A FRIMAL HIDE-AND-SEEK

Human vision, like that of cinema, is partial and directional. Hearing, though, is omnidirectional. We cannot see what is behind us, but we can hear all around. Of all the senses, hearing is probably the earliest to occur. The fetus takes in the mother's voice, and will recognize it after birth. Sight comes into play only after birth, but at least in our culture, it becomes the most highly structured sense. It takes on a remarkable variety of forms and disposes of a highly elaborated language, which dwarfs the vocabularies for phenomena of touch, smell, and even hearing. Sight is generally what we rely on for orientation, because the naming and recognition of forms is vastly more subtle and precise in visual terms than with any other channel of perception.

The sense of hearing is as subtle as it is archaic. We most often relegate it to the limbo of the unnamed; something you hear causes you to feel X, but you can't put exact words to it. As surprising as it may seem, it wasn't until the twentieth century that Pierre Schaeffer first attempted to develop a language for describing sounds in themselves.1

In the infant's experience, the mother ceaselessly plays hide-and-seek with his visual field, whether she goes behind him, or is hidden from him by something, or if he's right up against her body and cannot see her. But the olfactory and vocal continuum, and frequently tactile contact as well, maintain the mother's presence when she can no longer be seen (in fact, seeing her implies at least some distance and separation). This dialectic of appearance and disappearance is known to be dramatic for the child. The cinema transposes or crystallizes it into certain ways of mobilizing off-screen space (e.g., masking characters but keeping their presence perceivable through sound). In some ways, film editing has to do with the appearance-disappearance of the mother, and also with games like the "Fort-Da" game to which Freud refers and which Lacan analyzes as a model of

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1. Pierre Schaeffer

Elva (Lage Lundgren) meets the murderess's shadow in AF
(Fritz Lang, 1931).
the "repetitive utterances in which subjectivity brings together mastery over its abandonment and the birth of the symbol."2

Onscreen and offscreen space can thus be called by another name when what’s involved is the voice “maintaining” a character who has left the screen, or better yet, when the film obstinately refuses to show us someone whose voice we hear: it’s a game of hide-and-seek.

NEITHER INSIDE NOR OUTSIDE We know that the invention of talking pictures allowed people to hear the actors’ voices, for example to put a voice to the face of Garbo. Perhaps more interesting is that the sound film can show a closed door or an opaque curtain and allow us to hear the voice of someone supposedly behind it. Sound films can show an empty space and give us the voice of someone supposedly “there,” in the scene’s “here and now,” but outside the frame. A voice may inhabit the emptiest image, or even the dark screen, as Ophuls makes it do in Le Plaisir, Welles in The Magnificent Ambersons, and Duras in L’Homme Atlantique, with an acousmatic presence.

Acousmatic, specifies an old dictionary, "is said of a sound that is heard without its cause or source being seen." We cannot praise Pierre Schaeffer enough for having unearthed this arcane word in the 1960s. He adopted it to designate a mode of listening that is commonplace today, systematized in the use of radio, telephones, and phonograph records. Of course, it existed long before any of these media, but for lack of a specific label, wasn’t obviously identifiable, and surely was rarely conceived as such in experience. On the other hand, Schaeffer did not see fit for his purposes (he was interested in musique concrète) to find a specific word for the flip side of acousmatic listening, the apparently trivial situation wherein we do see the sound source. He was content to speak in this case of "direct" listening. Since his term is ambiguous, we prefer to speak of visualized listening.3

The talking film naturally began with visualized sound (often called synchronous or onscreen sound). But it quickly turned to experimenting with acousmatic sound—not only music but more importantly the voice. Critics often cite an early scene in Fritz Lang’s M (1931) as an example. The child-murderer’s shadow falls on the poster that offers a reward for his capture, while his offscreen voice says to the little girl (she is also offscreen at this moment, contrary to the evidence of the famous production still): “You have a pretty ball!” The copresence in this shot of the voice and the shadow, as well as the use of the acousmatic voice to create tension, are eloquent enough. But fairly quickly in the development of sound film, the voice would stand alone without “needing” either the shadow or other narrative devices, such as superimposition, to present acousmatic characters.

