

Invisible Storytellers

Stories told by Ghosts

By Jochen Brunow

When Brian held his key note at Writers for Europe in Beaconsfield last year, he used a few wonderful films including his own work as examples. He had another reason to mention them but each of these films used voice over. At the same time all the manuals about screenwriting tell us this is a bad device, it is not filmic to use it. So I thought I should have a closer look at and articulate a few ideas about voice over the next time we meet for Writers for Europe.

Ever since my very first cinematic experiences in the movies, the narrators, the voices emerging from outside the projected image have held a strange fascination for me. It was as if through these invisible Storytellers the movies themselves were talking to me. I was not merely emphatically and anticipatorily involved in the events on the screen, the film addressed itself to me personally, me the one viewer in the crowd ... it was *for my eyes and ears only*. When I was a kid the radio shows I secretly listened to at night, under the blanket, which featured Rock music and especially the Blues, had a similar effect on me. What awe at finding oneself thus addressed directly by a total stranger – savouring the full semantic spectrum of the phrase “it spoke to me” –and thus being not merely addressed but affected.

First published more than a quarter of a century ago, Sarah Kozloff’s book „Invisible Storytellers, Voice-over Narration in American Fiction Film“ provided me with a first insight into the theory behind these emotions. „... the narrator implicitly acknowledges the spectator’s own existence and personhood, such an acknowledgement is a pleasant form of flattery.“ A courageous attempt to rescue the off screen narrator, the book was, as it seemed to me even then, long overdue. Yet it yielded little in terms of results. Film theory as well as practical manuals for screenwriters continued to dismiss the device as too literary and hence unfit for film and do so to this day.

Yet, as Kozloff put it, the observer assumes a narrating voice behind every movie, a „master-of-ceremonies figure“, presenting and controlling the narration. „Adding voice-over narration to a film creates a fascinating dance between pose and actuality, word and image, narration and drama, voice and „voice“. (...) The technique itself draws on two contradictory impulses – a harking back to simple oral storytelling and a modernist (if not postmodernist) self-consciousness regarding narrative discourse.” Take the rough, whiskey soaked voice of Walter Brennan at the opening of Howard Hawk’s “Red River”: „You see, the story of Red River D. started this way. ...“. This prelude makes the viewer feel like they were joining the character at a camp fire. It conveys a sense of immediate involvement in the unfolding of the story, as if one were the private and sole addressee of the narration. Take, on the other hand, the opening sequence of “Le Mepris”, in which cast and production team are not listed in writing but are read out from the off by the

narrator that introduces us to the film, highlighting from the very beginning its artificial nature as an aesthetic product.

Is the still all too common prejudice against voice over a relic from the time when silent film was replaced by talkies? Critics of the day feared the loss of the genre's elaborate visual language and fought for a narrative cinema. "Show, don't tell"¹ became a byword which survives in screen writing manuals to this day. "... the misuse and overuse of narration is not only slack, it's patronizing." as Robert McKee puts it bluntly in "Story" during his strangely vehement attempt at banishing and eradicating these ghostly voices. To be able to evaluate conclusively the significance of voice over for the construction of fiction in film, it is of necessary to understand the fundamentals of hearing and to acknowledge the effect and power of the voice.

Quite some time ago I attended the theatre in the company of two young children. It was a simple Punch and Judy show, yet it taught me the fundamental difference between a recorded image and a technologically recorded voice. My two God-children had until that day been kept more or less away from television and other technological visual media by their parents. A live Punch and Judy show in the company of their God father was, however, deemed wholly acceptable and thus we went. While all the other children in the audience were completely mesmerized by the action of the characters on the stage, Joya and Nicolai kept looking, even staring, around the large auditorium. After a short moment of irritation I suddenly realized the reason for this behaviour. The characters voices were broadcast via speakers that were located at the sides of the large room and the children had been searching for and identifying the actual source of the technologically transmitted voices. They located the voices according to where they actually seemed to come from. With the advent of microports this kind of experience has become commonplace for all who attend theatres and operas. But the technologically reproduced voice is actually physically present in the space and can be localized. And it conveys more than words or song. Hence this Punch and Judy performance provided me with a deeper understanding for why films that feature voice over were such a particular pleasure for me.

A voice cannot be neutral. It always belongs to someone, regardless of how dry it may have been recorded in an aphonic studio. It is always the audible expression of a concrete human being, of an entity in possession of a soul, and carries with it a hint of the real. Even a technologically reproduced voice always unquestionably points to its actual place of origin, to the body which produced it. Thus the voice retains within itself something like a trace of that speaking body. And this is the reason why we never perceive an actual or technologically reproduced voice as totally objective, for it always contains personal information about the speaker, about their age, sex and about the state of their emotions. One could say that body and voice always speak together.

