

# The Object of Silent Cinema

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**Abstract:** For psychoanalytic theory, the object of the cinema has always been the gaze. The importance of the gaze as the impossible object around which films are constructed is impossible to question. However, this essay contends that we should consider the importance of the voice as a possible object of a particular type of cinema. We should think of these two objects, the voice and the gaze, as having a historical relationship with each other. The contention here is that while the gaze is the object of the sound film, the voice is the object of the silent film. The absence of voices in silent cinema provides the perfect form for depicting the voice as an absent object. Once characters actually begin to speak on the screen, however, their voices obscure the voice as an absent object, and the result is that the gaze becomes the central cinematic object and preoccupation.

**Key words:** voice, gaze, objet a, Jacques Lacan, psychoanalytic film theory

## Encounter with the Absent Object

Since the emergence of psychoanalysis in the study of cinema, the gaze has played a privileged role. Even though a profound disagreement exists between early psychoanalytic theorists (who contend that the gaze is the eye of the spectator, which parallels the camera) and recent theorists (who locate the gaze as an unseen object in the screen, in what is absent from the visual field), the gaze retains its priority as the cinematic object.<sup>1</sup> However one understands it, the gaze has become the privileged point of analysis because the visuality of the cinema trumps its aurality. Many theorists influenced by Jacques Lacan, including Michel Chion and Kaja Silverman, note the conceptual underestimation of the voice among psychoanalytic theorists of the cinema.<sup>2</sup> They are not incorrect: the psychoanalytic theorization of cinema has for the most part forgotten the voice, in spite of the fact that Lacan, the foundational thinker for psychoanalytic film theory, gave the voice a central role in his system. Like the gaze (the object that dominates the psychoanalytic analysis of cinema), the voice, according to Lacan, is a version of the objet a, the lost object that causes desire.

The lost object is crucial to every art form. It is an impossible object irreducible to any field of representation, which is why it triggers the subject's desire but can never serve as an object of desire that the subject might obtain. Its absence is constitutive of its status as an

<sup>1</sup>The psychoanalytic theorist who first criticized the early conception of the gaze is Joan Copjec. She claims, "film theory operated a kind of 'Foucauldianization' of Lacanian theory." Copjec 1994, p.19.

<sup>2</sup> See Chion 1999 and Silverman 1988.

object. This absence from the perceptual field of the artwork arouses the spectator's desire for aesthetic engagement. Without this central lack in the artwork, it would appear complete unto itself and leave the potential spectator cold. The question is what form the impossible object takes in each aesthetic medium.

As with other arts, the encounter with the impossible object defines the cinema. It testifies to the cinema's importance for the spectator because this encounter plays a central role in the constitution of the subject. Though psychoanalytic theorists have disproportionately focused on the gaze, both the voice and the gaze function as the central cinematic object. We should not, however, see them both as equally important at all times. The cinematic object has a history: despite what might appear self-evident, my claim is that the voice serves as the object of silent cinema, while the gaze plays this role for the talkie. The revolutionary invention of recorded dialogue transforms the psychic experience of cinema for the spectator in a radical way—by introducing the gaze as the cinematic form of the impossible object and causing the voice to retreat behind the gaze's predominance.<sup>3</sup> With the onset of recorded dialogue, all of the talking tends to obscure the voice as an object that could cause the spectator's desire. The encounter with the impossible object changes over the course of cinematic history, but this encounter in its changing form remains the source of cinema's lasting appeal.

When the subject experiences the encounter with the impossible object, it necessarily recognizes the division of its subjectivity and the division of the social authority (or big Other) at the same time. The encounter with the impossible object reveals an opening beyond any authorization, a gap within signification. It is a moment that opens the path to the subject's free act because it shows that the subject is its own authority, that there is no external substantial authority. The enactment of the division in social authority represents the possibility for the subject to act in the face of its symbolic determination and to consider itself as a political being.<sup>4</sup> Because it strips away the authorization that gives the subject its identity, the encounter with the impossible object is always traumatic, and the trauma of this encounter holds the key to the political potential of the cinematic experience for the spectator. Lacan notes the

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<sup>3</sup> As many film theorists and historians have noted, the terms in English for the two modes of cinema are misleading. "Silent cinema" almost always included sound, including music and narration, which seems to render the opposition to "sound cinema" nonsensical. The French terms—*cinéma muet* (mute cinema) and *cinéma parlant* (talking cinema)—have the virtue of a much greater accuracy. It is a contingency of the French language that permits one to emphasize the difference between *muet* and *silencieux* in the cinema, which makes the conceptualization of the voice as object a of *cinéma muet* more clearly articulatable.

