

Words & Moving Images: Essays on Verbal and Visual Expression in Film and Television

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Words and Moving Images is a widely varied collection of essays, related in time and space (most of the work was presented at the 1983 Film Studies Association of Canada Conference), and in general theme (words and images in the cinema). Through this theme, Canadian scholars address their primary concerns — the ontology of the photographic image, feminist discourse in film, modernism, film styles and genres — in short, the primary concerns of film scholars almost anywhere.

The book is a great deal of fun to read. It reminds me of a collection of mystery or science-fiction stories: while more or less related to the others generically, each presents its own little methodological and substantive problems and solutions. It is a must for Canadian film scholars and students: the scholarship is a virtual sampler of approaches to contemporary film studies; and what makes this book truly unusual — and a pleasure — is that the objects studied are almost invariably Canadian films and filmmakers. There is a lot to wrestle with here, to argue with, and a lot to learn.

Do words pose a threat to theatre? Actors speak and audiences listen hard to hear what the actors have to say. Theatre is a spectacle defined first by its dependence upon a verbal text. But words seem to pose a threat to the cinema: film doesn't "proclaim," it "shows." Audiences don't listen so much as enter into a world, watching, deciphering. The text of the film is not then primarily verbal, but visual — manipulations of images of concrete time and space. Speech in the cinema must remain the speech of everyday life, the word subordinate to the image. So goes the common argument, and it is this popular aesthetic canon which justifies, loosely, this collection of essays, reposing the question (as well as many others) from a variety of historical, critical and theoretical perspectives.

The first two chapters (a discussion and an essay) confront problems posed by one of Canada's most interesting filmmakers, Michael Snow. Snow is an articulate proponent of a modernist conception of the equality of materials of expression in the cinema: words, as space and time, are a plastic material to be manipulated by the artist. At the limit (as in Snow's film *So is This*), words become images, physically. This interview is a good entry to the book, because it challenges the aesthetic canon mentioned above, clearing the way for a reasonable discussion of words and images, rather than words *versus* images. Bruce Elder is then inspired by Snow's work to challenge another historically important aesthetic and metaphysical position: the ontological realism of the photographic image. According to Elder, Snow's *Presents* nails down the coffin on the "metaphysics of presence." The

image is not categorically and ultimately an index, a sign existentially linked to the object it represents (as a death mask is linked to a face, or a footprint to the being which made it): "Snow has shown that distorting a photographic image can cause us to lose our faith that it is bound to reality by a primordial ontological bond..." In fact, Snow "uses these images to question whether any photographic/cinematographic images are truly indexical" (p. 40).

Putting aside the question of whether it is actually Snow or Elder using these images to that express purpose, I wonder if this argument isn't just flogging a dead horse. This is the age of electronic image processing, of creating colors for black/white films, of creating buildings for skylines, of taking people out of photographs, and putting others in — of "photographing" things which don't exist and never will. Bazin's metaphysics are suspect, of course, but that will surprise no-one anymore. Bazin was wonderful in describing a psychological fact of the photograph: that, given even a marginally identifiable object (given certain iconic characteristics), the image evokes a very strong sense of presence. You don't have to believe in the manifest presence of God or the eternal essence, spiritual or otherwise, of man and things, and you don't have to be a partisan of the "metaphysics of presence," to know that the photographic image carries with it a very strong ontological "value," a presence which is a psychological, if not a metaphysical, fact (just look at any family album). Snow's films do not "argue" against this power, they are simply evidence that the photograph can be manipulated beyond its range — that this power is neither defining nor all-encompassing. Is it really relevant (to an assessment of Snow's work) to proclaim that "Michael Snow's genius in *Presents* is to have challenged the foundational assumptions of this metaphysics..." (p. 39)? When Elder does at last leave behind his struggle against Bazin the philosopher, he offers a nice compromise which reflects the thinking of more recent film theorists (Mitry, Metz): there is always a double game in film, of presence and absence. "It is this complex alliance which permits presence to turn into absence and back into presence again and so makes possible the phenomenon of re-presentation" (p. 45). Elder then does an interesting job of tracing the work of this double game through Snow's film.

From impassioned and intricate argumentation, one jumps next into a much less supercharged discourse. (The effect is almost shocking.) Michel Larouche offers an overview of the various ways in which words are used in contemporary experimental film. He takes us from the devaluation of the seamless, visually-based narrative structure, to the hypervaluation of the word within the narrative tradition (Duras), and finally to "postmodernist" attempts to break all realist/narrative links. Here image and word are freed, to the ends of textual/perceptual play. Michael Snow's *Rameau's Nephew* is a virtual encyclopaedia of image-sound relationships. "Dans le cinéma de la post-modernité, c'est l'énonciation qui l'emporte à la fois sur l'énonciateur (cinéma narratif classique) et l'énoncé (films de Duras, Syberberg, Schroeter, Straub, etc.)" (p. 62).