We should emphasize that between one (visualized) situation and the other (acousmatic) one, it’s not the sound that changes its nature, presence, distance, or color. What changes is the relationship between what we see and what we hear. The murderer’s voice is just as well-defined when we don’t see him as in any shot where we do. When we listen to a film without watching it, it is impossible to distinguish acousmatic from visualized sounds solely on the basis of the soundtrack. Just listening, without the images, “acousmatizes” all the sounds, if they retain no trace of their initial relation to the image. (And in this case, the aggregate of sounds heard becomes a true “sound track,” a whole).4

To understand what is at stake in this distinction, let us go back to the original meaning of the word acousmatic. This was apparently the name assigned to a Pythagorean sect whose followers would listen to their Master speak behind a curtain, as the story goes, so that the sight of the speaker wouldn’t distract them from the message.5 (In the same way, television makes it easy to be distracted from what a person onscreen is talking about; we might watch the way she furrows her eyebrows or fidgets with her hands: cameras lovingly emphasize such details.) This interdiction against looking, which transforms the Master, God, or Spirit into an acousmatic voice, permeates a great number of religious traditions, most notably Islam and Judaism. We find it also in the physical setup of Freudian analysis: the patient on the couch should not see the analyst, who does not look at him. And finally we find it in the cinema, where the voice of the acousmatic master who hides behind a door, a curtain or offscreen, is at play in some key films:

[Note 3. In French, "acousmatic" does not appear in English-language dictionaries. The word’s source is the Greek “acousma,” a thing heard. See also note 2. (Above.)]
The Testament of Dr. Mabuse (the voice of the evil genius), Psycho (the mother's voice), The Magnificent Ambersons (the director's voice).

When the acousmatic presence is a voice, and especially when this voice has not yet been visualized—that is, when we cannot yet connect it to a face—we get a special being, a kind of talking and acting shadow to which we attach the name acousmêtre. A person you talk to on the phone, whom you’ve never seen, is an acousmêtre. If you have ever seen her, however, or if in a film you continue to hear her after she leaves the visual field, is this still an acousmêtre? Definitely, but of another kind, which we’ll call the already visualized acousmêtre. It would be amusing to invent more and more neologisms, for example to distinguish whether or not we can put a face to the invisible voice.

However, I prefer to leave the definition of the acousmêtre open, to keep it generic on purpose, thus avoiding the tendency to subdivide ad infinitum. Let’s say I am going to concentrate primarily on what may be called the complete acousmêtre, the one who is not-yet-seen, but who remains liable to appear in the visual field at any moment. The already visualized acousmêtre, the one temporarily absent from the picture, is more familiar and reassuring—even though in the dark regions of the acousmatic field, which surrounds the visible field, this kind can acquire by contagion some of the powers of the complete acousmêtre. Also more familiar is the commentator-acousmêtre, he who never shows himself but who has no personal stake in the image. Which powers and which stakes come into play, we shall examine further on.

But what of the acousmètress of the radio, and the backstage voice in the theater and the opera? Are these not of the same cloth, and are we perhaps just pompously reinventing the radio announcer or the actor-in-the-wings?

The radio-acousmêtre. It should be evident that the radio is acousmatic by nature. People speaking on the radio are acousmètress in that there’s no possibility of seeing them; this is the essential difference between them and the filmic acousmêtre. In radio one cannot play with showing, partially showing, and not showing.
In film, the acousmatic zone is defined as fluctuating, constantly subject to challenge by what we might see. Even in an extreme case like Marguerite Duras’s film *Son nom de Venise dans Calcutta désert*, in whose deserted images we hardly ever see the faces and bodies that belong to the acousmètres who populate the soundtrack (the same soundtrack as *India Song’s*), the principle of cinema is that at any moment these faces and bodies might appear, and thereby de-acousmatize the voices. Another thing: in the cinema, unlike on the radio, what we have seen and heard makes us preclude what we don’t see, and the possibility of deception always lurks as well. Cinema has a frame, whose edges are visible; we can see where the frame leaves off and offscreen space starts. In radio, we cannot perceive where things “cut,” as sound itself has no frame.

The theater-acousmètre. Georges Sadoul, in his *History of Cinema*, yields to the temptation to associate experiments in “audio-visual counterpoint” in the early sound era with “traditional offstage sounds in the theater.” But between an offstage voice and a film acousmètre there is more than a shade of difference.

