

From Disjunction to Discordance

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“Sound, Music and the Moving Image”, this conference’s title, seems simple enough when read the first time, but on further consideration, it is a challenge in itself. In several ways, it challenges our usual assumptions about the relationship between acoustic and visual materials. First, it gives sound precedence over music and image: all begins with sound. Then comes music, which has been described as organised sound, and then, just beyond the limits of these two acoustic materials the image suddenly materialises. Second, it gathers together what our culture separates, sound and music. Between sound and music, a comma only expresses here a little fold within a deeper material and perceptive continuity. We cannot hear the difference between sound and music; we only negatively feel it, in the silence: “Sound, (*silence*) Music *and* the Moving Image”. The audible and dramatic articulation is rather between the acoustic field *and* the moving image. It is an articulation between two material fields, between two perceptive functions, between two deceptive phenomena. For all these reasons, this title is a challenge.

This paper is a humble attempt to take up this challenge, by considering—to come back to language—the title’s conjunction “and”, this “and” that moves between sounds and images, this moving “and” that circulates between the ear and the eye. Precisely, this conjunction will here move between voices and bodies, between still pictures and panoramic shots, between the wind and the desert. First, we will try to show how this circulation builds a particular space-time. Second, we will discuss, briefly, how this particular space-time reconfigures the relationship between perception and memory. Ultimately, the articulation between acoustic and visual materials, between the acoustic and the visual perception, will be a relationship between the senses, the memory and the imaginative processes’. When a moving “and” circulates between sounds and noises and voices and movements and bodies and images, the cinema can create a new relationship between our fundamental faculties. This moving “and” we will find it at work in one of the first sequences of *The Passenger* directed by Michelangelo Antonioni (1975). The reporter David Locke is back from a hard and unsuccessful expedition in the desert. At his hotel he finds his neighbour David Robertson dead. Suddenly conscious of their resemblance, Locke takes the decision to trade his identity for the one of Robertson. The sequence we are especially interested in is the one wherein Locke, back in his own room, meticulously unglues from his passport his identity picture and glues it on Robertson’s one. Let’s take a look at it.

Projection: *The Passenger*, chapter 6, from 18:49 to 23:27.

If we follow the moving “and” here, and try to describe the space-time relationships between sound and image, we find a system of coupling and unhooking. The relations between sounds and images constantly change and therefore constantly reshape the space-time. The character’s reactions and camera movements force us to listen again, to redefine what he heard, to

switch temporalities and rebuild the space. We hear the noise of someone knocking at the door. At first, we hear it as the acoustic perception of the character that looks off-screen towards the door. But when David Locke says, “Come in”, without moving his lips, we suddenly are in his head and in his memories. If the door is immediately beside him, the noise of the door is somewhere else, in the past and in Locke’s memory—and if he allows us to go in, it is into himself, so to speak. But another camera movement will change everything. We discover that the past does not take the form of a personal memory here, but the form of a material memory: the conversation between Locke and Robertson has been recorded and a mechanical device independent of the character now replays it. And this recording will create a new off-screen: not an immediate dependency of the visible space, but another time, a past just beside the present, that we reach by following the paradoxical continuities of the recorded conversation and the camera pan.

Of these relationships between sounds and images, we can now identify their temporal aspects. First, the changing relationships between all the elements (the character’s gazes, the camera movements, sounds, noises, voices, etc.) express the polymorphic nature of time: we hear an actual present that becomes an audible past and then a visible past before it becomes an audible past again while we rediscover the visible present. Each new relationship between sounds and images is a new temporality: we go from an actual present to a bygone time, to a recalled experience, to a repeated action. Second, each interaction between audible and visible elements expresses the coexistence of time sheets: each new temporality does not eliminate a former one. While we see the present, we hear the past; while we hear the present, we see the past. A visible present opens onto an audible past invisible off-screen; an audible past is made visible by incorporation in the visible present; a visible past for a moment coexists with an audible present. Each audiovisual combination is a different form of temporal coexistence: we hear the recorded past (the voices) in the middle of the audiovisual present (Locke’s becoming); when the audible present (the ceiling fan noise) disappears we realize that the past or the sound of the desert wind was only covered by it.

Of course, these audiovisual combinations change the off-screen’s nature. The voices dwell in it, and fill the visual not-seen with a specific presence that can change its nature. As Gilles Deleuze would put it, the off-screen usually has a relative aspect. The off-screen is always linked to a visual space, it naturally extends the space seen in the image: the sound-off prefigures what it comes from, something that will soon be seen, or which could be seen in a subsequent image. This relation is that of a given set with a larger set which extends or encompasses it, yet which is of the same nature (TI, 236). But here Antonioni makes slight, though still important, shifts. Sound still prefigures what will soon be seen in a subsequent image. What we hear and will see is still immediately beside what we actually see. But what we hear and will see is not a space that is the natural extension of the actual visual space. What we hear does not have the same make-up as what we see: it is not an actual present, but a past, and when it finally comes visible it keeps its original nature. The voices are not situated in the same space-time as the action; only the tape-recorder is. The voices come from a moment that precedes the actual present, from a before, but a before that is repeated in the actual present, a before still coexisting with a now. Here, not only the voices come from the past, but from a past included and repeated in the present that can foreshadow a future and make it a destiny. The recorded voices bring together to form a whole the past, the present and the future.