"Where and when is whose voice

uttering whose thought through whose mouth and what for?" With this terrific quote from Yvonne Rainer, Kay Armatage interrogates the use of the voice in the cinema, which has recently become an important thrust of feminist film theory and practice. *Words and Moving Images* presents two interesting attempts to apply the theory to Canadian works, inspired by a school of post-Lacanian feminist theory which posits a "politics of the voice." Both Armatage and the essay by Brenda Longfellow find in the non-traditional use of the voice a place for feminist deformation and subversion of an essentially male language. Armatage suggests that "Against the theorization of the look in cinema as phallic support of voyeurism and fetishism, the voice appears to lend itself readily as an alternative to the image, whereby the woman can make herself heard" (p. 73). She describes in *Sifted Evidence* (Patricia Gruben) the development of an "écriture féminine" based upon a use of voice which, rather than incarnating a patronizing, simplifying, and generalizing omniscience, quests and explores. "Such an *écriture féminine* would be characterized by ambiguity, multiplicity, wordplay, enigma, disguise; it would be metaphoric, interrogative, incomplete" (p. 72). Her description of the theoretical literature is concise and quite good. Theory also seems to be the strongpoint of Brenda Longfellow, who, too, offers an impeccable and very useful summary of post-Lacanian feminist film theory. Longfellow goes on to describe the formal strategies of two films by women — *Strass Café* (Lea Pool) and *Journal inachevé* (Marilyn Mallet) — in terms of a "conjunction of feminism with Post-Modernism... most specifically in their concern with mapping a feminine subjectivity in relation to language and practices of writing" (p. 81). Unfortunately, while these two films clearly share certain modernist and feminist impulses, they are, as she admits, very different films — as different, formally and thematically, as they are similar. Her argument becomes difficult to follow, as she explores, in separate sections, the specific aspects of feminist film practice which each film embodies. Finally, she seems to have to force them back together again into the same discourse, finding common ground only in the very broadest types of generalizations, obscuring the nature of the specificity of an *écriture féminine*.

The next pair of essays form a nice couplet, complementing each other so well that they almost seem to rhyme. The subject here is poetry and film, first through the working experience of an experimental filmmaker, Richard Hancox, and second through a definition and discussion of the "poetry-film." In his "personal statement," Hancox describes a growing dependence on poetry in his creative process (from superimposing a poetic text over images to complete *Waterworks*, to working with the more egalitarian in *Beach Events*). William Wees then describes and makes a case for the particular powers of the "poetry-film" (a film which incorporates "a verbal poetic statement in narrated or captioned form" in Herman Berlandt's definition [p. 107]). Not surprisingly, Wees' arguments parallel those made for Symbolist poetry as a privileged instrument of awareness, evoking a dynamic, even dialectical fusion of phys-

ical, emotional and intellectual activity. "Perhaps the poetry-film is the closest approximation we have to "handing over sensations bodily," when words and images touch, simultaneously, that part of the mind attuned to visual perception and that part occupied with verbal language" (pp. 112-13). There is a long history of this type of discourse in film aesthetics, leading from Eisenstein to Mitry, and directly tied to Romantic and Symbolist poetics. Wees here applies the tradition to the "poetry-film" in particular, specifying both the powers and limits of the genre.

From genre the book moves to two auteur-oriented critiques: "Voiceover Narration in Carlos Saura's *Elisa, Vida Mia*," and "François Truffaut and the Language of Romanticism." Wendy Rolph provides a minute, convincing analysis of the ambiguously shifting and destabilizing voiceover-image relationship in *Elisa*, as well as a brief cultural and critical overview of Saura's work. What I found most interesting in her description of image-sound disjunction were its quite specific parallels with the earlier critiques of Armatage and Longfellow. Here, though, far from the context of feminist vocabulary and ideology, the emphases — and thus the conclusions — are different. Rolph focuses above all on the "alienation effect" — which forces the viewer "to re-examine his own expectations and his modes of understanding, and to acknowledge the complexities of the transactions involved in his own negotiation of the text" (p. 122). Armatage and Longfellow might have chosen to stick closely to this approach in their analyses of *Strass Café*, *Journal inachevé*, and *Sifted Evidence*. Rolph might have adopted their perspective. Each approach is equally valid in theory (the only real question is whether an approach is appropriate in a particular case) — and, as these essays demonstrate, each inevitably determines its own conclusions.