The technologically realized voice was separated from time and space long before the image. Telegraph, telephone, radio and vinyl records made voices audible independently

¹ McKee, Robert, 1941-Story: substance, structure, style, and the principles of screen writing, page 345

from their speakers. Contrary to moving photography, which transported what was obviously only a representation of the human body, the technologically transmitted voice is itself actually present in the space. Perhaps the reason for the intense interest in ghosts which characterizes the 19th and early 20th centuries can be found here.

For the cinema, image and voice were recorded separately but were perceived together when the film was screened. The actors on the screen were accepted as the source of the voices. But talking film only seemingly dispensed with the ghosts. Audience and critics thought to have come an actual step closer to reality. But even Bela Balaz already differentiated sharply between the effects of image and of sound. "No doubt, what we see on the screen is the image of the actor, but we do not see the image of his voice. His voice is not represented but reproduced. It may sound somewhat altered, but it does have the same reality."² But if an off-screen voice narrated the film it was deemed as inappropriate, as a relapse into the times of the silent film narrator or as literary and theatre like and thus ill-fitted to the medium.

I never shared this peculiar distaste or contempt for off-screen narration. On the contrary, I considered it an especially exciting form of genuine story telling in film. Movies that make use of it are among my most intense cinematic experiences. In a barren landscape under a grey sky children play on a rough gravel road. Over this scene we hear the voice of Florence Delay – or Charlotte Kerr if you are in a screening of the version dubbed in German – "The first image he told me about was of three children on a road in Iceland, in 1965. He said that for him it was the image of happiness and also that he had tried several times to link it to other images, but it never worked. He wrote me: one day I'll have to put it all alone at the beginning of a film with a long piece of black leader; if they don't see happiness in the picture, at least they'll see the black." It is the author himself, Chris Marker, who speaks with this female voice which we hear at the opening of "Sans Soleil", the movie which Fritz Göttler declared to be a "turning point in modern cinema"

The darkness of the screen can be more than a mere absence of images: a space from which rises the voice of another woman. The roughness of this voice, dark and full of high pitched overtones and resonances – it has audibly been moulded by alcohol and cigarettes. The words flow into the auditorium with no variation of loudness, with redundancies, in a wholly idiosyncratic rhythm and tell the story of a love, the love for „L'Homme Atlantique“. For a long time the voice of author Margerite Duras evokes images into the completely dark screen until, with a shocking suddenness, the projection commences. The flow of her words weaves pictures into the void, creates an immaterial film in the head of the watching listener which then collides violently with a concrete depiction of reality that suddenly becomes visible.

Or Gerard Depardieu traversing deserted suburbs in the cab of a truck, French landscapes moving slowly past the windscreen and, again, this unique, this unmistakable voice of Duras from the off creating a narrative undertow: „L'Camion“.

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BELA BALAZS: EARLY FILM THEORY: Visible Man and The Spirit of Film, Bela Balazs, Edited by Erica Carter, Berghahn Books, publ. 2010 (original 1930), page 192

The wild leaps of insight and associative links of Jean-Luc Godard or the quiet narrative voice of Johan van der Keukens. But also the sonorous voice of Michael Altens in "Auge in Auge" or of Dominik Graf in "Es werde Stadt!". Experimental films are generally self-reflective and self-referential and explore the origin of the images and sounds they use, thus pointing to their own process of creation. Hence it is far from surprising that invisible off-screen narrators play such an important role in most of them. But the deep fascination, enthrallment and enjoyment those narrators created in me, their invisible voices drawing me into the cinematic flow and involving me into the progression of the film in a way which was decidedly different from that of a montage of events, was not limited to experimental film. To explain these feelings Sarah Kozloff quotes linguist Walter Ong: "... by contrast with vision, the dissecting sense, sound is a ... unifying sense. The auditorial ideal ... is harmony, a putting together ... Because in its physical constitution as sound, the spoken word proceeds from the human interior and manifests human beings to one another as conscious interiors, as persons, the spoken word forms human beings into close knit groups."

Lubitsch did it: "Heaven can wait"; "To be or not to be". Billy Wilder did it frequently and with lucid delight: "Double Indemnity"; "The seven year itch"; "The Apartment" to name only three. Ford did it, Hawks did it, Huston did it, the Coen Brothers do it. Even the Europeans don't want to stop; Kubrick did it and Petersen did it, Resnais did it, Godard, Wim Wenders and Louis Malle do it. With this whole host in favour, how can anyone seriously believe that these laughable attempts at discrediting and belittling voice over narration could succeed in any way? Especially in the works that are top in any canon of cinematic history, beginning with Orson Welles' „Citizen Kane“, voice over is widely used, which makes it hard to understand its consistent condemnation throughout all dramaturgical literature.

In her annex to „Invisible Storytellers“ Sarah Kozloff chronologically lists both title and director of all films that employed voice over narration between 1939 and 1987. In addition to "Laura" by Otto Preminger we find 17 further movies for 1944. In 1948 there were 23, among them Max Ophuls' „Letter from an unknown woman“ and Orson Welles' „The Lady from Shanghai“. The 1960s see a further rise in this number with a much smaller increase during the 1980s.

