Michel Chion, The Voice in Cinema (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

Karl Meixner in Fritz Lang's *Testament of Dr. Mabuse* (1932).

PROLOGUE RAISING THE VOICE

STRANGE OBJECT The voice is elusive. Once you've eliminated everything that is not the voice itself—the body that houses it, the words it carries, the notes it sings, the traits by which it defines a speaking person, and the timbres that color it, what's left? What a strange object, what grist for poetic outpourings . . . I say this because French writing on the voice these days seems like so much formless verbalizing, resolutely skirting the clear and systematic language necessary for making headway.

How can we think about the voice? Freudian psychoanalysis, invented in the form of a talking cure, could have seized upon the voice as an object of study, for in psychoanalysis everything happens *in* and *through* speech, even if it only uses the voice as a vehicle for the verbal signifier. But a serious theoretical elaboration of the voice as an object did become possible with Lacan, when he placed the voice—along with the gaze, the penis, the feces, and nothingness—in the ranks of *"objet (a),"* these *part objects* which may be fetishized and employed to "thingify difference."[1] And building on Lacan, the excellent book by Denis Vasse, *L'Ombilic et la voix (The Umbilicus and the Voice*, published in 1974), proposed one of the first consistent and dialectical approaches to the topic. Vasse's work allowed us not only to speak "around" the voice, but also to consider it as an object, without either becoming lost in the fascination it inspires or reducing it to being merely the vehicle of language and expression.

THERE IS NO SOUNDTRACK By what incomprehensible thoughtlessness can we, in considering what after all is called the talking picture, "forget" the voice? Because we confuse it with speech. From the speech act we usually retain only the significations it bears, forgetting the medium of the voice itself. Of course the voice is there to be forgotten in its materiality; only at this cost does it fill its primary function.

1. Cf. for example Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1966), p. 817; Lacan, *Ecrits: A Selection*, Alan Sheridan, trans. (London: Tavistock, 1977), pp. 314–15. "Objets petit autres": objects with only a little otherness, objects the child previously experienced as parts of itself. See Alan Sheridan's translation in Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: A Selection* (London: Tavistock, 1977), pp. 314–315.

Greta Garbo being directed by Jacques Feyder in an international version of her first talking picture, *Anna Christie* (1930).

Characters whose voices one imagines: *La Glace à trois faces (The Three-Sided Mirror)* (Jean Epstein, 1927).

The police chief (I. Ivanov) in Eisenstein's *Strike* (1925).

Discussions of sound films rarely mention the voice, speaking instead of "the soundtrack." A deceptive and sloppy notion, which postulates that all the audio elements recorded together onto the optical track of the film are presented to the spectator as a sort of bloc or coalition, across from the other bloc, a no-less-fictive "image track."

And yet everyone knows from experience that nothing of the sort occurs. A film's aural elements are not received as an autonomous unit. They are immediately analyzed and distributed in the spectator's perceptual apparatus according to the relation each bears to what the spectator sees at the time. (First and foremost: according to whether you see in the image the source attributed to the sound—for example, if words are heard, whether or not you see the person who is speaking.) It's from this *instantaneous perceptual triage* that certain audio elements (essentially those referred to as synchronous, i.e., whose apparent source is visible onscreen) can be immediately "swallowed up" in the image's false depth, or relegated to the periphery of the visual field, but on alert to appear if there's a sound whose cause is temporarily put offscreen. Meanwhile, other aural elements, notably background music and offscreen commentary, are triaged to another place, an imaginary one, comparable to a proscenium.

If there is an invisible orchestra playing the film music, we might think of this proscenium as an orchestra pit like that of opera or vaudeville (it was of course a real orchestra pit during the silent era in large movie theaters). And if we hear a commentator's voice, it corresponds to a sort of podium below the screen or alongside.

These distinctly different triages of sounds emitted from the single real source of the loudspeaker, triages based on the simple criterion of each sound's relation to each image at each moment, already testify sufficiently that *there is no soundtrack*, to put it provocatively. It is the image that governs this triage, not the nature of the recorded elements themselves. The proof is that so-called synchronous sounds are most often forgotten as such, being "swallowed up" by the fiction. The meanings and effects generated by synch sounds are usually chalked up to the image alone or the film overall. Only the creators of

a film's sound—recordist, sound effects person, mixer, director—know that if you alter or remove these sounds, *the image is no longer the same*. On the other hand, the sounds from the proscenium, at a remove from the visual field, more easily gain the spotlight, for they are perceived in their singularity and isolation. This is why people have written much more about film music and voiceover commentary than about so-called synchronous sounds, most often neglected unjustly for being "redundant."

