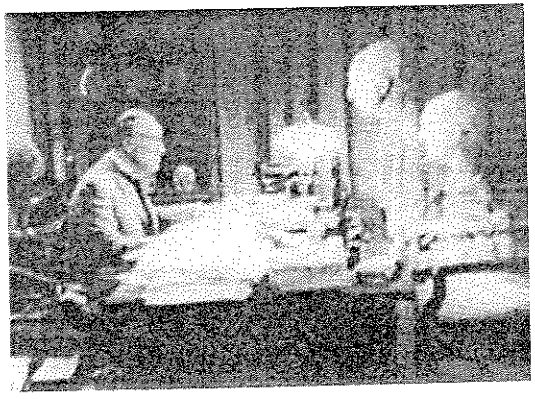
This plot did not spring fully clothed from the imagination of writers Betty Comden and Adolph Green. From the very beginning, the sound film introduced the possibility of lending someone the *voice of another*.

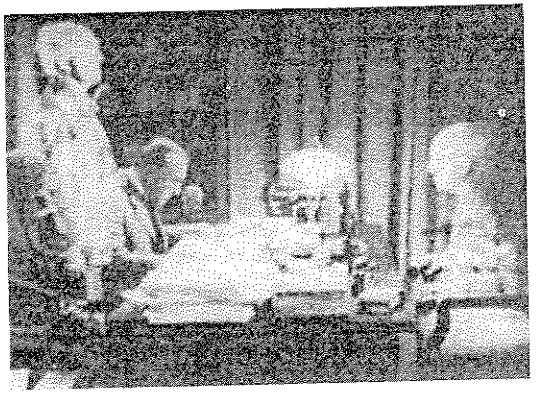
This situation in which *one woman's voice passes for that of another* is also found in other sound films such as Bergman's *Persona*, and Aldrich's *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane* and *The Legend of Lylah Clare* (which I will discuss further on).

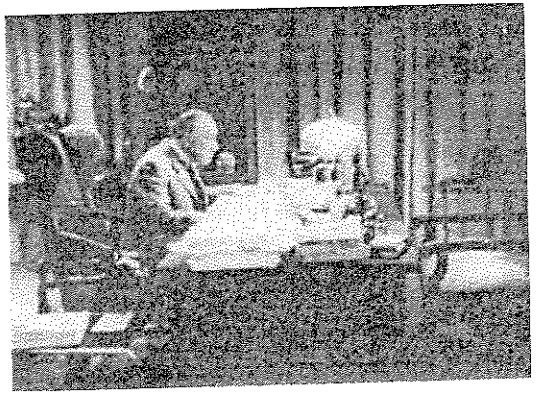
One man's voice passing for that of another is the crux of the plot of Lang's *Testament of Dr. Mabuse*. In fact, we might consider this situation dictated in its dramatic workings by the very principle of the sound film.



Oskar Beregi and Rudolf Klein-Rogge (superimposed) in *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse.*







Thus, no sooner was the sound film born than it showed the human voice in the dimension of doubt and deception, but also of *possession*.

THE VOICE SUPPLANTS THE SUPERIMPOSITION Few dramatic genres are as prone as the sound film to lend the voice the roles of soul, shadow, and double; this occurs because of the invention of the filmic acousmêtre.

The silent cinema was rich in stories of ghosts and doubles, yet it did not have the resource of the voice. Unable to use the acousmêtre, it used a device which the voice would supplant with the coming of sound—the *superimposition*.

The silent cinema relied on superimpositions for three specific purposes. First, you could signify a sound heard by characters (clock striking, musical instrument, train whistle, knock at the door) by showing the image of the sound's source at the same time as the image of the character hearing it. This device indicated the sound's simultaneity, whereas indicating a sound through cutting would suggest that the imagined sound was intermittent. Second, superimpositions were used to show apparitions, doubles, or ghosts. Third, they were employed to signify a character's thoughts or subjective perceptions.

As I have suggested, these three functions of the superimposition, among others, were rapidly superseded in the sound film by acousmatic sound. (For practitioners of the time, sound was already in itself a sort of parallel dimension or superimposition.) In a number of films one finds the two devices coexisting, one visual and the other auditory, as if mutually reinforcing one another.

