Introduction

The Study of Filmic Speech

I'd like to start with a scene from William Wyler's *Wuthering Heights* (1939), a film I admire, even though many would dismiss it as the epitome of Hollywood pretentiousness—an overwrought, unfaithful, "prestige" adaptation of a famous novel. The scene that interests me—nay, haunts me—occurs perhaps a third of the way through the film, when headstrong, frivolous Cathy (Merle Oberon) comes down to the kitchen to tell the servant Ellen that her rich, upper-class neighbor, Edgar Linton, has just proposed to her. What Cathy does not know, but the viewer does, is that Heathcliff (Laurence Olivier), the poor, rough foundling her father adopted years ago, is in the outer passageway listening in on the conversation. The scene proceeds as follows:

Heathcliff opens the door to the kitchen. His hands are bleeding.

HEATHCLIFF: Has he gone?
ELLEN: Heathcliff, your hands—what have you done?
HEATHCLIFF: Linton—is he gone?
ELLEN: What have you done to your hands? Oh, Heathcliff . . . What have you been doing?
HEATHCLIFF: I want to crawl to her feet, whimper to be forgiven, for loving her, for needing her more than my own life, for belonging to her more than my own soul.
CATHY: *(from the other room, off camera)* Ellen . . .
HEATHCLIFF: Don't let her see me, Ellen.
ELLEN: No.

Heathcliff hides in the outer vestibule.

CATHY: Ellen, I wondered whether you were still up.
ELLEN: Has he gone?

All quotations of film dialogue, unless otherwise noted, have been transcribed from the screen. For details of screenwriters, studios, and so on, see the Select Filmography.

CATHY: Ellen, I've got some news for you.
ELLEN: But the kitchen's no place for that. Let's come into the parlor—
CATHY: Come here.
ELLEN: Please, Cathy.
CATHY: Sit down. Listen. Ellen, can you keep a secret? Ellen, Edgar's asked me to marry him.
ELLEN: What did you tell him?
CATHY: I told him I'd give him my answer tomorrow.
ELLEN: But do you love him, Miss Cathy?
CATHY: Yes. Of course.
ELLEN: Why?
CATHY: Why? That's a silly question, isn't it?
ELLEN: No, not so silly. Why do you love him?
CATHY: Because he's handsome and pleasant to be with.
ELLEN: That's not enough.
CATHY: Because he'll be rich someday. And I'll be the finest lady in the county.
ELLEN: Oh. And now tell me how you love him.
CATHY: I love the ground under his feet, the air above his head, and everything he touches.
ELLEN: What about Heathcliff?
CATHY: Oh, Heathcliff. He gets worse everyday. It would degrade me to marry him. I wish he hadn't come back. Oh, it would be heaven to escape from this disorderly, comfortless place.

After these lines Heathcliff silently slips out of the house, a fact communicated to the viewer through the effect of showing a lamp flicker in the breeze of the opened doorway (fig. 1). Alas, Heathcliff has left too soon; he doesn't stay to hear Cathy further reveal her preference:

ELLEN: Well, if Master Edgar and his charms and money and parties mean heaven to you, what's to keep you from taking your place among the Linton angels?
CATHY: I don't think I belong in heaven, Ellen. I dreamt once I was there. I dreamt I went to heaven and that heaven didn't seem to be my home and I broke my heart with weeping to come back to Earth. The angels were so angry they flung me out into the middle of the heath on top of Wuthering Heights. And I woke up sobbing with joy. That's it, Ellen—I've no more business marrying Edgar Linton than I have of being in heaven. But Ellen . . . Ellen, what can I do?
ELLEN: You're thinking of Heathcliff.
CATHY: Who else? He's sunk so low, he seems to take pleasure in being mean and brutal. And yet, he's more myself than I am. What-

1. *Wuthering Heights.* Ellen notices that Heathcliff has left.

> ever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same. And Linton's is as different as frost from fire. My one thought in living is Heathcliff. Ellen, I *am* Heathcliff. Everything he's suffered, I've suffered. The little happiness he's ever known, I've had, too. Oh Ellen, if everything in the world died and Heathcliff remained, life would still be full for me.

Cathy has come to know her heart, but it is too late. Hearing only her slighting remarks, Heathcliff has run out into the storm and quitted Wuthering Heights. Desperately, Cathy seeks him in the rain, making herself seriously ill; months later she ends up marrying Linton after all.

What's apt about this scene is its tragic irony. For too many decades, film viewers have put themselves in the position of Heathcliff: we've been bad eavesdroppers; we've jumped to conclusions; we haven't listened attentively all the way through. Like Heathcliff, who walks into the kitchen so smoldering from slights and shame that moments earlier he's smashed his "dirty hands" through a windowpane, we've listened with preconceptions, with a chip on our

2. *Wuthering Heights*. CATHY: I *am* Heathcliff.

shoulder, and we've only been open to that which confirmed our expectations.

Since the birth of the cinema, we've chanted a mantra: "Film is a Visual Medium." Films must tell their stories visually—editing, deep focus, lighting, camera movement, and nifty special effects are what really count. Dialogue, on the other hand, is just something we have to put up with. John Ford encapsulated these sentiments in a 1964 interview: "When a motion picture is at its best, it is long on action and short on dialogue. When it tells its story and reveals its characters in a series of simple, beautiful, active pictures, and does it with as little talk as possible, then the motion picture medium is being used to its fullest advantage."[1]

Try this experiment: show this scene from *Wuthering Heights* to anyone and ask them what they like best about it, and they are bound to point to the neat trick with the candle flame, a visual effect.

Ask them what they like least about the scene, and they're equally bound to point to the line, "I *am* Heathcliff." For besides serving as a metaphor for faulty eavesdropping, this scene haunts me because it

also exemplifies why so many have scorned dialogue for so long—it contains a line of dialogue so outrageously bad that it makes one squirm with discomfort. The sentiment—being such soul mates that one can't tell where one ends and one's lover begins—is so corny that it's embarrassing. The phrasing is too naked, too preposterous.

"I *am* Heathcliff" is easy to scorn. But before we rush to judgment, we might note that the script is by Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur, a writing team famous for cynicism and wit in plays and films such as *The Front Page* (1928) and *Twentieth Century* (1934). Moreover, the line itself is straight out of Emily Brontë (as is the whole scene), and in the novel, it sounds important, not jarring. Is the phrase itself really so terrible, or is the problem in Merle Oberon's strained performance, with her eyes stretched wide and her phony pause? (According to reports, Wyler was dissatisfied with her playing of the scene and made her do it again and again, until she left the set in tears.)[2] Or is the flaw actually in Wyler's own direction? After all, *someone* decided to emphasize the line through a long pause, a dolly-in, a flash of lightning. Would "I *am* Heathcliff" be palatable if it had been downplayed, thrown away in a sad mumble, by an actress with the skill of Emma Thompson?