Christina Heiser, who expands on Kozloff in her book "Erzählstimmen im aktuellen Film" – "Narrating voices in contemporary cinema" writes "An increased and more complex use of voice over narration only began in the 1990s. A new generation of directors, who had grown up with the films of New Hollywood and were fed up with the manipulative and straight forward story lines of the contemporary main stream, reintroduced an experimental approach to narrative structures into American film." She locates another reason for the increased use of voice-over in self-reflective films in the altered visual habits of the audience, brought about by the now possible ceaseless consumption of movie classics on cable and pay TV channels, the visual style of music videos and commercials, the use of other audio-visual media and the spread of home cinema systems and DVD technology.

Today the strange discrepancy regarding the situation of invisible narrators in film is exacerbated more and more: while voice over as a means of cinematic narration is still condemned theoretically in screen writing manuals, voices from the off fill cinema auditoria and immerse their audiences into an expanded narrative space. And this is not limited to post-modern, non-linear productions but extends, for example, to historical films like the voice of author Dominic Graf in "Beloved Sisters".

In contrast to Kozloff's slim but weighty volume in which the intention of rescuing narration is reflected even in its language, Heiser examines the phenomenon with scientific neutrality and thoroughness over nearly 400 pages and in a style which does not always prioritize ease of consumption. She meticulously retraces the historical development of voice over narration and engages the reader by supplying one paradigmatic example for each of her major points. Orson Welles' use of voice is still linked to the invisible voices of radio, "Sunset Boulevard" established voice over for Film Noir. She terms appearance of the narrating voices in the Nouvelle Vague "a transcription" while focussing mostly on the works of Godard. Fassbinder's canon serves as an example of voice over in German film, "Taxi Driver" represents the appearance of the invisible narrator in New Hollywood and "Apocalypse Now" introduces technological innovations and a modified world of sound. Voice over in current Film Noir is explored through "Memento", "Fight Club" and "Sin City". Finally, Heiser provides an in depth analysis of Charlie Kaufmann's "Adaptation" which untangles its many multiphone narrators and describes the film's narration as a puzzle dissolving all conventions.

Heiser dedicates a whole chapter to the emancipation of female off-screen narrators: "If voice-over was deemed to be an infantile means of narration, this did not prevent female narrators from being shunned. The reason for this was, according to Kozloff, that women were seen as substantially less credible narrators than men." In her study, covering all films up to 1987, Kozloff found one film only with a female narrating voice, a situation, which in the present day, has seen a complete change. The most well-known example is perhaps Jane Campion's "The Piano" in which narrator and protagonist Ada is also mute. There is no physical reason for her muteness, it is a revolt against a narrative tradition dominated by men, in which women were perceived as unreliable gossipers. „The voice you hear is not my speaking voice“ Ada opens the movie, „but it is my mind's voice.“ But it is not only in US TV shows that one gets the impression that it is the female narrator, who is dominant today: „Sex & the City“, "Desperate Housewives" and a third is a prominent presence in contemporary cinema as well: „Stranger than fiction“. „The Tree of Life“, and „The Curious Case of Benjamin Button“ to name only some other examples.

Heiser attributes great vocal power to voice over narration and claims that this stylistic device presents narrative cinema in its most original form and that the oral telling of a story goes directly to the root of narration itself. Leaving all scientific enjoyment of detail pertaining to the analysis of the different forms of voice over aside, these two books convey one point very emphatically: the image on the screen may still mostly be two-dimensional but the imaginary space into which the observer is immersed when watching a talking movie has always been more than that, richer and much more varied. It is not merely the expansion of the projected space beyond the screen. The acoustic dimension endows the moving image with a complexity that enables the full immersion of the viewer. The market driven promotion of 3-D is no prerequisite for this, rather any

efforts on the visual plane need to be substantiated acoustically. The more ruptured and breathless the montage of images becomes the greater the significance of sound as “unifying sense”. For this reason the technological development of cinematic sound systems quickly surpassed simple stereo effects, with surround sound creating an immersive effect that differs completely from that of the 3D image.

Even the great screenwriter William Goldman included the following sentence in his “Adventures in the Screentrade”: „In a movie you don’t tell people things, you show people things.“ It is high time that books dealing with the writing of screen plays dispensed with this one-dimensional and limited view. Those authors who fully realize the significance of sound in film will not be deterred by the prejudice against voice over narration. For it in no sense weakens the image but is a wonderful expansion of the pictorial space imagined by the viewer. It is a genuinely cinematic form of narration and for me, at least, one of the greatest among many others.

The river Rhine, the Thames, the Spree and the equally much sung about river Moldau they can speak, they have a voice. And may be they will be the narrators of the Stories on their waterfront.