To see or not to see the sound's source: it all begins here, but this simple duality is already quite complex. We can suppose that there aren't just two places for the triage to go, that a sound can be nonsynchronous without necessarily inhabiting the imaginary proscenium offscreen I have described. Consider as examples the "offscreen" voice of someone who has just left the image but continues to be there, or a man we've never seen but whom we expect to see, because we situate him in a place contiguous with the screen, in the present tense of the action. These sounds and voices that are *neither entirely inside nor clearly outside* are those that interest me the most, as will become amply evident. Because perhaps it is with these sounds and voices left to wander the surface of the screen that the real and specific power of the cinema comes into play.

Indeed, all the other cases or types of voices in cinema may have derived from older dramatic forms. The synchronous voice comes from the theater; film music comes from opera, melodrama, and vaudeville; and voiceover commentary from the magic lantern shows and from older arts involving narrated projections.

The cinema has its own specific devices for putting these three situations into play, but it nevertheless inherits and deploys the older genres' principles. However, sounds and voices that wander the surface of the screen, awaiting a place to attach to, belong to the cinema and to it alone. Their effect is all the more elusive in that it occurs in a context where sounds and images are ceaselessly moving and changing.

Having abruptly decreed that there is no soundtrack, let us go

further, and make a dent in the notion that for the filmic spectator, there are "sounds" as a collective entity—as if we received sonic messages, in films and elsewhere, in an undifferentiated and neutral way; as if our hearing weren't first and foremost human hearing.

VOCOCENTRISM In actual movies, for real spectators, there are not *all the sounds including the human voice. There are voices, and then everything else*. In other words, in every audio mix, the presence of a human voice instantly sets up a hierarchy of perception.

Christiane Sacco elegantly writes, "The presence of a body structures the space that contains it" (meaning of course the human body).[2] Let us paraphrase this to say that *the presence of a human voice structures the sonic space that contains it*.

Near the Forum des Halles, which in 1978 was a large new shopping mall in the middle of Paris, a giant cement construction presented to the passerby the spectacle of a blind wall, an immense neutral rectangle, empty and vertical like a blank page. One day someone painted onto this surface a small walking man and his shadow—occupying about one hundredth of the wall. The moment this figure appeared, the visual space was structured entirely around him. His presence gave the space an inclination, a perspective, a left and right, a front and rear. It's the same for any sonic space, empty or not. If a human voice is part of it, the ear is inevitably carried toward it, picking it out, and structuring the perception of the whole around it. The ear attempts to analyze the sound in order to extract meaning from it—as one peels and squeezes a fruit—and always tries to *localize* and if possible *identify* the voice.

This is such a natural reflex that everything is mobilized implicitly, in the classical cinema, to favor the voice and the text it carries, and to offer it to the spectator on a silver platter. The level and presence of the voice have to be artificially enhanced over other sounds, in order to compensate for the absence of the landmarks that in live binaural conditions allow us to isolate the voice from ambient sounds. But production mixing—what in French is called "prise de son" or *taking of*

2. Christiane Sacco, *Plaidoyer au roi de Prusse ou la première anamorphose* (Paris: Buchet-Castel, 1980), p. 12.

sound during shooting—is really a "taking of voices" in most cases; the other noises are reduced as far as possible. In the same way, the technical and aesthetic norms of the classic cinema were implicitly calculated to privilege the voice and the intelligibility of dialogue. Is it not natural to ensure comprehension of what is spoken? No doubt yes, but intelligibility is not the only thing at stake. It's rather the privilege accorded to the voice over all other sonic elements, in the same way that the human face is not just an image like the others. Speech, shouts, sighs or whispers, the voice hierarchizes everything around it. Just as a mother awakes when the distant crying of her child disturbs the normal sound environment of the night, in the torrent of sounds our attention fastens first onto this other *us* that is the voice of another. Call this *vococentrism* if you will. Human listening is naturally vococentrist, and so is the talking cinema by and large.