In fact, sound supplanted the superimposition

- (of course) to signify sounds,
- also in order to embody doubles and ghosts,
- and finally, to signify thoughts, imaginings, and subjective perceptions (for example the scene of Marion's "voices" as she drives in *Psycho*).

The Testament of Dr. Mabuse, a transitional film bringing a silent movie protagonist to the sound screen, executes a kind of handover or transfer of power from the superimposition to the acousmatic voice. It does so by virtue of using them in combination. Lotte Eisner confirmed this revelation: "Lang tells me that these days he would not use the device of the superimposed apparitions of Mabuse's ghost, which he judges clumsy; he prefers a "voice-off" to guide the doctor's crazy careering, which ends . . . in front of the gates of the asylum."[7] But he still used the superimposition, as if seeking to reinforce the experimental new device of the acousmatic voice with the silent convention. In certain scenes, the visual superimposition of a phantom appears to duplicate and reinforce the "vocal superimposition" of Mabuse's voice. The same is true of the shadow outlined behind the curtain, which appears during flashes of light, acting as a double and guarantee, in a sense, of the Master's voice.

One might see this as a sign of weakness or lack of confidence. Yes, but *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* is also about this passing of the torch from silent to sound, from the disappearing superimposition to the acousmatic voice, which would gradually win over the cinema—indeed, sometimes to the point of engulfing it (Duras). This is entirely evident in the scene where Baum is hypnotized by Mabuse's ghost.

Alone in his office, Baum is reading the manuscript of his patient, the Testament written in a trance by the mad scholar, collected and put in order by the asylum staff. "Herrschaft des Verbrechens," the Empire of Crime, is the title of this text that's at first disjointed and frenzied, then organized. Coming as it does in 1932, it of course pointedly suggests a denunciation of Nazism on the rise, since it is presented as a method of gaining power through the terror generated by inexplicable actions.

So Baum is reading this will aloud to himself. For his own voice the film then substitutes *another*, that of an acousmêtre, which takes over: a closeup voice, the insinuating whisper of the hypnotist. It seems at first to be a so-called subjective voice; Baum's lips remain closed, and his eyes are lowered onto the manuscript. Then he sud-

7. Lotte H. Eisner, *The Haunted Screen* [1952]. Roger Greaves, trans. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), p. 325.

denly raises his eyes; across from him, the ghost of Mabuse in superimposition is speaking to him, in an increasingly demented way.

Fascinated by the apparition, Baum remains still. The superimposition compounds itself: a double rises out of the seated ghost. Across from this standing Mabuse, there appears next to Baum in the mirror yet a third Mabuse. While Baum is under the spell of the first ghost seated before him, the third turns the pages of the Testament, and *enters Baum*. Then, with a sound of kettledrums, the three ghosts fade away at once. A high continuous sound is heard during the scene, with a sudden accent just before Baum raises his eyes. The scene is brief, rigorous, terrifying.

What has happened? The silent Mabuse produced a written text, which had been waiting for someone to decode. And when Baum looks at it, *through reading it out loud he unleashes its force*. In turn this reading voice summons *another voice*, an I-voice that inhabits him and then becomes the voice of a ghost that becomes visible, immobilizing him with hypnotic eyes.

This is an example of possession by the "Stimme" (voice), against which one is powerless, what the Peter Lorre character evoked with such terror in Lang's earlier film *M*. So from the text to the voice, and from the voice to the look, Mabuse works his way to ever greater power. During the silent era, he was a hypnotist and acted through the look. *The Testament* refers to that only in brief moments of close-ups on blankly staring eyes. But on the other hand, the film deploys the new power exercised *by texts* and above all *by the voice*—just as there is a succession from the visual device of superimpositions to the auditory device of the acousmatic voice.

As for the voice of this ghost, it is of capital importance, since it's the only moment in the film where we have a voice on a body of Mabuse. But the body is transparent and monstrous, and the voice is unreal. Neither its age nor its sex is certain, perhaps like the voice of the original phallic mother, or the combined voices of the father and the mother in the primal scene. Such a voice often goes with someone who is possessed: too low and harsh for a woman, too high for a man.