<sup>4</sup> According to Lacan, "The objet a is that by which the speaking being, when it is taken up in discourses, is determined. It doesn't know at all what determines it. It is through the object that it is determined as a subject, that is to say, divided as a subject, or it is the prey of desire." Lacan 20011, p. 73.

effect of the trauma with the appearance of this object when he says, "the objet a is not tranquil, or rather, one must say, it could be that it doesn't leave us tranquil."<sup>5</sup> The trauma occurs because the encounter with the impossible object makes clear that the subject exists only as deracinated. The object confirms that subjectivity is not equivalent to symbolic identity. Through the encounter with the absent object, subjectivity loses the security of knowing what it is.

At the same time, the encounter with the impossible object is also the source of the freedom of the spectator in the filmic experience. When one watches or hears this object, one finds oneself confronted with a lack of support for one's identity. This support no longer exists in the Other. Neither the subject nor the Other can offer any sort of foundation for identity. This lack of support is the subject's freedom. Because the subject and the Other are divided and cannot offer a basis for identity, the subject has no complete or permanent symbolic determination. One discovers the path to the freedom of the subject in the filmic experience when the impossible object is in play. The cinema is a privileged site for this encounter with the impossible object.

In order for it to attract the desire of the spectator, every film must include an impossible object, an object that is lacking, a gap in the form of the film. Spectators engage the film because they experience an absence in the film of the film or a deformation in its structure. The way in which a film deploys its lack is at the same time the way it shows its lost object. When one speaks about the cinema, it is almost self-evident that the gaze has the foremost position among the versions of the lost object, but the gaze is not the only possible cinematic object.

### Versions of the Object

Although his notion of the objet a develops and receives many different iterations during his intellectual trajectory, Lacan gives the clearest explication of this object in his *Seminar XI* on the four fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis. For Lacan, the objet a has four forms. He adds the gaze and the voice to the two sexual objects theorized by Freud—the breast and the feces. The gaze and the voice are activities that the subject performs. Even if a subject looks, however, the gaze as objet a is not the act of looking. By distinguishing the gaze from the look (even though there is only one term in French—*le regard*), Lacan turns away from his own earlier theorization of what's at stake in the act of seeing that occurs in his most well-known essay, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the / Function." In this essay (which has had an outsized influence on psychoanalytic film theory), he conceives of the act of looking as the way that the subject establishes its ego and creates an illusory sense

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<sup>5</sup> Lacan, unpublished seminar, session of 1 December 1965.

of bodily wholeness.<sup>6</sup> As he puts it, “For the total form of his body, by which the subject anticipates the maturation of his power in a mirage, is given to him only as a gestalt.”<sup>7</sup> Here, Lacan links the act of looking with the subject’s self-deception. But by the time he develops the concept of the gaze as a form of the objet a, this focus undergoes a profound transformation.

Rather than facilitating an illusory ego identity in the mirror relation, the gaze is the deformation that places subjects in what they see. All the forms of the objet a play a similar disruptive role for the subject. When one encounters a form of the objet a or impossible object, one encounters a fundamental disruption in the field of experience. Lacan defines these forms as the breast, the feces, the gaze, and the voice, and he insists that none of them fit within the subject’s field of experience.<sup>8</sup> Instead, they trouble this field by including the subject within it as what doesn’t fit.<sup>9</sup>

The versions of the objet a are not the objects that the subject wants to have. There is thus an important distinction between the object of desire (what the subject desires) and the objet a or impossible object (what causes the subject’s desire). The impossible object functions as the cause of desire because it is not present in the field of experience and cannot become present, unlike the object of desire. It is the absence of this object that gives it its privilege. It attracts the desire of the subject because it remains always unassimilable for the subject. Even the breast and the feces (when they function as versions of the objet a) are beyond the mastery of the subject. This resistance to the subject’s mastery is the key to their power relative to the subject’s desire.