Hitchcock said something once in an interview for *Cahiers du cinéma* that provided inspiration for my own thinking (he was speaking not of the soundtrack but of the frame): "The first thing I draw [in storyboarding], no matter what the framing, is the first thing that people will look at—faces. The position of the face determines the shot composition."[3] I had only to transpose this lucid remark to the aural register: the first thing people hear is the voice. Now I had an axis, a way to talk about *film sound* which was no longer merely a tiresome academic subject. I no longer faced the inert, heterogeneous and undifferentiated mass connoted by the catchall term "soundtrack." Just as the question of the closeup became clarified as soon as it was viewed with reference to human measure, it is by relating the question of film sound to human perception (which is naturally vococentric) that we escape the mechanistic and reductionist impasse that the notion of a soundtrack leads to. Which doesn't mean we can't refocus eventually on the other sounds, on noises and music.

3. Interview with Alfred Hitchcock by Jean Domarchi and Jean Douchet [*Cahiers du cinéma* no. 102, 1959], reprinted in André Bazin et al., eds., *La Politique des auteurs* (Paris: Editions Champ libre, 1972), p. 153.

WHEN THE CINEMA WAS DEAF Jean Painlevé wrote that "the cinema has always been sound cinema." Jean Mitry specified, on the other hand, that "the early cinema was not mute, but quiet." To which Adorno

and Eisler replied in advance, "the talking picture, too, is mute." Indeed, corrects Bresson, "there never was a mute cinema." Besides, André Bazin noted, "But not all of silent films want to be such," and so on.[4] I throw out these few citations (out of context, to be sure) to stir the waters of pat formulas; to this I'll toss in another stone of my own in stating that the silent cinema should really be called "deaf cinema."

First, why do the Latin countries call silent cinema "mute cinema"? It is interesting to ask at what moment this expression arose. Logically, it would be with the birth of the talkies, when the latter retrospectively made clear that the movies that came before were *voiceless*. Not that people didn't know that; they had simply forgotten. Similarly, while we await the three-dimensional cinema of the future, we continually forget that the cinematic image is flat, although it tries to make us believe the contrary.

But the spectators and critics of 1925 didn't talk of going to see a mute film or silent film any more than we say we're going to see a talkie or sound film today. The symbolic date of 1927, the year of *The Jazz Singer*, marks the moment when the entire previous cinema was retrospectively declared silent, just as perhaps one day people will talk of the flat cinema. Today's flat cinema *dreams of depth*; and similarly the so-called mute cinema made spectators imagine the voice, far from denying or mourning its demise.

The silent film may be called deaf insofar as it prevented us from hearing the real sounds of the story. It had no ears for the immediate aural space, the here and now of the action.

But the expression "mute cinema" is what had taken hold by 1929, two years after the official birth of the talkies. In French, mute and silent are not synonymous. If the French hardly ever distinguish between sound film and talking film, they speak rarely of "silent" film. In René Clair's writings, the use of this term is an anglicism. The hesitation between mute and silent film, like the one between sound and talking film, centers on the same issue: speech, the voice.

However, could anyone rightly call this cinema silent, which was

4. Painlevé, in "Souvenirs," *Le Film français*, no. 1755 (Feb. 1979), p. 22; Mitry, *Esthétique et psychologie du cinéma*, Jean-Pierre Delarge, ed.; Hanns Eisler [and T. W. Adorno], *Composing for the Films* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), p.76; Bresson, interview by Michel Delahaye and Jean-Luc Godard [*Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 178, 1966], reprinted in *La Politique des auteurs*, p. 301; Bazin, *What Is Cinema?* Hugh Gray, trans. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), vol. 1, p. 138.

always accompanied by music from the outset—the Lumière Brothers' very first screening at the Grand Café in Paris—not to mention the sound effects created live in some movie houses? There were also the commentators, who freely interpreted the intertitles that the audience could not read, since many moviegoers were illiterate and most were unable to cope with subtitles in foreign languages.