The theme of being possessed by a voice figures also in Robert Aldrich's *Legend of Lylah Clare*. Lylah Clare is a deceased movie star who has become a legend. Her Pygmalion, who as we'll learn is also responsible for her death, is the director Zarkan (Peter Finch). The latter is looking for an actress to fill the role onscreen in a biographical movie about the star. He is going to repeat with the new woman the story that led the first to her death. A nice young woman named Elsa (Kim Novak) is chosen to play Lylah, and she is asked to let her character penetrate into her. She becomes Zarkan's mistress. We know we've seen this story before. . . .

Elsa achieves perfect identification with Lylah the day she fuses with the dead woman *through her voice*. A cinematic simulacrum fittingly becomes the means and the place of this fusion.

A scene of one of Lylah's films is shown on a projector to Zarkan, Elsa and others. Elsa, who knows the scene by heart, begins to utter the lines of the dead woman who speaks on screen. The projectionist, who gets what's happening, lowers the volume of the film soundtrack. Now there are no longer two simultaneous voices but only the image of Lylah that continues silently while the living Elsa dubs her live, giving her a voice that's *exactly like the original*. Zarkan and the others are transfixed; they're seeing Lylah come back to life. From this day on, Elsa is possessed by Lylah Clare.

Dubbing normally consists in replacing an onscreen character's voice with the voice of another. Diabolically here, the situation is reversed. By imitating Lylah's voice, Elsa is dubbed, so to speak, by the dead woman. But you do not lend your living voice *casually* to the recorded body of a dead person. Elsa will relive Lylah's fate, and she will die her same death.

In her trances when possessed, she has a harsh and obscene voice, its sex and age indeterminate, and she has a demonic laugh, which makes you think it can't possibly be she. It reminds one of moments when a child doesn't recognize its mother; she cannot be this person where violence or sexuality reside, she must be someone else.

IMPOSSIBLE EMBODIMENT So Elsa succeeds only too well in doubling Lylah Clare, that is, in having herself dubbed by her, because she has been imprudent enough to make her voice resemble the dead woman's voice.

Psycho explores a parallel situation of an impossible attachment of a voice to a body, or what I am calling impossible embodiment.

In French, the term *embodiment* (mise-en-corps) is reminiscent of *entombment* (mise en bière) and also to *interment* (mise en terre). And we are, in effect, dealing with something related to a burial.

Burial is of course a symbolic act; some say that it was even the first symbolic act distinguishing human beings from the other species. To bury someone is not merely to dispose of the body for purposes of hygiene. It also means designating a place for the soul, the double. Or for those not believing in an afterlife, it is a place for what remains of the person *within us* or for us. Burial is marked by rituals and signs such as the gravestone, the cross, and the epitaph, which say to the departed, "You must stay here," so that he won't haunt the living as a soul in torment. In some traditions, ghosts are those who are unburied or improperly buried. Precisely the same applies to the acousmêtre, when we speak of a yet-unseen voice, one that can neither enter the image to attach itself to a visible body, nor occupy the removed position of the image presenter. The voice is condemned to wander the surface. This is what *Psycho* is all about.

Much has been written about *Psycho*. Most analyses neglect to consider the role of the *mother's voice* as an acousmêtre. The mother in *Psycho* is first and foremost a voice. We catch occasional glimpses of some mute, bestial monster waving a knife, or a shadowy figure behind the window curtains of her room (like Mabuse's shadow behind the curtain). And fleetingly also on the landing of Norman's and his mother's house, we glimpse a body carried by Norman. But the voice—cruel, insistent, and certainly not fleeting—is always heard at length offscreen.

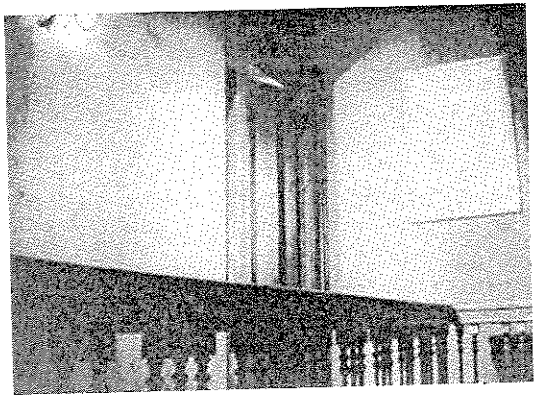
The three speeches delivered by the mother's voice are heard at three turning points in the plot. The first occurs when Marion, freshly

arrived at the motel, overhears the argument between Norman and his mother. Second, there is the scene on the landing, when we hear offscreen another equally stormy discussion between Norman and his mother; he's trying to take her down to the basement. It ends with an apparent de-acousmatization. The third occasion closes the film: Norman is shown in his cell, completely possessed by his mother.