Clearly, the breast and the feces do not play a significant role in the experience of the cinematic spectator, except perhaps for someone obsessed by the absence of the mother’s breast during the projection or someone else who cannot stop visiting the bathroom instead of watching the film. But these are, clearly, exceptional cases. There is no doubt that the two objects of cinema are the gaze and the voice. This doesn’t explain,

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<sup>6</sup>The most influential work of film theory that takes Lacan’s mirror stage as its point of departure is Laura Mulvey’s classic essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” According to Mulvey, what she calls the gaze enacts a fetishistic process that enables the male spectator to disavow castration by associating it with the female character in the field of cinematic vision. Mulvey’s gaze has nothing to do with Lacan’s understanding of the gaze as a form of the objet a. See Mulvey 1975, pp. 6-18.

<sup>7</sup> Lacan 2006, p.76.

<sup>8</sup> Lacan states, “we have found a certain type of objects, in the final account, that have no use. These are the objects a, the breasts, the feces, the gaze, the voice.” Lacan 1973, p. 269.

<sup>9</sup>The concept of the objet a is unlike Lacan’s other concepts, such as the symbolic, imaginary, and real. That is to say, the concept of the objet a does not exist throughout Lacan’s intellectual career. He invents it, but one cannot be entirely precise concerning the date of its birth. According to Guy Le Gauffey, “the term objet a is not encountered, with the value and signification that we give it today, before the beginning of the 1960s. And contrary to Lacan’s other inventions or discoveries, it is not easy to date this appearance in a simple and clear fashion.” Le Gauffey 2012, p. 13.

however, the fact that almost everyone ignores the importance of the voice in order to analyze the gaze.<sup>10</sup> We certainly live in a visual era, and one could say that the theoretical emphasis on the gaze at the expense of the voice is simply what one would expect in such an era. But this explanation is an explanation that doesn’t really explain anything and thus leaves us unsatisfied. There is another possibility. Perhaps psychoanalytic theorists have privileged the gaze because they have concentrated by and large on the talkie and left silent cinema unspoken for. The examples of the experience of the impossible object in the cinema proffered by psychoanalytic theories comes almost without exception from the era of the talkie.

This is evident in the work of Slavoj Žižek, who is doubtless the most influential psychoanalytic theorist today in the study of cinema. He chooses his examples of the impossible object from the films of Alfred Hitchcock, Krzysztof Kieslowski, and David Lynch, among others. Žižek provides a multitude of cinematic examples, but he rarely talks about silent cinema. When he does, he theorizes the resistance to the talkie as a resistance to the voice. This resistance, according to Žižek, is the result of a desire to remain in the paradise of silent cinema. He writes, “directors like Eisenstein, Chaplin and even Hitchcock were so resistant to embracing sound [because they] ... wanted to prolong their sojourn in the silent paradise where castration is suspended.”<sup>11</sup> For Žižek, there is no lack in the universe of silent cinema. The resistance to voice among early directors is a resistance to the encounter with lack. But perhaps what was happening among directors in silent cinema was not resistance to the voice but resistance to giving it up. The universe of silent cinema looks like a paradise where one is not subject to castration only because we look at it retroactively. There is no escape from the ubiquity of lack, but lack doesn’t always take on the same form. If we look for lack in the form of the voice rather than the gaze, we can find it in silent cinema. The absence of speech makes the voice the lost object.

### Encounter with Absence

It is difficult to hear the absence of the voice in the talkie. Theorists find the gaze and miss the voice because they choose the talkie as their primary theoretical terrain. In this cinema, there is too much noise for the voice, and at the same time the presence of sound gives free space for the emergence of the gaze. There are only a few truly exceptional talkies that are capable of making the voice evident. In the epoch of the talkie, it is difficult to find instances where the gaze doesn’t play the privileged role. But the epoch of silent cinema is another story.

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<sup>10</sup> For my own culpability in privileging the gaze and marginalizing the voice, see McGowan 2007.

<sup>11</sup> Žižek 2012, p. 677.