In the theater, the offstage voice is clearly heard coming from another space than the stage—it’s literally located elsewhere. The cinema does not employ a stage, even if from time to time it might simulate one, but rather a frame, with variable points of view. In this frame, visualized voices and acousmatic voices are recognized as such only in the spectator’s head, depending on what she sees. In most cases, offscreen sound comes from the same actual place as the other sounds—a central loudspeaker. There are of course ambiguous cases when we can’t easily distinguish what is “offscreen” from what is in the visual field (Fellini’s films are rich in examples). But it should go without saying that the presence of such ambiguity does not make the distinction between offscreen and onscreen any less pertinent.

So we are a long way from the theatrical offstage voice, which we concretely perceive at a remove from the stage. Unlike the film frame the theater’s stage doesn’t make you jump from one angle of vision to another, from closeup to long shot. For the spectator, then, the filmic acousmètre is “offscreen,” outside the image, and at the same time in the image: the loudspeaker that’s actually its source is located behind the image in the movie theater. It’s as if the voice were wandering along the surface, at once inside and outside, seeking a place to settle. Especially when a film hasn’t yet shown what body this voice normally inhabits.

Neither inside nor outside: such is the acousmètre’s fate in the cinema.

**What are the acousmètre’s powers?** Everything hangs on whether or not the acousmètre has been seen. In the case where it remains not-yet seen, even an insignificant acousmatic voice becomes invested with magical powers as soon as it is involved, however slightly, in the image. The powers are usually malevolent, occasionally tutelary. Being involved in the image means that the voice doesn’t merely speak as an observer (as commentary), but that it bears with the image a relationship of possible inclusion, a relationship of power and possession capable of functioning in both directions; the image may contain the voice, or the voice may contain the image.

The not-yet seen voice (e.g. Mahuè’s in *The Testament*, or Maupassant’s in the first two parts of Ophuls’ *Le Plaisir*) possesses a sort of virginal, derived from the simple fact that the body that’s supposed to emit it has not yet been inscribed in the visual field. Its de-acousmatization, which results from finally showing the person speaking, is always like a deflowering. For that point the voice loses its virginal-acousmatic powers, and re-enters the realm of human beings.

The counterpart to the not-yet-seen voice is the body that has not yet spoken—the silent character (not to be confused with the character in the silent movie). These two characters, the acousmètre and the mute, are similar in some striking ways.

An entire image, an entire story, an entire film can thus hang on the epiphany of the acousmètre. Everything can boil down to a quest
to bring the acousmêtre into the light. In this description we can recognize Mabuse and Psycho, but also numerous mystery, gangster, and fantasy films that are all about "defusing" the acousmêtre, who is the hidden monster, or the Big Boss, or the evil genius, or on rare occasions a wise man. The acousmêtre, as we have noted, cannot occupy the removed position of commentator, the voice of the magic lantern show. He must, even if only slightly, have one foot in the image, in the space of the film; he must haunt the borderlands that are neither the interior of the filmic stage nor the prosenium—a place that has no name, but which the cinema forever brings into play.

Being in the screen and not, wandering the surface of the screen without entering it, the acousmêtre brings disequilibrium and tension. He invites the spectator to go see, and he can be an invitation to the loss of the self, to desire and fascination. But what is there to fear from the acousmêtre? And what are his powers?

The powers are four: the ability to be everywhere, to see all, to know all, and to have complete power. In other words: ubiquity, panopticism, omniscience, and omnipotence.

The acousmêtre is everywhere, its voice comes from an immaterial and non-localized body, and it seems that no obstacle can stop it. Media such as the telephone and radio, which send acousmatic voices traveling and which enable them to be here and there at once, often serve as vehicles of this ubiquity. In 2001, Hal, the talking computer, inhabits the entire space ship.

The acousmêtre is all-seeing, its word is like the word of God: "No creature can hide from it." The one who is not in the visual field is in the best position to see everything that's happening. The one you don't see is in the best position to see you—at least this is the power you attribute to him. You might turn around to try to surprise him, since he could always be behind you. This is the paranoid and often obsessional panoptic fantasy, which is the fantasy of total mastery of space by vision.