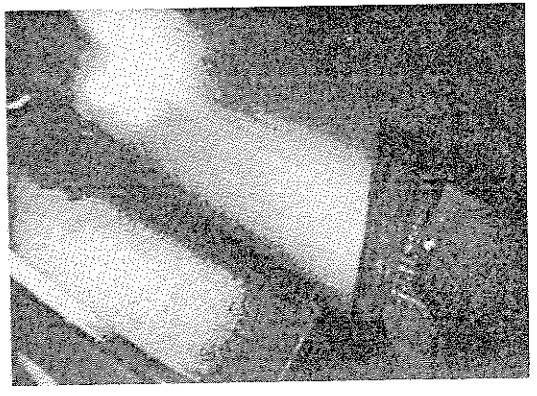
1. *The argument.* Norman (Anthony Perkins) is the young man who manages the motel where Marion (Janet Leigh) ends up after her escape from Phoenix. He proposes that Marion come up and have some dinner in the old house that he shares with his mother next to the motel. While he goes up to the house, Marion settles into her motel room. That's when she overhears a row offscreen, coming from the house, between Norman and an old woman with a hard, powerful voice that also sounds far-off and improbably bathed in reverb. The "acousmother" unleashes her anger at her son's gall, this libidinous boy, in proposing to bring a strange woman into *her* house. Norman returns to the motel shortly thereafter and apologizes. He explains that "Mother isn't quite herself today," and that he has to take care of her all by himself.

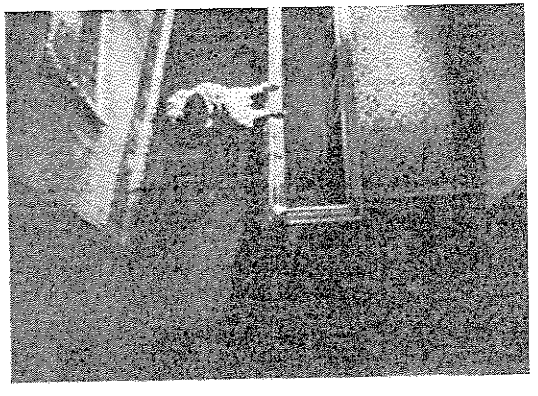
The obvious function of this scene is to set the acousmatic mechanism in motion. In other words, even before the murder, it *creates the desire to see what is going on*. In fact, it is the law of every offscreen voice to create this desire to go and see who's speaking, even if it's the most minor character (provided that the voice has the potential to be included into the image; it can't be the disengaged voice of commentary).

From this point forward, the story is propelled by the obsessive idea of getting into the house in order to see the mother. The violation of the family home by a woman is, as we know, a typically Hitchcockian scene and generally has dramatic consequences. *Rebecca, Notorious, Rear Window, The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1956), and *The Birds* all provide examples. But here, entering the house equals finding the source of the voice, bringing the mother onscreen, attaching the voice to a body. Soon after the first occurrence of the



Anthony Perkins
in *Psycho.*





acousmêtre, a tall, mute and savage creature, whose physical details we do not see and who we are led to believe is the mother, suddenly appears and stabs Marion to death in her shower. We will see the same ambiguous figure later, going out onto the second-floor landing in the house, to exterminate the detective Arbogast in much the same way.

Here it could be said, "So you've got your embodiment already—there's your acousmêtre, for what it's worth." But this isn't right; the process of embodiment does not consist just of showing us a fleeting glimpse of a mute body (and never frontal at that) plus a voice that supposedly belongs to it—leaving it up to the spectator to mentally assemble the separate elements. Real embodiment comes only with the simultaneous presentation of the visible body with the audible voice, a way for the body to swear "this is my voice" and for the voice to swear "this is my body." It must be a kind of marriage with a contract, consecrating the bonding of the voice to the habitat of the body, defusing and warding off the acousmetric forces. Which doesn't happen here.