Because the lost object is an object that arises in its absence, silent cinema offers the perfect arena for the encounter with the voice. There is a direct relationship between the different modes of cinema and the different forms of the lost object. The gaze is the form of the lost object privileged in the talkie, while the voice is the form privileged in silent cinema. When cinema begins to speak, it changes objects. Although several theorists analyze the gaze as the central object of cinema, in fact this version of the lost object does not emerge completely until after the end of silent cinema. In the first epoch of the cinema, the voice is absolutely absent, but it deforms the silent film as such precisely through its absence. Each silent film must struggle with the voice as a central absence. While the gaze functions as an absence in the field of experience of the talkie, the object that serves this function for silent cinema is the voice.

Silent cinema indicates the absence of the voice and renders this absence determinative and significant. In any art, there are absences that are simply not there, that are absolutely removed and outside of the field, like the breast and the feces in cinematic art. We cannot create a psychoanalytic theory of cinema taking the feces as the point of departure, except perhaps for a certain genre of fetishist pornography. This is not only a joke, however. Feces are a complete absence in the cinema. But there are also absences that have the status of a proper absence, that is to say, absences that the art produces as an absence and that it renders palpable for the spectator. This is the case with the voice in silent cinema.

There is little space for the gaze in silent cinema. Of course, one could mention instances where one definitively encounters the gaze, including the celebrated Odessa steps sequence from *Battleship Potemkin* (Sergei Eisenstein, 1925) or the end of *City Lights* (Charlie Chaplin, 1931), but the voice plays an important role even in these scenes that depict an encounter with the gaze. Even when the gaze is evident in silent cinema, the voice takes the upper hand. These scenes offer us the definitive proof of this postulate because they show the gaze in such a powerful fashion. But the voice is even more powerful. The evident and massive absence of the voice determines the structure of these scenes and of all silent cinema. The lack of voices concentrates the desire of the spectator on this object that is not there: silent films are constructed around what they cannot say. Because they have different objects, silent cinema and the talkie are different species of the same art. In order to understand these species, one must distinguish their proper objects.

The politics of a talkie is located around the question of its relationship with the gaze (and secondarily in relation to the voice). If a film maintains the gaze in its absence and demands that the spectator confront this ineluctable absence, the film takes a radical direction and stimulates a political questioning that derives from its own structure. If a film forces the spectator to encounter the gaze as a deformation of the

perceptual field, the film goes even further politically. On the other hand, more ideological films are those that deploy the gaze but then fill the lack that they introduce and thus resolve the problem that they raise.

In the talkie, the gaze creates the possibility for spectators to encounter the trauma of their own unaccounted desire, a possibility that seems not to exist in silent cinema. The absence of the voice creates the image of a cinema without the traumas that are always just around the corner for the spectators of the talkie. From our perspective, it seems as if the universe of silent cinema is a paradise lost. This idea furnishes the basis for Pascal Bonitzer's analysis of the cinema. Describing the transformation from silent cinema to the talkie, he says, "The cinema had been innocent, joyful, and dirty. It is going to become obsessional, fetishist, and icy. The dirtiness doesn't disappear, but it is interiorized, moralized, and moves into the gaze, that is to say, into the register of desire."<sup>12</sup> The idea that the gaze emerges in its proper form with the talkie is convincing, but one must not, following Bonitzer, nostalgically transform silent cinema into a field of pure plenitude. According to this position, lack is not constitutive but avoidable at certain historical epochs and in certain aesthetic modes. If Bonitzer were correct, there would be no way to make sense of why spectators returned to see silent films because these films would lack any free space in which the subject could desire. In order to experience enjoyment, one must desire. One must be a lacking subject. The life of a subject or of an art does not begin with pure enjoyment but with the lack that creates a path toward enjoyment that the subject follows. According to Bonitzer, silent cinema is a space filled with enjoyment and empty of desire. It is cinema before the fall. Romanticism about origins is always a temptation. But it is also always a trap that one has to avoid. When Bonitzer talks about the innocence of silent cinema, he falls into this trap.

