

Language and the Early Cinema

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Rudolf Arnheim

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

The following short excerpt from *Film* [1] is all but unknown to the readers of the English version of the book as well as to those of the other translations. The edition of 1957, titled *Film As Art* [2], on which all these translations are based, was prepared by the author in the conviction that only the essential sections, dealing with the nature of the visual medium, were still relevant whereas much of what had been observed in the infancy days of the sound film was no longer worth saying. A complete English version of the German original of 1932 had been published in 1933 by Faber and Faber in London in a translation by L. M. Sieveking and Ian F. D. Morrow but has vanished of course long ago even from most libraries. The following few pages, slightly retouched by the author, will give today's readers a taste of the principles that governed discussions of the media in those early days.

LANGUAGE (1933)

The problem of language is intimately bound up with the question of whether sound film has its own laws and of the relation between sound film and stage.

Speech is a means of communication discovered and used by man: a part of our world as much as men and beasts, houses and trees. And by giving speech the power to describe things, events, reflections, we enable it to bring before our minds completely the whole world of which it is a part. Literature—poetry, narrative, drama in book form—offers us representations of life, made entirely by means of words. We need no sense-impressions of any other kind to supplement such delineations. Hence language is a complete and sufficient material for the art we call literature. Even illustrations to books are generally found to be disturbing. They do not supplement but are at variance with the task of language, which it fulfils alone to our complete satisfaction. Since, however, according to the laws of aesthetics, nothing superfluous may be included in a work of art without detracting from it, language appears to be not merely an adequate but also a very autocratic art medium. Probably where language is used no other means must be employed, so that no lawless jumble, no hybrid form, shall result. Language does do its work unaided because it is capable of doing so.

This would be a very strong argument against the use of the spoken word in sound film. Sound film may be nothing but speech with illustrations; and that must be rejected as bad art. The pictures in silent film gave us an optical image of the world, language gives us a verbal one—if they are coupled, will they not both have the same work to do simultaneously and, therefore, instead of supplementing and uniting each other, hinder one another intolerably? That would certainly be the case if language—besides being an art medium—were not also a part of nature. For while as

an art medium it cannot tolerate any rival, as a part of the cosmos it must suffer all the rest of the world beside it. These two functions, moreover, need not even be kept sharply distinct, as is seen from the theatre. A drama is, in most cases, a complete work of art even as a book—thus a purely verbal work of art. Moreover, in this case, language is used merely as the means of expression of people talking, that is, in the same form as it appears in real life. At the same time we do not demand that the language of a drama shall be exactly like that of real life, that is to say that people shall talk on the stage exactly as they would at home. We know, on the contrary, that the drama began very unrealistically; that it arose not as an imitation of our everyday speech but from ceremonial singing, dancing and prayer, and that naturalistic dialogue was only introduced at a comparatively late stage in development. The artist practices his formative work and impresses his style on language just as he does on all other natural objects. Just as the painter does not imitate natural objects but makes them anew with the materials at his command, so the dramatist re-forms the piece of nature which is speech with the art-medium speech which comes from quite a different source.

Although the written drama is a complete verbal work of art, author and audience consent to its being arranged in a sumptuous optical and acoustic setting on the stage. If a chapter of a novel were enacted on the stage with allotment of parts, costumes, sound effects and scenery, we should be shocked. When a play is performed we are not; for, on the one hand, it is repugnant to language as an art medium to be allied with effects of a different kind, but, on the other, it fits in with the rest of visible and audible nature quite peaceably. This curious contradiction can always be felt in theatrical art. The style of theatrical performance oscillates constantly back and forth between one kind of production in which the whole presentation is based on the text of the book—*décor*, action and even the miming of the actors being limited and suppressed as far as possible, in order that the words shall make their effect undisturbed—and the other kind which furnishes a sumptuous flesh-and-blood world, so that speech as a part of nature shall take its proper place with the rest of nature and develop in the most natural manner.

The sound-film situation is very similar, indeed apparently more favorable, for the division is much less clearly marked than in the theatrical world. The verbal part alone of a sound film is quite meaningless and is, indeed, without artistic value. Sound film—at any rate real sound film—is not a verbal work of art supplemented by pictures, but a homogeneous creation of word and picture which cannot

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be split up into parts that have any meaning separately. (This is the reason why so little is to be expected of dramatists and novelists for sound films.) Even the picture part is meaningless alone. Moreover, in general, speech in sound film will be much more effective if used as a part of nature instead of as an art form. Film speech will have to be more lifelike in the same degree as the film picture is more like nature than the stage picture.

It must not give the impression of being something artificial either on account of the polished style and perfec-

tion of its phraseology or of fine elocution, if it is not to appear in its surroundings as an isolated foreign substance. Sound film will provide the often casual and scrappy conversation of everyday life, which may even be interrupted by inarticulate sounds and indistinct murmurs—just one sound among many. The attraction of this perfectly natural intimate art of speech has up to the present hardly been exploited at all in sound film. On the contrary, most film actors—partly no doubt because they do not yet feel quite at home with their new craft of speech—talk in an affect-

edly precise manner that is quite unnecessary and deprives the performance of its best effects.

References

1. Rudolf Arnheim, *Film*, Ian F. D. Morrow and L. M. Sieveking, trans. (London: Faber and Faber, 1933).
2. Rudolf Arnheim, *Film As Art* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957).