2. *The scene on the landing.* The second moment of the mother's voice in *Psycho* occurs when Norman goes upstairs to his mother's bedroom to get her to a hiding place, since everyone is looking for her. The suspense in this scene hangs on nothing if not the prospect of de-acousmatizing the Acousmother.

At first the camera follows Norman from behind as it goes up the stairs with him. But when Norman enters the bedroom through the open door, the camera does not go in, because it has already separated from him and remains outside on the stairs, moving up all in the same shot in such a way that it ends up above the landing, looking over it from a bird's-eye perspective. It watches from there as Norman emerges from the room carrying his mother. In the preceding moments we've listened to an offscreen conversation from the bedroom, between Norman and his mother. Her voice is still haughty, but closer-up, no longer shouting, with no reverb, with a drier quality than before. This voice we are getting nearer to seems

almost to be touching the frame from offscreen, causing us to expect, to fear, the de-acousmatization. The offscreen dialogue:

NORMAN: Now, mother, I'm going to bring something up—

MOTHER: I am sorry, my boy, but you do manage to look ludicrous when you give me orders.

NORMAN: Please, mother.

MOTHER: No, I will not hide in the fruit cellar. Ha! You think I'm fruity, huh? I'm staying right here. This is my room and no one will grab me out of it, least of all my big, bold son!

NORMAN: They'll come now, mother! He came after the girl, and now someone will come after him! Mother, please, it's just for a few days, just a few days so they won't find you.

MOTHER: Just for a few days? In that dark, dank fruit cellar? No! You hid me there once, boy, and you won't do it again, not ever again! Now get out! I told you to get out, boy!

NORMAN: I'll carry you, mother.

MOTHER: Norman, what do you think you're doing? Don't you touch me, don't! Norman! Put me down. Put me down, I can walk on my own—

With these last words Norman comes out of the room, but the camera has already assumed its bird's-eye perspective so that in this brief moment when he appears and begins down the stairs, and during which we hear the mother, we can only indistinctly see the body he is holding. Very rapidly, a fade to black ends this glimpse, accompanied by an aural fade to silence of the mother's voice on her last line. (It hardly needs saying that this choice to cut off the line of an important character at the end of a scene is rare in the sound cinema.)

We expect de-acousmatization to happen here; Hitchcock gives it to us only halfway, like a magician at once showing it and conjuring it into thin air. The disappearing act consists, of course, in using the extreme high-angle shot that makes it hard to see, and also in fading out before we've been able to see or hear much of anything—just at the moment when we'd hoped we could have both voice and body

together. As the scene ends the mother's voice remains in wait of a body to take her in.

This scene insistently harks back to the primal scene, in the words of the offscreen mother, with the terrifying double meaning of aggression and desire: "Don't touch me! Don't touch me!" This line suggests two bodies together, the sight of which is both anticipated and feared. And generally in fiction films, the terrorized attraction of going to see what one is hearing, often bears a close relation to the primal scene. The effect of the scene is reinforced by a "shuddering-cue," as Raymond Bellour puts it, created by the revelation at the end of the preceding scene that the mother is actually *dead and buried*. The sheriff's line cleverly displaces the question: "If the woman upstairs is Mrs. Bates, who is the woman buried in Greenlawn Cemetery?"

Few things in the cinema are as disturbing as this "disappearing act" on a de-acousmatization. Marguerite Duras creates a similar situation in *India Song*. The spectator is just about to see the synched speaking of the silent ghosts who move in the image and whose voices we've been hearing offscreen. This produces the particularly fascinating and morbid effect of *India Song*, which draws its power from *leaving something forever uncompleted*. Doubtless, *Son Nom de Venise*, in which Duras applies the same soundtrack to images empty of characters, answered a need to conjure the ghostly wanderings of *India Song* away by giving it symbolic closure—definitively forbidding the voices to enter onscreen.