Or could the difficulty lie elsewhere altogether, not in the film, but in viewers' expectations? Why is the line's heightened rhetoric so embarrassing to contemporary ears? Isn't this style appropriate, even required, for a gothic melodrama? Why does such a bald expression of love make us squirm?

It is worth admitting, here, at the outset of a defense of film dialogue, that not every line in every film is felicitous. Yet if we allow ourselves to focus too intently on this one bad line, we are repeating Heathcliff's folly. The rest of the scene's dialogue surely merits attention. We might notice that it is through conversation that Cathy actually discovers her own feelings and reveals them to the viewer. We might pause over the complexities of Ellen's strategies—first her attempt to forestall Cathy, then her endeavor to draw her out and lead her to knowledge in an almost Socratic fashion. Cathy's narration of her dream is a key foreshadowing of the story's events, for Cathy does die, but she does not rest quietly in the afterlife, her soul returns to Heathcliff and Wuthering Heights. And as for the dialogue's style, the metaphors concerning frost and fire, heaven and earth are richly evocative. Note, too, that Heathcliff's manner of

speaking—he claims to "belong to her more than [his] own soul"—exactly matches Cathy's both in substance and in tone. One mark of these lovers' connection and their separation from everyone else is that they speak the same impassioned rhetoric. It is the dialogue, not the flickering flame or Gregg Toland's skillful deep-focus cinematography, that actually gives the scene its substance.

FALLING ON DEAF EARS

Since the late 1970s, when the field of cinema studies "rediscovered" the sound track, numerous productive studies have been published on sound technology, film music, sound effects, and sound theory. With notable exceptions,[3] most of this scholarship has only minimally addressed the most important aspect of film sound—namely, the dialogue.

Although what the characters say, exactly how they say it, and how the dialogue is integrated with the rest of the cinematic techniques are crucial to our experience and understanding of every film since the coming of sound, for the most part analysts incorporate the information provided by a film's dialogue and overlook the dialogue as signifier. Canonical textbooks on film aesthetics devote pages and pages to editing and cinematography but barely mention dialogue. Visual analysis requires mastery of a recondite vocabulary and trained attentiveness; dialogue has been perceived as too transparent, too simple to need study.

Recent historical work on screenwriters has not gone very far toward addressing this neglect. "How to" primers on screenwriting discuss dialogue superficially; their treatment is invariably prescriptive rather than analytical. Analyses of individual screenplays focus on the genesis and development of the text (often with the intention of determining who deserves the credit), rather than on dialogue technique. Film reviews fall back on vapid clichés—the dialogue is "witty" or "clumsy"—without specifying the grounds for such evaluations.

The neglect of film dialogue by more recent film scholarship actually reflects the field's long-standing antipathy to speech in film. This bias is blatant in the writings of early film theorists such as Rudolph Arnheim, Sergei Eisenstein, and Siegfried Kracauer, who are notori-

ous for championing silent film over sound.* Classical theorists offered numerous and sometimes contradictory reasons for their disdain for film sound and speech: sound would restrict montage; sound would restrict camera movement; silent film had its own poetry precisely because it found visual substitutions for sound; dialogue kept films from crossing national boundaries; dialogue was a distraction from the camera's ability to capture the natural world; dialogue encouraged too much attention to character psychology; dialogue turned film into "canned theater."[4]

Some of the complaints of classical theorists have been assuaged; for instance, improvements in microphones, sound mixing and editing, and the muffling of camera noise swiftly ameliorated the initial difficulties with the transition to sound that had temporarily compromised camera movement and editing. The practical problems with international distribution also have been lessened through workable systems of dubbing and subtitling.

But the fear that incorporating dialogue compromises film as an independent art form by bringing it too close to theater has persisted. "Cinema, at once high art and popular art, is cast as the art of the authentic," explains Susan Sontag. "Theatre, by contrast, means dressing up, pretense, lies. It smacks of aristocratic taste and the class society."[5] Moreover, there has been a widespread embrace of what is called "the specificity thesis," the argument that each artistic medium is distinct, and so to be true to itself and to reach its highest potential, each should capitalize upon its unique characteristics. Noël Carroll has argued, however, that "the specificity thesis" is based on illogical, tautological premises and misconstrues the relationship between narrative arts. Carroll notes that the thesis:

> [A]ppears to envision each art form on the model of a highly specialized tool with a range of determinate functions. A film, play, poem or painting is thought of, it seems, as analogous to something like a Phillips screwdriver. If you wish to turn a screw with a cross-shaped groove on top, use a Phillips screwdriver. If you wish to explore the

* There *were* a few early defenders of film speech. Marcel Pagnol, for one, declared: "Any talking film which can be shown silent and remain comprehensible is a very bad talking film" ("The Talking Film," in *Rediscovering French Film*, ed. Mary Lea Bardy [New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1983], 91).

> potentials of aesthetically crafted language, use theater. If your topic is animated action, use film. But I think it is incumbent on us to question whether this underlying metaphor has any applicability when it comes to art forms. Are art forms highly specialized tools? I think not. If art forms are like tools at all, then they are more like sticks than like Phillips screwdrivers. That is, they can be used to do many things; they have not been designed to perform a specific task. . . . An artistic medium, including a self-consciously invented one, is such that many of its potentials remain to be discovered.[6]

Perhaps film *is* adept at many of the goals classical theorists allotted to it, such as revealing the beauty of the natural world, creating abstract moving images, taking editing to extremes, capturing machines in motion. Yet Carroll helps us see that being talented in certain areas does not equate with being restricted forever to solely those objectives.