The movies were even less deserving of the term "mute," if by that we're supposed to understand that the characters *did not speak*. On the contrary, film characters were quite chatty. In this sense Bresson is right to say that there never was a mute cinema. "For the characters did in fact talk, only they spoke in a vacuum, no one could hear what they were saying. Thus it should not be said that the movies had found a mute style."[5] How did spectators know that the characters were speaking? By the constant movement of their lips, their gestures that told of entire speeches whose intertitles communicated to us only the most abridged versions. So it's not that the film's characters were mute, but rather that the film was deaf to them. This is the reason for using the term "deaf cinema" for films that gave the moviegoer a deaf person's viewpoint on the action depicted.

Still, this spectator who is forced to be deaf cannot avoid hearing voices—voices that resonate in his or her own imagination. As the radio listener gives a face to her favorite announcers, especially if she has never seen them (which allows her all the more freely to imagine them), likewise the silent-film spectator—rather, the deaf-film spectator—imagined the film's voices, in his or her individual way. Voices in silent film, because they are implied, are dreamed voices. Garbo in the silent era had as many voices as all of her admirers individually conferred on her. The talkie limited her to one, her own.

Had anyone ever before seen a dramatic genre for which the actor moves his lips without our hearing one word? Never, certainly not in mime, which is done with mouths closed. If for some people the talkie still seemed vulgar by comparison to the silents, it is because the real voices heard in it came into conflict with the imaginary voices that everyone could dream to their heart's content. The

5. Interview with Robert Bresson in *La Politique des auteurs*, p. 301.

same disappointment, the same effect of gross realism arises when on television or in a photograph we see a radio star of whose physical attributes we were previously unaware. (This revelation is becoming rare, but still occurred frequently a generation ago).

So it's not so much the *absence of voices* that the talking film came to disrupt, as the spectator's freedom to imagine them in her own way (in the same way that a filmed adaptation objectifies the features of a character in the novel). We're no longer allowed to *dream the voices*—in fact, to *dream period*: according to Marguerite Duras, the cinema has "closed off" the imaginary. "Something about the silents is lost forever. There is something vulgar, trivial . . . in the unavoidable realism of direct dialogue . . . and the inevitable trickery it involves."[6]

Which doesn't mean the cinema didn't quickly discover uses of the voice other than filming plays and musicals (uses that were by no means dishonorable). Indeed, just about all that the cinema can do structurally with the voice in a cinematic narrative can be found in one film from 1932, Fritz Lang's *Testament of Dr. Mabuse*. By "structurally" I mean here a syntax of possible relations between the film image and the voice, relationships whose types and combinations seem to be of a limited number. But just as western music has operated for several centuries on the basis of twelve notes, the cinema is far from having exhausted the possible variations on these figures. And the richest of voice-image relations, of course, isn't the arrangement that shows the person speaking, but rather the situation in which we don't see the person we hear, as his voice comes from the center of the image, the same source of all the film's other sounds. This is the cinema's invention of the *acousmêtre*.

LACKING LACK From the moment they became heard, the voice and synch sound brought a bit of disappointment to film, the disappointment that comes from the "oral" filling of an absence or lack over which desire has built its nest. Once heard in reality, even the most divine voice had something trivial about it. But as a wise American said to Alexandre Arnoux, "Once you have given a child a doll

6. [Marguerite Duras], *Marguerite Duras* (Paris: Editions Albatros, 1975), p. 80.

that says 'papa' and 'mama,' even badly, he doesn't want any other."[7] The dazzling success of the sound film, which to everyone's surprise profoundly shook up the film industry, demonstrated the strong allure of talkies. Perhaps what people sought there was the same kind of oral satisfaction that today's special visual effects and Dolby stereo give us, this hyper-nurturing cinema whose sensory realism may offend the cinephile's sensibility but that brings on a sort of beatitude. In the same way, the talking films (leaving aside the transitional part-talkies) were not good at tolerating lack, i.e. silence, even though they authorized silence as a new creative element.

The early sound film *lacked lack*, so to speak; some time had to pass before the magical and cloying effect of hyperrealism would abate, and for the reappearance of the lack necessary for the sound film's full functioning.

It should not be assumed that the cinema began to talk in a single moment. In 1895 Thomas Edison first tried to invent sound film. Which was possible technically; the gramophone as well as the telephone were already well in place before cinema. The idea of reproducing reality by coupling sound and image in synch motivated many of film's pioneer inventors. Between 1895 and 1927, between the *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory* and *The Jazz Singer*, sound film patents number in the dozens, as do the public demonstrations of talking pictures in commercial cinemas (such as the Gaumont-Palace in Paris).