But while falling Bonitzer nevertheless places his finger on an important point: it is true that the spectator of the silent film doesn't encounter the gaze in the same manner as it occurs in silent cinema. With the introduction of actual voices in 1927, a cataclysm occurs. This event marks the end of the career of many directors and actors, as recorded fictionally to perfection in *Singin' in the Rain* (Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly, 1952). The film industry undergoes a tremendous upheaval and becomes an actual industry, which it wasn't before. But another more dramatic event also occurs. Cinema's principle object radically changes. The importance of the voice declines while the gaze takes its place. The gaze was always there in silent cinema, but the complete absence of the voice in this cinema obscures the role of the gaze and hinders its functioning as the object that orients the desire of the spectator and the structure of the film. Bonitzer is wrong to say that there is no gaze

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<sup>12</sup> Bonitzer 1999, p. 38.

in silent cinema, but he is right to say that the gaze emerges with the introduction of actual voices in the cinema.

In silent cinema, there is no pure enjoyment but rather another sort, another structure, of desire. The form, as Bonitzer explains, is more open to the public and less interiorized, but it nonetheless maintains the possibility of a confrontation with the trauma of desire in the distortions of the visual field produced by the absence of the voice. Clearly, one cannot hear the voice in silent cinema—that's why it's called silent—but one can see one's lack of hearing. This phenomenon happens all the time.

In silent cinema, the voice reigns over the gaze because of its absence from the perceptual field. One produces a form of the impossible object by removing something from the perceptual field. The lost object emerges through subtraction. The gaze, for example, emerges when spectators lose their mastery over the visual field, as occurs in Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954). When the film's hero Jeff (James Stewart) looks out his window and sees nothing but a cigarette burning in the darkened apartment across the courtyard, we encounter the gaze. We see what doesn't belong in the visual field and what interrupts the spectator's mastery over this field—the desire of the murderer in that apartment. With the cigarette in this scene, Hitchcock introduces a gap in the visual field and demands that the spectator confront its ramifications. After this appearance, we don't see the visual field as a whole—that is, with the eye of mastery—but as the site where desire can explode in the form of the gaze. The visual field has a void in the center where the lighted cigarette is located. But to produce this effect, the film must create an absence at the moment when we expect a presence.

Of course, silent cinema can produce the same effects by introducing absence in the visual field. There is nothing prohibiting it. It's completely thinkable as a possibility. But this cinema has no need to produce the absences like the one that we see in Hitchcock's film. There is an entire field that is absent—the auditory field. This absence opens the door to the appearance of the impossible object in the form of the voice.

To say that silent cinema is silent would be an error that many historians of cinema have already corrected. The absence of speech does not equal silence. There was always music in the cinema—and many silent films had narrators. There was sound. However, silent cinema does not have the voice. When an art lacks the voice but at the same time shows characters that visibly speak, the absence comes to the fore.

The emergence of the voice as the principle object in the cinema is not exclusive to silent cinema. There are talkies that place the accent on the voice, but they remain necessarily exceptional. One encounters the voice, for instance, in Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation* (1974) or Brian DePalma's *Blow Out* (1981), when one confronts a gap in the sound of the film. Kaja Silverman, a theorist of sound in the cinema, spends much time discussing *The Conversation* because this film is one of the few in the era of sound cinema that privileges the voice. But even here,

in a case that seems clearly on the side of the voice as object, one could make a reasonable argument that it is still the gaze that predominates. In her analysis of the final scene, Silverman herself talks about the gaze as much as the voice. She says, "whereas in the opening shot of the film we look at and listen to Union Square through Harry's bugging equipment, here [in the final scene] we look at and presumably listen to him through someone else's."<sup>13</sup> When one analyzes the talkie, even if one wants to emphasize the voice, the gaze manifests itself during the course of the analysis.

### Listening For What We Can't Hear

Turning toward silent cinema, one discovers that the situation is completely different. The theorist who seeks the lost object in silent cinema might begin by looking for the gaze, but the voice becomes perceptible if we listen for its absence. Although few (or no) analyses of silent cinema emphasize the voice, this object comes to the fore when one approaches this form of cinema with the aid of psychoanalysis. When one dives into the analysis of this cinema, one finds everywhere the effects of the voice as the predominant form of the lost object. The traumatic encounter with the point of absence occurs with the voice rather than with the gaze. One can see this in the most important scene in the history of cinema.

The scene on the Odessa steps that Sergei Eisenstein constructs in *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) is visually unforgettable. Clearly, to say that it represents an instance of the voice as object is a provocation. Eisenstein's visual montage advances the art of cinema, not his utilization of sound. But the key moments of this scene have an intimate relationship with the visibility of the absence of the voice. One sees the horror of the massacre through the fact that one hears nothing but music.