Via these sound and image relationships, multiple sheets of time coexist. Moreover the system of coupling and unhooking finds ways to make this temporal coexistence without any ruptures, cracks or gaps. The disjunction between the recorded voice and the visual elements, between the past and the present, is not an exclusive but an inclusive one. Because one does not at first see those who speak, but only a character who listens, especially to himself, then because one does not see either who speaks or who listens, but only an empty white wall and a desert, one is transported from the present to the past and back to the present again without any discontinuities. The different combinations between the seen and the heard and the unseen and the unheard, are different and cumulative ways to go from the present to the past by partial overlapping. Therefore, not only does the audible past coexist with the visible present, but also shifts from one to the other by a continual visual and acoustic movement of coupling and unhooking. The two camera pans and the unreeling of the recorded tape are the forms that this movement in continuity takes. On one side, pans trace the abstract curve from what has happened to what will happen, and the room space stands for what is buried in it—an encounter, a past life, a death. On the other side, the recorded voice recreates the past event and appeal for an event to come, but always set against deadening visuals: a white wall, a desert landscape, and empty shelves. It is as if the recorded voices are set against visual images themselves organised like so many temporal sections, time rooms, in variable order according to the camera pans. Temporal strata are re-linked on top of irrational movements, pans that no longer belong to either the past or the present and are valid for themselves. Like Antonioni says, the camera gains autonomy, it stops following the movement of the character or directing its own movement at them, to carry out constant reframing as functions of imagination or memory (AV, 169).

The conversation also gains autonomy by being separated from the bodies. Its rhythm too is autonomous, the result of its recitation only. The silences express bodies' hesitations no more; they are in themselves the lapse of time it takes to the present for converting into past, or the other way round. It is the rhythm of the recorded conversation, its own logic, its links, its knots, its splits, in other words its own periodicity that makes possible the movement from one coexisting sheet of time to another. The recorded voices come from the past, the image unfolds itself in the present, and it is the unreeling of the conversation's tape, its temporal logic that builds the bridge between these two temporal cosmos. To have this power the conversation needs a great autonomy. The conversation has to get rid of talking bodies' anchored in their present action. It also has to get rid of the personal memory that would keep voices in the present action of remembering. It has to get rid of the body and the soul of Locke and Robertson. That is why the second aspect of Antonioni's work here is the isolating of the pure speech-act: this act must be torn first from its body support, then from its magnetic support. This tearing-away presupposes a certain resistance of the body and the magnetic support, and all the more a special effort from the senses and the imagination and the memory to draw the speech-act out of it. Not only do the voices need to be recorded, but also even when they get their body back they will need to keep the characteristics of a recording: the regularity of an editing and the splitting in two. The Robertson's speech will always keep the form of a carefully edited interview. Locke will listen to himself, he will hear himself think and will recognize his thoughts as ones of another self. These are conditions of strangeness that will reveal the pure speech-act. It is not an interactive speech-act, a dialogue in the strict sense, because the one who talks is an auditor of his own speech. It is not an indirect or reflexive speech-act (a voice-over in the strict sense). It is a free indirect speech: a passage from the indirect to the direct, or the other way round. The direct speech keeps the marks of an indirect origin, of its recorded status, and does not allow itself to be

fixed with the first person: when we finally see Robertson on the patio, and Locke who joins him, for a long time their voices float over their heads and their bodies before each voice anchors itself to its proper face and mouth. As if one character could have dub the other one.

In the end, these spatiotemporal relationships between sounds and images are a redefinition of memory and its relations to perception. We believe that what makes a subject is the harmony or the concord of his faculties: the I who sees is the same as the I who recalls, imagines, thinks. Consequently, what I recall was first seen by me: not only is it the same subject who sees and recalls, but he also sees and recalls the same object. What about *The Passenger*? What becomes of the relation between perception and memory? The sound recording concretely shows the independence between perception and memory. It shows that while we perceive we recorded or we recall in advance. While I am seeing a device is recording or remembering in its own independent way. Therefore, the past that comes back to us we never perceived, it is not a former perception; the memory has constituted itself by itself. What the recorder has memorised Locke never perceived—he performed; it is only now that he can perceive it. The perception sees something and the memory records another one. The past was never perceived, it never was an actual perception, it never was present to us but always unconscious, an always and already past. Memory is the perception's unconscious. When we recall the past we recall something that was never lived or performed but immediately recorded or memorised. Therefore the subject is a multiple one: the I who perceives is not the one who records and recalls; they are two. For one David there is a Robertson and a Locke, a sound memory and an actual perception of it. That is why the contradictions between image and sound no longer allow us simply to confront the heard and the seen bit by bit, or one by one: their role is to induce a system of unhooking and intertwining between memory and perception which in turn determine the different presents and pasts. From a material and perceptive disjunction we get a discordant subjectivity.

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