Although today everyone graciously allows movies to talk, commonplace attitudes toward dialogue still betray suspicion and a fierce desire to regulate. Anti-dialogue dicta are not confined to the era of the transition to sound or to some benighted past; these prejudices seem to linger like the undead, periodically reappearing to poison our perception. Witness a 1991 statement by David Mamet: "Basically, the perfect movie doesn't have any dialogue. So you should always be striving to make a silent movie."[7] Or note the definition of dialogue offered in Ephraim Katz's widely used *Film Encyclopedia* (originally compiled in 1979, with a third edition in 1998):

> **dialogue:** In a film, all spoken lines. Since the cinema is essentially a visual medium, dialogue is, or should be, used more sparingly than in the theater, supplementing action rather than substituting for it.[8]

However, the wish to separate cinema from the theater and capitalize on its visual expressivity does not really explain these widespread and prolonged efforts to suppress film dialogue. For one thing, although theater was film's direct competitor in the early years of the twentieth century, by now film has decisively won the competition for mass audiences, and the need to distinguish the new art from its forebear is no longer pressing. For another, in point of fact, discussions of drama and literature also bear witness to the same desire to minimize dialogue. "Good dramatic dialogue reveals

but does not explain. The fewer words the character speaks and the more he shows of himself by them, the better the writing," decreed the American playwright Rachel Crothers (1878–1958) in the 1920s.[9] Sam Smiley reprised this stance in a playwrighting manual published in the 1970s:

> What Ernest Hemingway often said about writing fiction applies to dialogue as well: Good writing means erecting an iceberg of words; only a few words are visible; but many more are there under the surface. So it is with dialogue economy in a play. A writer should avoid superfluous words and delete every one that does not carry a burden of meaning. In plays, actors' physical actions can substitute for many words. Although dialogue has to be continually emotive, it should be absolutely economic.[10]

And although twentieth-century playwrights such as Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, and Eugène Ionesco have obviously made wordplay their central strategy, other dramatists—specifically Antonin Artaud, the futurists, and the theatricalists—have sought to annihilate the "the theatre of language," believing that pantomime is the essence of theatre.[11] As regards the novel, the so-called "school of virility" in American literature, which enshrined the economic style of Hemingway and demonstrated hostility to expansiveness or eloquence, has been very influential.[12]

If theatrical and literary discourse also reveals the urge to suppress dialogue, and if the prejudices against film dialogue far outlast the memory of the special artistry of silent films and the technical flaws of early sound recording, larger or stronger cultural forces than lags in technology and the rather esoteric issue of aesthetic specificity must be at work.

I believe that the hostility toward cinematic (and theatrical and literary) speech should be seen as just part of the enduring denigration of all speech. Proverbs advise us that "Silence is golden" and "Talk is cheap." Benjamin Franklin counseled: "Speak little, do much."[13] Ambrose Bierce defined "Talk" as: "To commit an indiscretion without temptation, from an impulse without purpose."[14] Søren Kierkegaard once commented: "How ironical that it is by means of speech that man can degrade himself below the level of the dumb creation—for a chatterbox is truly of a lower category than a dumb creature."[15]

In the attacks on speech, certain themes recur:

1. Words can be used to lie, whereas pictures provide more trustworthy evidence. "One picture is worth ten thousand words."*
2. Words are empty, vacuous. "Actions speak louder than words."
3. Words may be hasty, intemperate, leading the speaker into trouble. "Loose lips sink ships."
4. Showing is superior—more informative, more meaningful, more subtle—than telling.

Although these statements seem seductively reasonable, all four can be refuted or at least qualified. Pictures can also "lie"—they can be doctored, staged, or digitally "enhanced." As for the charge of vacuousness, speech-act theory has taught us that words are hardly empty—they are themselves "actions." Elizabeth Traugott notes:

> One of the most important things to be learned from approaching language in terms of its use is that the familiar opposition between saying something and doing something—between word and deed—is not at all clear-cut. Saying is doing, and utterances are acts, capable of producing enormous and far reaching consequences. For example, the sentence "You are under arrest . . . " can deprive you of your physical freedom.[16]

Physical actions can be as hasty as intemperate words: buying the too-expensive item or grasping the pan before it has cooled are actions one may regret as much as the rash promise or betrayed confidence.

Finally, the belief in the superiority of "showing" over "telling" stems partly from the efficacy of demonstrating some manual skill over merely describing the same in words—a swim instructor who physically demonstrates the motions will get better results than one who just gives verbal commands. However, "showing over telling" has a specific history in aesthetic theory. It reflects the influential and widely echoed argument advanced by the followers of Henry James, such as Percy Lubbock, Joseph Warren Beach, and Ford Madox Ford, in the 1920s and 1930s. Part of modernism's revolt against Victorian

* William Safire has traced this phrase's history. It was coined in 1921 by an advertising man, Fred Barnard, who wanted to stress that a photograph of appetizing candy would attract more customers than a verbal description ("Worth a Thousand Words," *New York Times Magazine*, 7 April 1996, 16).

aesthetics, specifically the chatty narrator of Victorian novels, the tenet quickly hardened into an inflexible dogma in literary circles. "Showing," that is, presenting actions without any narrative commentary, is supposed to be more subtle, and to call for more participation by the reader than allowing a narrator to evaluate or summarize. But Wayne Booth has demonstrated in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* that seemingly objective "showing" is just another form of "telling," just another method by which authors guide their readers' responses.[17] Moreover, visuals are not always subtle—note the overly obvious miming of silent film—and words are not necessarily blatant. This argument slights the subtexts of verbal messages, all the subtleties that are common not only in literature and poetry but in everyday social discourse. Engagement is called for whether one is interpreting action or speech, visual images or dialogue.

I suspect that the four charges against words detailed above are to some extent pretexts. The underlying issue stems neither from some essential drawbacks of verbal communication nor from the diverging relationships between words and images/action and the physical world. The fundamental motivation comes from the fact that talkativeness has traditionally been allied with femininity, terse action with masculinity.

Of course, recent scholarship—particularly that linked to the work of Jacques Lacan—has been devoted to pointing out a contrary cultural disposition that identifies the Word, *logos,* as masculine, as the Word of God or the Law of the Father. In this paradigm, women are clearly linked with visual images, with bodies/beauty/silence—in short, with the lack of speech or logic or power. However, these two apparently opposite conceptions are not actually contradictory; they are two sides of the same coin. Walter Ong distinguishes between two kinds of speech: the common *materna lingua* (mother tongue) and the educated, "civilized" *patrius sermo* (father speech).[18] Whenever speech is valued as an important act in a public sphere, it is seen as masculine; when it is held to no account in the casual language of ordinary conversation, it is ascribed to women. The reason that women are silenced and objectified is to deny them access to powerful speech; when women *do* talk, their speech is redefined as inconsequential, nonstop chatter.

I am hardly the first scholar to focus on the association of trivial talkativeness with femininity. In *Literary Fat Ladies: Rhetoric, Gender,*

Property, Patricia Parker has traced the "tradition that portrays women as unflappable talkers" from ancient literature (she cites the biblical admonition: "Let woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, not to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence") to James Joyce's *Ulysses.*[19] In *Gossip,* Patricia Spacks has painstakingly detailed the customary connection of women with this category of speech.[20] Turning from the academic to the popular sphere, maxims also provide abundant evidence of the widespread association of private talk with women:

"Where woman is, silence is not." (France)

"The tongue is the sword of a woman, and she never lets it become rusty." (China)

"The North Sea will sooner be found wanting in water than a woman at a loss for a word." (Jutland)

"Ten measures of speech descended on the world; women took nine and men one." (Babylon)

"Two women and a goose are enough to make as much noise as you would hear at a fair." (Venice)

"Many women, many words; many geese, many turds." (England)

The linkage of talking women with animals is particularly common; in a famous instance in Fritz Lang's *Fury* (1936), the director cuts from a shot of rumormongering women to a shot of clucking hens; this visual metaphor is repeated during the "Pick-a-Little-Talk-a-Little" number in Morton Da Costa's adaptation of *The Music Man* (1962).