A good number of films are based on the idea of the all-seeing voice. In Fritz Lang's Testament of Dr. Mabuse the master's look pierces through an opaque curtain. In 2001 the computer Hal, a voice-being, uncannily starts reading the astronauts' lips even when they have incapacitated its hearing. Many films classically feature a narrator's voice which, from its removed position, can see everything. And there are the voices of invisible ghosts who move about wherever the action goes, and from whom nothing can be hidden (Ophuls' Tenente Ennemi). And of course thrillers often feature telephone voices that terrorize their victims to the tune of "you can't see me, but I see you."

A John Carpenter horror film, The Fog, enacts the panoptic fantasy in a particularly ingenious form. The film's heroine, played by Adrienne Barbeau, works as a disc jockey at a local radio station perched atop an old lighthouse, from where she can see the entire city. The film's other characters know her only as a voice that is uniquely in the position to see the predicament they are in (the town invaded by an evil cloud). The fog makes them lose their bearings and the only thing that cuts through it is the voice of the airwaves, which broadcasts from the lighthouse, materializing its panoptic power.

The all-seeing acousmêtre appears to be the rule. The exception, or anomaly, is the voice of the acousmêtre who does not see all; here we find the panoptic theme in its negative form. In Josef von Sternberg's Saga of Anatahan, the action takes place on an island where Japanese soldiers have been marooned; we hear them speaking in Japanese. For the Western spectator, these scenes, instead of being dubbed or subtitled, have an English-language voiceover commentary spoken by Sternberg himself. He speaks in the name of the band of soldiers, employing a strange "we." This "we" refers not to the entire group, but to most of them—the ones excluded from contact with the only woman on the island. In fact, when the image and sync dialogue in Japanese bring us into the shack to discover the woman with her partner of the moment, the narrator speaks with the voice of someone who cannot see what is before our eyes, and who only imagines it ("We were not able to find out"). Contrary to the camera's eye, the narrator has not gone inside the shack. The dissociation between the acousmetric narrator's voice and the camera's
indiscreet gaze is all the more disconcerting in that the voice claiming not to be looking is in the very place from which film voices can normally see everything—i.e., offscreen—and it’s hard to believe that the voice is not privy to the action onscreen. We’d prefer to suppose that it’s a bit dishonest about its partial blindness. The “we” in whose name it speaks seems not to refer to anyone in particular; you cannot detect which specific individual among the soldiers has taken charge of the storytelling.

In much the same way, acousmatic voices heard as we see Marguerite Duras’s India Song speak as unseeing voices. This not-seeing-all, not-knowing-all occurs first in connection with the couple consisting of the Vice-Consul and Anne-Marie Stretter, just like that of Sternberg’s “we” applies to the couple in the hut. This and other examples we will examine suggest that the partially-seeing acousmêtre has something to do with the primal scene. What it claims not to see is what the couple is doing. Bertolucci’s film Tragedy of a Ridiculous Man revolves around a perverse inversion of the primal scene. It is the father who does not see what the son is doing with . . . as I take it, the mother. The father has received as a present from the son a pair of binoculars with which, on the roof of his factory, he enjoys the power of looking at everything going on. Bertolucci has endowed the father (Ugo Tognazzi) with a singular “internal voice.” We cannot tell where the father’s voice’s vision and knowledge end, especially with regard to the son whom “it” sees being kidnapped, and with regard to everything that happens behind his back of which “it” sees nothing.

The most disconcerting, in fact, is not when we attribute unlimited knowledge to the acousmêtre, but rather when its vision and knowledge have limits whose dimensions we do not know. The idea of a god who sees and knows all (the gods of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are acousmétres) is perhaps an “indecent” idea, according to the little girl Nietzsche writes of, but it is almost natural. Much more disturbing is the idea of a god or being with only partial powers and vision, whose limits are not known.

The acousmêtre’s omniscience and omnipotence. By discussing the acousmêtre’s supposed capacity to see all, we have set the stage for considering the powers that follow from this. Seeing all, in the logic of magical thought we are exploring, implies knowing all; knowledge has been assimilated into the capacity to see internally. Also implied is omnipotence, or at least the possession of certain powers whose nature or extent can vary—invulnerability, control over destructive forces, hypnotic power, and so on.