First of all, the spectator doesn't hear the cries of the people in the process of being shot. The slaughter occurs with cries in the visual field but without any vocalization. This silence of the people creates a disconcerting effect for the spectator, in which the absence of the voice that cries out functions as the center of the scene. This absence arouses the spectator's desire and actually produces all the movement of the montage in the scene. Eisenstein cuts the shots so quickly and in a completely discordant way in order to approach the silent cries in another manner. The cuts speak what cannot be spoken on the soundtrack. The montage shows the cries of the people indirectly and points toward what remains inexpressible.

The scene focuses on the people who arrive at the shore to congratulate the sailors who have successfully revolted against the officers on their battleship. But state power in the form of well-armed

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<sup>13</sup> Silverman 1988, p. 98.

soliders arrives to suppress any possible birth of revolutionary spirit among the people. When the soldiers march toward the people as soldiers would march to combat and when they pitilessly fire on the civilians, we see the people facing this onslaught begin to cry out. There are certain particularly important sequences, both of which concern a mother who cries out because of her child.

The first series of shots involves a mother who is in the middle of the steps and who is descending hand-in-hand with her child. As this mother flees the firing soldiers, she suddenly discovers that she has lost contact with the hand of her son. She turns around, finds her son bleeding on the steps, and carries him in her arms while walking toward the soldiers. Eisenstein shows her pleading to the soldiers for the life of her seriously injured son. The spectator sees her speak but hears nothing, and this nothing functions here as the impossible object. One sees that her speech has no effect on the soldiers. Their response: fire at her and her son in cold blood. In the montage of this scene, Eisenstein places the spectator in the same position as the soldiers. Neither one nor the other hears the cry of the mother, and she dies with her son because of this deafness. But the deafness of the spectators is also the provocation for their investment in this scene. Out of our deafness, we hear the voice in its absence.

After this series of shots, there is another series that follows more or less the same logic. This series begins with the shot of a mother who pushes her baby in a stroller. The soldiers fire on the mother, leaving her mortally wounded. She cries out in pain and lets go of the stroller with her baby inside. As the stroller moves down the steps, one sees the baby crying in panic because of the fall. The mother is dead, and the baby is in absolute peril. One hears nothing but music at this moment, but one sees what one should hear. One desires through the impossibility of the voice. If the voice were accessible during this fall, its presence would diminish the trauma of the impossible encounter. It is the absence of the voice of the baby—its silent scream—that is at the center of this scene and that gives it its power over the spectator.

Eisenstein localizes the spectator's desire around what is not present in the film's visual field. But the visual field gives clues that put the spectator on the proper track. This is the genius of Eisenstein's film: one sees what one cannot hear, and in seeing this lack of hearing, one experiences the voice as an impossible object. This object predominates in silent cinema, but Eisenstein, especially in this scene, shows it in a way that has no precedent and no equal. The scene rouses the spectator in opposition to despotism through its depiction of the voice. The voice that we don't hear in this scene cries out against despotic violence and demands that the spectator cry out in a way that can be heard. In this scene, Eisenstein develops a politics of the cinema on the basis of the absence that he includes in the scene. Focusing on the absent voices of those suffering points toward the elimination of this type of suffering through political transformation.

The Odessa steps sequence is unequalled in the history of cinema. No other scene has its political power. However, it is not the only scene that places the voice in the fore and that emphasizes the hole that it creates in the representation. Nor is it the only scene that makes clear the trauma of this hole for the spectator.

After the scene on the Odessa steps, the two other most important instances of the voice as impossible object in silent cinema appear in two comedies, in the masterpieces of Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton. The films are *City Lights* and *The General* (Clyde Bruckman and Buster Keaton, 1926). As in all films of the silent epoch, one hears no voice during the course of these films. In this sense, they are not exceptional. But at the end of each film, one suddenly encounters the voice as a trauma that troubles the spectator's position of mastery.