Another area in which the correlation of women and excess speech is manifest is in the English language. In *Language: The Social Mirror,* Elaine Chaika writes:

> It has already been noted that English vocabulary reflects a disvaluing of talk for its own sake. Moreover, it was shown that most words that mean "idle talk" in SE [Standard English] also are marked to mean [+ female], and/or [+ young, + trivial]. A person who is gabby, talkative, and gossipy, a nag, a shrew, or a chatterbox, must be a woman.[21]

In actuality, contemporary linguistic research does not support the supposition that the female sex talks the most. Dale Spender

flatly states: "There has not been one study which provides evidence that women talk more than men, and there have been numerous studies which indicate that men talk more than women." She explains that the myth of the overtalkative woman has arisen because "women have not been judged on the grounds of whether they talk more than men, but of whether they talk more than silent women. . . . When silence is the desired state for women . . . then any talk in which a woman engages can be too much."[22]

Films that are "talky" come with the connotations "trivial" and "idle" and, ultimately, "female." Visual images and physical activity, which in the history of the cinema came first (as Adam preceded Eve), are associated with masculinity and "naturally" given precedence.

My argument is that dialogue has been continually discredited and undervalued in film because it is associated with femininity. To some it may appear far-fetched to assert that gender stereotypes have unconsciously affected the evaluation of film aesthetics by filmmakers, scholars, and viewers. But many of the "neutral" or "objective" discussions of film aesthetics betray just such an undercurrent. Listen to Alfred Hitchcock, who viewed every issue of his craft in sexual terms:

> Suspense is like a woman. The more left to the imagination, the more the excitement. . . . Movie titles, like women, should be easy to remember without being familiar, intriguing but never obvious. . . . A woman of mystery is one who also has a certain maturity and whose actions speak louder than words. Any woman can be one, if she keeps those two points in mind. She should grow up—and shut up.[23]

Kaja Silverman in *The Acoustic Mirror,* Mary Ann Doane in *The Desire to Desire,* and Amy Lawrence in *Echo and Narcissus* have all studied women's roles in American films and noticed how often female characters are silenced or punished for talking. My argument here dovetails with theirs but enters on another level: I believe that all dialogue (regardless of the gender of the speaking character) is associated with femininity, that films that speak "too much" are punished (with criticism from reviewers and academic disdain, and sometimes even low box office receipts). How else can one explain the reflexive, omnipresent pronouncements that dialogue must be "kept in its place"?

Just as Heathcliff is led into grievous error by his preconceptions and poor listening, so film history has been deformed by our lack of respect for dialogue. Many Hollywood directors—Cukor, Wilder, Mankiewicz, Sturges, Capra, Huston, Wyler—who chose to work with more literate scripts have historically been underappreciated. (Several of these have also been castigated as "women's" directors.) Secondly, the importance of screenplays and screenwriters to the final film has been obscured. Moreover, certain films that we now value quite highly were initially dismissed out of hand for their "talkiness"; see, for instance, Penelope Huston's misguided review of *All about Eve* (1950) and *Sunset Boulevard* (1950): "If, as I believe, the first quality of good screen writing is economy, then they are wasteful films, lavishing all that virtuoso writing on material which, in the last analysis, has not the strength to sustain it."[24]

Perhaps the most noteworthy consequence of this anti-dialogue bias is that it has led to misconceptions in our model of how films actually work. Many of the ways in which narrative is communicated, empathy elicited, themes conveyed, visuals interpreted come from the interaction of the words with the visual images. Ignoring the role of the words has led to overestimation of what viewers understand from the visuals or the editing alone.

Even our metaphor regarding the viewing experience needs adjustment. We are accustomed to using the analogy that the filmgoer is a voyeur, surreptitiously spying on the actions of the on-screen characters. What we've often overlooked is that *viewers* are also *listeners*, in fact, they are *eavesdroppers*, listening in on conversations purportedly addressed to others, but conversations that—in reality—are designed to communicate certain information to the audience.

THE NATURE OF FILM DIALOGUE

"Eavesdropping" is a loaded term, implying that the filmgoer is doing something surreptitious, something that gives him or her secret power and/or sexual pleasure. In a paper given at a recent conference, "The Narrative Functions of the Ecouteur," Elisabeth Weis traces the psychoanalytic context of "eavesdropping," noting that Freud placed great stress on the child's overhearing its parents making love, and that he thought such experiences crucial to the child's sexual development. Weis continues,

> Psychoanalysts working with patients often hypothesize that the adult eavesdropper recapitulates the primal scene. The listener can identify with either of the people overheard, who represent the aggressive and the submissive parent. Or the listener's identification can be placed with the overhearing child. . . . I would simply suggest here that overhearing is a fundamental experience with profound implications for films. If we consider the film-going experience to be one of watching and overhearing characters who are separated from us, then the entire film-going experience could be defined as eavesdropping as well as voyeurism.[25]

Weis then proceeds to direct attention to films that include scenes of on-screen characters eavesdropping on one another, films such as *Careful, He Might Hear You* (1983), *Stella Dallas* (1937), *Addicted to Love* (1997), and *M*A*S*H* (1970). Weis demonstrates how diegetic eavesdropping raises issues concerning invasion of privacy and of social inclusion versus exclusion, and she examines how the act can lead to the on-screen listener finally recognizing a painful truth or having his or her deepest secrets exposed in public. Weis examines how films offer models of eavesdropping behavior that range from sadistic or pathological to sympathetic, and she examines narrative strategies that sanction the behavior of eavesdroppers, thereby sanctioning that behavior in the audience as well.

There may always be an element of illicit eroticism and mastery involved in sitting in the dark listening as characters enact their most intimate scenes. However, on another level of our consciousness, filmgoers always know that we haven't actually caught these people unawares. Herbert Clark and Thomas Carlson append to speech-act theory a systematic overview of the roles of different participants in conversations. One of their categories deals with "overhearers," such as strangers on a bus, or children listening in on their parents:

> Speakers also design their utterances with overhearers in mind. . . . [T]hey realize that the overhearers can nevertheless form conjectures or hypotheses about what they mean. . . . By designing their utterances just right, speakers can lead overhearers to form correct hypotheses, incorrect hypotheses, or even no coherent hypotheses at all. If they know their overhearers, they can even design what they say to fit them in particular. . . . Overhearers are generally not meant to realize how utterances have been designed for them.[26]

Film dialogue has been purposely designed for the viewers to overhear, so that we can draw the best hypotheses, but films disguise the extent to

which the words are truly meant for the off-screen listener. Part of the film-going suspension of disbelief is to collaborate in this fiction.