Why all these powers in a voice? Maybe because this voice without a place that belongs to the acousmêtre takes us back to an archaic, original stage: of the first months of life or even before birth, during which the voice was everything and it was everywhere (but bear in mind that this “everywhere” quality is nameable only retrospectively—the concept can arise for the subject who no longer occupies the undifferentiated everywhere).

The sound film is therefore not just a stage inhabited by speaking simulacra, as in Bloy Casares’s novella The Invention of Morel. The sound film also has an offscreen field that can be populated by acousmatic voices, founding voices, determining voices—voices that command, invade, and vampirize the image; voices that often have the omnipotence to guide the action, call it up, make it happen, and sometimes lose it on the borderline between land and sea. Of course, the sound film did not invent the acousmêtre. The greatest Acousmêtre is God—and even farther back, for every one of us, the Mother. But the sound film invented for the acousmêtre a space of action that no dramatic form had succeeded in giving to it; this happened once the coming of sound placed the cinema at the mercy of the voice.

De-Acusomatization Such are the powers of the acousmêtre. Of course, the acousmêtre has only to show itself—for the person speaking to inscribe his or her body inside the frame, in the visual field—for it to lose its power, omniscience, and (obviously) ubiquity. I call this phenomenon de-acusomatization. Embodying the voice is a
sort of symbolic act, dooming the acousmêtre to the fate of ordinary mortals. De-acousmatization roots the acousmêtre to a place and says, “here is your body, you’ll be there, and not elsewhere.” Likewise, the purpose of burial ceremonies is to say to the soul of the deceased, “you must no longer wander, your grave is here.”

In how many fantasy, thriller, and gangster films do we see the acousmêtre become an ordinary person when his voice is assigned a visible and circumscribed body? He then usually becomes, if not harmless, at least human and vulnerable. When the heretofore invisible Big Boss appears in the image, we generally know that he’s going to be captured or brought down “like just any imbecile” (as Pascal Bonitzer says in talking about Aldrich’s Kiss Me Deadly).12

De-acousmatization, the unveiling of an image and at the same time a place, the human and mortal body where the voice will henceforth be lodged, in certain ways strongly resembles striptease. The process doesn’t necessarily happen all at once; it can be progressive. In much the same way that the female genitals are the end point revealed by undressing (the point after which the denial of the absence of the penis is no longer possible), there is an end point of de-acousmatization—the mouth from which the voice issues. So we can have semi-acousmètres, or on the other hand partial de-acousmatizations, when we haven’t yet seen the mouth of a character who speaks, and we just see his hand, back, feet, or neck. A quarter-acousmêtre is even possible—its head facing the camera, but the mouth hidden! As long as the face and mouth have not been completely revealed, and as long as the spectator’s eye has not “verified” the co-incidence of the voice with the mouth (a verification which needs only to be approximate), de-acousmatization is incomplete, and the voice retains an aura of invulnerability and magical power.

The Wizard of Oz (1939) has a lovely scene of de-acousmatization that illustrates these points well. “The Great Oz” is the name that author L. Frank Baum gave his magician character. He speaks with a booming voice in a sort of temple, hiding behind an apparatus of curtains, grimacing masks, and smoke. This thundering voice seemingly sees all and knows all; it can tell Dorothy and her friends what they have come for even before they’ve opened their mouths. But when they return to get their due once they’ve accomplished their mission, the wizard refuses to keep his promise and starts playing for time. Dorothy is indignant; her dog Toto wanders toward the voice, tears the curtain behind which the voice is hidden, and reveals an ordinary little fellow who’s speaking into a microphone and operating reverb and smoke machines. The Great Oz is nothing but a man, who enjoys playing God by hiding his body and amplifying his voice. And the moment this voice is “embodied,” we can hear it lose its colossal proportions, deflate and become a wisp of a voice, finally speaking as a human. “You are a naughty man,” says Dorothy. “Oh no, my dear,” timidly replies the former magician, “I am a very nice man, but a very bad magician.” For Dorothy this de-acousmatization marks the end of her initiation, this moment when she mourns the loss of parental omnipotence and uncovers the mortal and fallible Father.