By 1905, processes such as Phono-Ciné-Théâtre, Tonbild, and the Bio-Phonographe could present to audiences a scene from *Hamlet* with Sarah Bernhardt, *with voices*, or a filmed opera like Gounod's *Faust*, *with sound*. The means of synchronization weren't reliable, though, especially for longer stretches, and the cinema—aesthetically as well as commercially—pursued other directions. This is why, until the watershed of 1927, these numerous experiments remained little more than curiosities.

Reading the newspapers of the time announce these demonstrations of talking cinema before its official birth, we're struck not by the writers' lyrical transports but rather the calmness with which

7. René Clair, *Cinema Yesterday and Today*, R. C. Dale, ed., Stanley Appelbaum, trans. (New York: Dover, 1972 [1970]), p. 148.

they describe it. The public was doubtless acquainted with the idea of talking films if not their reality. They were invited to see them as we are today to see holograms—prepared for, yet amazed by, a new technology still applied only to modest ends. Although all histories of cinema allude to this plethora of sound experiments to one extent or another, they still don't challenge the neat division (statistically based) of film history into a silent period and a sound period.

The so-called silent cinema was thus a sort of lame duck for a long while, quite aware of a change in store. What remained unknown at the time was what would become of the sound film in the long run. But in 1929, or two years after its "birth," many had already made up their minds. Sound film, they claimed, was only good for filmed theater or musical comedy; ascribing artistic dignity to it was out of the question. For others, the cinema could only hope to acquire such dignity through such phenomena as *audiovisual counterpoint*. Pudovkin, Eisenstein, and Alexandrov's manifesto argued against using sounds as flat literal illustrations of images, and in favor of audiovisual counterpoint, wherein sounds declare their independence and act metaphorically, symbolically. And who at the time could foresee the role to be played by the new entity we call the acousmêtre?

If moviegoers were enthusiastic about the talking film—and such was the case for the vast majority—they could enjoy being carried away by its sensory rush. But if people wanted to look for its shortcomings (as we do today for films in stereo), they could note with Alexandre Arnoux the effect of voices being "glued" onto bodies, and the perceptible mismatch between the position of characters' mouths onscreen and the real source of the sound (the central loudspeaker behind the screen). Today our brains are entirely accustomed to plugging sounds into whatever images we see—sounds whose real localization is much more dispersed and dissociated with respect to what we see.

THE VOICE'S LOSS OF INNOCENCE In a period when the new talking film was contested by such major artists as Chaplin, Eisenstein, and Stroheim, we might well ask why there was so little discussion of the voice in

itself, since it was the voice that truly constituted the great revolution.

It *was* discussed, of course. It's just that instead of saying "the voice," people said "speech" or "dialogue," putting the focus on language. But since there was already language and speech in the silent film, it was the *voice* and not language that was the problem. Greta Garbo's voice was hoarse and had a Swedish accent: the producers of her first talkie, *Anna Christie*, wondered whether audiences would put up with it. John Gilbert's somewhat high and nasal voice spelled the ruin of his career. The voices of American actors brought British audiences to laughter . . . It's against the voice that Chaplin was really protesting, under the name of speech. Sound, on the other hand, didn't bother him, since he made *sonorized* films until 1935.

As film began to talk, the problem was not text; silent cinema had already integrated text through the bastard device of intertitles. It was the voice, as material presence, as utterance, or as muteness—the voice as being, double, shadow of the image, as a power—the voice as a threat of loss and seduction for the cinema.

"To use sound [as naturalistic speech]," said the three Russians' manifesto, "will destroy the culture of montage." René Clair contemplated the talkie as a "frightful monster," and French film historians Bardèche and Brasillach issued this suggestion: "We who have witnessed the birth of an art may also have witnessed its death." In a word, the fantasy of *the death of cinema* was alive and well, as it is today at the beginning of the 1980s. The reasons are no doubt different. It is perhaps only a coincidence that the voice figures prominently today as a theoretical object simultaneously with the appearance of films like Marguerite Duras's *L'Homme Atlantique*, in which a woman's voice announces, during a marvelous speech about love, the end of cinema. All this may be only a French phenomenon, coinciding accidentally with revolutionary technological developments (high definition video, new audio processes, home video distribution of films) that mark the end of cinema as we know it.