Discarding the fear of the contaminating power of the theater allows film analysts to learn from the work of drama theorists. The best description of how film dialogue works can be gleaned from Jean Chothia's *Forging a Language: A Study of Plays of Eugene O'Neill:*

> Stage dialogue is different from real speech. It operates by duplicity: it is not spontaneous but must appear to be so. It is permanent but must appear to be as ephemeral as the speech it imitates. The actor must seem to speak what in reality he recites. In sharing the convention, the audience in the theatre has a share in the duplicity. We simultaneously accept the illusion of spontaneity and know that it is a pretense. . . . For it is not the hearing of the words by the interlocutor that completes the exchange, as it is in everyday speech, but the witnessing and interpreting of both the utterance and the response by the audience. Much of the particular effect of drama derives from the gap between two ways of hearing, that of the interlocutor on stage and that of the audience, and from the audience's consciousness of the gap. The audience sets each utterance beside each previous utterance made within the limited time span of the play and, in doing so, catches implications beyond those immediately relevant to speaker and interlocutor. . . . If the dramatist is to create an action of significance . . . his dialogue, however natural it may appear, must be most *un*naturally resonant with meaning and implication.[27]

Film dialogue shares with dramatic dialogue these deformations from everyday conversation, this unnatural resonance, this double-layeredness—in short, this dramatic irony. The filmgoers always know *more* than any single character (we know that Heathcliff is hiding in the vestibule, we know that Ellen is aware that Heathcliff is eavesdropping; because of the flashback structure of the film, we even know something of the characters' futures), and we put each speech into the context of all the other information we've been receiving. Because we inevitably have a broader "range of knowledge"[28] about the characters and events, our interpretation of each line of dialogue differs from that of the on-screen conversationalists.

Chothia's description is extremely useful for understanding film speech. Yet film dialogue is distinguished from stage dialogue in two key ways: by the simultaneous signification of camerawork/mise-en-scène/editing that serves to select, emphasize, undercut, distract, reveal, or deform the filmgoer's interpretation; and by the phe-

nomenological absence of the actors from the filmgoers' space and reality, which allows the spectators' cathexis with the characters more free play.*

Film dialogue is distinguished from dialogue in novels by the absence of the literary narrator who could explicitly summarize or interpret the characters' speeches or even render interior views of the characters' minds and emotions. Instead of a narrator sequentially contextualizing the characters' speech, film offers the simultaneous signification of camerawork/mise-en-scène/editing. Moreover, the difference between reading words printed on a page and hearing them spoken aloud by actors is immeasurable.

To further refine our understanding of cinematic dialogue: the interaction between the visual and verbal tracks is always complicated and depends greatly upon the details of each instance. A major goal of this study is to unravel these connections. In general, however, it is a mistake to think of one track as "supplementing" or "adding to" the other. This is why—although I wholeheartedly agree with Michel Chion's analysis—I quarrel with his term "added value." Chion has coined this term to denote the extent to which verbal text affects the interpretation of an image. His discussion is worth quoting at some length:

> An eloquent example that I often draw on in my classes to demonstrate value added by text is a TV broadcast from 1984, a transmission of an air show in England, anchored from a French studio for French audience by our own Léon Zitrone. Visibly thrown by these images coming to him on the wire with no explanation and in no special order, the valiant anchor nevertheless does his job as well as he can. At a certain point, he affirms, "Here are three small airplanes," as we see an image with, yes, three little airplanes against a blue sky, and the outrageous redundancy never fails to provoke laughter.
>
> Zitrone could just as well have said, "The weather is magnificent today," and that's what we would have seen in the image, where there are in fact no clouds. Or: "The first two planes are ahead of the third," and then everyone would have seen *that*. Or else: "Where did the fourth plane go?"—and the fourth airplane's absence, this plane hopping out of Zitrone's hat by the sheer power of the Word, would

* To forestall any suspicions that my examples in this book were not drawn from "real" films, I have tried to avoid discussing adaptations of plays. If a few have slipped in—such as *Casablanca* (1942) and *His Girl Friday* (1940)—it's because neglecting these important films entirely would have been just too perverse.

> have jumped to our eyes. In short, the anchor could have made fifty other "redundant" comments; but their redundancy is illusory, since in each case these statements would have guided and structured our vision so that we would have seen them "naturally" in the image.[29]

As Chion argues, the announcer's words made the number of airplanes in view important. His statements are neither redundant nor some minor, dispensable "addition," but a fundamental component of the viewer's experience of that moment of the broadcast. "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn" is not some supplemental, optional addition to the image of Clark Gable walking out the door at the end of *Gone with the Wind* (1939); these words both explain the reason he is leaving and mete out a measure of revenge. The shots and physical pantomime without these words—with their exact mixture of politeness, affection, anger, and resignation—would not be just less effective, but totally different.

The pantomime has a long-standing international tradition—it has been traced to ancient Rome, the Chinese, Persians, Hebrews, and Egyptians. It was useful for silent film (especially for comedy); it lives on in circus clowns and narrative ballet. Wordless strings of pictures—in stained-glass windows, comic books, photo essays—can also tell simple stories or stories that are already familiar. But dialogue is a necessity for stories and characterizations of more than rudimentary complexity. To the extent that film chooses to be a narrative art form, as opposed to presenting visual poetry or abstraction, it has been and will continue to be dependent upon dialogue as an integral part of its arsenal.

But we must also bear in mind the ways in which film dialogue differs from spontaneous everyday speech. In narrative films, dialogue may strive mightily to imitate natural conversation, but it is always an imitation. It has been scripted, written and rewritten, censored, polished, rehearsed, and performed. Even when lines are improvised on the set, they have been spoken by impersonators, judged, approved, and allowed to remain. Then all dialogue is recorded, edited, mixed, underscored, and played through stereophonic speakers with Dolby sound. The actual hesitations, repetitions, digressions, grunts, interruptions, and mutterings of everyday speech have either been pruned away, or, if not, deliberately included. Less time is devoted to the actual functions of everyday dis-

course, such as merely establishing social contact (what Roman Jakobson calls "the phatic function") or confirming that a conversational partner is listening attentively. Although one cardinal rule of real conversation is that speakers should not tell each other what the other already knows,[30] film dialogue is often forced to smuggle in information merely for the viewer's benefit. Because the words are in truth directed at the filmgoer, not at the on-screen conversationalists, each word does double duty, works on double layers.