Chaplin notably resists for longer than other directors the physical voice in his films. *City Lights* is a silent film that appears in the epoch of sound. Chaplin disdains the use of speech in his film in order to emphasize the voice as an object. This object is present in its absence throughout the film, but the last scene reveals it in the most traumatic fashion. *City Lights* recounts the story of the Tramp (Charlie Chaplin) who gives a million dollars (that he obtains from a drunk millionaire) to a blind florist (Virginia Cherrill) for a surgery that will give her sight. She doesn't know the identity of her benefactor but, due to a misunderstanding, believes him to be a rich man. When the surgery takes place and she regains her sight, she sees the Tramp and understands after a few moments that he is the source of the money that saved her: she asks if it is he, and he responds affirmatively. At this moment, Chaplin ends the film with a close-up of the Tramp's face. The spectator does not see how the florist reacts, whether she is happy or whether she begins to laugh or even cry. But the most important thing is that one hears nothing from her because no one can speak audibly in the film. The absence of the young florist's voice produces an encounter with the lost object for the spectator.

In the conclusion of this scene, the spectator's desire is oriented around the young florist's desire. Many questions arise because one doesn't hear her. Is she disappointed? Does she love the Tramp, or is pity the only sentiment that she has for him? Does she think of him with gratitude, or does she wish he were someone else, like the millionaire? The encounter with the lacking voice sustains the impossibility of responding to questions like these and leaves the spectator without any hope for the resolution of the problem of desire.

In a talkie, this scene would have been much more difficult or even impossible because sound would change the spectator's expectations. Watching this scene unfold, one would expect the response of the young florist. Her lack of verbal response would be a definitive response, that is to say, a negative response. Saying nothing to the revelation would entail rejecting the Tramp. But the lack of the voice permits Chaplin to

emphasize the complete absence of what she says. The absence of the voice produces an encounter with it.<sup>14</sup>

This encounter has the effect of forcing spectators to confront their own attitude toward those who don't belong. The Tramp is a social misfit, an internal exile within the social order. The florist's reaction to him thus stands in for our own. The absence of her voiced response puts all the weight of this response on the spectator. While watching and not hearing, we must accept the Tramp's proximity to us without recoiling. We must, the film suggests, embrace the Tramp and like figures as potential love relations. Taking up this attitude involves one in a complete political on the personal level. One must embrace what one feels compelled to push away. One must accept the proximity of those who don't belong.

In the final scene of *The General*, one finds oneself in the same situation as a spectator. Thanks to the efforts of Johnnie Gray (Buster Keaton) and his locomotive the *General*, the South wins a battle in the Civil War, and Johnnie receives a reward for his part in the victory: he becomes an officer in the army, which is what his lover Annabelle Lee (Marion Mack) desires in order to marry him. At the beginning of the film, Annabelle refuses to marry Johnnie, despite her love for him, because he is not a soldier. This was an absolute barrier for her that left Johnnie totally distraught. But finally, at the very end of the film, his success on the battlefield makes possible a marriage with Annabelle.

When Johnnie begins to kiss Annabelle for the first time in the film in this final scene, another barrier arises. Because he is now a lieutenant in the army, all the soliders that pass in front of the couple must salute and thus interrupt the kiss. Each time that Johnnie tries to kiss Annabelle, another solidier passes and again interrupts until the end of the film. Johnnie finally begins to salute while kissing, which solves the problem but detracts from the kiss. Unlike the conclusion of *City Lights*, one knows in this case that Johnnie and Annabelle desire each other. They want to kiss. However, they cannot realize their desire because of the procession of soldiers. If Johnnie could speak out loud, he could say that he wants to be left alone with Annabelle. It is thus evident in the film that he cannot speak. He responds to the salutes with his own salute but never says anything. This scene shows an unsurpassable barrier that deforms desire, and this barrier is the absence of the object that could realize desire.

*The General* seems to lack the clear politics of *Battleship Potemkin* or even *City Lights* because it involves someone who achieves acceptance. Johnnie isn't a figure of social nonbelonging like the women on the Odessa steps or the Tramp. He has become part of the ranks of

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<sup>14</sup>The proof that Chaplin treated the voice as an objet a occurs in his next film, *Modern Times* (1936). This film has a completely ambiguous status: some people speak, but others (including Chaplin himself) act as if they as in a silent film. It is impossible to classify the film definitively in the category of silent cinema or the talkie. This gives the voice a spectral quality in the film, especially when one hears it through the loudspeakers (I owe this point to Sheila Kunkle, Metropolitan State University).

society—both through gaining his military commission and gaining a marriage partner. But the insight of Keaton consists in showing how even those who belong to the social order nonetheless persist in their nonbelonging. Even as a full member of the military, Johnnie still cannot attain the complete satisfaction that he anticipated. Here, the voice shows itself as the obstacle to completeness. The encounter with the impossible object doesn't just prompt us to political changes. It also reveals the limit of these changes. The conclusion of *The General* makes evident that even the enjoyment of insiders remains always partial.

