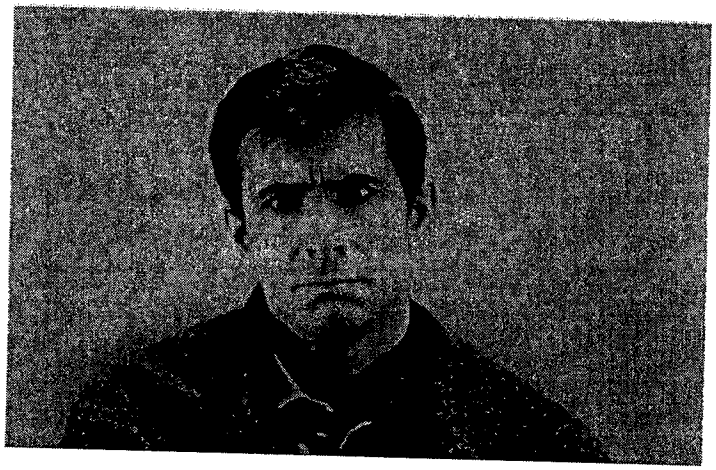

anet Leigh and Anthony
rkins in *Psycho* (Alfred
Hitchcock, 1960).

Michele Chion

THREE THE I-VOICE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

hion's term here is *en nce de corps*: awaiting de- f a body, with a body on der; but it also carries the ition of a body suffering, mething is missing. For an id discussion, see chapter s.]

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2. Itzer, *Le regard et la voix*,

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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