Norman Page has written a valuable study of dialogue in literature. He concludes his analysis of such dialogue's "reality-status" by noting that

> for various reasons it seems overwhelmingly likely that no dialogue in [a] novel or play will consist merely, or even mainly, of an accurate transcript of spontaneous speech. It is important to insist at this point that there is an inevitable gap—wider or narrower at different times, but never disappearing entirely—between speech . . . and even the most "realistic" dialogue in a world of literature.[31]

The same applies to film. This is why, although I have found the work of linguists extremely helpful, I conclude that the cross-disciplinary poaching cannot proceed in the opposite direction; linguists who use film dialogue as accurate case studies of everyday conversation are operating on mistaken assumptions.[32]

SOME POINTS TOWARD A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

For the most part, this study deals with formal generalizations rather than tracing a history of the development of film dialogue. Yet I do not mean to imply that film dialogue is a static entity or that it exists in a timeless void. Industrial, technological, and social changes have all affected the ways in which films have their characters speak.

First of all, the English language has itself changed enormously over the decades of the sound film. Tom Shachtman argues,

> We have to recognize that English is altering at a phenomenal rate of speed. Comparing successive editions of dictionaries, we find about

> 10,000 words per decade are added or dropped from the usual college dictionaries, those which contain the working vocabularies of most users of our language, somewhere around 100,000 words out of the entire corpus of more than a million. That is to say, what one generation accepts as its standard is, at least in terms of vocabulary, perhaps 10 to 15 percent altered from what its parents accepted as standard.[33]

If the dialogue of films of the 1930s strikes us now as quaint or unnatural, this may be because of our distance in time from its original audience and linguistic community.

In recent years, film theory has put new emphasis on the dynamics of film reception. We should keep in mind that while the history of film production affects movies' use of dialogue, a parallel history of the audience's reception is equally as important, as Christopher Faulkner stresses.[34] As a minor instance of the effect of change in reception time, my students always laugh at Edie's line in *On The Waterfront* (1954) claiming that her convent school in Tarrytown is "in the country." Their amused reaction was certainly not desired or anticipated by the filmmakers; it is a marker of the temporal gap—and concomitant suburban development—between the world of the characters and the present day. Similarly, Barbara Klinger points out that certain lines in Douglas Sirk films spoken by Rock Hudson now trigger laughter because of contemporary knowledge of Hudson's homosexuality.[35]

A study focusing on the chronological development of film dialogue would start with the silent era. Speech sometimes literally accompanied silent films—we know that some exhibitors hired lecturers to narrate silent films and local actors to speak lines for the characters. As the industry moved toward standardization, film producers found it desirable or necessary to include printed dialogue and expository intertitles. Barry Salt has found dialogue intertitles as early as 1904;[36] Eileen Bowser records that from 1907 to 1915, producers experimented with finding exactly the right placement and format for such titles.[37] After 1915, with feature-length films, title writing became a specialty, and dialogue intertitles were used for humor, to convey important information and to individuate characters. The critical overvaluation of the few films that tortuously managed to avoid intertitles—for example, F. W. Murnau's *The Last Laugh* (1924)—should not be taken as indicative of the typical practices of the silent era.

It is well known now that filmmakers experimented with the use of synchronized sound throughout the "silent" era and that numerous sound shorts were produced. Alan Williams has recently theorized that the popularity of *The Jazz Singer* (1927) and its aesthetic breakthrough stemmed, not from its use of sound per se, but from its move away from the direct address of vaudeville-inspired shorts toward the representational style of theater.[38] (In my terms, the shift was so successful because it allowed film audiences to slip into the comfortable role of *overhearers*.)

The transition to sound in the late 1920s was complicated for American studios and theater owners, demanding great outlays of capital and entailing negotiation between competing technologies and corporate strategies.[39] Equally upsetting for the film community was the wrenching ontological shift in the medium caused by the possibilities of sound. Many of the diatribes against sound as a whole and dialogue in particular date to this era—and the suspicions that sound would be the death of the visual artistry of silent film were initially abetted by the limitations of early microphones and recording apparatus, which restricted camera movement and disallowed both postsynchronization and multitrack mixing. From a historical perspective, what is remarkable about the transition to sound is, not that it was bumpy, but that the technical and aesthetic problems were solved so quickly and successfully, so that by the early 1930s the use of dialogue, sound effects, and music betrays none of the restrictions, tinniness, or fumbling of the transition films.

Aside from the legacy of anti-sound prejudice (and the associated critical overestimation of the importance of asynchronous matchings of sound and image), three events during the transition-to-sound years had major consequences for the future development of cinematic speech. First was the importation to Hollywood of East Coast writers, who were suddenly needed to write for the talkies. The newspapermen, playwrights, and vaudevillians who came west in the early 1930s brought with them new sensibilities, new stories, and a fresh approach to language. Pauline Kael has concentrated particularly on the influence of a group of talented cynics (some of whom once clustered at the Algonquin Hotel), including Herman Mankiewicz, Ben Hecht, Dorothy Parker, Charles MacArthur, George S. Kaufman, Nathanael West, S. J. Perelman, Samson Raphelson, Philip Barry, Robert Sherwood, and Sidney Howard. She writes:

> Once American films had their voice and the Algonquin group was turned loose on the scripts, the revolting worship of European aristocracy faded so fast that movie stars even stopped bringing home Georgian princes. In the silents, the heroes were often simpletons. In the talkies, the heroes were to be the men who weren't fooled, who were smart and learned their way around. The new heroes of the screen were created in the image of their authors: they were fast-talking newspaper reporters.[40]

Secondly, the addition of sound instantly altered the balance of genres. Film musicals were suddenly possible, as were more literal adaptations of stage plays, which now could retain, not just plot points, but some of the original dramatic dialogue. Verbally based comedies featuring vaudeville performers such as the Marx Brothers and W. C. Fields expanded the contours of film comedy. And genres that had been established during the silent era underwent sea changes because of the new possibilities afforded by sound.