In Hitchcock's scene, what is given is taken away in the same movement. What is lost is lost in the very mechanism of its apprehension, and all this happens within one shot. Hitchcock explains why:

> I didn't want to cut, when he carries her down, to a high shot because the audience would have been suspicious as to why the camera has suddenly jumped away. So I had a hanging camera follow Perkins up the stairs, and when he went into the room I continued going up without a cut. As the camera got up on top of the door, the camera turned and looked back down the stairs again. Meanwhile, I had an argument take place between the son and his mother to distract the audience and take their minds off what the camera was doing. In this way the camera was above Perkins again as he carried his mother down and the public hadn't noticed a thing. It was rather exciting to use the camera to deceive the audience.[8]

Regarding the choice of this overhead camera position, Hitchcock explains it in connection with the scene of the murder of Arbogast: "If I'd shown her back, it might have looked as if I was deliberately concealing her face and the audience would have been leery. I used that high angle in order not to give the impression that I was trying to avoid showing her."[9]

Doubtless Hitchcock did not have to adopt such an elaborate strategy in order to maintain suspense. It seems to me that it's the very operation of belief that he tried to push to its limit, by applying a law of *montage interdit* or "forbidden montage" (whose rule is "don't cut"), which Bazin had considered a touchstone of the impression of reality in the cinema.

You might say that Hitchcock's words to sum up the audience's suspicions—"Why has the camera suddenly jumped away?"— recall *coitus interruptus*. Note that the scenes where Hitchcock refuses to cut, to edit, are often kissing scenes. For him, cutting such scenes into component shots would amount to breaking up the couple. "I think one can do a lot with love scenes," he says (cf. the very lengthy kissing shot in *Notorious*). During his conversation with Truffaut he tells the story of a strange love scene he never shot. From this rather smutty scene, let us merely report that it is again based on the disjunction between the dialogue and the situation. The situation involves words that diverge from what is seen, and by their very contrast, reinforce it. Equallyinstructive is the nature of a personal memory etched in his mind, which he recounts to explain his decision *not to cut*. Traveling in a French train, he said, he witnessed a young couple embracing by the

8. Truffaut, *Hitchcock*, pp. 206–210.

9. Ibid., p. 208.

wall of a factory. "The boy was urinating against the wall and the girl never let go of his arm. She'd look down at what he was doing, then look at the scenery around them, then back again at the boy. I felt this was true love at work."[10] Again we have a sort of *ménage à trois*, involving the two partners and Hitchcock's look from the train, returned by the girl. In all these scenes, the spectator's look is implicated as a third party with respect to the couple.

It happens that the no-cutting rule that Hitchcock has imposed on himself here was theorized by André Bazin in connection with an entirely different kind of scene: fights between man and beast. But isn't there something bestial in the image of the couple constituted by Norman and his mother? Bazin's text, published in 1953, explores the issue of verisimilitude in cinema, and what happens to the "reality effect" when a fight between man and beast is simulated by means of the artifices of editing. Bazin states that we simply won't believe the scene if the man and beast are shown in separate shots. We have to have at least one shot showing them together in order to believe. He cites Chaplin, who in *The Circus* is "truly in the lion's cage, and both are enclosed within the framework of the screen."[11] So his aesthetic is as follows: "When the essence of a scene demands the simultaneous presence of two or more factors in the action, montage is ruled out. It can reclaim its right to be used, however, whenever the import of the action no longer depends on physical contiguity."[12]

We could analyze the scene on the landing equally well along the Hitchcockian principle of "not breaking up the couple" or according to the Bazinian principle of "showing the man and beast together" (the living man and the murderous dead woman, here in a clinch). For whether it's a human couple or a man and animal, it amounts to the same thing for the primitive horror of sex.

For even as he shows us man and beast, or son and mother, or body and voice together, Hitchcock has to whisk them away. For the beast is a half human, the mother is a mummy, and the voice comes not from the mother's body (except by a sort of macabre ventriloquism), but from Norman as he plays both parts. It's as if the film

10. Ibid., p. 199.

11. Bazin, "The Virtues and Limitations of Montage," in *What is Cinema?* Hugh Gray, trans. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), p. 52.

12. Ibid., p. 50.

were pinpointing the very essence of the unfilmable: the entwined couple, monstrous, the two-backed beast of the primal scene, the impossible couple of body and voice.

