

OVERHEARING
FILM
DIALOGUE



Sarah Kozloff

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SARAH KOZLOFF

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To Lloyd and Bonnie Kozloff
parents extraordinaires

Contents

Acknowledgments	ix
Introduction: The Study of Filmic Speech	1
PART ONE GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS	
1. The Functions of Dialogue in Narrative Film	33
2. Structural and Stylistic Variables	64
3. Integration	90
PART TWO DIALOGUE AND GENRE	
4. Verbal Frontiers: Dialogue in Westerns	139
5. Word Play: Dialogue in Screwball Comedies	170
6. Words as Weapons: Dialogue in Gangster Films	201
7. Misunderstandings: Dialogue in Melodramas	235
Conclusion	267
Notes	271
Select Filmography	289
Bibliography	297
Index	311

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Introduction

The Study of Filmic Speech

I'd like to start with a scene from William Wyler's *Wuthering Heights* (1939), a film I admire, even though many would dismiss it as the epitome of Hollywood pretentiousness—an overwrought, unfaithful, “prestige” adaptation of a famous novel. The scene that interests me—nay, haunts me—occurs perhaps a third of the way through the film, when headstrong, frivolous Cathy (Merle Oberon) comes down to the kitchen to tell the servant Ellen that her rich, upper-class neighbor, Edgar Linton, has just proposed to her. What Cathy does not know, but the viewer does, is that Heathcliff (Laurence Olivier), the poor, rough foundling her father adopted years ago, is in the outer passageway listening in on the conversation. The scene proceeds as follows:

Heathcliff opens the door to the kitchen. His hands are bleeding.

HEATHCLIFF: Has he gone?

ELLEN: Heathcliff, your hands—what have you done?

HEATHCLIFF: Linton—is he gone?

ELLEN: What have you done to your hands? Oh, Heathcliff . . .
What have you been doing?

HEATHCLIFF: I want to crawl to her feet, whimper to be forgiven, for loving her, for needing her more than my own life, for belonging to her more than my own soul.

CATHY: (*from the other room, off camera*) Ellen . . .

HEATHCLIFF: Don't let her see me, Ellen.

ELLEN: No.

Heathcliff hides in the outer vestibule.

CATHY: Ellen, I wondered whether you were still up.

ELLEN: Has he gone?

All quotations of film dialogue, unless otherwise noted, have been transcribed from the screen. For details of screenwriters, studios, and so on, see the Select Filmography.

CATHY: Ellen, I've got some news for you.
ELLEN: But the kitchen's no place for that. Let's come into the parlor—
CATHY: Come here.
ELLEN: Please, Cathy.
CATHY: Sit down. Listen. Ellen, can you keep a secret? Ellen, Edgar's asked me to marry him.
ELLEN: What did you tell him?
CATHY: I told him I'd give him my answer tomorrow.
ELLEN: But do you love him, Miss Cathy?
CATHY: Yes. Of course.
ELLEN: Why?
CATHY: Why? That's a silly question, isn't it?
ELLEN: No, not so silly. Why do you love him?
CATHY: Because he's handsome and pleasant to be with.
ELLEN: That's not enough.
CATHY: Because he'll be rich someday. And I'll be the finest lady in the county.
ELLEN: Oh. And now tell me how you love him.
CATHY: I love the ground under his feet, the air above his head, and everything he touches.
ELLEN: What about Heathcliff?
CATHY: Oh, Heathcliff. He gets worse everyday. It would degrade me to marry him. I wish he hadn't come back. Oh, it would be heaven to escape from this disorderly, comfortless place.