That the voice has today become a subject of discussion and theoretical study does not mean, of course, that people are going to make more interesting uses of it in the future. The cinema could be losing the authenticity that allowed movies until now to engage the voice in such immediate and striking ways. Films like *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse*, *Psycho*, *Sansho the Bailiff*, and *India Song*, in which the powers of the voice are brought into play with singular imaginative force, belong perhaps to an age forever past—the voice's Age of Innocence.

It was necessary to lose this innocence before we could perceive it as such. Perhaps there is so much writing on the voice now because there has been a break, a separation from that innocence. But this break testifies to a change in our sensibility, and of investment in a new cinematic object: the voice, from the same unchangeable mythology of paradise lost.

I. MABUSE: THE MAGIC AND POWER OF THE ACOUSMÊTRE

Elsie (Inge Landgut) meets the murderer's shadow in *M* (Fritz Lang, 1931).

ONE THE ACOUSMÊTRE

A PRIMAL 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 offscreen 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

1. See Schaeffer, *Traité des objets musicaux* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1966).

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 can never praise Pierre Schaeffer enough for having unearthed this arcane word in the 1950s. 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* (1930) 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:

2. Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1966), p. 318; Anthony Wilden, trans., *Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis* (Lacan's 1953 "Discours de Rome") (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981 [1968]), p. 318.

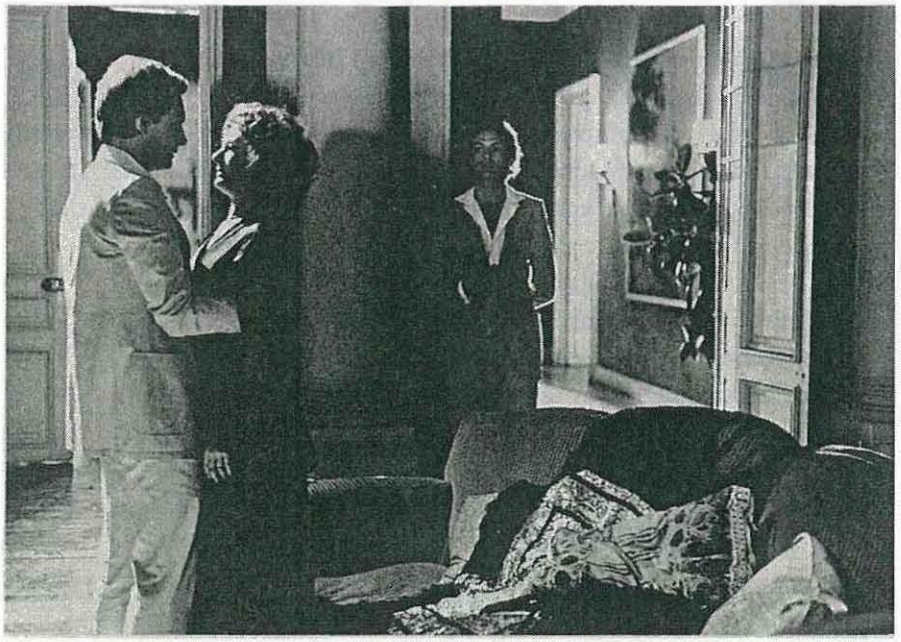
3. Since the terms most often used, *offscreen* and *nondiegetic*, are much too ambiguous, I use acousmatic to replace them.