The scene on the landing is constructed so as to end up with the effect of voice and body lightly touching, brushing up against one another, approaching the limits of the "effet de réel," much more than in the convention of synchronization.[13] (Let us say in passing, if the voice that's totally liberated from bodies in Duras's films is often sublime, with other filmmakers the disembodied voice represents a system that's quickly exhausted. For even if the voice fastened to the body forms a conventional couple we might want to break up, *if it's removed far from the body, it can quickly get bored.*)[14] In *Psycho*, as in *India Song*, they brush up against each other at the end of a long asymptotic trajectory, but why is there something horrible in this touching—why does the wing of death seem also to brush the spectator?

3. *The holding cell.* The third moment of the mother's voice, as noted before, comes after Marion's sister Lila discovers the real mother is a mummy, and after the psychiatrist's monologue that meticulously analyzes the story and gives it a logical explanation that accounts for all the events of the film. So everything seems to be resolved. But when someone announces that the prisoner is feeling chilled and a policeman takes a blanket into the cell, the camera follows the policeman (as it had followed Norman up the stairs). The spectator still hopes to see the incestuous marriage between the mother's voice and Norman's body. Again, we first hear the mother's offscreen voice saying "thank you," before we enter the cell. But when we hear the voice over Norman's face—the mother's monologue—his mouth is closed, as if to suggest possession by spirits, or ventriloquism. Ultimately the voice has not found a body to own it and assign it a place—just as the burial of the mother did not take place according to correct custom since it was exhumed and stuffed. In order for the story to have closure, the corpse discovered in the cellar would have to be symbolically reburied. Instead, the very last

13. ["effet de réel": Chion is alluding to the Real in the Lacanian sense (the three registers of the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real), that is, the encounter with the impossible. *Trans.*]

14. [Lacan associates sexual liberation with ennui. Chion here proposes a reading of the voice as something that can liberate itself from the body-as-prison. *Trans.*]

shot of the film is yet another image of unearthing, the dredging of Marion's car—her coffin—from the pond. Other allusions to burial or to its "opposite," taxidermy, indicate the prominence of this motif in *Psycho*. It's no surprise that the ghost's voice reigns over the final image, which consecrates the triumph of the acousmêtre. This is the same story as in *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse*, with which *Psycho* shares a number of similarities.

Both films revolve around a being who is hidden from us, and whose voice attests to his/her existence and power. In both, it is impossible to reunite the voice with a body that would orient it in space, in a body that isn't buried (Mabuse's dissected, dispersed body, the mother's stuffed body). Both films are concerned with the vocal possession of a man by an acousmêtre that's stronger than he (Baum by Mabuse, Norman by the mother). In both we find a shadow behind a backlit curtain, attesting to the presence of the Master, and in both a man who takes on the voice of his mother (Hofmeister in his madness when he tries to conjure away the horror, and Norman). Further, in both there is the intrusion of a woman into a forbidden space (Lily goes into the curtained room, and the similarly-named Lila, into the cellar). This intrusion leads to a revelation, in both cases of a non-human—no Mabuse, but a mechanical arrangement; no living mother, but a mummy. Finally, both plots end with the total identification of the weak character with the strong one, which seems to occur at the cost of permanent madness and incarceration: Baum with Mabuse, and Norman with his mother.

We know that Hitchcock saw Lang's film, but I don't believe that he consciously lifted the story's framework for his own, since it differs so much, in so many ways. It's simply that both films engage the same myth of the acousmêtre with the same rigor, the same desire to push at cinema's limits. *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* as well as *Psycho* expose the very structure of sound film, based on an offscreen field inhabited by the voice, which is the inevitable corollary of the onscreen field. Finally, these two films also evoke the power to return the dead to life through sound and image. Both revolve around the illusion of sight

and hearing, an illusion upon which the cinema is based, and in these films the cinema is drawn to its "impossibilities." The voice and the image can only appear as cut apart, they cannot consummate their reunion in a forever lost mythic unity. The talking film is but a jerry-rigged assemblage, and perhaps in this condition it finds its greatness. Instead of denying this rigging, it can choose it as its subject matter, taking that route, under the sign of the impossible, to the very heart of the effect of the Real.