After these lines Heathcliff silently slips out of the house, a fact communicated to the viewer through the effect of showing a lamp flicker in the breeze of the opened doorway (fig. 1). Alas, Heathcliff has left too soon; he doesn't stay to hear Cathy further reveal her preference:

ELLEN: Well, if Master Edgar and his charms and money and parties mean heaven to you, what's to keep you from taking your place among the Linton angels?
CATHY: I don't think I belong in heaven, Ellen. I dreamt once I was there. I dreamt I went to heaven and that heaven didn't seem to be my home and I broke my heart with weeping to come back to Earth. The angels were so angry they flung me out into the middle of the heath on top of Wuthering Heights. And I woke up sobbing with joy. That's it, Ellen—I've no more business marrying Edgar Linton than I have of being in heaven. But Ellen . . . Ellen, what can I do?
ELLEN: You're thinking of Heathcliff.
CATHY: Who else? He's sunk so low, he seems to take pleasure in being mean and brutal. And yet, he's more myself than I am. What-



1. *Wuthering Heights*. Ellen notices that Heathcliff has left.

ever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same. And Linton's is as different as frost from fire. My one thought in living is Heathcliff. Ellen, I *am* Heathcliff. Everything he's suffered, I've suffered. The little happiness he's ever known, I've had, too. Oh Ellen, if everything in the world died and Heathcliff remained, life would still be full for me.

Cathy has come to know her heart, but it is too late. Hearing only her slighting remarks, Heathcliff has run out into the storm and quitted *Wuthering Heights*. Desperately, Cathy seeks him in the rain, making herself seriously ill; months later she ends up marrying Linton after all.

What's apt about this scene is its tragic irony. For too many decades, film viewers have put themselves in the position of Heathcliff: we've been bad eavesdroppers; we've jumped to conclusions; we haven't listened attentively all the way through. Like Heathcliff, who walks into the kitchen so smoldering from slights and shame that moments earlier he's smashed his "dirty hands" through a windowpane, we've listened with preconceptions, with a chip on our



2. *Wuthering Heights*. CATHY: I am Heathcliff.

shoulder, and we've only been open to that which confirmed our expectations.

Since the birth of the cinema, we've chanted a mantra: "Film is a Visual Medium." Films must tell their stories visually—editing, deep focus, lighting, camera movement, and nifty special effects are what really count. Dialogue, on the other hand, is just something we have to put up with. John Ford encapsulated these sentiments in a 1964 interview: "When a motion picture is at its best, it is long on action and short on dialogue. When it tells its story and reveals its characters in a series of simple, beautiful, active pictures, and does it with as little talk as possible, then the motion picture medium is being used to its fullest advantage."¹

Try this experiment: show this scene from *Wuthering Heights* to anyone and ask them what they like best about it, and they are bound to point to the neat trick with the candle flame, a visual effect.

Ask them what they like least about the scene, and they're equally bound to point to the line, "I am Heathcliff." For besides serving as a metaphor for faulty eavesdropping, this scene haunts me because it

also exemplifies why so many have scorned dialogue for so long—it contains a line of dialogue so outrageously bad that it makes one squirm with discomfort. The sentiment—being such soul mates that one can't tell where one ends and one's lover begins—is so corny that it's embarrassing. The phrasing is too naked, too preposterous.

"I am Heathcliff" is easy to scorn. But before we rush to judgment, we might note that the script is by Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur, a writing team famous for cynicism and wit in plays and films such as *The Front Page* (1928) and *Twentieth Century* (1934). Moreover, the line itself is straight out of Emily Brontë (as is the whole scene), and in the novel, it sounds important, not jarring. Is the phrase itself really so terrible, or is the problem in Merle Oberon's strained performance, with her eyes stretched wide and her phony pause? (According to reports, Wyler was dissatisfied with her playing of the scene and made her do it again and again, until she left the set in tears.)² Or is the flaw actually in Wyler's own direction? After all, *someone* decided to emphasize the line through a long pause, a dolly-in, a flash of lightning. Would "I am Heathcliff" be palatable if it had been downplayed, thrown away in a sad mumble, by an actress with the skill of Emma Thompson?

Or could the difficulty lie elsewhere altogether, not in the film, but in viewers' expectations? Why is the line's heightened rhetoric so embarrassing to contemporary ears? Isn't this style appropriate, even required, for a gothic melodrama? Why does such a bald expression of love make us squirm?