Bart Testa's approach to Truffaut certainly seems appropriate: language and Romanticism — what could be more Truffaut? Testa first forges the link between Bazin and Romanticism, to finally demonstrate the gulf which existed between Bazin and his protégés, even the most romantic, Truffaut. Unfortunately, in this beautifully written essay, Testa, through no fault of his own, falls victim to the anthologizing process: while his discussion of Bazin establishes a background against which he can expose Truffaut's own conception of and use of Romantic language, it is simply too much for the reader, who has already been treated to Bazin and the issue of ontology early on. (Though the arguments are considerably different, the presence in this volume of two essays hinging upon Bazin attests to a streak of quaintness in contemporary Canadian film scholarship.) Testa contends that while Truffaut acknowledges certain instrumental values for Romantic language in the definition of the self, in the end it provides nothing close to the prophecies, revelations and absolute truths proclaimed by its adherents (including Bazin). In Truffaut, "Romantic literature is celebrated as the vehicle of self-discovery, but one that does not engender a transcendental consciousness... Indeed, those who would shape themselves to the drama of Romantic quests are seen in Truffaut's films as

comic failures" (p. 138).

Testa's analysis of the limits of Romanticism reads nicely against the theory developed for the "poetry-film" by Wees. Again, these couplings provide one of the great pleasures of *Words and Moving Images*. The next three essays, however, simply do not feel at home here: a description of how Wyndham Lewis uses film as a metaphor in his writings; a philosophical argument for censorship based on social utility rather than on morality; and an analysis of how a film on that great Canadian, Ronnie Hawkins, does everything it can to suppress the fact that Hawkins is neither great nor Canadian. I guess the best way to look at the inclusion of these three essays is simply to say that we are provided a surplus of riches. Each has its charm. The essay on censorship might even be seen as relevant to the concerns of the volume (one of the issues discussed – the question of verbal vs. visual censorship in the cinema – is a fascinating one). But generally speaking, my momentum ground to halt as I moved through this section of the book. Even if, as Maurice Yacowar puts it in his essay on Hawkins, "the price of cultural nationalism is eternal belligerence" – I could only wonder if this was truly the appropriate arena.

These feelings were strengthened by the last two chapters of the book, essays which do complement each other, and fulfill the original aspirations of the volume. Denyse Therrien provides a capsule history of the use of language in Québec cinema between 1960 and 1980. She describes an early period of intellectualizing ("On réfléchit, on discute. On verbalise plutôt que d'agir" [p. 195]), a later period of radical male belligerence ("Il dit n'importe quoi, il dit tout, il le dit comme ça vient, souvent n'importe comment" [p. 197]), and finally, a more realistic and self-confident linguistic coming-to-terms with everyday social and human realities. Therrien interprets the significance of these linguistic changes in the context of the political evolution of Québec society. Although Therrien ends this useful study with the cinema of the late 1970's, she makes a wonderfully provocative statement at the beginning of her essay, suggesting parallels between the economics, politics, and cinemas of the 1980's (*Les Plouffe, Maria Chapdelaine*) and 1940's and '50s!

In the last chapter, Seth Feldman describes – in contrast to the linguistic fecundity analyzed by Therrien in *Le cinéma québécois* – a lack, an atrophy of language in the English Canadian cinema. According to Feldman, this absence reflects the fact that the English Canadian has no linguistic identity. "Within the flux of Canadian multilingualism the language of any conversation is understood to be nothing more than a lingua franca, a temporary agreement entirely dependent upon the immediate situation... the national identity exists as nothing more or less than the compromises needed to contain it" (p. 206). The cinematic response to this absence of identity generally takes one of two forms: a "pantheistic silence" (*The Grey Fox*), or submersion in the voice of the all-knowing (the voice of Grierson). And thus we come full circle, back not only to the voice of the father, but back as well to Michael Snow and *So Is This*: "Perhaps this is the solution: the reduction of language to a level compatible with the linguistic chaos of the Canadian milieu... Snow's playful bat-

tering of this landscape of signification is, finally, a native's answer to the native silence" (p. 212). A delightful ending for this book.

Like the English Canadian, dumbstruck before the vast landscape, so *Words and Moving Images* leaves us gazing over the immense panorama of Canadian film scholarship. Around this

central theme are represented most of the mainstream approaches to academic film theory and criticism. Not only can the reader investigate the specific theme of words and images, from a variety of critical, historical and theoretical perspectives, but the volume's great value makes it indispensable for anyone wanting to "have a look around" the world of

film scholarship in Canada.

(A final note – while the book has a nice format and is beautifully printed, now much worked over, it has, alas, fallen into a pile of pages at my feet.)

Brian Lewis ●



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