A third event of these years was the adoption of the Production Code, written in 1930 and more stringently enforced after 1934. Although there are numerous and complicated reasons why this formal practice of industry self-censorship was put in place at this time, one of the least discussed is that *verbal transgressions* of prevailing standards were now possible, and such violations were greatly feared. Although much of the Production Code deals with overall plot development, moral attitudes, and viewer conclusions, several of the tenets deal specifically with language. For example:

> *Oaths* should never be used as a comedy element. Where required by the plot, the less offensive oaths may be permitted.
>
> *Vulgar expressions* come under the same treatment as vulgarity in general. Where women and children are to see the film, vulgar expressions (and oaths) should be cut to the absolute essentials required by the situation.
>
> The name of *Jesus Christ* should never be used except in reverence.[41]

Censorship has been a major factor influencing cinematic speech. Looking forward in time, the defiance of the Production Code in the late 1950s and the gradual loosening of all restrictions throughout the 1960s prompted something of a seismic upheaval in scripting, al-

lowing the frank treatment of taboo subject matter, the incorporation of street language, and the inclusion of obscenity, while obviating the need for circumlocution or double entendre.

Along with the Production Code, one of the major influences on dialogue throughout the studio years was the star system. The famous advertising slogan for Clarence Brown's *Anna Christie* (1930)—"Garbo Talks!"—is evidence both of the salability of film speech in general, and of the public's interest in hearing its favorite movie stars in particular. Throughout the studio era and continuing into today, scripts have been specifically tailored for their stars' personae and verbal abilities. Lenore Coffee, who wrote for both Bette Davis and Joan Crawford, has volunteered: "The difference was entirely in the dialogue. Bette spits out her words, Joan doesn't. I gave Bette short sentences, short speeches."[42] Production histories are rife with tales of parts being rewritten to accommodate new casting, or of lines being shifted to (or from) the star to enhance his or her stature.

The breakdown of the Hollywood studio system in the 1950s was not in itself a watershed event for film dialogue, because the conventions that were formed during the studio years have long survived that specific industrial organization. While the overall quality of the sound track has been enhanced by technical advances such as magnetic tape and Dolby or THX sound systems, those innovations have been most helpful for the quality of musical scoring and special effects.

However, significant side branches off the main line of dialogue scripting can be identified. The first dates from the late 1960s and early 1970s, when (possibly influenced by the breezy scripting of the French New Wave) American films appeared in which the dialogue was noticeably more colloquial, less careful about rhythm, less polished, more risqué, and marked by an improvisational air. The accompanying acting style was less declamatory, faster, and more throwaway; the recording of lines allowed much more overlapping and a higher degree of inaudibility. This more "realistic," "informal" style of dialogue can be noticed particularly in John Cassavetes's *Faces* (1968), which relies on improvisation,[43] in the films of Robert Altman, who pioneered the use of radio mikes to allow multiple actors to speak at once in films such as *M*A*S*H* (1970), *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971), and *Nashville* (1975);[44] in Hal Ashby's *The Last Detail*

(1973) and *Shampoo* (1975); and in Martin Scorsese's *Mean Streets* (1973) and *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (1974).

The example of such 1970s films may have contributed to a slight loosening of the careful precision of mainstream films' dialogue over the past twenty years, but actually it has been low-budget independent productions that have been most adventuresome with their dialogue. Partly this stems from independent filmmakers' genuine desire to break new ground, but novel approaches to dialogue have also moved to the fore because they are cheaper and more easily accomplished than extensive special effects or lush production value. Louis Malle's *My Dinner With André* (1982), which confines the film to a dinner-time conversation between two friends, David Mamet's *House of Games* (1987), in which the characters speak in carefully polished cadences approaching blank verse, Gus Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho* (1991), which literally mixes Shakespeare with prosaic speech, and Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (1992), in which characters speak in a Gullah dialect, all demonstrate creative manipulation of dialogue. Spike Lee and Quentin Tarantino have made verbal dexterity downright fashionable.

Lower-budget independent films of the 1990s, such as *Before Sunrise* (1994), *Chasing Amy* (1997), and *Grosse Pointe Blank* (1997), commonly allow their dialogue relative prominence. Yet big blockbusters—perhaps because they depend so heavily on earning back their investment with overseas distribution—are less likely to focus on dialogue. As David Kepin notes, "Why bother writing good lines . . . if they will only be mistranslated?"[45]

Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* sees all of Western literature as a progression towards realism, a halting but unmistakable breakdown of elevated courtly language and subject matter in favor of the serious, respectful treatment of everyday life, told in vernacular language.[46] It is tempting to similarly conclude that the overall progression of film dialogue from 1927 to the present has been a movement toward realism, toward a more colloquial, naturalistic style. Certainly, one could argue that, in general, the films of the 1930s were heavily influenced by theatrical models and reflected the dominance of the white upper class. Nan Withers-Wilson's tracing of the history of voice training in American acting offers relevant evidence:

> Throughout the 1920s, 30s and 40s Theatre Speech or Transatlantic was taught in America's professional acting schools. It represented a neutral dialect that borrowed from both Standard British and Standard American pronunciations. . . . Standard American is that variety of American speech that is devoid of regional or ethnic characteristics and does not reveal the geographical or cultural origins of the speaker. . . .
>
> When talking films were introduced in 1927, actors wishing to work in the movies rushed to obtain instruction in this elevated mode of pronunciation. . . . Robert Hobbs' *Teach Yourself Transatlantic* and Edith Skinner's *The Seven Points for Good Speech in Classic Plays* are two texts that provide instruction for the Transatlantic dialect, and it can be readily heard in numerous films from the 1930s and 1940s which include performances by actors such as Bette Davis, Katharine Hepburn and Tyrone Power.[47]

Undeniably, the tide of American culture in manners, dress, and everyday speech over the past seventy years has decisively shifted away from formality, toward individuality and naturalism. This movement has clearly been reflected in the arts: Henry James's and Edith Wharton's upper-class protagonists were supplanted first by Theodore Dreiser's losers, then by John Steinbeck's Oakies and by characters like Richard Wright's Bigger Thomas. Eugene O'Neill introduced lower-class and regional dialects to the stage. Method acting changed the rules for both theater and film, promoting what it claimed was emotional sincerity over eloquence or stagecraft. Many forms of official or unofficial censorship of controversial topics, or references to sex, or obscenity, have been shucked away.

While the progression-toward-realism thesis has a certain validity, it fails to take genre into account. Yes, one can point to the drawing-room dramas of the 1930s, but there were also films like *I Was a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (1932), which already eschewed "Transatlantic" in favor of lower-class speech patterns. More recently, one can point to the free-wheeling dialogue of *Menace II Society* (1993), but our screens also offer films such as *Remains of the Day* (1993), which are as "elevated" in their language as anything produced in the 1930s. Although *True Romance* (1983), *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), and *Fargo* (1996) contain cursing, street language, or regional dialects, "realistic" in the sense of an accurate transcription of common conversation is the last word I would use to describe them; they are too

carefully polished, too rhythmically balanced, too self-consciously artful.* One of the arguments of this study is that genre conventions have been a powerful force in shaping film dialogue, ultimately equally or even more influential than time period.