It is worth admitting, here, at the outset of a defense of film dialogue, that not every line in every film is felicitous. Yet if we allow ourselves to focus too intently on this one bad line, we are repeating Heathcliff's folly. The rest of the scene's dialogue surely merits attention. We might notice that it is through conversation that Cathy actually discovers her own feelings and reveals them to the viewer. We might pause over the complexities of Ellen's strategies—first her attempt to forestall Cathy, then her endeavor to draw her out and lead her to knowledge in an almost Socratic fashion. Cathy's narration of her dream is a key foreshadowing of the story's events, for Cathy does die, but she does not rest quietly in the afterlife, her soul returns to Heathcliff and Wuthering Heights. And as for the dialogue's style, the metaphors concerning frost and fire, heaven and earth are richly evocative. Note, too, that Heathcliff's manner of

speaking—he claims to “belong to her more than [his] own soul”—exactly matches Cathy’s both in substance and in tone. One mark of these lovers’ connection and their separation from everyone else is that they speak the same impassioned rhetoric. It is the dialogue, not the flickering flame or Gregg Toland’s skillful deep-focus cinematography, that actually gives the scene its substance.

FALLING ON DEAF EARS

Since the late 1970s, when the field of cinema studies “rediscovered” the sound track, numerous productive studies have been published on sound technology, film music, sound effects, and sound theory. With notable exceptions,³ most of this scholarship has only minimally addressed the most important aspect of film sound—namely, the dialogue.

Although what the characters say, exactly how they say it, and how the dialogue is integrated with the rest of the cinematic techniques are crucial to our experience and understanding of every film since the coming of sound, for the most part analysts incorporate the information provided by a film’s dialogue and overlook the dialogue as signifier. Canonical textbooks on film aesthetics devote pages and pages to editing and cinematography but barely mention dialogue. Visual analysis requires mastery of a recondite vocabulary and trained attentiveness; dialogue has been perceived as too transparent, too simple to need study.

Recent historical work on screenwriters has not gone very far toward addressing this neglect. “How to” primers on screenwriting discuss dialogue superficially; their treatment is invariably prescriptive rather than analytical. Analyses of individual screenplays focus on the genesis and development of the text (often with the intention of determining who deserves the credit), rather than on dialogue technique. Film reviews fall back on vapid clichés—the dialogue is “witty” or “clumsy”—without specifying the grounds for such evaluations.

The neglect of film dialogue by more recent film scholarship actually reflects the field’s long-standing antipathy to speech in film. This bias is blatant in the writings of early film theorists such as Rudolph Arnheim, Sergei Eisenstein, and Siegfried Kracauer, who are notori-

ous for championing silent film over sound.* Classical theorists offered numerous and sometimes contradictory reasons for their disdain for film sound and speech: sound would restrict montage; sound would restrict camera movement; silent film had its own poetry precisely because it found visual substitutions for sound; dialogue kept films from crossing national boundaries; dialogue was a distraction from the camera's ability to capture the natural world; dialogue encouraged too much attention to character psychology; dialogue turned film into "canned theater."⁴

Some of the complaints of classical theorists have been assuaged; for instance, improvements in microphones, sound mixing and editing, and the muffling of camera noise swiftly ameliorated the initial difficulties with the transition to sound that had temporarily compromised camera movement and editing. The practical problems with international distribution also have been lessened through workable systems of dubbing and subtitling.

But the fear that incorporating dialogue compromises film as an independent art form by bringing it too close to theater has persisted. "Cinema, at once high art and popular art, is cast as the art of the authentic," explains Susan Sontag. "Theatre, by contrast, means dressing up, pretense, lies. It smacks of aristocratic taste and the class society."⁵ Moreover, there has been a widespread embrace of what is called "the specificity thesis," the argument that each artistic medium is distinct, and so to be true to itself and to reach its highest potential, each should capitalize upon its unique characteristics. Noël Carroll has argued, however, that "the specificity thesis" is based on illogical, tautological premises and misconstrues the relationship between narrative arts. Carroll notes that the thesis:

[A]ppears to envision each art form on the model of a highly specialized tool with a range of determinate functions. A film, play, poem or painting is thought of, it seems, as analogous to something like a Phillips screwdriver. If you wish to turn a screw with a cross-shaped groove on top, use a Phillips screwdriver. If you wish to explore the

* There were a few early defenders of film speech. Marcel Pagnol, for one, declared: "Any talking film which can be shown silent and remain comprehensible is a very bad talking film" ("The Talking Film," in *Rediscovering French Film*, ed. Mary Lea Bardy [New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1983], 91).

potentials of aesthetically crafted language, use theater. If your topic is animated action, use film. But I think it is incumbent on us to question whether this underlying metaphor has any applicability when it comes to art forms. Are art forms highly specialized tools? I think not. If art forms are like tools at all, then they are more like sticks than like Phillips screwdrivers. That is, they can be used to do many things; they have not been designed to perform a specific task. . . . An artistic medium, including a self-consciously invented one, is such that many of its potentials remain to be discovered.⁶

Perhaps film *is* adept at many of the goals classical theorists allotted to it, such as revealing the beauty of the natural world, creating abstract moving images, taking editing to extremes, capturing machines in motion. Yet Carroll helps us see that being talented in certain areas does not equate with being restricted forever to solely those objectives.

Although today everyone graciously allows movies to talk, commonplace attitudes toward dialogue still betray suspicion and a fierce desire to regulate. Anti-dialogue dicta are not confined to the era of the transition to sound or to some benighted past; these prejudices seem to linger like the undead, periodically reappearing to poison our perception. Witness a 1991 statement by David Mamet: "Basically, the perfect movie doesn't have any dialogue. So you should always be striving to make a silent movie."⁷ Or note the definition of dialogue offered in Ephraim Katz's widely used *Film Encyclopedia* (originally compiled in 1979, with a third edition in 1998):

dialogue: In a film, all spoken lines. Since the cinema is essentially a visual medium, dialogue is, or should be, used more sparingly than in the theater, supplementing action rather than substituting for it.⁸

However, the wish to separate cinema from the theater and capitalize on its visual expressivity does not really explain these widespread and prolonged efforts to suppress film dialogue. For one thing, although theater was film's direct competitor in the early years of the twentieth century, by now film has decisively won the competition for mass audiences, and the need to distinguish the new art from its forebear is no longer pressing. For another, in point of fact, discussions of drama and literature also bear witness to the same desire to minimize dialogue. "Good dramatic dialogue reveals

but does not explain. The fewer words the character speaks and the more he shows of himself by them, the better the writing," decreed the American playwright Rachel Crothers (1878–1958) in the 1920s.⁹ Sam Smiley reprised this stance in a playwriting manual published in the 1970s:

What Ernest Hemingway often said about writing fiction applies to dialogue as well: Good writing means erecting an iceberg of words; only a few words are visible; but many more are there under the surface. So it is with dialogue economy in a play. A writer should avoid superfluous words and delete every one that does not carry a burden of meaning. In plays, actors' physical actions can substitute for many words. Although dialogue has to be continually emotive, it should be absolutely economic.¹⁰

And although twentieth-century playwrights such as Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, and Eugène Ionesco have obviously made word-play their central strategy, other dramatists—specifically Antonin Artaud, the futurists, and the theatricalists—have sought to annihilate the "theatre of language," believing that pantomime is the essence of theatre.¹¹ As regards the novel, the so-called "school of virility" in American literature, which enshrined the economic style of Hemingway and demonstrated hostility to expansiveness or eloquence, has been very influential.¹²

If theatrical and literary discourse also reveals the urge to suppress dialogue, and if the prejudices against film dialogue far outlast the memory of the special artistry of silent films and the technical flaws of early sound recording, larger or stronger cultural forces than lags in technology and the rather esoteric issue of aesthetic specificity must be at work.

