She's Not There

What happens when sound and image part company

BY JOE MILUTIS

Michel Chion calls them poetic; Straub and Huillet denounce them as decadent; David Lynch explores them for their creepiness. Experiments with sound synchronization, whether a material necessity or a calculated mannerism, have always revealed that film is more the product of a collision than a faithful recording of a consistent entity. Times, places, various body parts—a film is a total mess that sometimes needs the magic immateriality of sound to become a coherent whole. From the wreckage of a film's production rises a living, moving, flickering presence that never existed in front of any camera.

Delphine Seyrig's presence in this system of dismemberment, displacement, and subsequent re-presentation through the powers of the voice was a calculatedly unsettling one. Take, for instance, her cameo appearance in Joseph Losey's *Accident*—a film that links its implicit commentary about the accidental nature of coupling and family to a meta-commentary on the "accident" of meaning holding a fiction film together. She and Dirk Bogarde conduct one of the film's many extramarital trysts in pantomime, as if their dalliance has caused a rupture in the soundtrack. We hear their conversation, but their mouths don't move; we see a record player turning, but it is at the very end of the disc. The music we do hear is some atonal harp plucking—a theme song more appropriate for guns with silencers poking out of opera box curtains (unless we imagine that these Oxford types make out to atonal modernism, which may very well be the case). Typically, a non-synchronized voice would be used to signal a flashback. Here, because the dubbed dialogue and the action we see appear to be contemporaneous, yet out of synch, both the temporality of the event and the reconstructive processes of memory are called into question.

sound

Film production itself is deeply asynchronous, although the forces of narrative never allow our minds to admit that, for example, "We'll always have Paris" could have been recorded before anybody had the Paris scenes in the can. In this *Accident* scene, we are left to imagine such backstage reshufflings of time and their implications. If the dialogue was postrecorded, the scene becomes a phantasm justifying a spurious memory; it would stand as a form of authorial control *over* the image. If it was prerecorded (and thus the image played as pantomime) it would illustrate William Burroughs's idea that "human activity is drearily predictable" because it's somehow already embedded on a kind of biological LP. What might have struck approving lotharios in the audience as a romantically spontaneous affair is thereby revealed as merely sex for the lemming-spirited. However, because we do not know where, when, or why the dialogue was recorded, we are instead left with a purely filmic moment, thwarting our imaginative and interpretive impulses.

Seyrig was involved in so many experiments that deflected the voice from her image that it's conceivable that at times she may have influenced how these scenes would be played. We can think of her debut in Robert Frank's *Pull My Daisy*, where she pantomimed the role of a long-suffering bohemian housewife while Jack Kerouac's voiceover narration pulled the puppet strings, or of her amnesiac promenades under the obliquely narrating voices of *Last Year at Marienbad*. (In the latter, we never quite know who speaks its frozen words; it very well may be that the corridors and mirrors, in which impossible meetings with Seyrig—the woman who was never there—are held up as the limit of Robbe-Grillet's aesthetic of pure description, desire's trompe l'oeil.)

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If one were to take a cue from the title of Seyrig's 1977 documentary project *Sois belle et tais-toi* (*Look Beautiful and Keep Your Mouth Shut*), we could interpret these "voiceless" roles as fundamentally disempowering. Yet throughout her career Seyrig turned the displacement of the voice from the body toward more

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intellectual ends. Her 1964 Paris stage performance of Beckett's *Play* exemplified the problematic: her character suffered from the linkage of sight to sound, as spotlights induced reluctant speech from her and two other actors encased up to their necks in urns. In the Seventies, she would become the diva of difficult films, a muse to Marguerite Duras and Chantal Akerman, for whom the avoidance of synchronization was a gesture of *écriture féminine*. Duras notably complained about how cinema "nailed" sounds to an image. Thus, in *India Song*, she casts Seyrig in the role of a character who is "deeply absent"—and that absence is conveyed by multiple, repeating voiceovers of uncertain origin. In the credits, Duras tells us no more than that these voices shall be termed *voix de la mendiante*, *voix intemporelle*, and *voix de la réception*.

Filmmakers don't often play around with these elements, because to have them come apart would seem like an accident, yet accidents have acquired some coin; technological "errors," with hindsight, tend to hint at the machine's very art. The way we receive bad dubbing in a B-film like *Carnival of Souls* migrates from poor production values to uncanny poetry over the years, so that now David Lynch can construct a whole philosophy of film montage and narrative ambience around such disruptions in *Mulholland Drive*. For all that, it still gets reined in as a cliché of cinematic creepiness—a narrativizing impulse first pointed out by Mary Ann Doane and Rick Altman.

The experiments in which Seyrig was involved, however, are much more radical than what Michel Chion calls the "acousmatic"—that unsettling sound without visible origin that is always destined, through the forces of narrative, to be "nailed" in the end (e.g., the voice of Norman Bates's mother, and those of the Wizard of Oz and Dr. Mabuse). Seyrig's performances let us in on the secret that, as Chion points out, "restoring voices to bodies is always jerry-rigging to one extent or another." The acousmatic is only uncanny if we momentarily forget this reality. The displacement of sync that to Seyrig is familiar territory instead provokes the potential of new narrative forms in cinema, a dialogue with its technological underpinnings, and a poetics of montage. For all those great European filmmakers of the Twenties who complained of the coming of sound as an end to the true art of cinema, Seyrig is a kind of deliverance. We might even say that she fashioned herself as the last silent film star. □