The greatest successes of silent cinema concentrate their attention on the voice. The inability to record the voice produces an absence in which we discover the object that animates desire, in the same way that blindness has a positive effect on hearing or the sense of smell. Without vision, one must hear and smell better to get by in the world. One can witness the same phenomenon in the history of silent cinema. The absence of the voice demands the invention of conflict montage. In fact, montage as such exists in large measure thanks to what the first films couldn't do directly with sound. If they could reproduce the voice at the beginning of the era of cinema, it is likely that we would not have montage today. It is always the case that a lack produces an excess.

The fecundity of the voice's absence in the visual field creates a real dread of the talkie among the first film theorists, including, among others, Rudolf Arnheim and Walter Benjamin. The future of the talkie engenders dread because they foresee in the recording of the voice the filling of the absence that constitutes the art of cinema, even if no one puts it this way. According to these theorists, the danger is the evanescence of the art of cinema under the pressure of another more ancient art—the theater.

Béla Balázs is the official representative of this theoretical position. Balázs, who initially has hope for the sound cinema, becomes disappointed after a few years of the development of this new medium. According to Balázs, "The art of the silent film is dead, but its place was taken by the mere technique of the sound film which in twenty years has not risen and evolved into an art. On the whole the film has reverted again to a speaking photographed theatre."<sup>15</sup> With the recording of the voice and the debut of the talkie, one has no need to cut the film in order for spectators to see what they cannot hear. Balázs expresses the fear that the art of cinema would become obsolete with the lack of its lack.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Balázs 1970, p.194-195.

<sup>16</sup> One should also note here the view of Walter Benjamin on the emergence of the voice in cinema. Benjamin believes absolutely that this emergence is nothing less than an almost consciously counterrevolutionary project. In a letter to Theodor Adorno, Benjamin writes, "I see more and more clearly that the launching of the sound film must be regarded as an operation of the film industry designed to break the revolutionary primacy of the silent film, which had produced reactions that were difficult to control and hence dangerous politically." Benjamin 1999, p.295.

The debut of the talkie is a desert for the deployment of the two forms of the impossible object—the gaze and the voice. The introduction of sound essentially prevents the utilization of montage, at the same time that the immobility of the camera limited the capacity for tracking shots. It is not a coincidence that once Eisenstein could include actual voices he turned away from montage. The visual field becomes impoverished as sound emerges. Contrary to what one might tend to believe, there is no great explosion of experimentation with sound during this epoch, except for the case of *Blackmail* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1929), Hitchcock's first sound film. The film begins without the voice and during certain moments Hitchcock introduces gaps and deformations in the soundtrack of the film. But this film remains an exception, even in the oeuvre of Hitchcock himself. For the most part, the initial talkies in the era of sound cinema utilize sound in a simple and synchronized way. The debut of the era of the talkie is not a promising debut.

Eventually, the gaze appears in the talkie, but other than a few exceptions, the voice more or less disappears. Before its quasi-obsolescence—that is to say, before 1927—the voice is the star of the cinema. When actors begin to speak, their voices obscure the voice as the cinematic object. A radical change occurs in the cinema. At one point in time, the voice was nowhere and thus everywhere; now, it is everywhere and thus inaccessible as an object.

We must continue to analyze the voice as the object of the talkie, even if Mladen Dolar has already written an essential work on the subject.<sup>17</sup> Other psychoanalytic theorists today have also tried to emphasize the voice, and many will undoubtedly follow their example. But one should also recognize that something has changed with this object. When characters speak on the screen, it is no longer possible for the voice to play the principal role that it played that it did when they were silent. One cannot lament the introduction of the talkie, but at the same time we must note the theoretical contours of the change that it brings. In 1927, cinema largely loses the voice, but it gains the gaze.

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<sup>17</sup> See Dolar 2006

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