I believe that the hostility toward cinematic (and theatrical and literary) speech should be seen as just part of the enduring denigration of all speech. Proverbs advise us that "Silence is golden" and "Talk is cheap." Benjamin Franklin counseled: "Speak little, do much."¹³ Ambrose Bierce defined "Talk" as: "To commit an indiscretion without temptation, from an impulse without purpose."¹⁴ Søren Kierkegaard once commented: "How ironical that it is by means of speech that man can degrade himself below the level of the dumb creation—for a chatterbox is truly of a lower category than a dumb creature."¹⁵

In the attacks on speech, certain themes recur:

1. Words can be used to lie, whereas pictures provide more trustworthy evidence. "One picture is worth ten thousand words."*
2. Words are empty, vacuous. "Actions speak louder than words."
3. Words may be hasty, intemperate, leading the speaker into trouble. "Loose lips sink ships."
4. Showing is superior—more informative, more meaningful, more subtle—than telling.

Although these statements seem seductively reasonable, all four can be refuted or at least qualified. Pictures can also "lie"—they can be doctored, staged, or digitally "enhanced." As for the charge of vacuousness, speech-act theory has taught us that words are hardly empty—they are themselves "actions." Elizabeth Traugott notes:

One of the most important things to be learned from approaching language in terms of its use is that the familiar opposition between saying something and doing something—between word and deed—is not at all clear-cut. Saying is doing, and utterances are acts, capable of producing enormous and far reaching consequences. For example, the sentence "You are under arrest . . ." can deprive you of your physical freedom.¹⁶

Physical actions can be as hasty as intemperate words: buying the too-expensive item or grasping the pan before it has cooled are actions one may regret as much as the rash promise or betrayed confidence.

Finally, the belief in the superiority of "showing" over "telling" stems partly from the efficacy of demonstrating some manual skill over merely describing the same in words—a swim instructor who physically demonstrates the motions will get better results than one who just gives verbal commands. However, "showing over telling" has a specific history in aesthetic theory. It reflects the influential and widely echoed argument advanced by the followers of Henry James, such as Percy Lubbock, Joseph Warren Beach, and Ford Madox Ford, in the 1920s and 1930s. Part of modernism's revolt against Victorian

* William Safire has traced this phrase's history. It was coined in 1921 by an advertising man, Fred Barnard, who wanted to stress that a photograph of appetizing candy would attract more customers than a verbal description ("Worth a Thousand Words," *New York Times Magazine*, 7 April 1996, 16).

aesthetics, specifically the chatty narrator of Victorian novels, the tenet quickly hardened into an inflexible dogma in literary circles. "Showing," that is, presenting actions without any narrative commentary, is supposed to be more subtle, and to call for more participation by the reader than allowing a narrator to evaluate or summarize. But Wayne Booth has demonstrated in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* that seemingly objective "showing" is just another form of "telling," just another method by which authors guide their readers' responses.¹⁷ Moreover, visuals are not always subtle—note the overly obvious miming of silent film—and words are not necessarily blatant. This argument slights the subtexts of verbal messages, all the subtleties that are common not only in literature and poetry but in everyday social discourse. Engagement is called for whether one is interpreting action or speech, visual images or dialogue.

I suspect that the four charges against words detailed above are to some extent pretexts. The underlying issue stems neither from some essential drawbacks of verbal communication nor from the diverging relationships between words and images/action and the physical world. The fundamental motivation comes from the fact that talkativeness has traditionally been allied with femininity, terse action with masculinity.

Of course, recent scholarship—particularly that linked to the work of Jacques Lacan—has been devoted to pointing out a contrary cultural disposition that identifies the Word, *logos*, as masculine, as the Word of God or the Law of the Father. In this paradigm, women are clearly linked with visual images, with bodies/beauty/silence—in short, with the lack of speech or logic or power. However, these two apparently opposite conceptions are not actually contradictory; they are two sides of the same coin. Walter Ong distinguishes between two kinds of speech: the common *materna lingua* (mother tongue) and the educated, "civilized" *patrius sermo* (father speech).¹⁸ Whenever speech is valued as an important act in a public sphere, it is seen as masculine; when it is held to no account in the casual language of ordinary conversation, it is ascribed to women. The reason that women are silenced and objectified is to deny them access to powerful speech; when women *do* talk, their speech is redefined as inconsequential, nonstop chatter.