WHAT IS AT STAKE

This study focuses on English-language narrative cinema, primarily American but including a few British films. I suspect that many of my findings are applicable to all narrative features, but I will not make generalizations about other national cinemas without knowing the language *as well as a native speaker.* Not the least of the deleterious consequences of the traditional disregard of dialogue's importance is that film scholars have cavalierly assumed they could analyze films in languages they don't know.†

Confining my study largely to American films does have the advantage of highlighting the fact that film dialogue is important to American culture. Speech is not some abstract, neutral communicative code: issues of power and dominance, of empathy and intimacy, of class, ethnicity, and gender are automatically engaged every time someone opens his or her mouth. What the characters say, how they say it, and how the filmgoer is influenced are crucial issues.

Much scholarship has been devoted to demonstrating the negative portrayals in American film of women, African-Americans, Hispanics, Asian-Americans, and Native Americans. Most of these analyses have concentrated on the level of plot and characterization. What is often overlooked is how much the speech patterns of the stereotyped character contribute to the viewer's conception of his or her worth; the ways in which dialect, mispronunciation, and inarticulateness have been used to ridicule and stigmatize characters has

* The difference between a real-life conversation and those portrayed in films is clearly apparent when one reads linguists' transcriptions of actual talk.

† For a study of dialogue, relying on subtitles would, of course, be intellectually bogus. Subtitles only translate a portion of the spoken text, and only that portion that the subtitler has decided is most important. This filters out emphases that may be unique to the film or to that national cinema. Repetitions, interruptions, slang, curses, antiquated diction, regional accents, of course, are all lost in subtitles. I hope that other scholars will apply my schema to other national cinemas to test its applicability and to discover the unique characteristics of their cinema's dialogue.

often been neglected. Who gets to speak about what? Who is silenced? Who is interrupted? Dialogue is often the first place we should go to understand how film reflects social prejudices. By the same token, if we want to learn more about communities that are different from our own, we might profitably pay attention to the dialogue of films made by minority filmmakers. Mark Winokur argues that the increasing number of films made by African-American filmmakers serve to advance a Bakhtinian polyglossia, allowing into American cinema the voices of audience segments never before heard.[48]

To some extent, films teach viewers how to talk, and thus how to think. When my sons were toddlers, I found myself unaccountably employing the odd endearment "Dollface," a term I could not remember ever hearing or reading. I later realized I had picked it up from *His Girl Friday*'s Walter Burns.

But my own trivial experience is echoed by common practice; film dialogue has often affected off-screen life in substantial ways. Movies have been a medium for language dispersal; linguists believe, for instance, that Hollywood has been instrumental both in contributing to the worldwide dominance of English, and, here at home, in introducing Yiddish expressions to the American public.[49] A more specific instance can be seen in the fact that "[f]or months after *The Day the Earth Stood Still* came out in 1951, grade school kids drove their teachers crazy chanting 'Klaatu barada nikto!,' the words Patricia Neal uses to call off the tinfoil robot Gort, who's hell-bent on atomizing Washington," as Peter Biskind remarks.[50] In the 1960s, rebellious teenagers mocked authority figures by throwing back at them the line of the sadistic prison warden in *Cool Hand Luke* (1967)—"What we've got here is a failure to communicate." Recently, a fund-raiser at Oberlin College quoted *Jerry Maguire*'s "Show me the money" to the *Wall Street Journal*.[51] And surely it is significant that an American president threatened the Congress with a line—"Go ahead, make my day"—from a Dirty Harry movie.

Of all the components of a film, dialogue is the most portable, the easiest for a viewer to extract and make his own. You can't look like the stars, you can't inhabit their world or imitate their actions, but you can mimic their lines. The Internet Movie Database catalogues favorite lines from films and many collections of movie quotes have

been published, including several in the format of a reference book of quotations for easy insertion into public presentations. The wisdom of Ovid, Montaigne, and Churchill is being replaced by new cultural touchstones.

To return to my opening topic, the prejudices against film dialogue, it is important to realize that no other aspect of film has been subjected to so many prescriptive rules. Cinematography is generally expected to meet certain minimum technical standards, such as being in focus, adequately lit, framing the subject appropriately. Beyond such "visibility" criteria, public discussion does not typically legislate the content of the shots. Yet popular discussion of dialogue goes far beyond minimum "audibility" standards. In the course of my perusal of older and even contemporary screenwriting manuals, film criticism, and theoretical analyses, I've constantly come across dicta such as the following:

Dialogue should be kept to a minimum.

Dialogue should always match the characters' sociological/class background.

Dialogue should be subtle.

Dialogue should never convey expositional information.

Dialogue should never be repetitious.

Dialogue should never be flowery or ostentatious.

Dialogue should never give information that can be conveyed visually.

Dialogue should never be obscure.

Dialogue should never preach.

Dialogue should never be intellectual.

The list goes on and on.

Perhaps these "rules" have been proclaimed so often out of desperation. For my researches have consistently indicated that no matter how loudly they have been shouted, *in actuality they have never been followed by American cinema.* Some of the greatest films, from Ernst Lubitsch's and Preston Sturges's and Howard Hawks's come-

dies, to Orson Welles's intricate masterpieces, to the Coen brothers' cold satires, offer dialogue that is repetitious, flowery, obscure, "out of character," expositional, intellectual, abundant, even, sometimes, inaudible. Sometimes a short speech offers a surprising zinger; in other cases a long monologue allows for nuance or builds up a head of steam. Everything depends upon the individual movie and its aims. I offer hundreds of examples in the pages that follow.

Which is not to say that all film dialogue is equally valuable, or that films are not sometimes marred by weak dialogue, on the order of "I *am* Heathcliff." But so little serious work has been done on the subject that we do not yet have the tools for determining why one instance of dialogue is brilliantly successful and another leaden-footed. This study is meant to help us make aesthetic evaluations based on informed analysis.

Critics who charge that dialogue is a vehicle for developing character psychology and thus the handmaid of a bourgeois humanistic ideology, are, in large part, correct. But whereas some condemn these ideological ramifications, I judge them a virtue. I believe that there is no more important a topic than *people talking*. Why is the loneliness of losing one's hearing universally feared more than the darkness of losing one's sight? Because talk provides the means for each of us to break out of our singularity and isolation into communion. Talk allows us an imaginative understanding of other worldviews, of other ways of being. Talk is our preeminent means of communicating. As Hannah Arendt has written, "We humanize what is going on in the world and in ourselves only by speaking of it, and in the course of speaking of it we learn to be human."[52]

Film dialogue is a particular kind of imitation of people talking. If we hope to understand either this art form or the broader landscape of American culture, unlike Heathcliff, we need to stay and listen attentively all the way through.