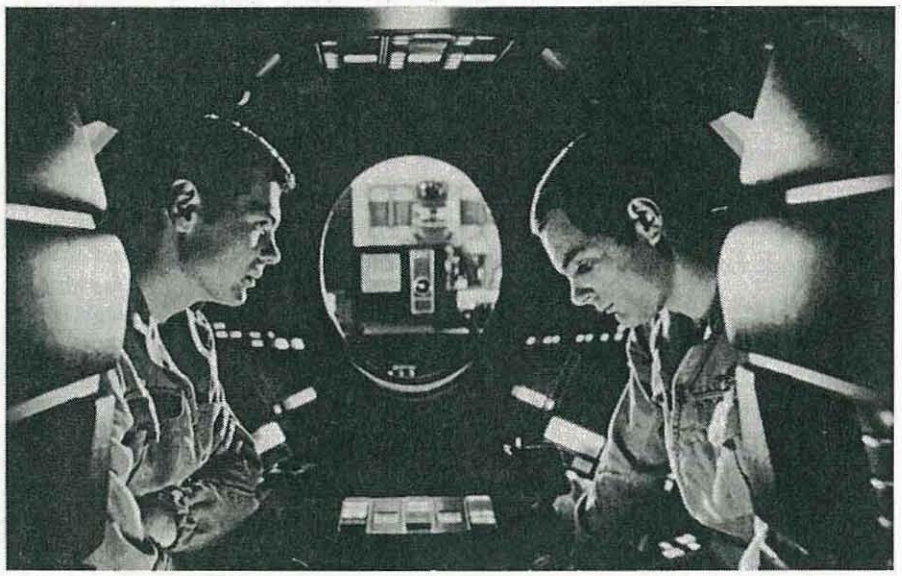
[Schaeffer and Chion's "acousmatic" does not appear in English-language dictionaries. The word's source is the Greek "akousma," a thing heard. See also note 5. *Trans.*]

4. Cf. Prologue, "There Is No Soundtrack."

5. The history of the term is interesting. The French word *acousmate* designates "invisible" sounds. Apollinaire, who loved rare words, wrote a poem in 1913 entitled "Acousmate," about a voice that resonates in the air. The famous *Encyclopédie* of Diderot and d'Alembert (1751) cites the "Acousmatiques" as those uninitiated disciples of Pythagoras who were obliged to spend five years in silence listening to their master speak behind the curtain, at the end of which they could look at him and were full members of the sect. It seems that Clement of Alexandria, an ecclesiastic writing around 250 BC, may be the sole source of this story, in his book *Stromateis*.

The writer Jérôme Peignot called this term to the attention of Pierre Schaeffer.





TOP: Didier Flamand, Delphine Seyrig, and Claude Mann in *India Song* (Marguerite Duras, 1974).
BOTTOM: Gary Lockwood and Keir Dullea in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick, 1968).

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*.[6] 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 acousmêtres 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 acousmêtres 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.

6. The French term is a neologism made from "être acousmatique," or acousmatic being.

MABUSE: MAGIC AND POWERS OF THE ACOUSMÊTRE

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 acousmêtres 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 prejudge 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-acousmêtre. 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."[7] But between an offstage voice and a filmic acousmêtre 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.[8] 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

7. Sadoul, *Histoire du cinéma mondial* (Paris: Flammarion, 1963), p. 234.

8. [Recall that these remarks were written in 1981, at a time when many French movie theaters were not outfitted for multitrack sound. Dolby and multitrack change the rules of the game—but not as much as one might think. Often, sound editors avoid locating an offscreen diegetic sound on a prolonged basis because the logic of cutting threatens to disrupt the logic of screen space. *Trans.*]

to another, from closeup to long shot. For the spectator, then, the filmic acousmêtre 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.[9] 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 acousmêtre's fate in the cinema.

WHAT ARE THE ACOUSMÊTRE'S POWERS? Everything hangs on whether or not the acousmêtre 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. Mabuse's in *The Testament*, or Maupassant's in the first two parts of Ophuls' *Le Plaisir*) possesses a sort of virginity, 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 at 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 acousmêtre and the mute, are similar in some striking ways[10].

An entire image, an entire story, an entire film can thus hang on the epiphany of the acousmêtre. Everything can boil down to a quest

9. Furthermore, we imagine it there in TV, at the drive-in, and so on.

10. See Chapter 7 on silent and mute characters in film.

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 proscenium—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' *Tendre Ennemie*). 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."[11]

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 synch 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

11. [See the Epilogue on recent uses of the telephone in horror films. *Trans.*]

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 acousmêtres) 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 the 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 Bioy Casares' 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-ACOUSMATIZATION 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-acousmatization. *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-acousmêtres, 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

12. Pascal Bonitzer, *Le Regard et la voix* (Paris: Union Générale d'Editions, 1976), p. 32.

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.