I am hardly the first scholar to focus on the association of trivial talkativeness with femininity. In *Literary Fat Ladies: Rhetoric, Gender,*

Property, Patricia Parker has traced the “tradition that portrays women as unflappable talkers” from ancient literature (she cites the biblical admonition: “Let woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, not to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence”) to James Joyce’s *Ulysses*.¹⁹ In *Gossip*, Patricia Spacks has painstakingly detailed the customary connection of women with this category of speech.²⁰ Turning from the academic to the popular sphere, maxims also provide abundant evidence of the widespread association of private talk with women:

“Where woman is, silence is not.” (France)

“The tongue is the sword of a woman, and she never lets it become rusty.” (China)

“The North Sea will sooner be found wanting in water than a woman at a loss for a word.” (Jutland)

“Ten measures of speech descended on the world; women took nine and men one.” (Babylon)

“Two women and a goose are enough to make as much noise as you would hear at a fair.” (Venice)

“Many women, many words; many geese, many turds.” (England)

The linkage of talking women with animals is particularly common; in a famous instance in Fritz Lang’s *Fury* (1936), the director cuts from a shot of rumormongering women to a shot of clucking hens; this visual metaphor is repeated during the “Pick-a-Little-Talk-a-Little” number in Morton Da Costa’s adaptation of *The Music Man* (1962).

Another area in which the correlation of women and excess speech is manifest is in the English language. In *Language: The Social Mirror*, Elaine Chaika writes:

It has already been noted that English vocabulary reflects a disvaluing of talk for its own sake. Moreover, it was shown that most words that mean “idle talk” in SE [Standard English] also are marked to mean [+ female], and/or [+ young, + trivial]. A person who is gabby, talkative, and gossipy, a nag, a shrew, or a chatterbox, must be a woman.²¹

In actuality, contemporary linguistic research does not support the supposition that the female sex talks the most. Dale Spender

flatly states: "There has not been one study which provides evidence that women talk more than men, and there have been numerous studies which indicate that men talk more than women." She explains that the myth of the overtalkative woman has arisen because "women have not been judged on the grounds of whether they talk more than men, but of whether they talk more than silent women. . . . When silence is the desired state for women . . . then any talk in which a woman engages can be too much."²²

Films that are "talky" come with the connotations "trivial" and "idle" and, ultimately, "female." Visual images and physical activity, which in the history of the cinema came first (as Adam preceded Eve), are associated with masculinity and "naturally" given precedence.

My argument is that dialogue has been continually discredited and undervalued in film because it is associated with femininity. To some it may appear far-fetched to assert that gender stereotypes have unconsciously affected the evaluation of film aesthetics by filmmakers, scholars, and viewers. But many of the "neutral" or "objective" discussions of film aesthetics betray just such an undercurrent. Listen to Alfred Hitchcock, who viewed every issue of his craft in sexual terms:

Suspense is like a woman. The more left to the imagination, the more the excitement. . . . Movie titles, like women, should be easy to remember without being familiar, intriguing but never obvious. . . . A woman of mystery is one who also has a certain maturity and whose actions speak louder than words. Any woman can be one, if she keeps those two points in mind. She should grow up—and shut up.²³

Kaja Silverman in *The Acoustic Mirror*, Mary Ann Doane in *The Desire to Desire*, and Amy Lawrence in *Echo and Narcissus* have all studied women's roles in American films and noticed how often female characters are silenced or punished for talking. My argument here dovetails with theirs but enters on another level: I believe that all dialogue (regardless of the gender of the speaking character) is associated with femininity, that films that speak "too much" are punished (with criticism from reviewers and academic disdain, and sometimes even low box office receipts). How else can one explain the reflexive, omnipresent pronouncements that dialogue must be "kept in its place"?

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